Hulbert Footner

Two On The Trail of The Far Northwest



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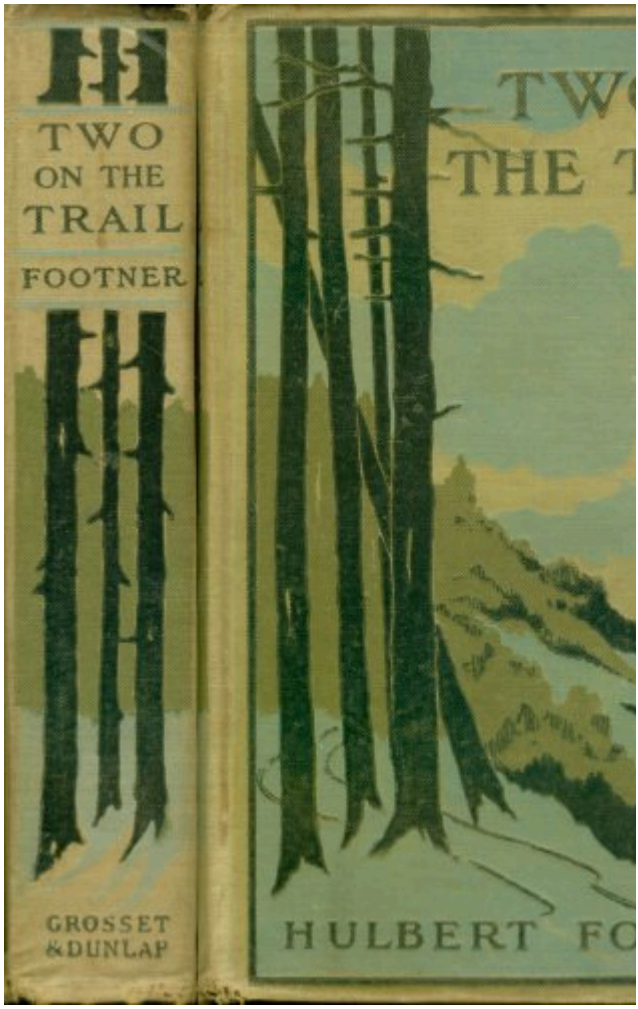
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TWO
ON THE
TRAIL
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HULBERT FO

"Look!" she cried. "Isn't it like the frontispiece to a book of adventure!"



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"Look!" she cried. "Isn't it like the frontispiece to a book of adventure!" (*Frontispiece*)
At the same instant the boat lurched drunkenly; and they pitched overboard together
There, clinging to the corner of the cabin for support, stood the figure of a woman
It was a grim figure that the first rays of light revealed sitting on the big rock

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TWO ON THE TRAIL

I

IN PAPPS'S RESTAURANT

The interior of Papps's, like most Western restaurants, was divided into a double row of little cabins with a passage between, each cabin having a swing door. Garth Pevensey found the place very full; and he was ushered into a cubby-hole which already contained two diners, a man and a woman nearing the end of their meal. They appeared to be incoming settlers of the better class—a farmer and his wife from across the line. Far from resenting Garth's intrusion, they visibly welcomed it; after all, there was something uncomfortably suggestive of a cell in those narrow cabins to which the light of day never penetrated.

Garth passed behind the farmer's chair, and seated himself next the wall. He had no sooner ordered his luncheon than the door was again opened, and the rotund Mr. Papps, with profuse apologies, introduced a fourth to their table. The vacant place, it appeared, was the very last remaining in his establishment.

The newcomer was a girl; young, slender and decidedly pretty: such was Garth's first impression. She came in without hesitation, and took the place opposite Garth with that serenely oblivious air so characteristic of the highly civilized young

lady. Very trimly and quietly dressed, sufficiently well-bred to accept the situation as a matter of course. Thus Garth's further impressions. "What a girl to be meeting up in this corner of the world, and how I should like to know her!" he added in his mind. The maiden's bland aloofness was discouraging to this hope; nevertheless, his heart worked in an extra beat or two, as he considered the added relish his luncheon would have, garnished by occasional glances at such a delightful *vis-à-vis*. Meanwhile, he was careful to take his cue from her; his face, likewise, expressed a blank.

The farmer and his wife became very uncomfortable. Simple souls, they could not understand how a personable youth and a charming girl should sit opposite each other with such wooden faces. Their feeling was that at quarters so close extra sociability was demanded, and the utter lack of it caused them to move uneasily in their chairs, and gently perspire. They unconsciously hastened to finish, and having at length dutifully polished their plates, arose and left the cabin with audible sighs of relief.

This was a contingency Garth had not foreseen, and his heart jumped. At the same time he felt a little sorry for the girl. He wondered if she would consider it an act of delicacy if he fastened the door open with a chair. On second thoughts, he decided such a move would be open to

misconstruction. Had he only known it, she was dying to laugh and, at the slightest twinkle in his eyes, would have gone off into a peal. Only Garth's severe gravity restrained her—and that in turn made her want to laugh harder than ever. But how was Garth to learn all that? Girls, more especially girls like this, were to him insolvable mysteries—like the heavenly constellations. Of course, there are those who pretend to have discovered their orbits, and have written books on the subject; but for him, he preferred simply to wonder and to admire.

Since her arrival the objective point of his desire shifted from his plate some three feet across the table; he now gazed covertly at her with more hunger than he evinced for his food. She had a good deal the aspect of a plucky boy, he thought; a direct, level gaze; a quick, sure turn to her head; and the fresh, bright lips of a boy. But that was no more than a pleasant fancy; in reality she was woman clear through. Eve lurked in the depths of her blue eyes, for all they hung out the colours of simple honesty; and Eve winked at him out of every fold of her rich chestnut hair. She was quick and impulsive in her motions; and although she showed such a blank front to the man opposite, her lips flickered with the desire to smile; and tiny frowns came and went between the twin crescents of her brows.

As for her, she was sizing him up too,

though with skilfully veiled glances. She saw a square-shouldered young man, who sat calmly eating his lunch, without betraying too much self-consciousness on the one hand, or any desire to make flirtatious advances on the other. Yet he was not stupid, either; he had eyes that saw what they were turned on, she noted. His admirable, detached attitude piqued her, though she would have been quick to resent any other. She was angry with him for forcing this repression on her; repression was not natural to this young lady. She longed to clear the air with a burst of laughter, but the thought of a quick, cool glance of surprise from the steady eyes opposite effectually checked her. As for his features, they were well enough, she thought. He had a shapely head, broadest over the ears, and thatched with thick, straight hair of the ashy-brown just the other side of blonde. His eyes were of the shade politely called gray, though yellow or green might be said with equal truth, had not those colours unpleasant associations. His nose was longish, and he had a comical trick of seeming to look down it, at which she greatly desired to laugh. His mouth was well cut, and decisively finished at the corners; and he had a chin to match. In spite of her irritation with him, she was reminded of a picture she had seen of Henry Fifth looking out from his helmet on the field of Agincourt.

As the minutes passed, and Garth

maintained his calm, she became quite unreasonably wroth. Her own luncheon was now before her. By and by she wanted salt, and the only cellar stood at Garth's elbow. Nothing could have induced her to ask for it; she merely stared fixedly. Garth, presently observing, politely offered the salt-cellar. She waited until he had put it down on the table, and removed his hand from the neighbourhood; then took it.

"Thank you," she murmured indignantly; furious at having to say it.

Garth wondered what he had done to offend her.

At this moment there was an interruption; again the apologetic Mr. Papps with yet another guest. This was a tradesman's comely young wife, with very ruffled plumage, and the distracted air of the unaccustomed traveller. She was carrying in her arms a shiny black valise, three assorted paper-covered bundles with the string coming off, and a hat in a paper bag; and, although it was so warm, she wore her winter's coat, plainly because there was no other way to bring it. Her hair was flying from its moorings; her face flamed; and her hat sat at a disreputably rakish angle. As she piled up her encumbrances on the chair next to the girl, and took off her coat, she bubbled over with indistinguishable, anxious mutterings. At last she sank into the seat

by Garth with something between a sigh and a moan.

"I've lost my husband," she announced at large.

Her distress was so comical they could not forbear smiling.

Encouraged by this earnest of sympathy, the newcomer plunged into a breathless recital of her mischances.

"Just came in over the A. N. R.," she panted. "By rights we should have arrived last night, but day-before-yesterday's train had the right of way and we was held up down to Battle Run. I tell you, the rails of that line are like the waves of the sea! I was that sea-sick I thought never to eat mortal food again—but it's coming back; my appetite I mean. He was to meet me, but I suppose he got tired after seventeen hours, small blame—and dropped off somewheres. S'pose I'll have to make a round of the hotels till I find him. You don't happen to know him, do you?" she asked Garth. "John Pink, the carpenter?"

"I'm a stranger in Prince George," said he politely.

"Oh, what and all I've been through!" groaned Mrs. Pink, with an access of energetic distress. She shook a warning finger at the girl. "Take my advice, Miss," she warned, "and don't you let him out of your sight a minute, till you get him safe

home!"

The girl looked hard at her plate; while for Garth, a slow, dark red crept up from his neck to the roots of his hair. Yet Mrs. Pink's mistake was surely a natural one; there they sat lunching privately together in the secluded little cabin. Moreover, they looked like fit mates, each for the other; and their air of studied indifference was no more than the air commonly assumed by young married couples in public places—especially the lately married. Without appearing to raise her eyes, the girl in some mysterious way, was conscious of Garth's dark flush. "Serve him right," she thought with wicked satisfaction. "I shan't help him out." But Garth's blush was for her more than for himself.

Mrs. Pink, absorbed in her own troubles, was innocently unaware of the consternation she had thrown them into. She plunged ahead; still addressing her remarks to the girl.

"Perhaps you think there's no danger of losing yours so soon," she went on; "and very like you're right. But, my dear, you never can tell! Bless you, when I was on my wedding journey, he hung around continuous. I couldn't get shet of the man for a minute, and I was fair tired out of seeing him. But that wears off—not that I mean it would with you"—turning to Garth—"but nothing different couldn't

hardly be expected in the course of nature."

Garth considered whether he should stop Mrs. Pink's tongue by telling the truth. But it seemed ungallant to be in such haste to deny the responsibility. He felt rather that the disclaimer should come from the girl; and she made no move; indeed, he almost fancied he saw the ghost of a smile. Under his irritation with the woman and her clumsy tongue, he was conscious of a secret glow of pleasure. There was something highly flattering in being taken for the husband of such an ultra-desirable creature. The thought of her being really one with his future, as the woman supposed, and travelling about the country with him made his heart beat fast. Slender, trim and mistress of herself, she had exactly the look of the wife he had pictured.

Mrs. Pink broke off long enough to order her luncheon, and from the extent of the order it appeared she had entirely recovered her appetite.

"The next thing I have to do after finding my man," she resumed, with a wild pass at her hat, which lurched it as far over on the other side, "is to find a house. They tell me rents are terrible high in Prince George. Are you two going to settle here?"

Garth replied in the negative. He had decided if the girl did not choose to enlighten Mrs. Pink, he would not.

"It has a great future ahead of it," she said solemnly. "It's a grand place for a young couple to start life in. And elegant air for children. Mine are at my mother's."

Garth swallowed a gasp at this; but the girl never blinked an eye.

"But how I do run on!" exclaimed Mrs. Pink. "No doubt you've got a good start somewheres else."

"Not so very," said Garth with a smile.

The smile disarmed the young lady sitting opposite, and somehow obliged her to reconsider her opinion of him. "I believe the creature has a sense of humour," was her thought.

"Are you Canadians?" inquired Mrs. Pink politely.

"I am from New York," said Garth.

Mrs. Pink opened her eyes to their widest. If he had said Cochin China she could not have appeared more surprised. For New York has a magical name in the Provinces; and the more remote, the more glowing the halo evoked by the sound.

"Bless me!" she ejaculated. Then, addressing herself to the girl: "How fine the shops and the opera houses must be there!"

"I've not been there in some years," she answered coolly. "I am from Ontario."

"Well, I declare!" cried Mrs. Pink. "Quite a romance! Where did you meet?"

"Here," said Garth readily. There was no turning back now.

"What a nice man!" now thought this perverse young lady.

"Well! Well!" exclaimed Mrs. Pink with immense interest. "Ain't that odd now! Was it long since?"

"Not so very," said Garth vaguely. He glanced across the table and saw that his supposed wife had finished her lunch. His heart sank heavily.

"Three months?" hazarded Mrs. Pink.

"It was about half an hour ago," came brisk and clear from across the table.

Mrs. Pink looked up in utter amazement; her jaw dropped; and a piece of bread was arrested halfway to her mouth. The girl had risen and was drawing on her gloves.

"Good-bye, Mrs. Pink," she said sweetly. "I hope you find your husband sooner than I find mine!"

With that she passed out; and the swing door closed behind her. All the light went with her, it seemed to Garth, and the cabin became a sordid, spotty little hole. Mrs. Pink stared at the door through which she had disappeared, in speechless bewilderment. Finally she turned to Garth.

"Wh-what did she mean?" she stammered.

"I do not know the young lady," said Garth sadly.

"Good land, man!" screamed Mrs. Pink. "Why didn't you say so at first?"

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II

THE UNKNOWN LADY

Garth Pevensey was a reporter on the *New York Leader*. His choice of an occupation had been made more at the dictate of circumstances than of his free will; and in the round hole of modern journalism he was something of a square and stubborn peg. He had become a reporter because he had no taste for business; and a newspaper office is the natural refuge for clever young men with a modicum of education, and the need of providing an income. He was not considered a "star" on the force; and his city editor had been known to tear his hair at the missed opportunities in Pevensey's copy, and hand it to one of the more glowing stylists for the injection of "ginger." But Garth had his revenge in the result; the gingerized phrases in his quiet narrative cried aloud, like modern

gingerbread work on a goodly old dwelling.

It was agreed in the office that Pevensey was too quiet ever to make a crack reporter. On a big story full of human interest he was no good. It was not that he failed to realize the possibilities of such stories; he had as sure an eye for the picturesque and affecting as Dicky Chatworth himself, the city editor's especial favourite; but he had an unconquerable repugnance to "letting himself go." Moreover his stuff was suspected of having a literary quality, something that is respected but not desired in a newspaper office. Howbeit, there were some things Garth could do to the entire satisfaction of the powers; he might be depended on for an effective description of any big show, when the readers' tear-ducts were not to be laid under contribution; he had an undeniable way with him of impressing the great and the near-great; and had occasionally been surprisingly successful in extracting information from the supposedly uninterviewable.

Though his brilliancy might be discounted, Pevensey was one of the most looked-up-to, and certainly the best-liked man on the staff. He was entirely unassuming for one thing; and though he had the reputation of leading rather a saintly life himself, he was as tolerant as Jove; and the giddy youngsters who came

and went on the staff of the *Leader* with such frequency liked to confide their escapades to him, sure of being received with an interest which might pass very well for sympathy. It was with the very young ones that he was most popular; he took on himself no irritating airs of superiority; he was a good listener; and he never flew off the handle. Such a man has the effect of a refreshing sedative on the febrile nerves of an up-to-date newspaper office.

Outside the office Garth led an uneventful life. He lived with his mother and a younger brother and sister, and ever since his knickerbocker days he had been the best head the little family could boast of. New York is full of young men like Garth who, deprived of the kind of society their parents were accustomed to, do not assimilate readily with that which is open to all; and so do without any. Young, presentable and clever, Garth had yet never had a woman for a friend. Those he met in the course of a reporter's rounds made him over-fastidious. He had erected a sky-scraping ideal of fine breeding in women, of delicacy, reserve and finish; and his life hitherto had not afforded him a single opportunity of meeting a woman who could anywhere near measure up to it. That was his little private grievance with Fate.

Garth came of a family of sporting and military traditions, which he had inherited

in full force. These, in the young bread-winner of the city, had had to be largely repressed; but he had found a certain outlet in joining a militia regiment, in which he had at length been elected an officer. He had a passion for firearms; and was the prize sharpshooter of his regiment. Wonderful tales were related of his prowess.

When the *Leader* was invited to send a representative on the excursion of press correspondents, which an enterprising immigration agency purposed conducting through the Canadian Northwest, Garth was chosen to go—most unexpectedly to himself, and to the higher-paid men on the staff. This trip put an entirely new colour on Garth's existence. He had always felt a secret longing to travel, to wander under strange skies, and observe new sides of life. From the very start of the journey he found himself in a state of pleasant exhilaration which was reflected in the copy he sent back to his paper. Pevensey's articles on the West made a distinct hit. The editors of the *Leader* did not tell him so; but in the very silence from New York that followed him, he knew he had found favour in their eyes; and he felt the delicious gratification of one who has been unappreciated.

When the excursion, lapped in the luxury of a private car (nothing can be too good for those who are going to publish their opinions of you), reached Prince George,

the outermost point of their wide swing around the country, the good people of the town outdid themselves in entertaining the correspondents. Among the festivities, a large public reception gave the correspondents and the leading men of the country the opportunity to become acquainted. To Garth the most interesting man present was the Bishop of Miwasa. His Lordship was a retiring man in vestments a thought shabby; and the other correspondents overlooked him. But Garth had heard by accident that the Bishop's annual tour of his diocese included a trip of fifteen hundred miles by canoe and pack-train through the wilderness; and he scented a story. The Bishop was one of those incorrigibly modest men who are the despair of interviewers; but Garth stuck to him, and got the story in the end. It was the best sent out of Prince George on that trip.

During the five days the correspondents spent there, the quiet Garth and the quiet Bishop became fast friends over innumerable pipes at the Athabasca Club. They discovered a common liking for the same brand of tobacco, which created a strong bond. Garth was entranced by the Bishop's matter-of-fact stories of his long journeys through the wilderness during the delightful summers, and in the rigorous winters; and the upshot was, the Bishop asked him to join him in his forthcoming tour of the diocese, which was to start from Miwasa Landing on the

first of August.

Garth jumped at the opportunity; and telegraphing lengthily to his paper to set forth the rich copy that was pining to be gathered in the North, prayed for permission to go. He received a brief answer, allowing him two months' leave of absence for the journey at his own risk and expense; and promising to purchase what of his stuff might be suitable, at space rates. This was precisely what he wanted; it meant two months' liberty. By the time he received it, the excursion had left Prince George behind; and was turned homeward. Garth dropped off at a way station and made his way back, this time without any fêtes to greet his arrival. He caught the Bishop as he was starting for the Landing; and it was arranged Garth should follow him by stage, three days later. Meantime he was to purchase an outfit.

On the evening of the day following his luncheon at Papps's, Garth, in his room at the hotel, was packing in a characteristically masculine fashion, preparatory to his start for the North woods next day.

It would have been patent to an infant that he had something on his mind. He was not thinking of the romantic journey that lay before him; that prospect, so

exhilarating the past few days, had, upon the eve of realization, lost its savour. He would actually have welcomed an excuse to postpone it for a few days—so that he might spend a little more money at Papps's. It was a pair of flashing blue eyes —for blue eyes do flash, though they be not customarily chosen to illustrate that capacity of the human orb—which had disturbed his peace. He was very much dissatisfied with the part he had played at luncheon the day before. What he ought to have said and done was now distressingly clear to him; and he craved an opportunity to put it into practice. He had spent the whole middle part of this day at Papps's, loitering in the entrance to make sure the blue eyes should not be swallowed in one of the cabins without his knowledge; but they had not illumined the place; nor had his cautious inquiries elicited a single clue to the identity of the possessor. He felt sure if he had three days more in Prince George he could discover her: but unfortunately the weekly stage for the North left the following morning; and the Bishop was waiting for him at the Landing; likewise the *Leader* back in New York was waiting for stories—and not about blue eyes. It was at this point in his circular train of reflections that he would resume packing with a gusty sigh.

He was interrupted by a knock on the door, and, upon opening it, was not a little astonished to receive a note from the hands of a boy, who signified his intention

of waiting for an answer. It was contained in a thick, square envelope with a crest on the flap; and was addressed in a tall, angular, feminine hand. Garth, his mind ever running in the same course, tore it open with a crazy hope in his heart; but the first words brought him sharply back to earth.

> "Will Mr. Garth Pevensey," thus it ran, "be good enough to oblige an old lady by calling at the Bristol Hotel this evening? Mrs. Mabyn will be awaiting him in the parlour; and as it concerns a matter of supreme importance to her, she trusts he will not fail her; no matter how late the hour at which he may be able to come."

Garth dismissed the boy with a message to the effect that he would answer the note in person. As he leisurely put his appearance in order, he thought: "Verily one's adventures begin upon leaving home." He was human, consequently his curiosity was pleasantly stimulated to discover what lay before him: but the little adjective in the first sentence of his appellant's letter was fatal to the idea of any violent enthusiasm on her behalf.

The parlour of the Bristol Hotel was on the first floor above the street level. Garth paused at the door; and cast a glance about the room. It was empty except for two figures at the further end. The one he

could see more plainly was an old lady sitting in an easy-chair; she was dressed in black, with a white cap and white wristbands; a spare, erect little lady. Garth judged her to be the writer of the note. The other figure, also a woman, was partly hidden in a window embrasure. She was standing by the window holding the curtain back with one hand, and looking into the street. She turned her head to speak to the old lady; whereupon Garth's heart leapt in his bosom, the room rocked, and the chandeliers burst into song; that clear profile, that slender figure could belong to none in Prince George but *Her*! He was overcome with delight and amazement; he could scarcely credit his eyes. He wished in the same instant he had spent more care on his appearance, and that he had not kept them waiting so long.

The younger lady perceived him standing in the shadowy doorway, and came toward him.

"Mr. Pevensey?" she began in a voice of cool inquiry. Then she stopped aghast; and the colour flamed into her face. "*You!*" she exclaimed in a voice too low to reach the older woman's ears. "Oh, I didn't know—I never suspected it might be you!"

Garth was conscious of a complicated feeling of irritation, a kind of jealousy of himself. "Why did they send for me, if they didn't know it was me?" was his

thought.

"What must you think of me?" she said in obvious distress.

"I am in the dark," said Garth helplessly.

She recovered her forces. "I am not in the habit of going to restaurants alone," she said. "But the hotel here is so bad! I am afraid you must think me a frivolous person, and I am anxious you should not think so."

"I don't," said Garth bluntly.

She smiled. "Very well," she said; "then there's no harm done."

"Natalie!" called the old lady, with a hint of irritation.

"Come and meet Mrs. Mabyn," she said quickly; and led the way.

"This is Mr. Pevensey, Mrs. Mabyn," she said.

The old lady regarded Garth with a sharp scrutiny; and Garth looked with interest at her. She was a fragile, elegant, plaintive little person of the old "lady-like" régime; but for all her gentleness, Garth was somehow conscious that he faced a woman of an iron will. She had the impatient, inattentive manner of one possessed by a single idea. With the result of her examination she appeared but half satisfied; she held out a delicate, wrinkled hand, dubiously.

"How do you do?" she said. "Please sit down."

"I am Natalie Bland," further explained the girl, who had again retreated to the window embrasure. "Mrs. Mabyn and I are travelling together."

"Dear Natalie is a daughter to me," murmured Mrs. Mabyn with commendable feeling.

The two women exchanged a glance which Garth was at a loss to interpret. He was looking at Natalie and he thought he saw patience, real affection, and perhaps a little kindly amusement—but there was something beyond; something grimmer and more determined, a hint of rebellion.

"My husband, Canon Mabyn, was the rector of Christ's Church Cathedral in Millerton, Ontario, up to the time of his death," murmured Mrs. Mabyn in her dulcet tones, with the air of one delivering all-sufficient credentials.

Garth murmured to show that he was suitably impressed.

"You are from New York, I believe," said Mrs. Mabyn.

Garth acknowledged the fact.

"So the newspaper said," she remarked. "Of course, I know very few Americans, still it is possible we may have common friends. You—er—" She paused invitingly.

"Hadn't we better explain why we asked Mr. Pevensey to call?" put in Natalie quietly.

"My dear, Mr. Pevensey was just about to tell me of his people," Mrs. Mabyn said in tones of gentle reproof.

Garth saw what the old lady would be after. "My father, Lieutenant Raymond Pevensey, was in the Navy," he said. "He was killed by a powder explosion on the gunboat *Arkadelphia*, twelve years ago."

"Dear me, how unfortunate!" murmured Mrs. Mabyn sympathetically; but it rang chillingly, and her abstracted eyes dwelt throughout upon that relentless thought of hers, whatever it was.

"I am related distantly to the Buhannons of Richmond, and the Mainwarings of Philadelphia," continued Garth, willing to humour her.

"There was a Mainwaring at Chelsea with my husband as a boy," remarked Mrs. Mabyn.

"Probably my great-uncle," he said. "In this part of the world," he went on, "there is no one who knows me beyond mere acquaintanceship, except the Bishop of Miwasa—"

"Pray say no more, Mr. Pevensey," interrupted Mrs. Mabyn. "The mere fact that the Bishop invited you to accompany him is, after all, sufficient." She turned to

the girl. "You may continue, dear Natalie."

"We read in this evening's paper," began that young lady with a directness refreshing after Mrs. Mabyn's circumlocutions; "that you were starting for Miwasa Landing to-morrow morning, to join the Bishop on his annual tour. We wished particularly to see you before you started; and that is why I—why Mrs. Mabyn wrote."

"We thank you for coming so promptly," put in Mrs. Mabyn with her gracious air.

Garth murmured truthfully that the pleasure was his. He felt himself on the breathless verge of a discovery. Intuition warned him of what was coming; but he could not believe it yet.

"Mr. Pevensey," resumed the young lady as if with an effort; she had the humility of a proud soul who stoops to ask a favour; "we are going to make a very strange request, as from total strangers."

Mrs. Mabyn raised an agitated hand. "Wait, wait, my dear Natalie," she objected. "Perhaps after all, we had better go no further. I—I think we had better give the plan up," she said in apparently the deepest distress.

The girl turned a patient shoulder, and looked into the street again, abstractedly playing with the cord of the blind.

"It is really too much to ask of you,"

continued Mrs. Mabyn distressfully; "and I am so afraid for Natalie! Natalie is so very dear to me. The situation is *so* unusual!" she wailed.

Poor Garth was sadly perplexed and exasperated by all this. The discovery he anticipated was now apparently in retreat.

"We are glad, anyway, to have had the pleasure of making your acquaintance," said Mrs. Mabyn with an air of finality.

Suddenly it was borne in upon Garth, partly from the girl's patient attitude, partly from the other's emphasis upon her distress, that it was simply, in newspaper parlance, all a bluff on the part of the older woman. Her fanatic eyes seemed to tell him that she was still bent on her object, whatever it might be. Experience had taught him that the quickest way to find out if he were right was to seem to fall in with her desire. So he promptly rose as if to leave. It worked.

Mrs. Mabyn's eyes snapped. She did not relish being taken up so quickly. "One moment, Mr. Pevensey," she said plaintively—and hastily. "Overlook the distraction of an old woman; I am torn two ways!"

Garth understood by this that the matter was reopened; and sat down again. There was a pause, while the old lady struggled, with the air of a martyr, to regain her composure. The girl continued to look

stolidly out of the window; and Garth simply waited for what was coming.

"You may continue, Natalie," said Mrs. Mabyn at length, faintly.

The girl resumed her explanation at the exact point where she left off. "We expected—that is, we hoped you were an older man—" Garth looked so disappointed she immediately added: "For that would make the request seem less strange." She hesitated.

"What is it?" asked Garth.

But she parried awhile. "What sort of a man is the Bishop?" she asked.

Garth described his modesty and his manliness.

"A very proper person to be Bishop in a wild country," remarked Mrs. Mabyn, patronizingly.

"And his wife?" asked Natalie.

Garth pictured a homely, unassuming body, with a great heart.

"Of course!" said Mrs. Mabyn. A whole chapter might be devoted to the analysis of the tone in which she said it.

"We had heard she accompanies her husband," said Natalie.

"Yes," said Garth.

"That simplifies matters!" exclaimed Mrs.

Mabyn.

"Their route takes in Spirit River Crossing, I believe," pursued Natalie.

Garth affirmed it, wondering.

Natalie paused before she went on. "Whatever you may think of what I am going to tell you, Mr. Pevensey," she said with the same proud appeal in her voice, "we may count on you, I am sure, not to speak of it to any one for the present."

"Indeed you may!" he said warmly.

"I am obliged to get to Spirit River Crossing at the earliest possible moment," she said simply.

Through the wilderness with *her*! Garth had to wait a moment before he could trust himself to reply with becoming coolness.

"Have you considered the kind of a journey it is?" he asked quietly.

"That is the worst of it!" complained Mrs. Mabyn. "I had expected to go with her; but we find it is out of the question."

Garth hastened to assure her that it was.

"I have considered everything," said Natalie.

"But do you know that you will have to travel two or three weeks in an open boat in all weathers, a mere canoe in fact; that

you will have to sleep out of doors, and live on the very roughest of fare? Could you stand it?" he demanded almost sternly.

"I am perfectly well and strong," answered Natalie.

"That is quite so, happily," said Mrs. Mabyn. "Otherwise, I would not hear of it for a moment."

"If the Bishop's wife can stand it, certainly I can," said Natalie.

"But she is obliged to do it," said Garth.

"So am I!" said Natalie quickly.

There was an awkward pause. Garth said nothing, but his question was felt.

"Naturally you wonder what forces me to undertake such a journey," said Natalie uncomfortably.

"Couldn't I help you more intelligently if I knew?" suggested Garth.

"But I cannot tell you," she said. "That is, not yet. Believe me, it is nothing I need be ashamed of——"

"Natalie!" exclaimed Mrs. Mabyn indignantly. "Is it not I who urge you to go?"

"Yes, I am doing what will be considered a most praiseworthy thing," said Natalie with what sounded strangely like—

bitterness.

"Yes, indeed!" urged Mrs. Mabyn, who seemed to have forgotten her late anxiety on Natalie's account.

"But in telling you," objected Natalie gently, "I would have to trust you to a far greater extent than you would be trusting me, in lending me, without knowing my reasons, the assistance of one traveller to another."

Garth was ready enough to throw himself at her feet without this affecting appeal. "Please count on me," he said, moved more than he would let them see, especially the old woman. "How can I help you?"

"See me as far as Miwasa Landing," she said simply. "I will then throw myself on the goodness of the Bishop and his wife; and trust to them to take me with them the rest of the way—that is, if I wish to go. The Bishop may be able to give me information," she added darkly.

"Natalie!" put in Mrs. Mabyn, warningly. "I —I will give her letters to those good people," she added hastily, to divert Garth's mind from the strangeness of Natalie's last words.

But Garth was in no temper to be deflected by a mystery. "I am thankful for the chance to be of service," he said fervently, having a keen sense of the

poverty of words.

"Thank you," said Natalie, simply. "Let us talk of ways and means," she added decisively. "What should I take?"

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III

ON THE TRAIL

At a quarter to eight next morning Garth was waiting again in the parlour of the Bristol Hotel. Promptly to the minute Natalie came sailing in, in her own inimitable way, walking all of a piece, with a sweep like a banner, Garth thought. When he saw her, his last doubt of the reality of this intoxicating journey vanished. She bore no trace now of the seriousness of the night before; all smiles and red-cheeked eagerness, she radiated the very joy of being.

"Enter Mrs. Pink!" she cried.

She had a brown valise, a fat bundle, a flat, square package wrapped in paper, a coat and a parasol.

"You said trunks were taboo," she explained. "I only had one valise and I couldn't nearly get everything in. Indeed I

sat up half the night studying how little I could do with."

"We'll get you a duffle-bag at the Landing," he said.

"Am I suitably dressed?" she demanded, showing herself.

Garth smiled. She was perfection; how could he blame her? She had interpreted his suggestions as to sober, serviceable clothes, in a diabolically well-fitting suit of brown, the colour of her hair. At the wrists and neck of her brown-silk waist were spotless bands of white; and on her head was a dashing little brown hat with green wings. She exhibited square-toed little brown boots as an evidence of exceeding common sense; and was pulling on a pair of absurdly small boy's gloves. This most suitable costume for the North was completed by a brown-silk parasol.

"All in place and well tied down," she announced. "Nothing to fly or catch!"

Garth pictured to himself the effect likely to be created in the wilderness by this adorable acme of the feminine, with something between a smile and a groan.

They walked to the post office, quaffing deep of the delicious morning air, Garth glancing sidewise at his exuberant companion, and wondering, like the old lady in the nursery rhyme, if this could really be he. It was a day to make one

walk a-tiptoe; the sky overhead bloomed with the exquisite pale tints of a Northern summer's morning; and the bricks of Oliver Avenue were washed with gold.

Natalie's face fell a little at the sight of the stage-coach; for it had nothing in common with the imagined vehicle of romance except the four horses; and they were but sorry beasts. In fact, it was nothing but a clumsy, uncovered wagon, which had never been washed since it was built; and was worn to a dull drab in a long acquaintance with the alternating mud and dust of the trail. Behind the driver's seat was a sort of well, for the mail bags and express packages; and behind that, two excruciatingly narrow seats for the passengers, running lengthwise between the rear wheels. The entrance was by a step at the tail-board.

Everything awaited the word to start. The driver, whip in hand, stood by the front wheel surrounded by a group of idlers; and his two great mongrel huskies, squatted on the pavement with expectant eyes on their master. Garth helped Natalie into the body of the wagon; and, climbing in after her, disposed her baggage with his own already in the well. The eyes of the driver and all his satellites were promptly transferred in wide wonder to the girl with the green wings in her hat. Garth, with a keen sense of difficulties ahead, was indignant and uncomfortable; but Natalie, serenely conscious that

everything was in place, dropped her hands in her lap, and chatted away, as if quite unaware of her conspicuousness.

Garth had put Natalie in the right-hand corner of the little cockpit. Another woman passenger was already in place opposite; and the aspect of this lady made an additional element in his uneasiness. She, too, was gotten up bravely according to her lights. She seemed something under forty, tall and angular; her hair, a crass yellow, was tied with a large girlish bow of black ribbon behind; and in her cheeks she had crudely striven to recall the hues of youth. Around her long neck another black ribbon accentuated the scrawny lines it was designed to hide; and on top of all she wore a wide black hat, which had a fresh yet collapsed effect, as if it had long been cherished under the lid of a trunk. Her knees touched Natalie's, and Garth's gorge rose at her nearness to his precious charge—and yet the antique girl greeted them with a sort of anxious, appealing smile, which disarmed him in spite of himself.

Promptly at eight o'clock the door of the post office was opened; and the last bag of mail was thrown into the stage. Still the driver made no move to climb into his seat; and Garth, becoming restless as the minutes passed, got out and approached him.

"Good morning, driver," he said, while the

bystanders stared afresh. "What's the delay?"

He gazed at Garth with a mild and cautious blue eye; and spat deliberately before replying. He was one of those withered little men, with a shock of grizzled hair, and deeply seamed face and neck and hands, who might be forty-five or seventy. As it turned out, Paul Smiley was within three years of the latter figure. He had on a pearl Fedora very much over one ear, a new suit of store clothes with a mighty watch chain, and new boots, which seemed like little souls put to torment—they screeched horribly whenever he moved.

"I couldn't start off and leave Nick Grylls," he said deprecatingly. "He has spoke for two seats."

Garth was sensible that he was hearing a great man's name.

"I tell you it ain't often Nick Grylls travels by the stage," continued Smiley, addressing the bystanders impressively. "He hires a rig and a team and a driver to take him to the Landing, *he* does."

"Who is this Mr. Grylls?" asked Garth, pursuing the reporter's instinct.

"Don't know Nick Grylls!" exclaimed old Paul, exchanging a wondering glance around the circle. "You *must* be a stranger! Nick Grylls is a wonderful bright man,

wonderful! He's the biggest free-trader in the North country; trades down Lake Miwasa way. Wonderful influence with the natives; does what he wants with them. I tell you there ain't much north of the Landing Nick Grylls ain't in on. Here he comes now! All aboard!"

As Garth resumed his seat by Natalie he saw a burly, broad-shouldered figure hurrying along the sidewalk; he saw under the wide, stiff-brimmed hat, a red face with an insolent, all-conquering expression, and fat lips rolling a big cigar. There followed after, a young breed staggering under the weight of a Gladstone bag, which matched its owner. Arrived at the stage, Nick Grylls flung a thick word of greeting to the bystanders, and taking the bag from the boy, threw it among the mail bags as one tosses a pillow; and climbed into the seat by the driver. The breed sprang on the step behind; another passenger took the place opposite Garth; old Paul cracked his whip and shouted to his horses; the dogs leaped and barked madly; and the Royal Mail swung away to the North with its oddly assorted company.

As they rattled through the suburbs the fat back on the front seat shifted heavily; and the red face was turned on them.

"Hello, old Nell!" shouted Nick.

The woman simpered unhappily. "How's yourself, Mr. Grylls?" she returned.

"Fine!" he bellowed from his deep chest.

This little manœuvre in the front seat was merely for the purpose of obtaining a prolonged stare at Natalie. The insolence of the little, swimming, pig-eyes infuriated Garth. The young man opposite him too, a sullen, scowling bravo, was staring boldly at Natalie. Garth stiffened himself to play a difficult part.

"I feel like a rare, exotic bird," whispered Natalie in his ear.

"You are," he returned grimly. "I think it would be better if you did not speak my name," he added. "I will not address you by yours. We must be prepared to parry questions."

"I will be careful," she said.

To do him justice, Nick Grylls, on a close examination of Natalie, had the grace to feel a little ashamed of his rough outburst. He altered his features to what he thought was a genteel expression; but Garth called it a leer.

"Bully day for our trip," he said.

They all agreed in various tones; even Garth. He knew it would not help Natalie for him to start by inviting trouble.

"You're the New York newspaper man," said Grylls to Garth.

"That's right," said Garth quietly.

"They tell me you're going to write up the country," said Grylls; exhibiting that curious blend of suspicion, contempt and respect his kind has for the fellow who writes. "I can tell you quite a bit about the country myself," he added with a braggadocio air.

Garth thanked him.

"It's an onusual trip for a lady," continued Grylls, cunningly trying to draw Natalie into the conversation; "but nothing out of the way at this season. The Bishop travels comfortable enough; separate tent for the women; and an ile stove like."

His move was not successful; Natalie continued looking charmingly blank. Old Paul created a diversion by facing them with a confiding smile. The pert Fedora with its curly brim was comically ill-suited to his seamed old face, and mild blue eye. He pointed with his whip down a road on the outskirts of the town.

"My place is down there," he said simply. "Just sold it last week; three hundred acres at three hundred dollars an acre. They're layin' it out in town lots."

"Good God, man!" cried Grylls. "You could buy me out and have a pile over!" Every time he spoke, he glanced over his shoulder at Natalie.

Old Paul smiled up at him admiringly. "But this is only a sort of accident," he

said. "You made yours."

"What in he—Why are you driving the stage, then?" demanded Grylls.

"Well," said the old man slowly; "seems though I just got in the way of it. Seems I just *had* to keep hanging on to the ribbons, or lose holt altogether."

"What are you going to do with all that money?" Grylls wanted to know.

"Well," said Paul with a quiet grin; "I bought me a new hat like the swells wear; and a pair of Eastern shoes. They pinch me somepin' cruel, too."

"Why don't you travel East, Mr. Smiley?" suggested Nell. She whom they all addressed so cavalierly was particular to put a handle to each name.

"Travel! I had enough o' that, my girl," he said. "Forty-five years ago I travelled East to Winnipeg and got me a wife. Brought her back over the plains in a Red River cart. Eight hunder miles, and hostile redskins all the way! What's travellin' nowadays!"

"Were you born out here?" asked Garth, shaping a story for the *Leader* in his mind.

"At Howard House, west of here in the Rockies," said Paul. "My father was Hudson's Bay trader there."

"Paul's an old-timer all right," said Grylls carelessly. He was becoming bored with

the trend the conversation was taking.

"One of the first eight who broke ground in Prince George," said the old man proudly. "Yonder's the first two-story house in the country. I built it. No!" he continued thoughtfully; "I'm keeping my house and ten acres; and me and the old woman's calc'latin' to stop there and watch the march o' progress by our door. She wouldn't give up her front step for all the real-estate sharks in Prince George. But," he added with a chuckle, "I shouldn't wonder if she was shocked some when them trolley-cars I hear tell of goes kitin' by."

"I kin understand just how she feels," remarked old Nell to Natalie, with her apologetic little smile. "What could take the place of a home with real nice things in it? I got a house up near the Landing with a carpet in every room. I just love to buy things for it. You see I never had what you might call a regular house until just lately. This trip I bought a pink-and-gold chiny washin' set; and a down comfort for the best room. I never could tire of fixin' it up. We'll pass there to-morrow afternoon. I'd just love to have you step in—"

Grylls laughed boisterously.

"Ah-h, shut up, Nell!" muttered the dark young man beside her.

"Thank you, I'd like to see it," said Natalie, with a flash of the blue eyes.

They had now left the town behind; and were rolling, or rather bumping, over the prairie. Here, it is not an empty plain, but a series of natural, park-like meadows, broken by graceful clumps of poplar and willow. On a prairie trail when the wheels begin to bite through the sod, and sink into ruts, a new track is made beside the old—there is plenty of room; and in turn another and another, spreading wide on each side, crossing and interweaving like a tangled skein of black cotton flung down in the green.

Natalie had never seen such luxuriant greenness; such diverse and plentiful wild flowers. Nell pointed out the brilliant fire-weed, blending from crimson to purple, the wild sunflower, the lovely painted-cup, old-rose in colour; and there were other strange and showy plants she could not name. Occasionally they passed a log cabin, gayly whitewashed, and with its sod roof sprouting greenly. These dwellings, though crude, fulfilled the great aim of architecture; they were a part of the landscape itself.

When they stopped at one of these places for dinner, Garth watched Natalie narrowly to see how she would receive her first taste of rough fare. But far from quailing at the salt pork, beans and bitter tea, she ate with as much gusto as if it had always been her portion. "She'll do," he thought approvingly.

Afterward as they toiled up a long, sandy rise in the full heat of the afternoon sun, Paul, the old dandy, had leisure while his horses walked to devote to his passengers. He was pleased as a child at the interest shown by Garth and Natalie in his anecdotes. Turning to them now, he pointed to a high mound topped by a splendid pine standing by itself, and said:

"Cannibal Hill. Used to be an Indian called Swift had his lodge there. A fine figger of a man too; high-chested; beautiful-muscled. He was a good Indian; and I want to say when a redskin is good, he's damn good—beg pardon, Miss—he's good and no mistake, I should say. He has a high-minded way of looking at things, which ought to make a white man blush; but it don't; for them kind makes the softest tradin'. I been a trader myself.

"This here Swift had a wife and ten childer, that he thought a power of. He hunted for 'em night and day; and he come to be known as the best provider in the tribe. Well, come one winter he went crazy; yes, ma'am, plumb looney; and he went for 'em with his hatchet. He killed and *et* 'em one at a time, beginning with the youngest; while the others waited their turn. You see an old-fashioned Indian was the boss of his family; and they didn't dast fight him back. Right up there on that hill, under that very same tree; I seen the ashes of their bones myself. In the Spring he come down to the

settlement and give himself up; said he didn't want to live no more. Shouldn't think he would."

Grylls made no secret of his impatience with the old man's yarns. He interrupted him, careless of his feelings.

"Are you making the round trip with the Bishop?" he asked Garth.

Garth answered in the affirmative.

"I have a rabbit-skin robe at the Landing I'd be glad to lend the lady," he said leering sidewise at Natalie.

"Much obliged," said Garth agreeably; "but we really have all we can use."

"What does *she* say?" growled Nick.

"Thank you very much," said Natalie quickly; "but I could not think of accepting it."

He had forced her to speak to him at last; but the words were hardly to his satisfaction. He flung around in his seat with an ugly scowl.

Meanwhile old Paul was still pursuing his thoughts about redskins. "Indians think when they go off their heads they're obliged to be cannibals," he continued agreeably. "They can't separate the two idees somehow. So when a redskin feels a screw beginning to work loose up above, he settles on a nice, fat, tender subject. He says his head's full of ice, and has to be

melted. I mind one winter at Caribou Lake forty years back, we were all nigh starving, and our bones was comin' through our skins, like ten-p'ny nails in a paper bag. And one night they comes snoopin' into the settlement an Indian woman as sleek and soft and greasy as a fresh sausage—and lickin' her chops—um—um! There was a man with her and he let it out. She had knifed two young half-breed widows, as fair and beautiful a two girls as ever I see—and she et 'em, yes, ma'am! And nobody teched her; they warn't no police in them days. She lives to the Lake at this day!"

"Good Law! Mr. Smiley!" cried Nell with an uneasy glance at the grinning half-breed on the tail-step.

"Keep cool, old gal!" growled Nick. "Nobody wouldn't pick you out for a square meal!"

Nell's companion rewarded this sally with an enormous guffaw; and poor, mortified Nell made believe to laugh too. Natalie's cheeks burned.

"I suppose you hunted buffalo in the old days," said Garth to old Paul.

"Sure, I was quite a hunter," he returned with a casual air. "It weren't everybody as was considered a hunter, neither. You had to earn your reppytation. We didn't do no drivin' over cliffs or wholesale slaughterin'; it was clean huntin' with us,

powder and ball. I mind they used to make a big party, as high as two hundred men, whites, breeds, and friendly redskins. Everything was conducted regular; camp-guards and a council and a captain was elected; and all rules strict observed. Every night we camped inside a barricade. One of the rules was, no tough old bulls useless for meat should be killed under penalty of twenty-five dollars. I was had up before the council for that; but I proved it was self-defense."

"Tell us about it," suggested Garth.

The old man scratched his head, and shot a dubious glance at Natalie. "I ain't sure as this is quite a proper story," he said. "You see, I was having a wash, as it might happen, at the edge of a slough—a slough is a little pond in the prairie, Miss, as you're a stranger—and my clothes and my gun was lying beside me, and my horse was croppin' the grass at the top of the rise. When I was as clean as slough water would make me, which isn't much, 'cause I stirred up a power of mud, and soap was an extravagance them days, I begun to dress myself. Well, I had my shirt on, and was sittin' down to pull on my pants, when I heard my cayuse start off on a dead run. I looked up quick-like and blest if there wasn't old Bill Buffalo a-pawin' and a-bellerin' and a-shakin' of his head, not thirty yards away! Soon as he see me look up he come chargin' down on me with his big head close to the ground like

a locomotive cow-catcher. And me in that awkward state of dishabilly!"

"What did you do, Mr. Smiley?" cried Nell in suspense.

Paul shifted his quid, spat, and shoved his pearl Fedora a little further over his ear. "G'lang there," he cried shaking the reins. "I reached my gun before he reached me," he said; "and I gave him the charge, bang in his little red eye. He reared up; and come down kerplunk right on top o' me; only I rolled away just in time!"

The trail to the Landing is considered something of a road up North; and the natives are apt to stare pityingly at the effeminate stranger who complains of the holes. It is something of a road compared to what comes after; but Natalie, hitherto accustomed to cushions and springs in her drives, could not conceive of anything worse. As the afternoon waned, what with the heat, the hard, narrow seat, and the incessant lurching and bumping of the crazy stage, which threw her now backward till her head threatened to snap off, and now forward on Nell's knees, the blooming roses in Natalie's cheeks faded, and her smile grew wan. Poor Garth, anxiously watching her, almost burst with suppressed solicitousness.

But at last the journey came to its end;

and at six o'clock the Royal Mail with its bruised and famished passengers swung into the yard at Forbie's, the halfway house, fifty miles from Prince George. Garth had learned that the men slept in an outside bunkhouse, while the women were received into the farmhouse itself. He hastened to interview Mrs. Forbie in private, that the dreadful possibility of Natalie's being asked to share a room with the other woman passenger might be avoided. It is doubtful if Natalie would have taken any harm from poor old Nell; but Garth was a young man falling in love; and so, ferociously virtuous in judging Nell's kind. Natalie had a room to herself.

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IV

THE STOPPING-HOUSE YARD

Next morning, Old Paul, assisted by Nell's dark companion, and the half-breed Xavier, was hitching up in the yard of Forbie's, when Nick Grylls appeared from the house, and walked heavily up and down at some distance moodily chewing a cigar. Big Nick was wondering dully what in hell was the matter with him. He had tossed in his bunk the night through; and now, at the beginning of the day, when a

man should be at his heartiest, he found himself without appetite for his breakfast, and in a grinding temper, without any object to vent it on. In his little eyes, bloodshot with the lack of sleep, and unwonted emotion, there was an almost childish expression of bewilderment.

A deep sense of personal injury lay at the root of his discomfort. Nick was accustomed to think of himself as a whale of a fine fellow, as they say in the West; he heard every day that he was the smartest man up North; and, of course, he believed it. He regarded himself as a prince of generosity; for was not his liberality to the half-breed women a reproach among cannier white men? He was fond of children, too; and one of his amusements was to distribute handfuls of candy over the counter of his store. And candy ("French creams," God save the mark!) is worth seventy-five cents a pound on Lake Miwasa. When any poor fellow froze to death, or went "looney" in the great solitudes, it was Nick Grylls who dug deepest in his pocket for the relief of the unfortunate family. This, then, was the meat of his amazed grievance; that he, the great man, the patron, should, here in his own country, be coolly ignored by a mere boy and girl.

There was good in Nick Grylls; and Garth travelling alone would have got along very well with him, and worked him for copy; but having Natalie to look after, he

instinctively put himself on his guard against the triumphant Silenus. Grylls, with an enormous capacity for pleasure, had carelessly taken his fill. He had to content himself with the coarse plants of the North; and up to now he had desired no other. But he had arrived at the age when, the passions beginning to cool, the grossest man conceives of fastidiousness; and at this crisis Fate had thrust a perfect blossom before him. Never so close to a woman of Natalie's world before, he had been free to look at her throughout an entire day; and she had actually spoken to him once. He did not realize what was the matter with him yet; but presently, when Natalie came out of the house, he would know.

Garth strolled out from breakfast; and filled his pipe while he waited for Natalie to repack her valise within. Nick's chaotic passions leaped to meet the aspect of the cool young man, and fastened on him. But there was no relief here; his hearty and irresistible career over prostrate necks was suddenly arrested in the light of Garth's cool glance. In his heart Nick suspected he was despised, and the fact emasculated his rage. He hung his head, and looked elsewhere.

When the horses were hitched, Xavier went into the bunkhouse for his master's bedding, old Paul pottered around the harness, while Albert, Nell's companion, strolled back to join Grylls.

"What do you make of this young couple?" asked Nick, assuming an indifferent air.

"I dunno," Albert returned lethargically.

"There wasn't anything about a girl in the newspaper," pursued Nick; "and young reporters don't generally have coin enough to travel with a wife."

"They ain't married," said Albert.

"What!" exclaimed Nick eagerly.

"Nell says she heard her call him Mr. Pevensey before the stage started; and he called her Miss What's-this."

Nick's little eyes glittered. "Then what in hell are they doing up here together?" he muttered.

"Search me!" said Albert indifferently. "Nell says she can't make it out."

"She seems to have taken a kind of shine to Nell," suggested Nick carefully. "Women are sly as links. Pass a quiet word to Nell to draw her out."

"She's tried," said Albert. "Nice as you please but mum. Why don't you pump *him*?" he suggested, indicating Garth.

"Because he's a damned, self-sufficient dude!" Nick burst out with a string of curses. "One of these porridge-mouthed Easterners that run up their eyebrows with a 'my word!' at any free speech or liberality in a man! The first time he finds

himself in man's country he patronizes us! Going to write us up! My God! My stomach turns over every time I look at him!"

"Well, he better not get *you* down on him," said Albert propitiatingly.

Natalie came sailing out of the farmhouse as fresh and smiling as the morning itself. Garth hastened to meet her. A dark flush rose in Grylls's cheeks, and he gritted his teeth, until the muscles stood out in lumps on either side his jaw. He felt a desire to possess this slender, swimming figure mounting in his brain to the pitch of madness. As she passed him Natalie nodded not unkindly, and the big man's eyes followed her in a sort of dog's agony.

Nell followed her out of the house; and Garth handed them both into the stage. He did not get in himself, but stood on the ground below Natalie, talking up to her. One of the horses had refused to drink at the trough, and old Paul, wishing to give him another chance, sent Xavier for a pail of water.

This Xavier deserves a word. The young breeds run to extremes of good looks or ill; and in his case it was the latter. In downright English he was hideous. A shock of intractable, lank hair hung over what he had of a forehead; and underneath rolled a pair of whitey-blue eyes, with a villainous cast in one of them. Some accident had carried Nature's work

even further, for one swarthy cheek was divided from temple to chin by a dirty white scar. He wore a pair of black-and-white checked trousers, which, once Nick's, hung strangely on his meagre frame. He was absurdly proud of this garment. His outer wear was completed by a black cotton shirt, and the inevitable stiff-brimmed hat, without which no brown youth feels himself a man. Xavier's face wore an expression of blankness verging on idiocy; but he was by no means deficient in cunning. His full name was St. Francois Xavier Zero.

Returning from the pump with the pail of water, as he passed Nick, the big man threw him an idle word or two in Cree. Xavier grinned comprehendingly; and Nick and Albert followed him a little way. Xavier came up close behind Garth; and in passing him, made believe to stumble. Some of the water splashed over Garth's legs. Garth swung around, and took in the situation at a glance; Grylls and Albert were grinning in the background. There was a crack as his fist met the half-breed's jaw; and Xavier rolled in the dust. In falling the pail capsized, emptying its contents on the cherished trousers.

Nick's guffaw was quickly changed for a scowl; Garth saw that an explosion was imminent; and that quick thought was necessary. He knew he must at all cost to his pride avoid trouble until he got Natalie off his hands. He walked over to Nick; the

big fellow clenched his fists as he approached.

"Hope I haven't hurt the beggar," said Garth blandly. "Perhaps he didn't mean to spill the water; but you have to deal quickly with a breed. That's your way, I'm told."

Nick was completely disconcerted by this unexpected line of action. His hands dropped; and he muttered something which might pass for agreement. Garth coolly returned to Natalie.

The breed picked himself up, and went crouching to his master with a voluble, whining complaint in his own tongue. Nick lifted his hand; and with a vicious, backhanded stroke sent Xavier again reeling across the yard. It was the blow which was meant for Garth. Passion had set Nick dancing to a strange tune. Albert, seeing the look in his eye, instinctively edged out of reach.

Old Nell looked at these things with a resigned air that spoke volumes for her daily life. Natalie kept perfectly quiet; but a bright spot burned in either cheek, and she turned a pair of shining eyes on Garth when he came back to her. His difficulties were by no means over. Old Paul, feeling that it might be well to forego the pail of water, gave the word to start. Grylls climbed in by the rear step, and sat next to Nell with a dogged air. This brought him opposite Garth, and very near Natalie.

Albert and the half-breed following him, they started. Xavier, covered with dirt, snivelling, and nursing a split lip, was as ugly as a gargoyle.

Garth saw a way out in the vacant place beside Paul. "The front seat would be more comfortable for you; it's wider," he said to Natalie, loud enough for all to hear. "Paul," he called, "have you room beside you for the young lady? She wants to hear some more stories."

Paul, delighted, immediately pulled up, and held out a hand. Natalie climbed over the mail-bags and took her place beside him. In crossing, she gave Garth's hand a grateful squeeze; and he returned to his place with a swelling heart, ready for Nick Grylls and any like him. But he would not allow himself to depart from the course he had laid out. In the past he had been compelled to conciliate, to flatter, to mould such men as Grylls for the advantage of the *Leader*; and he could certainly do it once more for the sake of Natalie. Nick faced him with a venomous eye, but was unable to make an opening for more trouble.

Old Paul, whenever they came to a hill and he could allow his four to walk, turned around; and half to Natalie, half to Garth, delivered himself of one of his characteristic stories. Neither was Nick impatient with his monologues to-day; for when Paul turned Natalie half turned also;

and then Nick could watch her face.

Garth had asked the old man about the half-breed rebellion.

"Sure, I was through it all," he began. "I was buildin' boats in Prince George; and scoutin'. Upwards of three months we hadn't no news from outside and the settlement was in a continuous state of scare. It was supposed the Crees had been joined by the Montana Indians; and all said we was cut off on the south. Women, children and cattle was crowded together in the stockade; but I didn't bring my family in. My old woman weren't afraid; and somepin' told me it was just one of these here panics like.

"Well, one day up came word to the commandant to send a force down the river to Fort Pitt, as they called it, to jine with General Middleton. Then it was Smiley here, and Smiley there, and they couldn't do nothin' without Smiley. I started down the river at last with two work boats carryin' fifty men under Major Lewis and Cap'n Caswell. It was a Saturday night, I mind. Lewis was one of these stuck-up, know-it-all johnnies, not long breeched. But Caswell was an old Crimea veteran; his face had been spiled by a powder explosion; but he certainly was a sporter! Me and him got along fine. My! My! what a randy old feller he was! The men used to sit around him with their mouths open waitin' to laugh. Grimy

Caswell they called him, along of his speckled face—great big man!

"We travelled for three days and three nights without stoppin'; and would you believe it, that damn fool Lewis—'scuse me, Miss—made us light a lantern at night! A mark for all the reds in the country! I was steerin' the first boat; and signallin' the channel to Dave Sinclair in the boat behind, with my hand; this way and so. But the second day Dave ran her aground. Young Lewis wouldn't allow that we knew how to lift a boat off a shoal up North. I let him break all the ropes tryin' to drag her off; then I showed him. Meanwhile, all this time, Grimy Caswell was dressin' himself up like a redskin in my boat; and smearin' his face with red earth. When it got dusk-like, he hid in the bushes; and by and by Lewis came along the shore. All of a sudden, Grimy in his war-paint popped out in front of him, let out a hell of a screech, and sent a shot over his head. Say, that young man near died right there. He turned the colour of a lead bullet; and made some quick tracks to the rear boat. Grimy sneaked back to ours and washed and dressed; and all night long he plagued Lewis to light the lantern; but he wouldn't; and the men near died holdin' theirselves in. Oh! Grimy Caswell was a humorous feller, he was!

"We landed at Fort Pitt on the fourth day; and at the same time the steamboats come up from Battle Run with the whole army.

They landed 'em all; and say, they had a brass band; and General Middleton rode a white horse. Never see such a grand sight in all my born days; they must have been all of seven hundred and fifty men!"

At the foot of another long hill Natalie expressed a wish to walk up; and Garth helped her down. They set off briskly, ahead of the horses; and for the first time found themselves free to talk to each other.

"How good you have been to me!" she murmured.

"Don't think of thanking me," said Garth, almost roughly.

"If I had known how literally you would have to take care of me, I would not have been so quick to ask you."

"It was nothing, really."

"Nothing, you mean to what is before us?" she asked quickly.

"I look for nothing worse," he said.

"Perhaps my appearance is too conspicuous," she suggested with a humility new to her.

"A little, perhaps," Garth admitted.

"What shall I do?" she said. "I have nothing else."

"At the Landing I will dress you in a rough

sweater, and a felt hat strapped under your chin," he said with a smile.

Natalie was aggrieved. "I like to look nice," she protested.

"You would—even then," said poor Garth.

She changed the subject. "What a gross beast that big man is!" she said strongly.

"Poor devil!" said Garth unconsciously. He understood from his own feelings a little of what Nick was going through.

Natalie turned a surprised face on him. "Are you sorry for him?" she demanded.

"A little."

"Why?"

"Well—I think perhaps he never saw any one like you before," he said quietly.

"But he *hates* you!"

"Naturally!"

"Why?" she demanded again—and was immediately sorry she had spoken.

Garth looked away. "He thinks I am—I am more than I am," he said oracularly.

She affected not to hear this. "What shall we do about him?" she asked.

"He won't trouble us after the Landing," said Garth. "He is bound down the river to Lake Miwasa, while we go up to Caribou

Lake."

"It's a precious good thing for me I didn't start off alone," she said feelingly.

"I'm glad if I've won your confidence a little," said Garth hanging his head.

This meant: "Aren't you going to tell me about yourself?" Natalie's mystery had been a thorn in his flesh all the way along the road. He was ashamed to speak of it, for seeming to imply a doubt of her; but he couldn't help approaching it in this roundabout way.

Natalie understood. "I'll tell you now, gladly," she said at once. "But not here; there isn't time. We have to get in directly."

This was precisely what Garth desired her to say. He longed for her to want to tell him; but for the story itself, he dreaded it, and was quite willing to have the telling deferred.

Later in the day they reached Nell's house, quite a fine edifice built with lumber instead of the usual logs. Natalie, true to her word, allowed herself to be shown through; and did not stint her admiration of Nell's treasures. When they drove on, she looked back with a genuine feeling for the old girl, who was so anxious to please. They left her standing in the doorway in her finery, with the sullen, black-browed bravo slouching beside her.

The way became very much rougher; and Garth was glad of Natalie's having greater comfort on the front seat. About five o'clock they climbed their last hill. At the top Old Paul, pulling up his horses, swept his whip with an eloquent gesture over the magnificent prospect lying below.

"All the water this side goes to the Arctic," he said.

Looking over a wealth of greenery, away below them they saw the mighty Miwasa River coming eastward from the mountains, make its southernmost sweep, and shape a course straight away for the North. The Miwasa river! There was magic in the name; they gazed down at it with a feeling akin to awe. Off to the left lay the roofs of the Landing, farthest outpost of civilization.

Presently they were rattling down the steep village street at a great pace, traces hanging slack; past the factor's house, the "Company's" store, the blacksmith shop and the "French outfit"; with a dash and a clatter that brought every inhabitant running to the hotel. Most of them were already there; for the arrival of the mail is the event of the week. Old Smiley swept up to the gallery at Trudeau's with a flourish worthy of coaching's palmiest days. The passengers alighted; and again the girl with the green wings in her hat became the cynosure of every eye. Garth delivered her into the comfortable arms of

Mrs. Trudeau, who took her upstairs. Turning back into the general room, he asked the first man he met where the Bishop lived.

"Up the street and to the left a piece," was the reply. "But say—"

"Well?" said Garth.

"The Bishop and his party started up the river two days ago."

Garth, turning, saw Nick Grylls listening with an evil grin.

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AT MIWASA LANDING

Miwasa Landing is the jumping-off place of civilization; here, at Trudeau's, is the last billiard table, and the last piano; here, the wayfarer sleeps for the last time on springs, and eats his last "square" ere the wilderness swallows him. It is at once the rendezvous, the place of good-byes, and the gossip-exchange of the North; here, the incomer first apprehends the intimate, village spirit of that vast land, where a man's doings are registered with more particularity than in the smallest hamlet

outside. For where there are not, in half a million square miles, enough white men to fill a room, or as many white women as a man has fingers, each individual fills a large space in the picture. Away up in Fort Somervell, three months' journey from Prince George, they speak of "town" as if it were five miles off.

And Trudeau's on the river bank, quite imposing with its three stories and its gingerbread gallery, is the nucleus of it all. Trudeau's is a reminder of the jolly bustling inns of a century ago. The traders, the policemen, the mail-carriers, the rivermen and the freighters come and go; each sits for a day or two in the row of chairs tipped back against the wall—for no one is ever in a hurry in the North—gives his news, if he be on the way "out"; takes it if he be coming "in"; and appoints to meet his friends there next year. The commonest type of all is the genial dilettante, the man who traps a little, prospects a little, grows a few potatoes, and loafs a great deal. Trudeau's is also the eddy which sooner or later sucks in the derelicts of the country, sons or brothers of somebody, incredibly unshaven and down at heel; capitalists of bluster and labourers with the tongue.

Such was the crowd that witnessed Natalie's arrival open-mouthed; and such the individuals that fastened themselves in turn on Garth, with the determination of extracting a full explanation of the

phenomenon. Garth succeeded in avoiding at the same time giving offense and giving information. But he could not prevent a fine podful of rumours from bursting at the Landing, and scattering seeds broadcast over the North.

He found a letter awaiting him from the Bishop.

> "I find," he wrote, "that Captain Jack Dexter's steamboat will be going up the river to the Warehouse in the middle of the week; and as my preparations are completed a day or two earlier than I expected, I am starting on ahead with my outfit. You will probably overtake us in the big river, as we have to track all the way; but should you be delayed, I will go on up the rapids; and will see that a wagon is waiting for you at the Warehouse, to bring you to me at Pierre Toma's house on Musquasepi. This will be more comfortable for you, as all this first part of the journey is tedious up-stream work."

The good man little suspected when he wrote it what a quandary his kindly note would throw Garth into.

After supper, he and Natalie, sitting in the rigid little parlour upstairs, talked it over; while Mademoiselle Trudeau, aged fifteen, sought to entertain them by rendering

effete popular songs on the famous piano. From below came the rise and fall of deep-voiced talk, and the incessant click of billiard balls.

Natalie made a picture of adorable perplexity to Garth's eyes as she said: "What would you advise me to do?"

"How can I advise you?" he said, looking away; "I do not know all the circumstances."

"But I can't tell you now," she said appealingly. "Don't you see, my reasons for going must not be allowed to influence our decision as to whether I *can* go?"

Garth did not exactly see this; but unwilling to beg for her confidence, he remained silent.

"My trouble is," she continued presently, "that if we follow the Bishop and overtake him, he'll virtually be obliged to take me; and I do not wish to force myself on him."

"As to that," Garth said, "one has to give and take in the North. It's not like it is outside. Besides, we pay our own score you know; and carry our own grub. I'll answer for the Bishop."

"Then I see no reason why I should not go," she said.

The journey with her stretched itself rosily before Garth's mind's eye; but his instinct to take care of her made him oppose it.

"There is me," he said diffidently; "travelling alone with me, I mean. Even in the North a girl is obliged to consider what people will say."

Natalie shook her shoulders impatiently. "There's not the slightest use urging reasons of propriety," she said resolutely. "As long as my conscience is clear, I can't afford to consider it. This is too important. It affects my whole life," she added in a deeper voice. "There's something up there I have to find out!"

Something in this made Garth's hopes lift up a little; for she did not speak as one whose heart was in thrall.

Mademoiselle Trudeau concluded her piece with an ear-tearing discord; and turned, self-consciously inviting applause.

"How well you play, dear!" said Natalie, the wheedler. "Isn't it nice to have music away up here! Try something else."

The performer, adoring Natalie, promptly turned her pig-tails to them again, and attacked "Two Little Girls in Blue." Garth groaned.

"Discourages listeners," remarked Natalie, indicating the curtained doorway.

"So," she continued presently, "if you haven't any better reasons to urge against it, we'll consider the matter settled."

"Couldn't I go for you?" asked Garth.

She resolutely shook her head. "I have promised," she said.

"It was a promise given in ignorance of the conditions," Garth persisted with rough tenderness. "This wild country is no place for you. I could not bear to see you wet and hungry and cold and tired, and all that is before us—besides dangers we may not suspect."

Natalie faced him with shining eyes. "Clumsy man!" she cried—but there was tenderness in her scorn too. "Do you think this is persuading me not to go? I'm not a doll; I won't spoil with a little rough handling! If you only knew how I longed to experience the real; to work for my living, to get under the surface of things!"

Garth, amazed and admiring of her bold spirit, was silenced.

As they were parting for the night, she said: "As soon as the steamboat casts off, and it's too late to turn back, I will tell you what I have to do up there."

Next morning Garth sought an interview with Captain Jack Dexter of the *Aurora Borealis*. At once proprietor, skipper and business manager of his boat, and serenely independent of competition, he was a type new to Garth. His single concession to sea-faring attire was a yachting cap several

sizes too small, perched on his spreading brown curls. His face was red; his eyes anxious, blue and bulging. He had the unwholesome, frenetic aspect of the patent medicine enthusiast, not uncommon in the North. Garth interrupted him in a grave discussion of the relative merits of "Pain Killer" and "Golden Discovery."

"I may take a run up to the Warehouse," he said guardedly, in answer to the question. "I'll let you know to-morrow."

"Aren't you sure of going?" asked Garth in some dismay.

"Never sure of nothing in this world," said Captain Jack, with a glance around the circle, sure of applause.

Garth bit his lip. "Haven't you freight to go up?" he asked quietly.

"Plenty of freight offered me," said the skipper coolly. "Plenty to go down-stream too."

"But it's highly important I should know what you're going to do," said Garth with increasing heat.

Captain Jack cocked a wary eye at the sky, and spat. "No water in the river," he said at length.

"Then you're *not* going," said Garth.

"Didn't say so," said Captain Jack. "May rain shortly, and bring her up an inch or

so."

The sky was clear and speckless as an azure bowl. "Do you mean I've got to wait around here indefinitely on the bare chance of its raining?" demanded Garth.

"Told the Bishop I'd bring you up," said Captain Jack in his detached way. "Reckon I can't break my word to the Church."

"Well, why didn't you say so in the beginning?" said Garth, wondering if this was a joke. "When will you be starting?"

"Oh, to-morrow, maybe," said the skipper without suspecting the least humour in the situation; "or Thursday—or Friday; whenever I can get the boys together. You just stay around and I'll let you know."

With this Garth was forced to be content.

Next there was the business of laying in supplies from the "Company." Garth tasted to the full the sweets of partnership, as he and Natalie gauged each other's appetite, and made their calculations. Paul Smiley accompanied them in the capacity of expert adviser; but the old man was inclined to be scandalized at the extravagant luxuries Garth insisted on adding to the five great staples of Northern travel; viz., bacon, flour, baking-powder, tea and sugar. Garth must have besides, canned vegetables and milk for Natalie; also cocoa, jam and fresh butter. The whole was contained in four goodly

boxes.

"Mercy!" exclaimed Natalie. "Fancy our two little selves getting outside all that! Picture us waddling back to civilization."

Garth also made the necessary rougher additions to her wardrobe; and bought her a rifle of small calibre.

In the afternoon, with strict injunctions to Natalie to remain indoors during his absence, he set off to a half-breed cabin a mile up the river, to obtain a supply of moccasins for both. Mademoiselle Trudeau undertook to bear Natalie company at home.

He had not been gone long before the Convent-bred child with her precise phrases began to get on the nerves of the irrepressible Natalie. At the same time the exquisite clarity of the Northern summer air, the delicate mantling blue overhead, and the liquid sunshine on the foliage all began to tempt her sorely. Across the road a field of squirrel-tail, dimpling silkily in the breeze, stretched to the river bank, and she saw she could cross it without passing any house. Natalie was never the one to resist such a lure; she sent the child away on an imaginary errand, and slipping out by the side door, crossed the field, and gained the bank without, as she fondly hoped, having been seen by the row of gossipers with their chairs tipped back against the front of the building. Rejoicing in her freedom, she followed the

path Garth had taken along the edge of the bank, thinking how pleasant it would be to surprise him coming home, and planning how she would cajole him into forgiving her disobedience. The thought of Garth's being angry with her caused a strange, vague little thrill, half dismay, half pleasure.

Natalie had not escaped the hotel unobserved; as she went leisurely waving her banners along the river path, a gross, burly figure with downcast head followed, pausing when she paused, and taking advantage of the taller bushes for cover. It was not characteristic of Natalie to look behind her; she continued her zigzag course all unconscious; sweeping her skirts through the grass, and ever and anon whistling snatches like a bird. Presently finding herself among wild raspberry bushes laden with fruit, she gave herself up to delicate feasting; searching among the leaves bright-eyed, like a bird, and popping the berries into her mouth—the raspberries paled beside the bloomy lips that parted to receive them. At last she plumped down on a stone beside the path; and gazing up the unknown river of her journey, thought her birdlike thoughts.

Nick Grylls appeared around the bushes. For the fraction of a second she was utterly dismayed; then sharply calling in her flying forces, she nodded politely, as one nods to a passer-by; and looked

elsewhere.

But the man had no intention of taking the hint. He had the grace to pull off his hat—the first time he had bared his head to a woman in many a long day—and he paused, awkwardly searching in his mind for the ingratiating thing to say. What he finally blurted out was not at all what he intended.

"You think I'm a coarse, rude fellow, Miss," he said with the air of a whipped schoolboy.

Natalie's thoughts beat their wings desperately against her head. Here, indeed, was a situation to try the pluck of a highly civilized young lady. What should she do? What should she say? What tone should she take? In the end she was quite honest.

"You have never given me any reason to think otherwise," she said. Her secret agitation peeped out in the added briskness of her tones.

Grylls incessantly turned his hat brim in his fat freckled hands. "I am not as bad as you think," he said dully. "Somehow I seem to have a worse look when I am by you."

Natalie let it go at that.

"I ain't had early advantages," he continued. "I never learned how to dress spruce; and talk good grammar. But a man

may have good metal in him for all that."

"Certainly!" said Natalie crisply.

"There ain't no reason why we shouldn't be friends," he said humbly.

"None at all," she returned. "Neither do I see any reason why we should be."

"But say, I can help you up here," he said eagerly. "I know the ropes. I have the trick of mastering the breeds. I have money in the country. I can do what I like."

"You wouldn't want me to simulate friendship for the purpose of using you?" said Natalie.

"Yes, I would," he sullenly returned. "I'd take your good will on any terms."

The difficulties of her position, it seemed to her, were increasing at a frightful ratio. The fact that Garth might at any moment come face to face with Grylls only added to her fears. But she gave Grylls no sign of the weakness within.

"I can't make believe to be friendly," she said briefly. "I give it gladly when I can."

"Show me what to do to be friends with you," he pleaded, not without eloquence. "I have the time and the money and the determination to do it—anything!"

But it was impossible Natalie should feel the slightest pity for a creature of so gross an aspect. "I cannot show you," she said

coolly. "You must teach yourself."

Grylls began to be encouraged by his own rising passion. "All I ask is a fair show," he said in a more assured voice. "Give me a chance as well as this squib of a reporter you picked up in Prince George. What can *he* do for you? Let me take you to the Bishop. I can carry his whole party through the country at a rate he never thought of!"

Downright anger now came to Natalie's aid. "My arrangements are made," she said curtly. "I do not care to change them."

Grylls's eyes quailed again under the direct look of hers; and a deeper red crept under his skin. His tone changed. "If I can't help, I can hinder," he muttered.

"Threats will not help you," said Natalie, instantly and clearly.

"You don't know what you're up against," he continued, still muttering, "I tell you I carry the breeds in my pocket. No white man knows them but me. I can hold you up wherever I please. I've only to give the word and you'll starve on the trail—you and your reporter!"

Natalie arose. For the moment she was too angry to speak. The man looked on her flashing beauty; and in the madness of his desire to possess it he forgot his awe of her.

"God! How beautiful you are!" was forced

from his breast like a groan. "You poison a man's blood!" His speech came in thick blurts like clotting blood. "What business have you got up here? This is no country for the likes of you!... I was a strong man before you came; and since I looked at you I'm sick ... sick ... sick ... you've stolen my manhood out of me! Don't you owe me common civility in return? I'd fawn like a dog for a kindly look!... But don't you provoke me too far—don't think, because maybe I can't meet your eye, I couldn't crush you—or have others do it! You and your damned follower!... Oh, that would give me ease!"

Natalie's breath came like a frightened bird's. Flight she realized was dangerous—but it was as dangerous to stay; and how could she stay listening to such impieties! Nick Grylls's own bulk cut off her retreat in the direction of the settlement—but somewhere in the other direction was Garth. She sized up the man in a darting glance; his swollen bulk promised shortness of breath.

He made a move toward her. "What's to prevent me from taking you now?" he muttered.

Natalie, turning, fled along the path; running like a bird with incredibly swift, short steps.

Nick Grylls plunged after her, passion lending his great bulk lightness and speed. The path, which is used for tracking boats

up-stream, skirted the extreme edge of a high-cut-bank bordering the river. On the one hand a single false step would have precipitated them to the beach twenty-five feet below; on the other hand the branches of an impenetrable undergrowth scourged their faces as they ran. Here and there the rain had worn deep fissures, across which leaped the nymph Natalie, with the panting Silenus close at her heels. She was running desperately over unfamiliar ground, knowing nothing of what lay ahead. She got away quicker than he; but he gained on her. The pursuer always has the advantage, in that he can measure his distance; and the quarry must make the pace.

The scene flashed past her like the half-sensed panorama of a hideous dream. She dared not look over her shoulder, but she could hear his heavy steps falling closer and closer. "He can run faster than I," she thought; and a dreadful sinking clutched her heart. She hazarded a fearful glance at the water below. The man's fingers clawed at her back. In another instant she would have leapt over; but she felt the ground tremble and give under her feet. She staggered, and with a desperate leap, gained a firm foothold beyond. Behind her, with a rumble and a hissing roar a great section of the bank half slid, half fell to the river beach beneath, carrying down bushes, trees, stones—and her pursuer.

She ran on without a backward look. In

her thankful heart she could now spare a glance of pity for the half-crazed man; but it did not carry her to the length of stopping to see what had befallen him.

A little way farther on, the bank flattened down into a little valley, which conveyed a brook to the river. A path struck inland here. Natalie, leaping from stone to stone across the stream, suddenly saw Garth's figure heave into sight around a bend in the path. Instantly she slackened her pace; and her hands went to her breast to control the agitation of the tenant there. She did not intend he should learn what had happened.

So when they met she was perfectly quiet; but her eyes were luminous, and her voice had a new dove-like note. To tell the truth, at the sight of him striding along, pipe in mouth, with an interested eye for all that showed; so cool and strong; so honest and clean and young; after what she had just been through, Natalie was hard put to it to forbear casting herself on his breast forthwith, and letting her heart still itself there.

He instantly started to scold her for venturing so far alone. She was glad to be scolded. She could not help slipping her arm through his for a moment, just to feel that he was there.

"I will be good," she murmured in a moved, vibrant tone, like the deepest note of the oboe. "Hereafter I will do exactly as

you say."

Garth trembled at the sound; and was silent in the excess of his happiness.

Returning, upon reaching the path up the valley, she made him turn inland; and they pursued a roundabout course back to the hotel. Nick Grylls, unhurt except as to certain abrasions of the countenance, and furiously sullen, had reached there before them. During the rest of their stay he carefully avoided them; but Garth was more than once conscious of the venomous little eyes fixed upon him.

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NATALIE TELLS ABOUT HERSELF

The little stern-wheeler lay with her nose tucked comfortably in the mud of the river bank; and a hawser taut between her capstan and a tree. Every soul on board, except the three passengers, slept. Garth and Natalie were sitting in the corner of the upper deck astern, on the seat which encircles the rail. The third passenger, a mysterious person, who all unknown to the other two had been making it her business to watch them, observing where

they sat, had softly entered the end stateroom; and with her head at the window, stretched her ears to hear their talk.

The *Aurora Borealis*, after the loss of three precious days, during which Captain Jack endlessly backed and filled, and the water in the river steadily fell, had finally cast off that afternoon; and after ascending twenty miles or so, tied up to the bank to await the dawn. It was now about ten; overcast above; velvety dark below; and still as death. For the first time Garth and Natalie missed, with a catch in the breath, the faint, domestic murmur that rises on the quietest night from an inhabited land. It was so still they could occasionally hear the stealthy fall of tiny, furry feet among the leaves on shore. The trees kept watch on the bank like a regiment of shades at attention. The moment provided Natalie's opportunity to fulfil her promise.

"I will try to be very frank," she began by saying, "I am so anxious you should not misunderstand. You have been so good to me!"

"Please don't," said Garth uncomfortably. "Take me for granted as a man would. I shall never be at ease with you, if you're going to be thanking me at every opportunity!"

"I'll try not to," she said meekly. The darkness swallowed the smile and the shine her eyes bent on him.

If Garth expected a sad beginning he was immediately undeceived. Natalie's invincible spirits launched her gaily on her tale.

"I've lived all my days in a Canadian city back East," she began; "too big a place to be simple; and too small to be finished. I never appreciated the funny side of it until I travelled. You have no idea of the complacency of such a place, the beautiful self-sufficiency of the people; you should hear what a patronizing tone they take toward the outside world! But they have their good points; they're kind and friendly with each other; and not nearly so snobbish as the people of little places are generally pictured. Everybody that is anybody knows all the other somebodies so well, it's like one great family. My people have lived there for ages; and so everybody knows me; and half of them are my cousins.

"We've always been as poor as church mice," she continued in a tone of cheerful frankness. "We live in a huge house that is gradually coming down about our ears; the drawing-room carpet is full of holes; the old silver is shockingly dented and the Royal Worcester all chipped. There are other household secrets I need not go into. People are kind enough to make believe not to notice—even when they get a chunk of plaster on the head.

"Everybody says it's my father's fault; they

say he's a ne'er-do-weel; and even unkinder things. But he's such a dear boy"—Natalie's voice softened—"as young, oh! years younger than you! And everything invariably goes wrong with his affairs," she continued briskly; "but he is always good-tempered, and never neglects to be polite to the ladies. My mother has been an invalid for ten years. We do all we can for her; but, poor dear! she isn't much interested in us! Can you blame her? And I have half a dozen dear, bad little brothers and sisters. We're all exactly alike; we fight all the time and love one another to distraction.

"You see it's not a picture of a well-ordered household I'm drawing you. Indeed it's a mystery how we ever get along at all; but we do, somehow; and no one the worse. Fortunately there seems to be something about us that people like. They just wag their heads and laugh and exclaim, 'Oh, the Blands!' and don't expect anything better of us. Conversations are started when some one comes in saying: 'Have you heard the latest about the Blands?' I'm sure they would be disappointed if we ever reformed. People have always been so kind to me"—Natalie's voice deepened again—"Ah! so *very* kind, it makes my heart swell and my eyelids prickle when I think of it. I've been carried everywhere in luxury like an heiress," she briskened, "and there is no doubt I have been thoroughly spoiled."

Natalie paused awhile here; and Garth apprehended that, the prologue finished, the story was about to commence.

"A man, the first, fell in love with me when I was eighteen—six years ago," she presently resumed. "Of course I do not count all the dear, foolish boys before that—they say in Millerton that the boys attach themselves to me to finish their education—but that's all foolishness. I'm so very fond of boys! I could laugh and hug them all! They're so—so theatrical! But the man was different; he was fifteen years older than I; and alas! another ne'er-do-weel! He had been a football and a cricketing hero; he was very good-looking in a worn-out, dissipated kind of a way. He had gone to the bad in all the usual ways I believe—even dishonesty; though I didn't learn that until long afterward." The fun had died out of Natalie's voice now. "It's a miserable, ordinary kind of a story, isn't it?" she said deprecatingly. "Most girls go through with it safely; but I—well I was the simple sprat that was caught!

"He was returning to Millerton after a long absence," she went on; "his people were well known there. He appeared to be perfectly mad about me; and my poor little head was quite turned. His wickedness was vague and romantic; for no one ever explained anything to me of course; and the idea of leading him back into the paths of righteousness was quite distractingly attractive. I had no one to

put me right, you see—but perhaps I wouldn't have listened if I had had.

"I won't weary you with all the silly details of the affair. My cheeks are burning now at the thought of my colossal folly. He won his mother over to his side. He was an only child; and she would have chopped off her hand to serve him. She joined her persuasions to his. He swore if I married him he would go out West, turn over that everlasting new leaf, and make his fortune. He wanted me to marry him before he went, so that he could feel sure of me. I did balk at that; I thought my word ought to be sufficient; but he and his mother pleaded and pleaded with me. Together, they were too much for me; and so, at last, I gave in. I thought I would be saving him; I thought I loved him—it is so easy for children to fool themselves! I married him."

Natalie paused; and with the ceasing of her voice, the great silence of the North woods seemed to leap between them, thrusting them asunder. Garth's heart for the journey was gone. He was thankful for the merciful darkness that hid his face.

Presently she resumed in the toneless voice of one who tells what cannot be mended: "We were married in Toronto. His mother and the clergyman were the only witnesses. The instant the words were spoken, the whole extent of the hideous mistake I had made was revealed

to me—why is it we see so clearly *then*? We went direct from the ceremony to the station, where he boarded his train for the West. I have not laid eyes on him since. His name is Herbert Mabyn—and that, of course, is my legal name, which I have never used. It was his mother you met in Prince George."

Garth drew a deep breath; and carefully schooled his voice. "Is he alive?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "My journey is to find him."

"Was it necessary for *you* to come?" he asked.

"There was no one else," she said. "No one but Mrs. Mabyn and he and I know of the marriage. There were many reasons—and complicated ones. I do wish to be frank with you; but I scarcely know how to explain. Only one thing is clear to me; I *had* to come; or never know peace again.

"I have a conscience," she went on presently; "a queer, twisted thing; and with every man that became fond of me, thinking I was free, it hurt me more—though perhaps it did *them* no real harm. And then there was Mrs. Mabyn—how can I explain to you about her?"

"I think I understand," Garth put in.

"She has been very kind to me all these years; but it was a kind of tyrannical kindness, too—it was as if she was tying

me to her with one chain of kindness after another. And I wished to live my own life! And it seemed to me that the only way in which I could discharge my obligations to her, and win my freedom, was by doing this thing, which she so ardently desires. She believes, you see, that I am the only one who can save him."

Garth muttered something which sounded uncomplimentary to Mrs. Mabyn.

"But I am really fond of her," Natalie said quickly. "She has a mortal disease," she added; "one must make allowances for that."

"Where is *he*?" Garth asked.

"His last letter, eight months ago, was post-marked Spirit River Crossing," she said. "We gathered from it that he had a place somewhere near there. We know very little. At first he wrote often and cheerfully; he seemed to be getting on: but later, he moved about a great deal; his letters came at longer intervals; and the tone of them changed. His mother thinks his health has broken down. I am to find out; and to save him, if I can."

There was a long silence here. Garth could not speak for the fear of betraying an indignation which could only have hurt her; and Natalie was busy with her own painful thoughts.

"There is something else," she resumed at

last in a very low tone. "I have not yet been quite frank with you—and I do so wish to be! You must not think I am undertaking this purely on his mother's account; for there is a selfish reason too. In the bottom of my heart there is a hope—perhaps it is a wicked hope—but if you knew how this collar has galled me!" She stopped; and then quickly resumed. "I married this man with my eyes open; and I will do my part by him—but if—" her voice fell again—"if it has not helped him; if in spite of my honest efforts to save him, and all the letters I wrote, if he has fallen lower than ever, and has ceased to struggle—then I will consider my part done!"

There seemed to be no more to say. Garth's heart was beating fast; and he was longing to tell her that he understood, and that he loved and admired her for what she had told him, but he could not tell her coldly, and he would not tell her warmly. As for Natalie, she waited breathlessly for his first word; mightily desiring his approval, but too proud to ask it. Finally she could stand the suspense no longer and pride succumbed. It took her a long time to get the question out.

"Are you—are you sorry you volunteered to take me?" she faltered.

"No!" cried Garth in a great voice.

She found his hand in the darkness; and gave it a swift, grateful squeeze. "Good

night!" she whispered; and ran to her stateroom.

Garth, with his pipe and the mighty stillness to bear him company, remained on deck until dawn. In the spirit of the North he discovered something akin to his own soul; the solitude and the stillness braced him to deny himself manfully what was not manfully his to have. In the act of relinquishing Natalie, he felt, what he would not have supposed possible, a great, added tenderness for her. Before he went in, his sober cheerfulness had returned; but in the morning he was somehow more mature.

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VII

MARY CO-QUE-WASA'S ERRAND

At noon next day the little *Aurora Borealis* was reclining drunkenly on a shoal in the river at the foot of Caliper island, sixty miles above the Landing, and fifteen below the Warehouse. This had been the place of Captain Jack's gloomy forebodings all the way up. The river spread wide, shallow and swift on either side the island, and neither one channel nor the other would permit their ascent.

The *Aurora* was having a little breathing space on the shoal, while Captain Jack and St. Paul, the big half-breed pilot, debated below on what to do.

The three passengers looked on from the upper deck. Natalie and Garth tacitly ignored any change in their relation to-day; and no reference was made to Natalie's story. They seemed, if anything, more friendly with each other; nevertheless Constraint, like a spectre standing between them, intercepted all their communications.

The third passenger was a half-breed woman nearing middle age, clad in a decent black print dress, and a black straw hat, under the brim of which depended a circlet of attenuated, grizzled curls. Her face, like that of all the natives in the presence of whites, expressed a blank, in her case a mysterious blank. She was silent and ubiquitous; whichever way they looked, there she was. Captain Jack had mentioned to Garth that her name was Mary Co-que-wasa. The off-hand shrug that accompanied the information, between men, was significant. Garth resented it; and his sympathies were enlisted. He had made several efforts to talk to the woman, only to be received with a stupid shake of the head. He thought she could not speak English. Natalie, more keenly intuitive, took an active dislike to her. "I'm sure she listens to us," she had said.

Meanwhile, preparations were undertaken to hoist the *Aurora Borealis* by main strength up the rapids. The "skiff," as they whimsically termed the steamboat's great, clumsy tender—its official name of "*sturgeon-head*" was more descriptive—was brought alongside; and a half-mile of hawser, more or less, patiently coiled in the bottom. The end of this rope was made fast on board the steamer, and the skiff, pushing off, was poled and tracked up the rapids with heart-breaking labour, paying out the hawser over her stern as she went. The other end of the rope was made fast to a great tree on the shore above, and, the skiff returning, the inboard end was turned about the capstan. Steam was then turned on, and with a great to-do of puffing and clanking, the *Aurora* started to haul herself up hand over hand, as one might say.

Alas! she had no sooner raised her head than the hawser parted in the middle with a report like a small cannon, and she settled dejectedly back on the shoal.

Captain Jack refreshed himself with a pull at the Spring Tonic bottle; and started all over. A newer piece of hawser was produced, and the skiff despatched once more on its laborious errand. The loose end was finally picked up and knotted, and the capstan started again. But no better success followed, as soon as the full strain came upon it, the rope burst asunder in a new place. After this they

went around the other side of the island and tried there. Each attempt consumed an hour or more, but time is nothing in the North.

At five o'clock, after the failure of the fourth attempt, Captain Jack threw up his hands, and turned the *Aurora's* nose down-stream. The little boat, which had sulked and hung back in the rapids all day, picked up her heels, and hustled down with the current, like a wilful child that obtains its own way at last.

Garth, in dismay, hastened to Captain Jack.

"Where are we going?" he demanded.

Captain Jack cocked an eye, and said with his air of gloomy fatalism: "The Landing's the only place for me."

Garth became hot under the collar, as he always did in dealing with the pessimistic skipper. "But we're only fifteen miles from the Warehouse!" he cried.

"Might as well be fifteen hundred," said Captain Jack, "for all I can get you there."

"Is there no house anywhere near?"

The skipper looked at him with gloomy scorn. "Say, do you think you're in a rural neighbourhood?" he inquired.

"I asked you a question," Garth repeated. "Is there any one living near here?"

Captain Jack shrugged. "Sometimes there's breeds at Bear Portage below," he said. "But not in the summer."

"Is there no road?"

"Not what *you'd* call a road. How would you carry your outfit?"

This was a poser, Garth could not deny. "Where are the breeds in the summer?" he demanded.

Captain Jack flung up his hands. "God knows!" he said. "Pitching somewheres about between the East and the West!"

Garth set his jaw. "Well, there's some way of reaching the Warehouse," he said, "and I'm going to find it. You stop at Bear Portage, as you call it, and I'll see what I can do."

"Sure!" said Captain Jack hopelessly. "As long as you like—But you'll never make it!" he added with an atrabilious eye. "Never in God's world! You better take my advice and get out of the country while you can!"

Garth turned on his heel, and Captain Jack revisited his stateroom for consolation. Here, two shelves at the foot of his berth contained his pharmaceutical stock in ancient, torn and fly-specked wrappers. He bought every new variety of remedy he heard of with the ardour of a collector. One of his most serious occupations was to lie in bed in the

morning, making up his mind what to begin the day on. Endless and ingenious were the combinations he made.

They tied up at Bear Portage and had supper. Afterward, three breed boys with their scent for happenings in the bush, as unerring and mysterious as the buzzard's scent for carrion, turned up from nowhere, and at the same time a fourth came nosing under the bank in a crazy dugout filled with grass. So soft was the arrival of the last that Garth was not aware of it, until he happened to catch sight of Mary Coque-wasa deep in a whispered consultation with the paddler. Finding Garth's eyes upon her, Mary, with a hasty word to the boy, embarked, and the canoe's nose was turned up-stream. As a possible means of transport later, Garth called after the boy; but he only paddled the faster. The incident caused Garth a vague uneasiness.

In the other three he found a means, such as it was, of extricating them from their dilemma. He learned through St. Paul, who interpreted, that there was a camp of Indians engaged in cutting wild hay, seven miles off, and that a wagon and team could be got there next morning, to carry them and their goods to the Warehouse. At the mention of seven miles, Garth looked dubiously at Natalie, but she stoutly averred her ability to do it twice if necessary, and since nothing better offered, Garth hired the boys to show the

way and carry the baggage.

The *Aurora Borealis* presently backed off, and blithely kicking up the water astern, disappeared down the river. Her going out severed their last bond with the world of civilization and henceforth they must fend for themselves in the wilderness. Natalie looked around at the grim, empty woods, and at the strange, alien boys who were to conduct them; and instinctively put out her hand to Garth.

The eldest and smartest of the breeds was a beady-eyed youth answering to the name of Pake. When the *Aurora* passed out of sight his demeanour changed. It was not that he became openly insolent, but what was harder for Garth to deal with, he was blandly and blankly indifferent to the whites. Garth inwardly fumed, and there was a heavy weight of anxiety, too, for Natalie. Pake constructed packing harness out of rope, and divided all their goods into five lots, of which four were of about equal weight, and the fifth lighter. This one Garth supposed was for Natalie, though he thought it too heavy, but to his astonishment he learned Pake intended the light pack for himself, and one of the others for Natalie. Upon Garth's vigorous objections, Pake coolly added the greater part of Natalie's load to Garth's.

Hampered as he was by his augmented pack, Garth still managed to carry his rifle across his arm. And yet St. Paul, who

interpreted for him, had assured him these were good boys and would treat him well. St. Paul was right, when Garth had been in the country longer he learned this was simply the breed way. Only superior, or at least equal, numbers will impress them, and then they are obsequious enough in good sooth.

Whatever Natalie thought of their situation, she put on a bold air. As they started Indian file, under the great trees in the gathering dusk, the three swarthy youths in advance bowed under their packs: "Look!" she cried. "Isn't it like the frontispiece to a book of adventure!"

The breeds inherit from the red side of the house a shuffling half-trot, produced with steady shoulders and rolling hips, that is a good deal faster than it looks. Natalie with her tiny bundle had much ado to keep up, and Garth under his, plodded doggedly behind, with breaking neck and shoulders. The breeds, careless of their fate, never once looked behind. Garth had to keep them in sight, or instantly lose the faint trail in the darkness.

After several miles of this, without warning, the breeds simultaneously cast their packs on the ground, and took a rest. Every move these strange creatures made was unexpected. Garth laboriously ridding himself of his burden, proceeded to read them a severe lecture on the necessity of accommodating their pace to the lady's for

the rest of the way. It was received with stolid, uncomprehending stares.

Among themselves they gossiped freely enough, and from the frequent recurrence of the word *moon-i-yas*, Garth knew that he and Natalie were the subject of it all. The discomforting thought did not fail to suggest itself that they might be hatching a plot in the very presence of their intended victims. Their outfit, Garth reflected, must seem a very fortune to the ragged breeds. He watched them closely.

Presently they set off again as fast as ever, whereupon Garth did as he should have done at first, lost his temper, and swore at them roundly. Pake looked around with a gleam of awakened intelligence, and slackened his pace. After a brief consultation, Pake and another set off in advance with their share of the goods, leaving the third boy to guide the feebler steps of the two *moon-i-yas*. Garth wondered if they would ever see Pake and the boxes again.

It was a long seven miles; and absolute darkness clothed the lofty aisles of the pine trees long before they finished passing through; and beyond there were interminable, misty meadows of wild grass to be crossed. Garth could no longer distinguish any sign of a trail; but the breed bent steadily ahead. Once or twice an owl whirred suddenly low over their heads; and somewhere far off a loon

guffawed insanely. In the end their guide, to cheer his own soul, lifted up his voice in the strident, unearthly chant of the Crees; and it only needed this to add the last touch of unreality to their eerie journey. They began to feel like spirits after death, hurried in the darkness they knew not whither.

At last a bright light flared suddenly across the hay marsh; and from their guide's joyful exclamation, they gathered that it marked the end of their journey. Fire was something human and known; and amazingly cheering. They covered the last lap at a brisk pace.

Five tepees, faintly phosphorescent with interior fires, stood in a line where the pine trees bounded the hay marsh. Garth's mind was relieved to find Pake waiting with the balance of the outfit intact. The fire they had seen was from an armful of brush lighted for a beacon to guide them. The people were all within. The three breed boys dived into the principal tepee without ceremony, leaving Garth and Natalie standing rather foolishly outside. They were evidently expected to follow; for presently a head was stuck inquiringly outside; and what they took for an invitation to enter was delivered in Cree.

"Let us go in," whispered Natalie. "I'm crazy to see what it's like!"

Without more ado, she lifted the flap which covered the entrance, and crawled,

blinking, into the light, Garth close at her heels.

A fire was built on the ground in the centre of the tepee; and the smoke, filling the apex, finally found itself out at the top. Around the fire was grouped a motley, gipsy crew of all ages; the elders in the place of honour above the fire; the children by the door. The firelight threw their copper-coloured faces into strong relief; each wore an expression of stolid expectation. Stolidity is the pet affectation of the breed; at heart he is as garrulous as an ape. Like mongrels generally, their manners were bad; a grunt served for welcome, and places were coolly pointed out where they should sit.

With that the guests were forthwith yielded up to discussion, while the whole circle stared at them as if they were vegetables. In especial, the children sitting across the fire, transfixed them with eyes, under each mop of raven hair, as hard, bright and unwinking as the eyes of little birds of prey. Young Pake sat at the right hand of the principal man—a personage in frayed overalls and cotton shirt, with a scarlet handkerchief about his temples—and called attention to the points of the two *moon-i-yas* like their showman. After all the elders had partaken of tea, somebody recollected to thrust the battered pot at Garth and Natalie, with two more than doubtful tin cups. They declined to partake.

Garth was fuming. "Let's get out," he whispered.

"Just a minute," Natalie begged, with bright eyes. "Never mind their manners. It's all so strange and different!"

Presently the preparations for retiring, which their arrival had probably interrupted, were resumed. Hideously dirty and torn comforters with protruding cotton filling, were spread on the ground; and individuals began to roll up, feet to the fire. A woman indicated a place for Garth and Natalie, side by side. When her meaning became clear, they elaborately avoided each other's eyes, and Natalie beat a hasty retreat outside. She never again expressed a wish to enter a tepee. Garth, blushing to the roots of his hair, explained that they preferred to sleep outside. The breeds let them go, with a shrug for the queer ways of the *moon-i-yas*.

Garth pitched the little tent he had for Natalie under the pine trees at a short distance, and spread her bed on balsam boughs inside, with tender hands. Natalie had suddenly half collapsed like a sleepy child. She disappeared with a murmured good night, and was heard of no more until morning. Garth spread his own bed under the stars, athwart the door of the tent. He remembered, before turning in, that they lacked water, and returned to the tepee to ask where it was to be

procured. As he entered the second time, his attention was arrested by the sound of Mary Co-que-wasa's name on Pake's lips.

"Who is Mary Co-que-wasa?" he asked, recollecting his previous uneasiness.

It appeared they could understand English well enough when they had a mind to. The women visibly bridled, as women white or red will do, when an erring ewe of the flock is mentioned in company.

"Mary Co-que-wasa—one—bad—woman," said one, with the toneless enunciation of a parrot.

Another volunteered further information in Cree, in which the names of Mary and Nick Grylls were coupled.

"What's that?" demanded the startled Garth.

"Mary Co-que-wasa—Nick Grylls's—woman," said his first informant.

That was all he could get out of them. It did not conduce to the ease of his first bed in the wilderness.

In the morning Natalie issued forth radiant; and Garth marvelled afresh at the vision of urban perfection she made in the wilderness. He was blowing the fire at the time; a typical tenderfoot's fire, all tinder

and no fuel, at which the breeds grinned askance. He soon learned better. The breeds haunted their camp, enjoying their struggles with that superior, insulting grin. Natalie, rolling up her sleeves, announced her intention of cooking the breakfast, while Garth struck camp. She who had never cooked under the best of conditions, had a sad time of it balancing a frying pan on a fire of twigs, and keeping the water in the pot long enough for it to come to a boil. They were sad-looking lumps of bacon that she offered Garth, burnt withal, and she gravely informed him there was a small slice of her thumb cooked up with it. The cocoa, too, which obstinately refused to dissolve in a cold element, was watery and full of lumps; however they still had civilized bread and butter; and Garth would have eaten Paris green with gusto, if offered with the same appealing smile.

Afterward an ancient box wagon came rattling up, drawn by two champing cayuses, guided by Pake, the "wise guy" of the bush. The duffle was thrown in; Pake and one of his brethren coolly preëmpted the box, allowing Garth and Natalie to dispose themselves as they chose among the freight; and they set off at a smart pace across the gloriously sunny meadow.

It was rough enough in all conscience; and in spite of every effort to brace themselves in the body of the wagon, they were shaken about like corn in a hopper. But in

the bush it was worse; there, though their pace necessarily slackened, what with the holes, roots, stumps and fallen trunks, they had seldom more than two wheels on the ground; and more than once all that stood between them and a total capsize was Pake's dexterous wrist. There were deep gullies, down which they precipitated themselves, almost turning the wagon over on the horses' backs at the bottom; and the climbs up the other side were heart-breaking. Pake was often obliged to descend and chop; and on the whole progress was so slow, Garth decided they might venture to insure their necks by walking.

So he and Natalie strode on ahead, pausing here and there to pick the delicious acrid mooseberries, and discussing their problems. Their talk was chiefly of Nick Grylls. Natalie finally confessed what had happened at the Landing.

"You should have told me immediately," Garth said with a frown.

Natalie looked "poor," as she called it. "I was afraid you'd send me home," she said. "Now you can't," she added provokingly.

Garth in turn told her what he had learned the night before.

"Look here," said Natalie frankly; "what is the use of our hiding these things from each other? Let us promise to tell

everything that happens after this. You wanted me to take you for granted as if I were a man. You treat me like a man and I will."

Garth smiled; and promised to try—just as she had done on a similar occasion.

"I wish I had some men's clothes," said Natalie stoutly; frowning as girls always do, when they see themselves in that character. And in the very act of wishing it, she forgot; and drove home her femininity. Tipping a palmful of mooseberries into her mouth, "Wouldn't I look nice!" she said with a sidewise sparkle.

Garth, swallowing a sigh, smiled, and allowed that she would.

They speculated on what Mary Co-que-wasa's errand might be; neither of them was experienced in villainy. There, in the matter-of-fact daylight, and, as Natalie said, on Sunday, August the fifth *now*, it was impossible for the thought of one silent old woman to cause them much uneasiness; besides, they presently expected to join forces with the Bishop's ample party. Nothing nearly so simple and devilish as the actual truth occurred to them; and it was brought home with the force of a blow, when they reached the Warehouse.

About eleven, a final descent brought them to the shore of a demure little river

flowing softly between high banks—Musquasepi, that they were to know so well. Off to the left it merged into the muddier waters of the "big" river. On the further shore stood the Warehouse they had heard of so often.

"Oh!" said Natalie. "Only another little log shack! Why I imagined a—a——"

"Five-story stone front?" suggested Garth.

"Well, I don't know," she said, "but not that!"

On the hither side was a solitary cabin; and in the doorway stood a breed, outwardly of a different pattern from any they had seen—but after all not so different. He was clad in decent Sunday blacks minus the coat; and wore heavy-rimmed spectacles which he took off when he really wished to see. On the table within was ostentatiously spread an open Bible—the sharp-eyed Natalie took note that it was upside down. This young man had a heavy expression of conscious responsibility, before which the insouciant Pake visibly quailed. Pake indicated to Garth that Ancose Mackey stood before him.

"Where is the Bishop?" Garth demanded impatiently.

Ancose blandly ignored the question for the present. "How-do-you-do, sir," he said, like a mechanical doll, at the same time

politely extending his hand.

Garth, shaking it hastily, repeated his question—but the young man was not to be hurried over any of his self-pleasing formalities.

"How-do-you-do, sir," he repeated to Natalie in precisely the same tone, gravely shaking hands with her.

Then they must needs come in and sit down, while their host made a remark on the weather, and informed them, with an air, that he was a very good reader. He wrapped his Bible in an end of comforter, and pulling a doll's trunk from under the bed, put it away. Natalie had a glimpse of the contents of the trunk; she said afterward, it was like the inside of his head; beside the Bible, there were sundry pieces of dried moose meat, a gaudy silk handkerchief, tobacco and a brass watch-chain of the size of a small cable. He took out the latter and put it on.

Finally he appeared to hear Garth's question. "Bishop gone up little river. Four days," he said.

"Some one was to meet me here," said Garth confidently.

An expression of genuine concern appeared under Ancose Mackey's solemn mugging. "You Garth Pevensey?" he asked.

Garth nodded.

Ancose's English was not equal to the situation. He turned quickly to Pake, squatting in the doorway, and exploded in Cree. Pake answered in kind. It takes a roundabout course to say anything of an abstract nature in Cree. Finally Garth heard the ominous name of Mary Co-que-wasa enter into their discourse.

"What is it?" he demanded impatiently.

Ancose turned a long face to him. "Bad medicine here," he said. "Bishop send ol' Pierre Toma down from head of rapids with him team to get you," he went on, struggling manfully with his English. "Ol' Pierre stay to me three days of waiting. Las' night come boy up big river in canoe. Boy say to ol' Pierre, Cap'n Jack stuck at Caliper Island. Boy say, Cap'n Jack want tell to Bishop, Garth Pevensey no can come. Garth Pevensey him gone back outside."

Garth and Natalie looked at each other in dismay.

"Mary Co-que-wasa do this," added Ancose. "Him no speak never true."

"Of course!" said Natalie. "She knew they wouldn't believe her, so she sent the boy up, while she waited below."

"Where's the boy?" Garth demanded.

Ancose shrugged. "Gone down," he said. "No can catch now."

"When did Pierre Toma go back?"

"Early," said Ancose. "Five hours. Him horses fresh."

"Maybe we can catch them yet!" cried Garth. "How much to the head of the rapids, Pake?"

Pake had ample English to make a good bargain. However, it was finally struck; and cutting Ancose Mackey's elaborate adieus very short, they took to the road again.

They had twenty-five miles to cover. This part of the trail is considerably used in freighting goods around the rapids, and in the North it is considered a good road, though the travellers' bones bore testimony to the contrary for several succeeding days. Pake, with the prospect of a substantial bonus before him, did not spare his horses; but the grass-fed beasts had already lost their enthusiasm for the journey, and they made but indifferent progress. They were presently compelled to stop a good hour and a half to let them rest and feed.

Garth, though he strove to hide it, was now very anxious. They had laid in only two weeks' provisions at the Landing; the trails seemed to be narrowing both before and behind; and the North closing in. Moreover, he suspected Nick Grylls was not the man to stoop to mere mischief-making; and he wondered apprehensively

what next move he contemplated. Looking at his charming Natalie, he could conceive of a man stooping to any villainy to possess her. However, he strove to keep her spirits up—and his own—with the oft-expressed belief that the Bishop would not leave Pierre Toma's until the next morning.

Six o'clock had passed before they turned into the rough little clearing on the river bank. The horses were done up. They had passed no other sign of habitation the whole way.

A bent old man with a snowy thatch came hobbling out of the cabin.

His look of surprise, and the quietness of the place, answered Garth's question before he put it.

"Where is the Bishop?"

The old man spread out his hands. "Gone. Four hours," he said.

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VIII

ON THE LITTLE RIVER

The next day found Garth and Natalie afloat on Musquasepi, headed alone into

the North. To be exact, only Natalie was afloat; she sat in the stern of a tiny boat, keeping her off shore with a paddle devised from the cover of a grub-box. Their outfit was piled amidships. Garth harnessed to the end of a towing-line, plodded through the mud and over the stones of the bank; climbing over fallen trees, and wading bodily into the river, when necessary to drag his tow around a reef.

Indecision had attacked Garth the night before—his responsibility was so great! But Natalie had said, pressing the soft curve out of her lips:

"*Any* means to get ahead! If we have to crawl on hands and knees!"

"Any *safe* means," Garth amended.

"Nick Grylls without doubt is counting on our being held up or driven back," she said. "I have an idea he is not far behind us."

It was Garth's own idea.

"So we *must* keep ahead!"

"We must do whatever will best ensure your safety," Garth said doggedly.

That bright red spot had appeared in either of Natalie's cheeks. "Bother my safety!" she cried. "You will not allow me a shred of pluck! My honour is engaged on this journey, just the same as if I were a

man! I said I'd do it; and I will! And if I hear another word about my comfort or my safety, upon my word, I'll go on alone!"

Garth had smiled at the threat, and given in; because on the whole it seemed safer to press ahead, than to attempt to return. Secretly, he was delighted with the spirit she showed.

They had bought the boat from Pierre Toma, a breed of the more self-respecting elder generation, in whose aged eyes still twinkled the spirit of the voyageurs. Pake's magnanimous offer of the wagon and team at only twice their real value was declined; inasmuch as the trail was impassible for wagons beyond Toma's place, and ceased altogether at Caribou Lake. They counted on the boat to carry them as far as the lake; there, Pierre Toma had assured them, they might very likely overtake the Bishop, if he were delayed by contrary winds, or christenings. In any case Wall-eye Macgregor, said Pierre, had a strong boat at the lake that could take them the eighty miles across. According to the haphazard measurements of the breeds, Caribou Lake was twenty-five miles from Pierre Toma's.

Their own boat was but crazily hung together. Natalie had christened it the *Flat-iron* from its shape. It was of extremely simple construction—two planks laid V-shape, with a shorter plank

to close the end, and boards nailed on for a bottom. Pierre Toma had said with pride, there was no other boat in the country like it; and after using it a day they were prepared to agree. It was designed to be propelled with a pole; and they had started in that manner; but the *Flat-iron* showed a perverse disposition to travel in any direction save the desired one; and her favourite manœuvre under the impetus of the pole was to swing on her centre without moving ahead at all. So Garth, after some study, had constructed the tracking apparatus.

It was a simple, park-like, little river with brown, foam-flecked water flowing moderately through a country of small timber; and occasionally there were natural meadows starred with flowers, where children in their white dresses should have been picnicking, so intimate and peaceful it seemed. None the less, it was the strange and lonely North into which they were thrust, on their own unaided resources—like the babes in the woods, Natalie said. They were abruptly cast back on the great and simple verities of existence, where a man, be his wits never so sharp, must be strong, to survive. Natalie looked at Garth's broad back, as he slowly put the miles behind him one after another; and considering the impatient vigour, with which he attacked the multitude of obstacles strewn along the river, thanked God for sending such a one to her aid.

The wonder of the unknown was in them both; and their breasts throbbed a little, as they looked to see what each bend in the stream would have to show. Only once in the course of the afternoon was there any reminder of human life; a breed boy suddenly appeared on the bank, only to duck behind a bush like a little animal, at the startling sight of white strangers on the river. Tempted forth at last, in response to Garth's question, he said they were twenty-five miles from the lake. Garth, who had been doing his best for seven hours to reduce that distance, felt distinctly aggrieved.

Natalie insisted on camping early; for it had been a gruelling afternoon on Garth. They chose a little promontory running into the water; and once he had started a fire, and put up her tent, she made him lie at length in the grass, where he stretched his limbs in delicious weariness, and watched her settling the camp for the night and cooking the supper. She was proud in the acquisition of a new accomplishment, that of baking bannock before a fire in the open, learned that morning from Mrs. Toma. The sight of her, bustling and cheerful, working for him, had a strange and painful pleasure for him. They two, alone together in the wilderness, cut off from all their kind!—the thought squeezed his heartstrings; she was so much his own there—and so little!

With the sinking of the sun, the awful

stillness came stealing to envelope them; and with insistent fingers seemed to press upon the very drums of their ears. The little river flowed as stilly and darkly as the water of Lethe at their feet; and the gaunt pines over the way stood transfixed like souls that had drunk of it. Under the spell of the silence they instinctively lowered their voices; and they broke sticks for the fire with reluctance; so painful was the crash and reverberation up and down. But there is always one sound that accompanies this stillness; hardly breaks it, so smoothly it comes stealing on the suspended evening air—the quavering howl of the coyote. They heard it throb miles off; and it was answered from immeasurable distances side to side. Little by little, attracted by the smell of cooking food, the animals drew closer, and at last stationed themselves in a kind of wide-drawn circle about their camp on both sides of the river, wailing back and forth like souls inconceivably tormented. Natalie shuddered.

"They are cowardly beasts," Garth said reassuringly. "They won't come any closer."

They spoke but little to each other. Night, solitude and that spirit of woe abroad, filled them with a mighty longing for each other's arms. At last she crept away to her tent.

As the darkness deepened; and the clear-

eyed Northern constellations looked out, one by one, there were other sounds; a peevish growling and whining at the top of the bank above them; a frantic scurry when Garth heaved a stone. The better to ensure Natalie's peace of mind, he weighted the tent all around with rocks; and heaped wood on the fire.

Natalie stuck her head out of her cosy refuge. "I can't bear to have you sleeping unprotected outside," she said anxiously.

Garth's heart paused breathlessly at the thought of the alternative. He sprang up and thrust the thought aside. "Nonsense! I'll be all right!" he cried. "To please you I'll keep the fire going all night."

Later, he rolled himself in his blankets across the door of her tent, as before; and lay there smoking, gazing at the fire, picturing Natalie asleep within; and assuaging his hungry heart as best he might with the sound of her child-like breathing.

The day broke gloriously; and shortly after sunrise they were on their way again, under a sky as tenderly blue as palest turquoise, over which were flung bright, silken, cloudy scarves. As they ascended, the character of the river changed; the trees disappeared, giving place to wide, flat meadows of blue grass as high as a man's waist; the current slackened, and its course became more circuitous. Along the shores, steep cut-banks alternated with

muddy shoals; and a new set of problems faced Garth.

These chiefly took the form of stout willow bushes overhanging the cut-banks —diabolically malicious, sentient beings, they became to Garth. He tried crawling underneath with his tow-line, whereupon the earth gave way, precipitating him in water up to his middle; he tried crashing bodily through, and the line would invariably knot itself around the most inaccessible twig. The *Flat-iron*, too, seemed to rejoice in his discomfiture; and at every interruption of her progress took the occasion, in spite of Natalie's paddle, to turn about and stick her nose stupidly into the mud of the bank. Every bush in turn offered a different and more complicated obstacle than the last; in three hours they made perhaps twice three hundred yards. Natalie, alarmed by the spectacle of Garth's set lips, and the swollen veins of his temples, besought him for goodness' sake to swear and not mind her.

He finally decided to change his mode of going; and contriving a second little paddle, he embarked with Natalie. They progressed but slowly against the current; for the short paddles had about the same effectiveness as two of those little instruments for making butter pats, which they strongly resembled. Garth figured they would be making a mile an hour—but this way was easier on his temper.

To-day, the little river, placidly flowing between its grassy banks, had an oddly pastoral look. With the familiar shapes of the overhanging willows, and the brilliant marsh marigolds on the shallows, all drenched in the opulent sunshine, they found themselves looking for cows on the bank; and it seemed incredible that no church spire rose above any of the distant clumps of trees. They could not rid themselves of the feeling that this was no more than a day's picnic, with a house awaiting them just ahead, and company and good cheer. But instead of that, silently rounding a bend, they were unexpectedly introduced to the true genius of the country. In the mud of one of the flats at the edge of the water, sat a large brown bear on his haunches, soberly licking his paws. He was no more than twenty feet from them—a room's length. At Natalie's slight gasp of astonishment, he turned his head; and stared at them agape, with hanging paws, like a great baby. He looked so homely and comical Natalie burst out laughing. At the sound, Bruin promptly fell to all fours; and with a great "woof!" of astonishment and indignation, bundled over the bank out of sight.

To-day, the delicate, heady air of the Northern summer inspired their veins like wine. As Olympians, they lunched on the greensward carpeting the bank of a little inlet; while their shallop floated among tiny white lilies at their feet. All afternoon

their spirits soared into the realms of incoherent enthusiasm; they filled the air with their full-throated laughter and foolish, glancing speech. Garth's old friends would have been astonished then to see how he could "let himself go"; but no one in the world ever really saw that besides Natalie.

They loved; their happy eyes confessed it freely, though their tongues were tied. Nothing needed to be explained, for they were perfectly attuned to each other; and everything was clear in an exchange of eyes. The tough old world, with all its tiresome, grimy businesses was thrust out of sight and out of mind, and they seemed to tread a brand-new sphere, created as they would have it, empty of all save their two selfish selves. On such a day, in such surroundings, crosses, hindrances, dangers, what were they? Life was a great joke: Nick Grylls and his minions were blithely whistled down the wind. Ascending between the flowery banks of the little river, *their* river, nothing mattered so they were not parted. In the more or less tarnished circlet of life it was their perfect golden day; and whenever afterward either remembered it, it was as if a delicate fragrance arose in his soul. All day they saw no sign of human habitation.

As long as the sun shone they maintained their light-hearted gaiety, neither remembering nor desiring anything more

———

"I say, Nat!" it would be, "toss me over the hatchet like a good chap. Hey, there! not at my head!"

"What's for supper, Nat? I'm hungry as an ogre!"

"Bacon *aux tomates à la Bland* and bannock *Musquasepi avec* ashes!"

"Bully! If you taste it so much there won't be any left to go on the table!"

"Where's the bag of hard-tack, Garth?"

"Grub-box number two; port side by the rail."

"Idiot! You put them on the bottom of the box! The water's leaked through, and they're all mush underneath!"

"What's the diff? Stick the soft ones in the lobscouse!"

But after supper, when the sun had gone down, and the great stillness crept over them again, Natalie's arms dropped at her sides, Garth's pipe went out, and an unaccountable sadness fell on both. Then, their sporadic attempts to keep up the old, friendly rattle rang so false that both fell silent. Their camp of itself had a gloomy aspect. It was pitched in an elbow of the river, where a section of the cut-bank had sunk down, making a little terrace of grass a few feet above the water. Above, there had been a small grove of trees, through which a fire had some time swept, leaving

only a few slender, charred trunks pointing askew against the slow, dusky crimson of the west. On the nearest and tallest of these wrecked monuments, immediately above their camp, as on a slender pedestal, sat a great owl, the only visible living thing in all the wide expanse, besides themselves. As long as there was light enough to see him, he crouched there, motionless.

Natalie sat huddled on a box, with Garth's coat thrown about her shoulders. Her chin was in her palm, and her lashes veiled rebellious, miserable eyes. There are moments when the most ærial spirits sink to earth; and just now Natalie could make no pretense at a flight. It was clear he loved her, as she loved him; what then were a few words five years old, to keep them apart? She tried honestly to arm her breast by thinking of the laws that separated them; but the insidious part of it was, they were worldly laws; and here the world was thrust out of sight. Why did he not take her in his arms, and let her heavy head fall on his shoulder? her heart reiterated; and that was the only voice she could hear then. Yet if Garth had betrayed any weakness on his part, Natalie would have been on the *qui vive* to repel him. The forces of her soul were thrown in a sad confusion; while her woman's instinct raged against him, that he could resist her, she loved him tenfold more for that very resistance.

And Garth—seeing her sitting there so small under his coat, and all relaxed and appealing, her mouth like an unhappy child's, and her eyes big with unshed tears—his arms ached to enfold her; his brain reeled with the intensity of his desire to take her as she trembled to be taken. But her helplessness, which tortured him, nerved him to endure the torture. In the turmoil of his blood he could not think coherently; but he could repeat to himself, dully, over and over: "I must take care of her! I must take care of her!" He busied himself with small unnecessary tasks; splicing the tracking line, chopping tent-pegs, cleaning the frying pan with sand.

Natalie disappeared within her tent—and cried herself to sleep. Garth, lying outside the door, though she attempted to smother the sound in her pillow, heard; and it was like little knives hacking in his breast. Sleep for him was out of the question; he was denied the relief of tears. He rose, when Natalie's quiet breathing told him she was asleep at last, and undressing, waded into the river, and swam back and forth until the cold water chilled him through. Brisk, silent exercise restored his circulation, and a pipe and communion with the stars quieted his nerves. In the end he toppled over all standing, and slept on the grass until daylight.

Natalie reappeared with the sun, brave and rosy again, and with little sign of the night's tumult, save in an added sense of gratitude toward Garth, which appeared in the pleasure she took in doing little things for him. His grayish pallor, and kind, tired eyes rebuked her sorely for having cast the whole burden on him. She vowed to herself it should not occur again.

To-day the character of the river changed little; only that the bends multiplied and sharpened; and where they were horseshoe curves yesterday, to-day they were hair-pin curves. Sometimes, just over the bank, they would catch sight again of a particularly marked tree they had passed a whole laborious hour before. Endless and futile were the calculations they made as to how far they had gone, and had yet to go.

They cut across from point to point, keeping under the bank out of the strength of the current as far as possible, and rounding the inside of each bend. In this manner they were ascending close under a willow bush, when suddenly and silently a huge, brown wing, like the wing of Sinbad's auk, sailed athwart the sky. They caught their breaths in astonishment. A great gray galley swept around the bend, no more than two oars' length from them. With her swarthy crew standing about the deck, their brows bound with bright silk handkerchiefs, and at the tiller, a great, bearded figure, she was the very picture of

a pirate craft. It would be impossible to state which crew was the more surprised at the unexpected encounter; the seeming pirates likewise stared open-mouthed at the *Flat-iron*. Just as the galley was disappearing, Garth collected presence of mind sufficient to hail, and inquire the distance to the lake.

The answer came back: "Twenty-five miles!"

They began to think there was witchcraft in it.

The wind had changed; and puffy, white clouds came rolling up from the west, passing beneath the serene and silky streamers of the upper air. Gradually the invaders thickened and spread over the field; their underbodies took on a grayish tint; and the blue openings narrowed. Finally a sharp shower descended; and the voyageurs sought shelter under a bush, where they hung, watching the millions of drops plopping roundly into the surface of the river; each drop with its attendant sprite leaping at its approach. One shower followed another, with intervals of hot and sticky sunshine between. It was more uncomfortable under the steamy, dripping bushes than in the thick of it; and they finally decided to paddle ahead, let it rain as it would. Luncheon, consisting of soaked bannock and cold cocoa, was a sorry affair.

Garth was glum. He had long

apprehended that bad weather would treble their difficulties. "How can I keep her warm and dry throughout the night?" was his ever-present thought. Natalie, on the other hand, was as happy as a lark; and she made a very attractive picture in the rain. Her dress had altered little by little during the last few days; and now comprised a blue sweater, short skirt and moccasins. The hat with the green wings was safely wrapped in the duffle-bag; and hitherto she had gone bareheaded on the river. When it began to rain she pulled a man's cap close over her head to keep her hair dry. As she industriously plied her paddle in the bow, ever and anon turning a rosy, streaming face to him, with a joke on her lips, in her rough get-up poor Garth thought her lovelier than ever. He was continually having to call himself down, as he would have said, for presuming to think he had measured the extent of her charm.

"Isn't it bully, Garth!" once she cried. "Ever since I was a baby I have longed to be allowed to play in the rain for just once, and get as wet as I possibly could—just to see how it felt! And now I shall! Isn't it funny just to sit and let it come down, without running anywhere? Women are babies, anyway. I mean never to put up an umbrella again as long as I live. The rain feels good in my face!"

Nevertheless, Garth, occupied as he was with the problems of how to find a dry

place to put up the tent, and how to build a fire in a downpour, was anxious. Little by little the showers merged into each other; and before the end of the afternoon, it had settled down to rain steadily all night.

He learned in the end never to trust the distances given in an unmeasured land. Rounding one of the endless bends toward five o'clock, they became aware of a new, indefinable, fresher smell on the air; and they increased their pace with an eager sense of a discovery awaiting them in the next vista. The next point proved to be the last; looking around it, the wind buffeted their faces fresh and cool; the river stretched away for half a mile, straight as a canal and there, away beyond, leapt the waves of Caribou Lake on the bar.

Natalie cheered. "Hooray for the crew of the *Flat-iron*!" she cried. "We've actually done it!" She reached back. "Shake, partner!"

Near the head of the river, in the wild waste of sand on the lake shore, squatted a weather-beaten little log cabin, almost eave-deep behind the dunes. Smoke arose from the chimney.

"Good!" cried Garth in high satisfaction. "You can dry your clothes here, anyway."

A glance up and down the shore of the river revealed no trace of the canoes or the outfit of the expedition they were in

pursuit of.

"We've missed him again," said Garth grimly.

They landed, dripping and stiff; and plodded through the sand to the tiny door. The outlook was desolate in the extreme; there was no sign of life anywhere, save only the wisp of smoke from the chimney. At their left hand, the lake spread bleakly to the horizon, torn and white under the west wind, and with great billows tumbling on the beach.

"The *Flat-iron* could never negotiate that," remarked Garth.

He knocked on the little door.

"Come in!" rang instantly from within.

They looked at each other in astonishment.

"An English voice!" she whispered.

"A white man! Thank God!" said he.

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IX

THE HEART OF A BOY

It was a youth who presently faced them

on the threshold of the hut; an apple-cheeked boy of seventeen, who bared two rows of shining white teeth; and whose blue eyes, at the sight of them, sparkled with the purest enthusiasm of welcome.

"Come right in, and dry out!" he cried. "I certainly am glad to see you!" The haunting reed of boyhood still vibrated faintly in the manlier notes of his voice.

Here was a greeting from a stranger to warm the hearts of the wet and weary wayfarers! It presented the North in a new aspect. Natalie in especial, beamed on their young host; he was wholly a boy after her own heart.

Looking at Natalie more particularly, the boy blushed and faltered a little. "It isn't much of a place to receive a lady in," he said apologetically. "I haven't been on my own long enough to get anything much together."

It was a characteristically boyish abode. The furniture was limited to the cook-stove in the centre of the room; and a home-made table and a bench. His bed was spread on straw in one corner; and another corner was given up to the heterogeneous assortment of his belongings and his grub. Apparently the cabin had long served as a casual storehouse to the boatmen of the river; for pieces of mouldy sails were hung over the rafters; oars and a mast crossed from beam to beam; and in a third corner were

a pile of chain and an anchor, slowly mouldering into rust. In wet weather, the present tenant evidently did his chopping within doors, the floor was littered with chips and broken wood. As they came in, a yellow and white kitten, retreating to the darkest corner of the cabin, elevated his back and growled threateningly.

"That's my partner, Musq'oosis," explained the boy. "He'll make friends directly. He plays with me by the hour; you'd laugh yourself sick to see the comical way he carries on. He's great company when you're batching alone!"

Natalie liked this boy more and more.

"Say, I'm having no end of company these days," he went on, with his happy-go-lucky air. "The Bishop's outfit was here all day yesterday; they went up on the last of the east wind, this morning. The old woman—that's what we call Mrs. Bishop, you know; no disrespect—she baked me a batch of her bread before she went. Real outside bread with a crackly crust to it! Oh my! Oh my!—with brown sugar! Say, we'll have a loaf of it for supper!"

Natalie in the meantime sat on the bench; and taking off her moccasins, put her feet on the oven sill to dry. Garth sat on a box; and their host squatted on the floor between.

"By the way," said this youth; "I'm Charley Landrum."

Garth introduced himself and Natalie.

"Hope you'll stay a couple of days," said Charley anxiously—"or longer. There's great duck-shooting on the sloughs; and we might get a goose or a wavy around the lake shore. It would be a pleasant change of meat for the lady."

Charley addressed all his remarks to Garth, without ever once looking at Natalie; it was clear, nevertheless, that he was acutely conscious of her presence; for he blushed whenever she spoke; and his eyes were continually drawn to her, though he dared not raise them quite to her face. To Garth and Natalie the nicest thing about this boy was the way he took her presence for granted. Of all the males they had met in the North, he alone had not gaped at her in vulgar wonder; and to his honest heart there was nothing out-of-the-way in the fact that she was Miss Bland, and Garth Mr. Pevensey.

"We're obliged to get on as soon as we can," said Garth. "We've been chasing the Bishop all the way from the Landing."

"How did you come up the little river?" asked Charley.

"I bought a boat from Pierre Toma."

"I know her," he said with a chuckle; "cranky as a bath-tub! You couldn't go up the lake in her!"

"Not while it blows like this," said Garth.

"Then I hope it hits it up for a week!" said Charley, apparently addressing the hem of Natalie's skirt.

"I was told one Wall-eye Macgregor had a strong boat," Garth said.

"Nothing doing!" returned the boy. "He's got it up at the head of the lake."

"Then I must try to strengthen the bath-tub and coast around the shore," said Garth.

"I'll help you!" said Charley. "We'll pitch in first thing to-morrow."

"How long have you been in the country, Mr. Landrum?" asked Natalie softly.

The boy blushed for pure pleasure; and his voice deepened as he replied: "Two years next March, Miss. I came in over the ice with a freighter. I ran away from school. What was the use?—I got a head like a hickory nut; and I couldn't keep out of trouble. They gave me a bad name; and everything that happened was put on me. So I cleared out and came North."

Gradually the whole naïve, boyish tale came out.

"I had a lot of fool ideas about the country then; but they were soon knocked out of me. All the kids that run away soon come sneaking home and have to eat their brags; and I wasn't going to do that. So I stuck it out. At first I admit I pretty near

caved in with homesickness; but I'm hardened now. The first year I worked for a trader up at Ostachegan creek; and this spring I bought this cabin on credit. Frank Shefford up at Nine-Mile-Point is going to lend me his team and mower when his hay is put up; and I'll put up hay myself."

The boy's eyes glowed, as he announced his brave plans for the future.

"Next winter I'm going to keep a stopping-house for freighters. I've got a good location here, and stable room already for eight teams. I'll build to it later. There's money in that; and it's a pleasant life for a man—plenty of company. And when I get a little money ahead, I'll trade; there's good chances for a free trader that knows the ropes; and in a few years I'll branch out and have a whole string of trading posts, like Nick Grylls. There's a smart one! They say he could sell out for a hundred thousand any day!"

Garth was reminded of his own hopeful, spouting youth.

"I hope you won't be like Nick Grylls," said Natalie gently.

"Don't you like him?" asked Charley in concern. "I always thought he was a pretty smart one. No!" he added suddenly. "I don't like him either. He's coarse!"

Supper was an affair of joint contributions; Garth's jam for Charley's

bread. In the meantime Charley had surreptitiously swept up the chips; and had then slipped away to the river bank, for a wash and a tidy-up. He reappeared with his hair well "slicked," his tip-tilted nose as pink as his shiny cheeks, and a smile that extended to the furthest confines of his face. But he was distressed that he had no white collar to honour the board; and his gratitude was silent and boundless, when Garth produced one for him from his duffle-bag.

It was a jovial meal that followed; the spirit of youth presided; and wisdom and grave speech were thrust under the table. Charley recovered of his bashfulness so far that he could occasionally nerve himself to look at Natalie. For all the boy's giddy jollity, his blue eyes had a kind of stricken look when they rested on her face. But his appetite did not suffer appreciably; and it did Garth's and Natalie's hearts good to see the bread and jam disappear between Charley's business-like jaws. Jam, they agreed, had surely never before been so successful in tickling the human palate. "Just do without it for a couple of years and see for yourself," Charley rejoined.

Afterward the cabin was further swept and garnished for Natalie's use; and a heap of fragrant hay brought from the stable on which to spread her blankets. The house was to be yielded up to her for the night. Garth and Charley shared the little tent outside. Garth, with his simplicity, and his

air of quiet understanding, was above all one to win a boy's confidence; and by bedtime they were as friendly as brothers —or perhaps more like a very young father and his oldest son.

When they rolled up side by side in their blankets Charley seemed to put off several years. He hunched closer to his bedfellow; and pressed his shoulder warmly against Garth's.

"Are you sleepy?" he asked diffidently.

Garth's heart warmed to the act and the speech. "Why, no!" he said. "Believe I'll have another smoke before dropping off. Fire away, old boy!"

"Say, it's simply great to have somebody young to talk to," said poor Charley. "Somebody that understands; and that you can let yourself go with, and say whatever comes into your head to. Say, I never had such a good time in all my life as to-night. All the fellows up here—they're a good sort all right—but they're a rough, cursing lot. And of course, a fellow has to curse too; and talk big just to keep his end up—chuck a bluff, you know, or they'll think you're a molly. And I just love to laugh, and act foolish; and I always have to hold myself in. Sometimes I near bust!"

"I get like that myself," said Garth encouragingly.

There was something else on Charley's

mind; but for a long time his tongue sheered off at every approach to it. Finally, rolling over, he hid a hot cheek on Garth's shoulder; and it came out with a rush.

"Say! I think she's the prettiest girl I ever laid eyes on!"

Garth's arm tightened about the boy's shoulders "She's the first white girl I've seen in nearly two years," he floundered on; "and girls meant nothing to me then. But I know darned well she's no ordinary white girl. Isn't it wonderful, the different ways she looks; and all that her voice seems to mean besides the words she says; and the way she walks and sits down; and the way she lifts her arm? Isn't it a pretty arm? And the finest thing about her is, she deals plain with you like a fellow; no silly fuss and make-believe, and hanging-back about her!"

If Garth liked the boy before, he was prepared to love him for this.

"Did you mark how she called me Mr. Landrum?" continued Charley eagerly. "She just did that to please me, I know. Didn't it sound funny? My chest expanded two inches, I swear it did! Wasn't she kind to me? She had no call to be so kind to me. It just makes me want to do something terrific! Oh, if I could only do something for her!—wouldn't I just be glad of the chance!"

He was silent for a while, tossing uneasily in his blanket. "Say, there's something I want to tell you," he blurted out at last. "I'm certainly good and ashamed of myself! There's a girl down the shore, her name is Julia; she's not a bad-looker for a breed. She came around my cabin sometimes. I was kind of lonesome, you see; and she was young, like me—"

Garth let him see that he understood—and he did understand, both the pitiful little tale, and the boy's reason for wishing to tell him.

"And to think of *her* asleep in there now!" he continued remorsefully. "It makes me sick and disgusted with myself. I'd give anything if it hadn't happened! You bet I'll have no truck with them in future!"

"Every man makes mistakes, old boy," said Garth.

Charley, his mind relieved by confession, in the midst of further rhapsodies, suddenly fell asleep.

In the morning he awoke all of a piece, as boys do, and rolling over, said instantly:

"Natalie is sure the prettiest name there is!"

Later in the day in the middle of their somewhat hopeless deliberations upon the

repairing of the half-submerged *Flat-iron*—her flimsily hung planks had been started even by her gentle journey on the river—there was a hail from down-stream. Looking, they saw four swart figures bending one after another in a tracking-harness, crawling around the edge of the cut-bank below. Presently a sharp prow nosed around the bend; and a long, low, double-ended galley swung into view, floating lazily on the current like a gigantic duck.

"A York boat!" cried Charley in surprise. "Didn't know any was due! Here's your chance to cross the lake!"

"Hm!" said Garth doubtfully. "We'll find out, first, what news she brings from below."

At the sight of the open water ahead, the breeds redoubled their shouting, and hit up their pace. It was interesting to see how, once having got her under way, they could allow nothing to stop them; but needs must crash through obstructions regardless; slipping scrambling, literally clawing their way along. Whenever the rope caught, it was the part of the fourth man to slip out of his collar, and disengage it, without stopping the others. It was racking work on the frame of a man; but the feather-headed breeds ceaselessly chattered and shouted, like boys out of school; roaring with laughter when any one of the four came down. In

the stern stood the helmsman, pulling her head around, with a mighty sweep, extending astern; and the other four of the crew, resting from their spell of tracking, fended her off the bank with poles. The York boat, pointed bow and stern, low amidships, and undecked, reminded Garth of the pictures he had seen of ancient Norse galleys.

Arriving opposite the cabin, they all leaped aboard; and poling across, landed in front of where Garth and Charley stood. Natalie, not caring to run the gauntlet of another battery of stupid stares, had retired to the cabin. On the prow of the boat, which had a dingy, weather-beaten look, very different from the smart green and white craft of the "Company," was crookedly painted the name *Loseis*. Making her fast, the breeds, with furtive stares at Garth, threw themselves on the ground like tired dogs. It was not long, however, before a "stick-kettle," the invariable tom-tom, was produced, the ear-splitting chant raised, and a game of *met-o-wan*, a sort of Cree equivalent for Billy-Billy-who's-got-the-button, started on the shore.

The steersman, pausing only to put on a gold-embroidered waistcoat, approached Garth with a disposition to be friendly—too friendly by half, Garth thought. He was an undersized man of not more than thirty, but already somewhat withered; a specimen of the unwholesome, weedy

breed of the settlements.

"Well, Charley," he said affably.

They shook hands with the touch of impressiveness that always marks this ceremony in the North; and then Hooliam, with a shifty glance, extended his hand to Garth. At the same time he said something in Cree.

"He says: 'You want to go up the lake,'" translated Charley.

"How does he know that?" asked Garth quickly.

Hooliam answered in Cree without waiting for Charley to translate. Evidently, like most of the breeds, he understood more English than he cared to confess.

"He says that Pierre Toma told him," said Charley.

"Ask him how it is he comes up with such a small load," suggested Garth.

Charley repeated the question in Cree. Hooliam's answer was prompt and glib. "He says that the water was too low to bring a full load," translated Charley.

"Ask him when he means to go on," said Garth.

Hooliam gave a glance at the still tossing lake. "As soon as the wind dies or changes. This wind would blow him right back on the shore," such the gist of his answer by

way of Charley.

"Tell him to let me know before he starts; and I'll tell him if we wish to go along," said Garth coolly.

"I want to have a talk with you," he added in a lower tone for Charley's benefit.

They sat down apart on the sand.

"What do you think of this outfit, Charley?" asked Garth.

The boy was surprised at the question. "Well," he said, "it does look a bit queer, their coming all this way with half a load. But you never can tell about these crazy niggers; they may have dumped out half their stuff on the bank somewhere, and left it to rot. A French range for the inspector has been lying on the point across the river for two months."

"Who is this Hooliam?" Garth asked.

"He boats back and forth pretty regular. He's a footless kind of breed—but straight, as far as I know. What do you care?" the boy asked curiously. "If he takes you on board, he's got to put you across."

Garth looked at Charley estimatingly. But there could be no doubt of the boy's straight-eyed, whole-souled devotion to Natalie; and he quickly made up his mind. He told him briefly what had occurred on the way in.

Charley whistled in astonishment. "So

that's the kind Nick Grylls is!" he exclaimed. "He sure must have gone clean daft!"

"This Hooliam," Garth continued, "is too anxious, judging by others of his kind, to get us on board. I suspect Nick Grylls has a share in this outfit. On the other hand we have less than a week's grub left. What have you got, Charley?"

"Nothing but sow-bosom and beans," said the boy disconsolately; "and damn little of that! It isn't good enough for *her*!"

"Any chance of another boat?" asked Garth.

Charley shook his head. "No Company boat due for three weeks," he said.

Garth set his jaw. "Then there's no help for it," he said firmly. "We'll have to go with Hooliam. I'll make him take our little boat along, so we won't be entirely at his mercy; and I'll watch him close."

Charley leaned toward Garth. The boy unconsciously clenched his hands; and in the intensity of his eagerness, his eyes actually filled. "I say, Garth, take me along with you," he pleaded.

Garth, looking at him gratefully, thought none but a boy could be so generous. "But I can't take you away from your own work," he objected.

Charley brushed it impatiently out of

sight. "What does that matter!" he exclaimed. "It can wait." He redoubled his pleadings. "This was what I wanted so badly, Garth! To be a little use to her! I could help—you think I'm just a crazy kid, and maybe I am, but I could think like a man, and plan like a man for her! You and I could stand watch and watch. Say, after what you've told me, I'd go near out of my head to see you two sail away, and me left behind, not knowing what was happening!"

Garth was more moved than he cared to show. "You're true blue, Charley," he said in a low tone. "You come along!"

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X

ON CARIBOU LAKE

From sundown until daybreak, the ki-yi-ing and the beating of the stick-kettle on the shore desecrated the stillness of the night with scarcely any intermission. Shortly after daybreak, the wind having gone down, Hooliam sent word to Garth that he would like to start.

They were ready in a few minutes. At the sight of Charley's bundle with the others, Hooliam scowled and muttered in Cree.

"Says he can't take me," said Charley.

Garth flushed angrily. "This was all it needed," he burst out. "What reason does he give?"

"No reason," said Charley coolly. "Just talks foolish."

Hooliam added something with a great show of plausibility.

"Says he hasn't got room," said Charley with a laugh.

"Rubbish!" said Garth. "You tell him he takes the three of us or none! Give it to him strong!"

Upon receipt of this ultimatum, Hooliam,

shrugging, turned away; and the three of them boarded the *Loseis*.

Running out two pairs of clumsy sweeps, which were no more than good-sized trees a little flattened at one end, they laboriously pulled out of the river. Before them the lake stretched to the horizon as smooth and colourless as a lightly frosted pane. Loons, herons and a little kind of gull; ducks in pairs and squadrons; flocks of brown geese and shining white swans, wheeled, sailed and swam about them in countless numbers.

When they had rowed upward of a mile into the lake a mighty discussion suddenly arose amongst the crew. The oarsmen ceased their labours to take part in it. Eight wetted brown forefingers were held aloft.

"They're scrapping about whether there is any wind," Charley explained.

To a white man's senses there was no sign of wind; nevertheless the oars were run in, the cargo shifted, and the heavy mast, with infinite labour, stepped amidships and guyed. Hooliam looked on indifferently from the stern, idly swinging his great sweep back and forth. Finally a dirty square sail was raised. It declined to belly or flap in the slightest degree; but the breeds, satisfied with what they had done, lay around the boat, preparing to enjoy themselves in luxurious ease. They amused themselves by tempting the water-

fowl close with imitations of their cries; and popping at them ineffectively with their twenty-two "trade-guns."

Garth stood it as long as he could.

"Look here!" he said at length to Charley. "Ask him how long this is going to last."

Charley translated. Hooliam looked sagely astern, spat, and answered in Cree.

"He says there'll be a breeze by and by," said Charley.

The scarcely veiled insolence of this reply caused Garth inwardly to fume. However, reflecting that, after all, Hooliam ought to know more about navigation than he, he possessed his soul in patience for another half-hour. There was still no sign of wind; and it was growing very hot in the sun. Garth, setting his jaw, drew out his watch.

"Tell him I'll give him just fifteen minutes longer," he said quietly. "If we're not under way by that time, there's going to be trouble."

Hooliam received the message with apparent indifference. Garth held his watch in his hand. Three minutes before the expiration of the time, he had Charley convey a final warning to the breed. Hooliam suddenly became voluble and expostulatory.

"He says the boys won't work when there's a breeze coming up," said Charley.

"You tell him, then, that I will take command of this boat, and run her myself," said Garth.

At the last moment the orders were hastily given. The mast was reluctantly taken down, and hung over the side; the cargo was shifted back, and the sweeps run out. The breeds rowed half-heartedly, with furtive scowls for the *moon-i-yas* who made them work.

After a couple of hours during which they covered a scant three miles, a breeze *did* spring up from astern; whereupon the whole business of raising the mast was gone through with again. Little by little it freshened, and the *Loseis* began to forge ahead, making a pleasant little murmur under her forefoot. The hearts of the three passengers rose in unison.

But they had not sailed two miles more, when the exasperated Garth discovered that Hooliam was slyly edging his craft inside a point of the shore. At first the breed unblushingly denied any intention of stopping; but when it became apparent that he could not round the point without hauling down the sail, he coolly admitted that he was going to land.

"What for?" Garth demanded.

"They're going ashore to spell—to cook and eat," Charley explained. "Hooliam says there is no other place to land in fifteen miles."

Garth was obliged to be content.

With the characteristic prodigality of the breeds, an enormous fire was built on the shore, over which their tea was furiously boiled in an iron pail, and their dried moose meat stewed a little less tough than moccasins. At a little distance the three passengers made their own preparations for lunch.

Natalie, serenely trusting in Garth, put aside all anxiety about the outcome of their journey; and was frankly interested and amused.

"Mercy!" she exclaimed. "They'll all die of tannic poisoning! And look what they eat! The bacon is as green as arsenic!"

She proved to be using her eyes and ears to good advantage on the way.

"The tall boy," she said, "the one that looks like an actor; he's the humourist of the party. He keeps them in fits of laughter by giving *moon-i-yas* imitations. He mimics us to our very faces. Their idea of us is too funny! The good-looking little one is his inseparable friend; they hold hands when they're not working. The one with the whitey-blue eyes is called by a very blasphemous name. I watched him turning over the pages of some stove catalogues that dropped out of a crate, with *such* a serious air. And they were all exactly alike, but he didn't know it, because he held some of them upside down! What do

you suppose he made of a picture of a self-feeder standing on its head?"

To Garth it seemed as if they took an interminable time to prepare and eat their simple meal; and afterward there could no longer be any doubt, from the way they loafed about, that they were soldiering, as a result of Hooliam's low-voiced encouragement. They grinned with childish impudence at the scowling *moon-i-yas*. At last Hooliam produced a pack of cards and a game of "jack-pot" was started on the shore. This constituted frank defiance; and Garth took instant action.

"Put up those cards!" he commanded.

The boys laughed and looked at Hooliam.

"Get on board the boat," Garth ordered, through Charley.

Hooliam's eyes bolted; but he made no move. With the sheer perversity of a child or a savage, he insisted there was no wind, even while the ripples were washing the stones at his feet.

Garth, thoroughly exasperated, picked up his rifle. His eyes glinted dangerously. "There's something behind this nonsense!" he cried. "And I'm going to stop it! You let him understand that if he opposes me any further I have eleven cartridges in the magazine of this rifle, and I would think as little of bringing him down as that wavy up there!"

A wild swan, most difficult of marks, was sailing high overhead. Garth, as he spoke, took aim and fired; and the great bird dropped like a plummet in the shallow water off shore.

Loud exclamations of admiration broke from the boys. Three of them dashed enthusiastically into the water to contend for the honour of bringing back the prize. Garth builded better than he knew. The boys while scarcely understanding the threat, were instantly impressed with the successful shot; and with it Garth established himself once and for all in their eyes. They instinctively began to carry the things on board as he had ordered; and in the end the scowling Hooliam was obliged to follow them on board, or be left behind.

As they were getting under way again, Garth observed Hooliam busy with the sail. When it was hoisted, it appeared he had taken a reef in it.

"Shake it out!" Garth commanded.

Hooliam shrugged and protested.

"He says the mast is not strong," Charley translated. "This heavy wind will carry it away," he says.

"Just now he said there was no wind," Garth said. "Let her go; and if anything breaks we'll mend it."

Hooliam in a long harangue, demanded to

know through Charley, if Garth would pay for the damage.

For answer Garth merely picked up his rifle; and the reef was let out in a hurry.

In all this there was something more than mere savage perversity; Hooliam, it was clear, had an urgent private reason for wishing to delay the journey. He had not sufficient command of his features to hide his chagrin at the failure of his several attempts. He sulked all afternoon. Garth sat with his weapon across his knees; and his steady gaze never wandered far from the steersman. Willy-nilly, Hooliam was compelled to hold the *Loseis* to her course; and by four o'clock, the wind holding light and steady, they had covered about thirty miles of their journey.

About this time the mast of another boat was discovered sticking above the bank of a creek on shore. The usual excited discussion arose—this time as to the identity of the craft. Finally the *Loseis's* prow was turned toward the shore. Garth demanded an explanation. Hooliam, more obsequious now, said that it was Phillippe's boat on the way out; and he had messages to deliver him from their common employers at the Landing. Garth suspected another excuse; but he was very reluctant to interfere with the real business of the North; and since it was almost time to spell for another meal, he decided to make no objections.

With true half-breed impetuosity they chose the worst place in miles on which to beach the *Loseis*. Her forefoot was run on a bar fully two hundred yards off shore; and communications were carried on by means of laborious wading, waist-deep, to and fro. The moment she touched, the entire crew and the skipper, dropping everything, dashed pell mell for the beach and across the intervening sand to the camp of the other boatmen on the shore of the creek. The passengers ferried themselves ashore in the *Flat-iron*, which had been stowed, much against Hooliam's will, on board the *Loseis*.

After supper, as time passed and there was no sign of the returning crew, Garth sent Charley after Hooliam with a peremptory message. Hooliam returned, cap in hand, his whole attitude changed. He expressed a willingness to start immediately; but deprecatingly pointed out that a storm threatened; and apologized for the unseaworthy condition of the *Loseis*. This time he had reason on his side; for angry clouds were heaped about the setting sun; and the orb itself was peering luridly between parted curtains of crimson rain. Garth, still suspecting him, was yet taken at a disadvantage. He thought of Natalie on board the shelterless *Loseis* in a rainstorm; and finally announced his wish to remain where they were for the night. Hooliam smirked demurely, in ill-concealed satisfaction.

All returned to the *Loseis* for what was needed during the night. The preparations to secure the York boat against the threatening storm were highly characteristic of her hit-or-miss crew. A stake was driven in the sand of the lake bottom, at either side the stern, and the rudder-post lashed between. This flimsy apparatus was designed to keep the boat from being driven broadside on the bar. The practical Garth frowned impatiently at its utter insufficiency; but the breeds could scarcely contain their impatience to resume their gambling with the other crew; and presently they dashed off, leaving the *Loseis* to her fate.

Garth pitched his camp under the shelter of a line of willows, marking the edge of higher ground along the wide waste of sand. The two crews with their ceaseless tom-tom on the shore of the creek, were upward of half a mile away. Natalie was made comfortable in her tent; and Garth and Charley, collecting a pile of firewood, covered it with a tarpaulin, against the coming rain. Charley, who had slept during the afternoon, was to watch until two o'clock; and Garth, covering himself with a piece of sail-cloth, lay down at the door of the tent.

It seemed to him he had no more than fallen asleep, when Charley shook his shoulder to awaken him.

"It's one o'clock," the boy said. "I think

something has happened in the camp over there. They quieted down; but now they have started up again, and have built up their fire. Looks to me as if somebody had arrived. Thought I'd better wake you, while I sneaked over and took a look."

Charley was gone more than an hour. Returning, as soon as he had entered the circle of the firelight, Garth saw by his face that something important was in the wind.

"I was right," the boy said. "Nick Grylls has come. He arrived in a canoe with a breed; and sent him back. Nick and Hooliam went outside the camp, and talked by themselves. I listened from behind a willow bush. Nick Grylls knows a lot more Cree than I do, and I couldn't understand everything; but I got the gist of it. Nick was giving Hooliam hell all around—first for making him paddle all night—it seems Hooliam ought to have waited for him at that point where we spelled this morning—and then for bringing me. That was the sorest touch; for Nick knows I understand Cree. He said it upset all his plans."

"It was a mighty good thing for Natalie and me, that we had you to-day!" Garth put in.

The boy blushed with pleasure.

"Go on," Garth said.

"Grylls was pretty mum about these plans

of his," Charley continued. "I guess he only lets Hooliam know part. I caught just a word or two. One thing was clear; you are his mark. I made out there was to have been a row at the point, and you were to have been put out of business, so you couldn't keep on with this journey. Then Nick was to happen along as if by accident; you were to be sent to the half-breeds at Swan river to be taken care of, and Nick was going to do the friendly act, and help Natalie on her way. I bet she never would have got there! In some way Nick has learned all about Natalie; for he seems to know where she's going; and what for. Anyway, you put his scheme to the bad by winning over the boys; and he is hot.

"He acted queer, too," Charley went on. "The first thing he asked was, if Natalie was well; and his voice sounded crying-like. Say, he's changed altogether from the hearty old sport, that used to travel through the country like a lord, handing out cigars. He's losing flesh. I think he's a bit touched."

When the boy finished, Garth took a turn, breathing deeply; and finally returning to the fire, sought that trusty counsellor, his pipe. "I'm glad he's turned up," he said coolly. "This is more like fighting in the open. And thanks to you, I'm well warned."

He smoked a while in silence. "I suspect

I'll have my work cut out for me to-morrow," he resumed reflectively. Presently he gripped Charley's shoulder, and searched the boy's face. "I'll be damn thankful to have you along, old fellow," he said. "But I don't think I have any right to let you in for this. This man is very powerful in the country; and he can spoil all your chances. You had better go back with Phillippe. Neither Natalie nor I would ever blame you."

The boy turned away his head. "I—I can't talk about it," he faltered. "If you go on that way you'll have me crying like a girl! You could talk all night, and it wouldn't do any good! What do you think I am? I'm not going to miss the fun!"

Garth laughed. "Turn in," he said briefly. "You'll need all the sleep you can get."

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XI

THE FIGHT IN THE STORM

Garth and Natalie were wondering next morning with what kind of a face Nick Grylls would greet them. He was the last to come off to the boat. Hooliam took possession of the punt as a matter of

course, to bring him aboard; but Garth, determined not to allow the slightest act of insolence to pass unchallenged to-day, curtly ordered it back; and the fat trader was obliged to wade out like the breeds, and scramble over the side of the *Loseis*—a very undignified reëntrance upon the scene.

His demeanour was remarkable. All the way out from the shore he had probably been shaping the character in which he meant to make his bow. He threw a leg over the side of the boat, affecting all his old, blustering heartiness; but the first sight of Natalie and Garth awaiting him, wholly self-possessed and unconcerned—they had determined in advance not to stoop to the pretense of any surprise at seeing him—pricked him like a blown bladder. His eyes bolted; he nodded at them askance; and he mumbled the words he had been intending to shout. Catching sight of Charley directly, he attempted to carry off his discomfiture by assuming an added boisterousness.

"Hello, Charley!" he cried. "What's the good word, boy?"

"Hello, Mr. Grylls," returned Charley with a demure grin, that was highly creditable to his powers of dissimulation. "Where did you drop from?"

Grylls guffawed with an overdone assumption of a man at his ease. "Oh, I got a sudden call up to the Settlement," he

said, in a tone meant to reach Garth's ears. "Got a big deal on to sell out my posts on the Spirit. I overtook you folks last night; and sent my canoe back. Thought I might as well save money. Have a cigar?"

"Thanks," said Charley. The boy lighted it elaborately, and commended the quality with the air of a connoisseur.

"You're all right, kid!" cried Nick, clapping him on the back. "I tell you I'm blame glad to have a white man to talk to on the way up"—this with a side glance at Garth. "What are you doing away from home at this season?"

"Grub running low," said Charley readily. "Had to go to the Settlement for a fresh supply."

"Well you go to Jonesy of the French outfit," bellowed Nick; "and tell him to give you my prices!"

Nick kept the boy at his side all day, flattering and cajoling him with an immense patronage, that, coming from the great man of the country, was meant to turn the head of this, the youngest of its settlers. In this Nick had a double purpose: he wished, of course, to secure the boy's interest to himself; but he also wished Garth and Natalie to see what a fine, generous fellow he could be when he got half a chance. There was a great deal of the child in the self-indulgent trader; and he had not lived among the breeds for

twenty-five years without imbibing many of their characteristics. As to the boy, Garth and Natalie felt not a moment's uneasiness; Charley met Nick's advances with a kind of imitative bluster, that was a source of great secret delight to Natalie.

The day's journey was uneventful. Grylls kept himself forward of the mast, and made no attempt to address either Garth or Natalie. Indeed, he appeared to ignore their presence on the boat altogether; which, considering the shortness of the distance separating them, was not without its ridiculous side. Garth, refusing to be deceived by this apparent indifference, kept himself quietly on the alert. The breeze continued favourable but very light; and the day waxed hotter and hotter. By nightfall they had covered perhaps another thirty miles of the way. There had been one "spell" on shore, during which Garth and Natalie elected to remain on board, satisfied with a cold lunch. No further offers were made by Hooliam to delay the journey; indeed, such was now their apparent anxiety to complete it, it was announced late in the afternoon that they would sail all night. They did not even wait for their supper on shore, but brought it off from the fire in a wading procession of frying pans, and steaming pails.

A lovely night succeeded. The velvety floor of heaven was strewn lavishly with bright stars; and later, the moon, just past

the full, rose out of the lake astern and hung, a lovely pale globe, in the eastern sky. The breeds fell asleep one by one; and for the first, the jabbering, the *ki-yi-ing* and the maddening stick-kettle were all stilled. The *Loseis* hovered over the lake with her gigantic wing spread, like some great bird of the night. The only evidences that she moved at all were the flecks of foam that drifted slowly astern under the counter.

Charley had constructed a little niche for Natalie among the freight astern—a bale of blankets serving for a seat, with a tall box inclined behind it for a back to lean against. She had insisted that Charley share it with her, and the boy had sat beside her too blissful to speak. In the end they both fell asleep, and Natalie's head dropped on his shoulder. In his dreams the boy smiled seraphically.

Garth watched them kindly and very enviously; and for the moment wished that he, too, were a boy, whom she need not take seriously. There was no sleep for him. He sat on the narrow seat encircling the stern, with his back against the gunwale, where, on the one hand he could watch the steersman elevated on his little platform, while on the other side he was prepared for any demonstration from the bow. The steersman was Natalie's humorous breed; his name was Aleck. Nick Grylls and Hooliam were together somewhere forward of the mast; in the

darkness Garth could not place them.

Garth's rifle lay across his knees—he would have given it, with much to boot, for the quicker and handier revolver. He was painfully aware that nothing would suit Nick Grylls's purpose so well as to knock him swiftly on the head, and heave his body overboard. He shrewdly suspected that some such intention was the reason for this night sail. It is easy to seek danger, to ride at it with a shout, the pulses leaping—but to *wait* for it, to wait motionless in the still dark for an attack that may be delivered one knows not when nor from whence—that is the great ordeal. Garth clenched the stem of his pipe hard between his teeth; and with a resolute effort of his will, put down the hysteria that will at such a time constrict the stoutest throat.

The first interruption of the awful stillness came, not from man, but from the elements. All around the western horizon clouds mounted so swiftly and imperceptibly that neither Garth nor the helmsman was aware of what was preparing, until they had reached the zenith. Caribou Lake is known for its swift and terrible summer storms. A sharp crack of thunder was their first warning. Aleck shouted; and dark forms arose here and there from their resting places. Garth swallowed a sob of relief for the diversion. The storm might be playing right into Nick Grylls's hand; but one could face the

bustle and uproar with renewed courage.

The sail was brought clattering to the deck; a couple of sweeps were hastily run out; and the *Loseis* was pulled for the nearest point of the shore. With true breed seamanship she was beached on a steep and stony incline on the lee side of a point. Garth tried his best to make their folly clear to them; but none of the crew, and least of all Hooliam, retained presence of mind to comprehend. With united strength the breeds dragged her up as far as they could, which was but little, and went through the same business of driving stakes into the bottom of the lake, and lashing the sternpost between. Garth threw up his hands in helpless exasperation. Tarpaulins and sails were spread over the cargo and lashed down. Charley made Natalie snug with a tarpaulin roof over her seat. Garth commanded him, no matter what might happen, not to leave her side.

The storm came roaring down the lake like a vast animate being; and there, in their exposed position, smote them hip and thigh. Each crash of thunder fell forth right upon the echo of the last; and the lightning played like wicked laughter on the face of the destroying heavens. Then came the rain, with pitiless, whistling whips that lashed the water, and bit cruelly into exposed flesh. Every man on board, save one, instantly dived under the sail-cloths; and Hooliam was the first to

seek shelter.

Only Garth dared not relax his watch in the open. He maintained his place with his back against the stern, a piece of tarpaulin across his knees to keep his gun dry, and his eyes bent forward in the boat whence any move must be made on him. So sure was he that Grylls would attack him, he was scarcely conscious of the tumult that roared about his ears. The wind tore his hat off; and the cold rain drenched him to the skin.

Before him, the lightning luridly showed up the trees on the shore, writhing horridly; and the wet mast and the guy ropes were often wreathed in faint, bluish flames. The *Loseis* forward, with her irregularly piled cargo, and the crouching forms under the sail-cloths, presented a thousand shifting, fantastic shapes in the playing flashes; and Garth had a score of false alarms. In the end, his enemy crept almost upon him undiscovered.

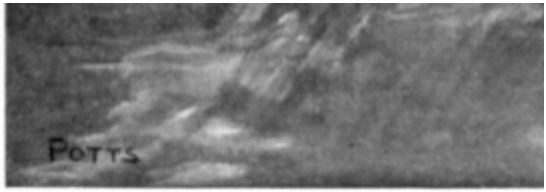
By the light of a great blaze, which held all the earth and the heavens suspended in flames for a moment, Garth suddenly saw revealed a crouching figure, and a hideous, distorted face no more than six feet from his own. In the blinding glare it was outlined with a horrid clearness; in its grossness and bestial hatred, less human than demoniacal.

Garth, snatching up his rifle, sprang to his feet, but before he could point it, Grylls

had flung himself upon him, and his mighty arms were squeezing Garth's ribs into his lungs. The useless weapon dropped to the deck. Grylls, trusting to his enormous strength, was unarmed; he wished to crush his adversary without leaving obvious traces of violence. No word was spoken by either.

They swayed on the narrow seat encircling the stern; and all sound of the little human struggle was swallowed up in the dreadful uproar of the elements. Natalie and Charley, but three yards away, heard nothing. Grylls was the stronger; Garth contented himself with a dogged resistance, trusting to his better wind to serve him in the end. Meanwhile the *Loseis* was continually heaved under their feet, and dropped heavily on the stones by the mounting breakers; and they maintained a footing with difficulty. Nick ceaselessly strained to force Garth to his knees. Failing, he lifted him clear of the deck. At the same instant the boat lurched drunkenly; and they pitched overboard together.


POTTS



At the same instant the boat lurched drunkenl

Somehow, they gained their feet, and stood, still locked together, while the tumbling waves boiled around their waists, and sucked at their knees. But Garth had struck his head on the gunwale in falling; his senses were slipping away, and nausea overcame him. He tried to cry out; but the feeble sound was lost at his lips. Nick forced him slowly down until the water broke over his head. Garth was dimly conscious of hearing him laugh—no one knew; and the explanation next day would be so simple! But the wholesome chill of the water rolling over his head revived the swooning Garth. He collected his forces for a last effort; and, suddenly wrenching his shoulders from under the hands that pressed them down, he gained his feet, and his hands seized upon Grylls's throat.

It was the big man's vulnerable point; and a subtle sweetness flooded Garth's breast as he felt him begin to fail. Foul living was telling in the end. Grylls struggled for his breath in loud, strangling sobs; and Garth could hear his bursting heart knock at his ribs. The smith's arms of him little by little softened of their steely strength; he strove in vain now to lift Garth off his feet. Garth, cool and strong again, and always waiting, let him tire himself. He disdained

to call for help now; he even relaxed his grip on the thick throat a little. It was not necessary to strangle the man; for he had done for himself.

Meanwhile the waves broke with ever-increasing violence on the frail bulwark the two bodies offered to their impetuous course, and it was only a question of moments when they would both be beaten down. Grylls's knees weakening under him first, down they went, Garth uppermost; and, the water seizing them, still gripped together, they were rolled over and over, and finally flung up on the stones.

Stunned, bruised and breathless as he was, Garth was still able to free himself from the automatic grip of the other man's arms; but Grylls lay motionless.

Briefly satisfying himself that the man still lived, Garth dragged him out of reach of the waves, and letting him lie in the driving rain, turned his attention to the boat.

The *Loseis* was in a bad way. The waves under her stern had lifted the driven stakes as easily as pins are drawn from a cushion. She had immediately swung broadside on the beach; and the waves, crashing under her counter, were driving over her in clouds of spray while her bottom heaved, and gave, and pounded sickeningly on the stones. No one on board required to be told that a very little

of this would separate every plank of her from her aged ribs. The breed boys appeared one by one from under the coverings; and standing about, dazed and careless of the downpour, waited to be told what to do. There was no sign of Hooliam.

Garth climbed painfully on board. Searching for the degenerate captain, he stepped on something soft, and a hollow groan issued from beneath the sail-cloth. He threw it back, and dislodged the palpitating Hooliam with a vigorous foot. The breed struggled to his knees, supporting himself by a guy rope. Just then there was a blinding flash, and the mast and the wet ropes were wreathed again for an instant in bluish flame. Partly shocked, but more from abject fear, Hooliam collapsed with a brutish moan.

"Throw this carrion ashore!" Garth commanded with strong disgust.

The breeds, understanding his gestures, instinctively obeyed; and Hooliam was dragged over the side, and dropped on the beach, not very far from the body of his unconscious employer.

"We'll have to save her ourselves!" shouted Garth to Charley. "Translate my orders!"

The storm had a revolving tendency; and the wind had now hauled to the south, whence it came shrieking across the lake with unabated fury. A little way ahead,

around the shallow crescent of the exposed bay in which they lay, they could see by the light of the frequent flashes a point on which the waves were beating wildly; and beyond there was a promise of smooth water and safety. It was only a little way, scarcely an eighth of a mile; but the way was beset with heart-breaking difficulties.

"All hands ashore to push her off!" cried Garth.

The breed boys, welcoming a voice of authority in that bewildering chaos, sprang to do his bidding. Garth and Charley set the example, and the ten backs were braced under the lee gunwale of the *Loseis*, measuring their sinews against the crashing blows of the waves on the other side. They budged her inch by inch, often thrown back again; but at last she floated, and there they managed to hold her for a moment, rising and falling. Only one who has measured the strength of the surf against the smallest craft, may comprehend the magnitude of their labour.

"Aleck's crew ahead with the tracking-line," shouted Garth.

The line is always kept coiled and ready, hanging on the bow. Aleck seized it, and followed by three others, ran ahead along the beach, paying it out. The four of them slipped into the harness; and digging their moccasined toes into the beach, painfully

straightened their legs under the pull. When the *Loseis*, answering, began to move inch by inch along the shore, Garth put the remaining men on board one at a time, where, armed with their poles, and braced almost horizontally, they held her off the stones.

Natalie had long since deserted her sheltered nook, and, heedless of the drenching downpour, watched them with eager eyes. Garth, his bruises forgotten, seemed everywhere at once; he had even time to shout a word of encouragement to her, and she longed mightily to do something to help. Looking around, she saw her chance. The steersman's long sweep lay along the deck; running it aft through its ring in the sternpost, and pushing with all her strength against the stones astern, she added her mite to keep the boat headed off. Garth observing, shouted his approval; and Natalie's heart waxed big in her breast.

Inch by inch, then foot by foot, they won their painful way along the lee shore. Over and over in spite of the six poles, she was thrown back on the stones, whereupon they all leaped overboard and put their backs under her lee. There was once when, Garth's pole snapping short, he pitched headlong overboard. He climbed back with blood colouring the rain in his face, and found another pole. Again, approaching the point, the four men on the end of the tracking-line

crawling slowly around the edge of a steepish bank, were by a sudden heave of the *Loseis* all four jerked into the water. Instantly picking themselves up, they scrambled ahead with their line through the breakers. Garth's heart warmed over the half-fed, half-clad boys. Not one of the eight faltered for an instant, and in the midst of their superhuman labours they could still be shouting at each other.

A reef ran out beyond the point; and how they ever got over this, or how long it took, none could have told. By that time they were merely insensate machines striving automatically against a mighty inhuman adversary. The *Loseis's* ribs yielded and trembled under the renewed blows on the stones. Dizzy and blind with fatigue they struggled ahead; but they would never have made it, had not the wind hauled still further around. Finally a wave greater than any preceding lifted them clear of the stones, and dropped them in smooth water inside. For a while, unable to realize they had rounded the point, they continued to struggle; then the *Loseis* gently beached herself. The tracking crew scrambled aboard, and all hands dropped where they stood for a breathing spell.

Soon after the storm showed signs of abating. In the end it ceased almost as abruptly as it had begun; and the moon looked wanly forth, as if ashamed for the recent disturbances aloft. Garth, thinking

of Grylls and Hooliam lying on the beach around the point, consulted with Charley what had better be done. It took them about three seconds to arrive at a decision.

"It is between eight and ten miles to the head of the lake," Charley said.

"Let them walk it then," said Garth coolly.

Presently the same breeze resumed its gentle course up the lake as if there had been no such thing as a storm. Tired as they were, it was too good to lose; and with hoisted sail, the *Loseis* forged through the rapidly subsiding waters, with Charley at the helm. The breed boys asked no questions. Having raised the sail, they promptly fell asleep. Hooliam they had little regard for anyway; and Grylls they may have supposed was still somewhere under the sail-cloths. In three hours they had reached Grier's point, the navigable head of the lake; and all hands slept until long after sunrise.

Garth and Natalie, meeting in the daylight, exclaimed each at the appearance of the other; Natalie, with remorseful sympathy, that she had not sooner learnt the extent of Garth's bruises; and Garth with delighted wonder at the freshness of her. Natalie was like the lake in the early sunshine; neither showed the slightest trace of a storm overnight.

While they were at their breakfast on the

shore, a deplorable figure, ashen-cheeked and shamed, came shuffling out of the bush. The eight breeds, as one, instantly set up a merciless, derisive jeering. It was Hooliam. He bore in his hands a little bottle and a bank-bill. Wretched as he was, his eyes glinted with satisfaction at the sight of the boat safe and sound on the shore. He went to Garth.

"Nick Grylls in the bush," he said, dully pointing back. "Him sick bad. Maybe him die. Him give five dollar for drink of whiskey."

Garth filled the bottle from his flask. "Put up your money," he said curtly.

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THE NINETY-MILE PORTAGE

The Settlement is upward of three miles from Grier's point. Avoiding the houses for the present, Garth pitched his camp outside, well off the trail. The first thing they learned was that the Bishop had gone on. This time they were not surprised; there seemed to be a fatality in it. The old problem confronted Garth anew.

"I think you should wait here," he

suggested to Natalie; "and let me ride on for you."

Natalie, as she always did when this question was brought up, merely looked obstinate.

"It is likely we will miss him again at the Crossing," Garth went on; "and I have learned there are only one or two cabins there, and no white woman. It would be difficult for you."

Natalie's silence gave him no encouragement.

"But here," he urged, "you could stay with the wife of the inspector of the mounted police; while I go on and bring Mabyn back to you. I do not think you should put yourself in his hands."

"He would not come with you," she said evasively.

"I promise to bring him," said Garth determinedly; "if he is alive."

"No!" she said with manifest agitation. "That is another reason!"

"What is?" he asked mystified.

"I—I could not have any trouble between you," she said in a low tone.

"But I promise to bring him safely," he said doggedly.

She still shook her head.

"I will go to the wife of the inspector," said Garth—"a woman in such a position is sure to be the right sort—and I will explain our position frankly. She will be glad to take you in!"

Natalie shot an odd glance at him. "I will not let you," she said quickly.

"But why?"

"The risk of the humiliation of a refusal is too great," she said. "I do not doubt she is a good woman; I'm sure she rises splendidly to all the demands of her position up here. But she *has* a position to maintain, you see; no doubt she is bringing up girls. And me!"—Natalie turned away her head—"consider how extraordinary the story sounds! Only one woman in a thousand would believe."

Garth turned a distressed face to her. "I have not taken care of you properly," he cried remorsefully.

Natalie veiled her eyes; and her hand stole to her breast. "Let us not talk about *that*!" she murmured unevenly.

Garth was perplexed and silent.

Natalie recovered herself presently; and looked at him with a misty shine in her eyes. "Why do you worry?" she asked. "We're a thousand times better off than we were yesterday; for you have laid our enemy by the heels! Why mayn't I go on with you just the same as before? I cannot

trust any one but you!"

How was Garth to resist such an appeal? Besides, there was nothing else to do.

Garth might have lodged a complaint against Nick Grylls at the barracks; but any investigation would have seriously delayed their journey; and a greater reason against it was his care for Natalie's good name. It was intolerable to him that the dear circumstances of their journey together should be made the subject of the common gossip of the North. It was better to let those who saw Natalie on the trail speculate as they chose, rather than give them an opportunity to put their own coarse construction upon the truth. He was well assured Nick Grylls would say nothing.

For the same reason, he decided to avoid the Settlement altogether. The two of them remained close in camp; and Charley was dispatched to purchase ponies and saddles, and what was needful to replenish their stores. He returned with all they required; and during the afternoon instructed Garth how to pack the ponies and "throw" the immovable diamond hitch. Natalie in the meantime, constructed a divided skirt for herself, since side-saddles are unknown in the North.

Their route now lay over the ninety-mile portage to Spirit River Crossing. The road, Garth learned, was straight, and, for the

North, well-travelled. There were no forks or cross-trails, hence no possibility of their missing the way. They set off before daybreak next morning. The parting with Charley was a wrench all around: but Garth was firm in insisting that the boy must go back, and put up his hay. In the easy-going North it is only too easy to drop one's tools and start off on a jaunt. Charley bade them an abrupt good-bye; and bustled away to hide his tears.

In the mystical gloom which, in northern latitudes, precedes the summer dawn, Garth and Natalie, each leading a pack pony, rode through the Settlement, which straggled for several miles around the shore of Moose Bay, a wide, shallow arm of the lake, once navigable, but now given over to the wild-fowl. The shacks were infinitely various; for in a land where every man builds for himself, a house quaintly expresses the character of its owner. But one thing was common to all; no one wastes any ornament on his dwelling; and in the luxuriant greenness of the northern summer, the grim, solid little houses were a reminder of the coming cold.

Later in the day they passed the long, gradual climb over the height of land separating the great watersheds of the Miwasa and the Spirit. On the other side they came to a flat country and of the same general character all the way. It was a shining day; and, being young, they

forgot their cares and rode gaily. For the most part the trail lay in a straight and lofty nave of aspen trees, rearing their slender, snowy pillars sixty, eighty—even a hundred feet aloft; and mingling their clusters of nimble, chattering leaves high overhead in the sun. There was nothing gloomy about this cathedral; the sun found a thousand apertures through which to launch his rays against the white pillars; while the green and mutable roof was bathed in almost intolerable radiance —it was a temple in green and white, Flora's colours.

Occasionally there were cloistered openings; sunny little meadows inclining to a spring, where the wild pea-vine, plant beloved of horses, and infallible sign of a rich soil, grew knee-deep. Such an opening they learned, however small, was quaintly dignified by the natives with the name of prairie.

Their ponies, each exhibiting a distinct individuality, afforded the excuse for their amusement on the way. Garth's mount, that a previous owner had christened "Cyclops," and who was tall enough and bony enough to be called a horse, was, like themselves, a stranger in the bush, and his face offered a comical study in anxiety, willingness and stupidity, under these new conditions. Natalie rode a young sorrel rejoicing in the name of Caspar. He had a dull eye, a long, sheeplike nose and a wagging under lip;

and Natalie vowed he was half-witted. He would not ride abreast; but insisted on following; and he screamed with terror, if for an instant he lost sight of the other horses.

But it was the two pack horses that offered the most diverting study of character. When they left the Settlement behind, Garth cast off their leaders. In Emmy, a rotund little mare, they had secured a treasure. Emmy had an indifferent air toward them, worthy of a breed; but unlike a breed, she was thoroughly business-like. Where the great mudholes of unknown depth blocked the trail, and they must strike into the bush, she required no guidance. They laughed and admired, to see her stop, looking this way and that, and deliberately pick her way through, always with due regard to the height and breadth of the pack on her back. Emmy declined to be hurried; she had an air that said as plainly as words, if they didn't like her pace, they could leave her behind, and be hanged to them!

The remaining animal was Emmy's son, a half-broken colt, whose only virtue was that he would not stray very far from his mother. Mistatimoosis was his mouthful of a name. He forgot his pack sometimes, and striking it full tilt against a tree, would be knocked endwise in the trail, blinking and dismayed, as who should say, "Who hit me?" The thing that caused them the heartiest laughter was to see

Mistatimoosis's endless attempts to steal the leadership of the caravan from his mother. It was the only thing that could tempt Emmy out of her sedate pace. On a fair piece of road the two of them would race at top speed for half a mile; and the colt was continually making sly detours into the bush to get around his mother. But she kept him in his place behind.

The riders finding they could safely leave the packhorses to follow, had ridden ahead to spy out grass and water for the noon spell. They were walking their horses over the turf bordering the trail, when suddenly from among the trees came with startling distinctness the sound of a voice. They reined up, astonished. It was the gentle, ambling voice of a loquacious old man; and his conversation there in the wilderness was as quiet and intimate as chimney-corner talk.

"I should say half-past eleven," they heard. "When Mr. Sun sits down on yonder spruce tree we'll make a break. So work your jaws good, Mother, old girl; and you Buck, my dear, stop looking around like a fool and get busy! Meanwhile, we'll pack up the grub-box."

Garth and Natalie smiled at each other. There was nothing very alarming about this.

"Will you have a pipe of baccy now, Tom Lillywhite?" the same voice resumed. "Thanks, old man, don't mind if I do! Is

there any cut? No? Well shave it close."

There was a pause here, while the speaker presumably filled his pipe. Then some one drew an audible sigh of content; and a kind of dialogue took place—though there was but the one voice full of quaint lifts and falls. Garth and Natalie, smiling broadly, listened without shame.

"Ah! a fine day, a bellyful of bacon, and a pipeful of tobacco!—would you change with a moneyed man, Tom Lillywhite?"

"Well I don't know, sir! Mebbe he don't enjoy his grub as much as us, havin' gen'ally the dyspepsy; but how about the winter, old sport, when we don't fetch up no stoppin'-house; and has to make a bed in the snow, hey? It's then a flannel bed-gown looks good to old bones; let alone woolly slippers and a feather bed! Seems I wouldn't kick agin the job of takin' care o' money in the winter time!"

"Ah! g'long with you, Tom Lillywhite! You'd a been dead long ago if you had money! Swole up and bust with good eatin', y'old epicoor! You'd be havin' a pig killed fresh every week if you had money!"

"Say, b'lieve I would cut some dash if I had money! I'd build me a house of lumber clear through, and I'd paint it all over, paint it blue! And I'd have sawdust on the settin'-room floor and a brass spittoon in every corner! 'Have a chair,' I'd say to stoppers, not lettin' on I was puffed

up at all. 'Have a ten-cent seegar. Don't mention it! Don't mention it! I get a case full in every Fall!'"

Here there was a jolly chuckle.

Their packhorses joining them noisily, the dialogue was cut short.

"Some one comin'," said the voice.

Rounding the clump of bushes, Garth and Natalie found themselves in a grassy opening in the bush. An untraced wagon stood in the centre; and two horses browsed. Immediately under the bushes, an old man sat on the ground. They instinctively looked around for the other persons brought into his conversation; but, save for the horses, he was alone.

At the sight of them his face lighted up with the pleased naïveté of a child. "How do! How do!" he said immediately, without getting up or raising his voice at all. "My horses are quiet. They won't tech yours. The spring is down there at the foot of the spruce. Just blow up my fire a little and it will do for you." He seemed to take them entirely for granted; and he spoke as if resuming a dropped conversation.

There was something very troll-like in the old figure, squatting on the ground; in his bright, glancing eyes, in his incessant, matter-of-fact loquacity, and the slight, peculiar gesticulation, with which he illustrated his talk. He was all of a colour;

high moccasins, breeches, shirt and cap were weathered to the same grayish-brown shade—and that much the colour of his skin. Against a background of withered grass, only his white hair would have been visible. He was like some good-tempered, little familiar of the forest.

He stared hard at Natalie in his bright-eyed, impersonal way; and as soon as Garth, having made his horses comfortable, came to build up the fire, he started in with his questions.

"Where you going?"

"Spirit River Crossing," said Garth.

"Thinking of settling?"

Garth shook his head.

"No, you don't look like settlers. Company business, maybe?"

"No," said Garth.

"Police? Gov'ment survey?"

"Private business," said Garth—his usual answer to the question direct.

Baffled inquisitiveness, vice of the kindest natures, made the old man's face ugly; and for a moment he looked like a wicked troll. For a little while he preserved an offended silence; but then, probably recollecting that he would hear the whole story at the Settlement, or simply because he could not keep still any longer, his face

cleared, and he resumed his engaging, inconsequential babble.

"See that horse over there, the buckskin? Best horse I ever had! True buckskin! Mark the zebra stripes round his legs, Miss; and the black stripe on his backbone. You can't kill a buck; he's got more lives than a cat. I call the old one Mother; she's good-natured, she is!"

"You're a freighter, I see," remarked Garth as a leader.

"Sure thing, stranger! Tom Lillywhite and his team is known to every settler in the country! Been here thirty-five year; and always on the move! Never sleep in the same place two nights going! That wagon there, and the grub-box is my home. It's a variegated life!"

Garth bethought himself the old man would likely prove a valuable source of information. "You must know everybody in the country!" he said, feeling his way.

"None better!" said Tom Lillywhite, bridling with pride.

"Are there many white men at the Crossing?" asked Garth.

"Quite a crowd," said the old man; "eight or nine at the least. There's the two traders, and Mert Haywood the farmer, and old Turner the J. P., and the priest, and the English missionary, and the school-master; that's seven. Then there's

old man Mackensie but you wouldn't hardly call him a white man—smoked too deep, and squaw-ridden."

"Is that all?" said Garth, disappointed of his quest.

"Well, there's a sort of another. He doesn't regularly belong to the Crossing but he comes into the store for his goods once or twict a year. I forgot him—most everybody's forgot him now. It's Bert Mabyn."

Garth and Natalie pricked up their ears; and their hearts began to beat.

"I got good cause to know Bert Mabyn, too," continued old Tom innocently; while the other two listened still as mice, and apprehensive of disclosures to be made. "But that's all past. I don't bear him no ill-will now. He's a cur'us chap, a little teched I guess; but as pleasant a spoken and amoosin' a feller as another feller could want to have with him on the road! Want to hear about him?"

Garth looked at Natalie dubiously.

"Yes," she said boldly.

"Well, it was three years ago," began Tom Lillywhite, with the zest of the true story-teller. "The Gov'ment sent four surveyin' parties in; and I had more'n I could do freightin' from the Settlement to the different camps. It was rough haulin', you understand, over the lines they cut

through the bush, straight as a string over muskeg and coulée. You couldn't load over twenty hundredweight, and sometimes you had to dump half of that, and go back for it. But right good pay, Gov'ment pay is.

"I needed another team bad, and I see a good chance to get one on credit from Dick Staley, with the wagon and all; but I couldn't get no white men to drive it for me. A breed, you understand, soon kills your horses on you!

"Well, it might be I was settin' outside the French outfit, talkin' it over," he went on tranquilly, little suspecting with what meaning his story was charged for the two strangers; "when along comes a feller and asts for me. Say, he was a sight! He was wearin' black clothes, though it were a workin'-day; and all muddied and tore, showin' the skin under; and his coat was pinned acrost the neck, with a safety-pin 'cause he hadn't no shirt. He had a Sunday hat on too—all busted. At the best he weren't no beauty; his teeth was out."

Natalie shuddered.

Garth, suffering for her, could not bear to meet her eyes. "Perhaps you'd rather hear another story," he suggested.

She braced herself. "No! Go on!" she said.

"Soon as I see him, I knew who he was," continued old Tom; "for I hear the fellers talk about a white man that took passage

up from the Landing on Phillippe's boat. He let them pull him all the way; and when they got to Grier's point, he hadn't no money. They took it out of his skin; and say, when a white man is beat by a breed it's good-day to him up here! In a hundred years he couldn't live it down.

"'Do you want to hire a man?' says he mumbling-like; he was too far down to meet your eye.

"'Hum!' says I thoughtful, 'I want a *man*,' I says.

"You should have heard the fellers laugh at that! They still talk about it! 'Tom Lillywhite, he wants a man', they say. It's quite a word in the country. 'Tom Lillywhite wants a *man*!'"

The old freighter went off into an interminable chuckling over the antique jest.

It was inexpressibly painful to Natalie to have Garth there, a witness to her humiliation; but she would not stop the story-teller, nor let Garth stop him.

"However, thinks I, you can sometimes make a man out of unpromisin' mater'al," he resumed. "And in the end I took him for his grub. That was Bert Mabyn. For three months I didn't regret it; he was used to horses, and was first-rate company on the trail. I didn't give him no money—said he didn't want none—but I fed him

up good, and he soon got fat and sassy. I give him other things too. I couldn't stand for the poor wretch a shiverin' by my fire in his buttoned-up coat, so I give him blankets; and afterward an outfit of clothes.

"What do you think was the first thing he ever ast me for?—a razor and a glass! And every day after that he used to shave hisself—every day mind you, if we was in the thickest part of the bush! And forever trimmin' of his nails, and polishin' 'em to make 'em shine! Wasn't that remarkable?

"He was a great talker. Nights around the fire he used to tell me all about himself. Seems he comes of real high-toned folks outside; but went to the bad young. Said he come West three years before that again, full of good resolutions, which lasted just so long as his money. Since then he'd been a grub-rider 'round the ranches, and dish-washer in hotels, and, 'scusin' your presence, Miss, worse than that—but he hadn't no shame about it!

"I liked the feller. He wasn't no good, but he had that persuasive way with him! And he knew so much more than me! You'd think a man 'ud feel shame to tell such stories on himself; but no! he'd make out as you ought to like him for bein' such a good-for-nothing waster; and by Gum! in the end you did! Never see such a feller!

"Well, all summer we travelled, me and him; him always behind me on the trail;

and I hadn't any fault to find. But come September I had a rush lot up to Whitefish Lake; and at the same time there was some stuff wanted in a hurry in Pentland's camp over on the Great Smoky. So for the first time we divided. I sent him to Pentland's over this very trail!

"I got back long before he did. After a while word come from Pentland, where in thunder were the goods? It was after the first snow before Mabyn come back. He was a wreck and the horses were just alive, and no more. He told a story how his wagon capsized in the river, and he lost everything; but the whiskey gave the lie to that. By and by we found he'd buried a keg of it, outside the Settlement. In the Spring when it was too late to do anything, it all come out through a breed. Seems away up by Fort St. Pierre, he met one of them crooked traders, that sometimes sneaks acrost the mountains; and he sold him the stuff for a keg of rot-gut. When I hear that I was thankful he brought back the horses at all. The business near busted me; for I had to make good three hundred worth of groceries to Pentland; and sacrificed the second team, 'count of the shape they were in. That was what Bert Mabyn cost *me*!"

"Didn't you have him arrested?" asked Garth indignantly.

Tom shrugged. "What were the use of that? The inspector was after me to

prosecute; but it was too late to get my money back, and put flesh on the horses—besides, I was too busy. Of course, it weren't just the same as robbin' me in cold blood," he added in the tone of one who must be fair; "for it were the whiskey, you see."

Natalie kept her face averted from the old man. "And what has become of this man since?" she asked, steadily controlling her voice.

"Oh, he hung around the Settlement, sponging on one and another till he were kicked out; then he come down to the breeds. It was a great honour for them to have a white man of any kind runnin' after them, you see, so they put up with him. Then he drifted West, up Ostachegan way; and lately, I understand, he's taken up a deserted shack he found on Clearwater Lake, away up on the bench there, northwest of the Spirit. There they tell me he lives all alone; but no one's seen him in a dog's age."

Garth and Natalie avoided everything beyond the merest commonplaces to each other until they were alone; and even after Tom Lillywhite, bidding them farewell, had driven off, chirping to his horses, it was a long time before either had the courage to make a move toward overcoming the ghastly constraint his

story had caused between them.

"Haven't we heard enough?" said Garth quietly at last. "Need you go any further?"

Natalie in the interim had had time to pass her emotional crisis. She was very pale, and her eyes were big; but she was now calmer than he. "I have heard enough, surely," she said; "but after coming all this way it would seem cowardly, wouldn't it, to be satisfied with hearsay evidence?—and there is still my promise to his mother."

Her tone impressed Garth with the utter hopelessness of trying to dissuade her. "But how can I let you expose yourself to —to what we may find!" he groaned.

"I am not a child," said Natalie quietly. "And I shall not quail at the mere sight of ugliness." She turned away from him. "Besides," she added in a lower tone, "you know the worst now; and that was the hardest thing to bear—your hearing it I mean. No," she went on, facing him again, wistfully and valorously; "it promises to be *very* ugly, but then I undertook it, you see. I am going on."

They could not bear to meet each other's eyes; and miserably turning their backs, affected to busy themselves with small tasks. Natalie, quivering with the shame of the lash all unwittingly applied by old Tom, longed with an inexpressible longing to have Garth with a hint or a look assure

her that he loved her, and so, thrusting the wretch Mabyn out of their charmed circle, reinstate her in her self-respect. But poor Garth in his clumsy, masculine delicacy thought that to obtrude himself at such a moment would only hurt her more. He kept silent, and he averted his eyes, and Natalie, misunderstanding, tasted the very dregs of shame.

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XIII

THE NEWLY-MARRIED PAIR

Out on the bosom of that infinite prairie, which rolls its unmeasured miles north and west of the Spirit River, a last place of mystery and dreams, still unharnessed by the geographers, and reluctantly written down "unexplored" on their maps, two human figures were riding slowly, with their horses' heads turned away from the last habitations of men. The prairie undulated about them like a sea congealed in motion—but seemingly vaster than the sea; for at sea the horizon is ever near at hand; while here the very unevenness of the ground marked, and fixed, and opened up the awful distances. The grass was short, rich and browned by the summer sun; and it mantled the distant rounds and

hollows with the changing lights of beaver fur. The only breaks in its expanse were here and there, springing in the sheltered hollows, coppices or bluffs of slender poplar saplings, with crowding stems, as close and even as hair. The leaves were yellowed by the first frosts.

The man rode ahead, slouching on the back of his wretched cayuse, with eyes blank alike of inward thought or outward observation. He was not yet forty years old, but bore the cast of premature decay, more aged than age. What showed of his hair beneath his hat was sparse and faded; and of his visible teeth he had no more than a perishing stump or two left in his jaws. His discontented, satiated, exhausted mien, had a strange look there in the fresh and potent wilderness.

The girl who followed with a travoise dragging at her pony's heels, was, on the other hand, in harmony with the land. Of the extremes to which the breeds run in looks, she was of the rare beauties of that strange race. Her features were moulded in a delicate, definite harmony that would have marked her out in any assemblage of beauty; and the spirit of beauty was there too. There were actually pride and dignity under the arched brows—so capricious is Nature in shaping her wilder daughters—and in the deep soft eyes brooded, even when she was happiest, a heart-disquieting quality of wistfulness. She was happy now; and ever and anon she raised

her eyes to the slouching back of the man riding ahead with a look of passionate abandon in which there was nothing civilized at all. She was slenderer than the run of brown maidens, and her clumsy print dress could not hide the girlish, perfect contour of her shoulders. In her dusky cheeks there glowed a tinge of deep rose; testimony to the lingering influence of the white blood in her veins.

Topping a rise, the man paused for her to overtake him.

"Here we are, Rina," he said indifferently. His voice was oddly cracked. His manner toward her expressed a good-humoured tolerance. His eyes approved her casually; inner tenderness there was none.

The girl apparently was sensible of no lack —but the breeds do not bring up their daughters to expect tenderness. Her eyes sparkled. "How pretty it is, 'Erbe't!" she breathed. "Ver' moch good land!" She spoke the pretty, clipped English of the convent school.

At their feet lay a shallow valley, hidden close until the very moment of stumbling upon it. In it was a sparkling slough but large enough to be dignified with the name of lake. It was something the shape of a gourd, with a long end that curved out of sight below, a very girdle of blue velvet binding the waists of the brown hills. At their left the shores of the wider part of the lake, the bulb of the gourd,

were, in unexpected contrast to the bareness of the uplands, heavily wooded with great cottonwood trees and spruce. A grassy islet ringed with willows seemed to be moored here like the barge of some woodland princess. Away beyond, elevated on a grassy terrace at the head of the lake, and overlooking its whole expanse, stood a tiny weather-beaten shack, startlingly conspicuous in that great expanse of untouched nature. Sheltered by the hills from the howling blasts of the prairie above; and with wood, water and unlimited game at its door, it was a wholly desirable situation for a Northern dwelling—but it was seventy-five miles off the trail.

The girl brought her pony alongside Mabyn's; and slipped her hand into his. "It is jus' right!" she whispered. "We will be ver' happy, 'Erbe't!"

He let her hand fall carelessly. "It's damn lonesome!" he grumbled.

All the shy boldness of an enamoured girl peeped out of Rina's eyes, as she whispered: "I'm glad it's lonesome! I don' want nobody to come—but you!"

Mabyn was unimpressed. He struck the ribs of his tired pony with his heels. "Come on," he said; and led the way down the incline.

Later, reaching the shack, on the threshold Rina spread out her arms with an

unconscious gesture. "This is my home!" she cried. "I will jus' love it!"

Mabyn looking around at the gaping walls, the empty panes and the foul litter, laughed jeeringly at her simplicity.

The girl was too happy to feel the sting. "I will fix it!" she said stoutly. "I will mak' it like an outside house. It will be as nice than the priest's parlour in the Settlement!" She clasped her hands against her breast in the intensity of her eagerness. "Jus' you wait, 'Erbe't! Some day I will have white curtains in the window! and a piece of carpet on the floor! and a holy picture on the wall! Oh! I will work so hard!"

"Get about the supper, Rina," said Mabyn shortly.

She prepared the meal at the rough mud fireplace built across the corner of the shack, for they had no stove; and they ate squatting on the floor in the breed fashion, for neither was there a table. Afterward Mabyn dragged the bench—a relic of the former tenant, and sole article of furniture they possessed—outside the door; and sat upon it, smoking, yawning, looking across the lake with lack-lustre eyes.

Rina having redd up the shack, came to the doorway, where she stood looking at him wistfully. Finally she hovered toward him and retreated; and her hands stole to

her breast. She was longing mightily to sit beside him; but she did not dare. In a breed's wife it would have been highly presumptuous, and would very likely have been rewarded with a blow; but Rina had a dim notion that a white man's wife had the right to sit beside him—still she was afraid. In the end her desire overcame her fears; drifting hither and thither toward the bench like a frond of thistledown, she finally alighted on the edge, and her cheek dropped on his shoulder. The act must have been subtly suggested by the tincture of white blood in her veins, for it is not a redskin attitude. The man neither repulsed nor welcomed her.

"'Erbe't," she whispered, "my head is so full of things I am near crazy wit' thoughts! And my tongue is in a snare; I cannot speak at all!"

Mabyn's only comment was a sort of grunt, which meant anything—or nothing.

Rina was encouraged to creep a little closer. "Oh, 'Erbe't, I love you!" she whispered. "I am loving you every minute! I so glad you marry me, 'Erbe't!"

The man took his pipe out of his mouth, and uttered his brief, jeering cackle of laughter. "That wasn't altogether a matter of choice, my girl," he said. "It was a little preliminary insisted on by your father and mother."

Rina hardly took the sense of this. "But

you do love me, 'Erbe't? jus' a little?" she pleaded.

"You're all right, Rina," he said patronizingly. "I never was one to make much of a fuss about a woman."

Little by little gathering courage, she began to pour out her soul for the man she loved. "I never love any man but you, 'Erbe't," so ran the naïve confession; "the breed boys, they always come aroun' and show off. I not lak them. They foolish and dirty; they eat same lak cocouche; and they know not'ing; but they think themself so fine. They mak' me sick! My mot'er say to me; 'You eighteen year old, Rina; w'en you go to marry?' I say to my mot'er, 'I never marry a pig-man; I want to stay to you.'"

Her voice changed, borrowing the soft, passionate music of the nightingale she had never heard. "Then bam-bye w'en the spring come, an' we pitch by Ostachegan creek, an' the crocus flowers are coming up on Sah-ko-da-tah prairie so many as stars in the sky—then you come by our camp, 'Erbe't; and you so poor an' sick I feel ver' bad for you! An' you talk so pretty, and know so much, my heart him fly straight out of my breast like a bird, 'Erbe't; an' perch on your shoulder; an' him go everywhere you go; an' I got no heart any more. I empty lak a nest in the snow-time!

"So you stay to us," she went on, "and I

mad to see all the men mock at you, an' treat you bad, an' mak' you eat after all have finished, and mak' you lie outside the fire. They t'ink themself better than a white man, hey! All the time you ask me to come away from the camp with you; an' you t'ink I don' want to come, but you don' know. Many, many nights I not sleep, 'Erbe't. I want so bad to come to the ot'er side of the tepee where you are, but I hold to my mot'er's blanket!"

The man looked up. "Hm! You did, eh?" he exclaimed. "If I had known!"

"But I t'ink I mos' not let you see I love you. So I mak' show I don' care at all. An' it hurt me ver' moch in my empty breast, 'Erbe't. But why I do it?—I want you so to marry me! an' bam-bye you marry me; an' I so scare and happy lak I was lose my head! Four days I married now! You not mad at me, 'Erbe't, 'cause I mak' you marry me?"

He shrugged. "What's the diff?" he said carelessly.

Rina dared to let her arm creep around his shoulders. "But bam-bye you ver' glad you marry me," she whispered. "For I mak' me ver' nice! I white woman now. I go no more to the breeds. I spik only Engliss now; we will sit in chairs and eat pretty with knives and forks; and always say good morning and good night, lak white people. 'Erbe't, you will teach me all the ways of white people, lak they do outside?

I want so bad to be ver' nice, jus' lak white woman!"

"Sure!" said Mabyn vaguely.

Rina was silent for a while. "'Erbe't," she said at last, "you never tell me about your folks; about your house where you live outside. Please tell me."

He muttered, and writhed uncomfortably on the bench. "What's the use of bringing that up?" he said at last. "You wouldn't understand if I tried to tell you."

"Loving makes me onderstan' moch," she softly pleaded.

He was silent.

"Have you any sisters outside, 'Erbe't?" she gently persisted.

"No," he said.

"Your mot'er, she is not dead?"

"No."

"She mos' be ver' nice, I think."

"She's a lady!" he blurted out.

Rina nodded wisely. "I know what that is," she said. "A lady is a ver' nice woman." Her voice dropped very low. "'Erbe't," she whispered, with infinite, passionate desire in her voice—stroking his cheek, "will you teach me to be a lady?"

He laughed. "You 'tend to your work about

the place," he said, "and don't bother your head over that."

Tears slowly welled up in Rina's eyes, and stole one after another down her cheeks. "I do so ver' moch want to be a lady," she whispered, more to herself than to him. He did not know she wept, she was so still.

By and by she raised her head, and shook the tears away. "To-morrow, I will begin to fix things nice for you, 'Erbe't," she said with renewed, soft tenderness.

He vented his hopeless, jeering chuckle. "Nice!" he echoed. "My God, Rina! What are you going to begin on?"

"I show you!" she said eagerly. "I have a whole tanned buckskin my father give to me when I go 'way; and my mot'er, she give silk, all colours. I make seven, eight, maybe ten pairs of glove, with cuffs; and work them with silk flowers! No woman can work so good with silk than me! I work all the time there is light; and when all are done I get forty dollar in trade at the store! And I buy cartridges and traps and grub, and another skin to work. Not any more will you be poor, 'Erbe't!"

"Lord! How will we ever drag out the winter in this God-forsaken spot!" he grumbled—unconsciously shifting the initiative to her shoulders.

Her arm tightened about him. "We will do

fine!" she said eagerly. "We will mak' moch money. There is no plentier place for fur; and we will have it all! Me, I can set traps and snares as good as Michel Whitebear. Maybe I will get a silver fox, or a black one. I know the fox! In the spring we will have plenty good credit at the store. We can travel to the Settlement then, and you will not be lonesome. There are many white men. We could stay in the Settlement all summer; and I would cook meals for the freighters and the travellers and mak' more money. I am a good worker, 'Erbe't. Everybody say so!"

Mabyn partly roused himself. "That's not a bad idea," he said. "Under cover of the restaurant, it would be dead easy to run in a little whiskey over the Berry Mountain trail, and make a pot of money. Fifty cents a drink, by Gad!"

Rina drew away from him. "I will not help you do that, 'Erbe't," she said quietly.

"You'll do what I tell you to do," he said coolly.

Rina remained silent. Her breast heaved and trembled with terror at her own temerity in defying her husband—but there were both firmness and reproach in her attitude. It was more than the weak Mabyn could bear for long in silence.

"Good God!" he burst out. "Have I married a breed to tell me what I ought to do, and ought not to do? Better learn once for all,

my girl, that I'm the head of this outfit, and I mean to do whatever I damned please!"

Rina sat gripping her hands together in her lap to control their trembling. Her head was bowed. "I am only a breed girl," she said. "You are my 'osban', and you can beat me, and you can kill me, but I would not cry out, or think bad of you. But you cannot mak' me help you to mak' a pig of you again. I will mak' you to have good credit, an' to be a rich and strong man, an' you can go back and spit on the poor breeds that mock you before. I will not help you trade in whiskey; whiskey mak' you poor, an' sick, an' crazy!"

Mabyn got up. "God! Women are all alike, white or brown!" he muttered indifferently. "Come on in."

But he had yielded the point. The regeneration of Herbert Mabyn had been undertaken.

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XIV

THE LAST STAGE

The hours of the afternoon that followed their encounter with Tom Lillywhite were

long and heavy ones for Natalie and Garth. A haggard misunderstanding rode between them on the trail. Denied the all-explaining, all-healing touch of hands—or lips, the unreasonable despair of lovers seized on each; and the sunny way was plunged in murk. They rode, and camped, and ate their supper in silence; and in silence they turned in for the night. But there was little sleep for either; they lay apart, each nursing a burden of unhappiness; unable to say now what it was all about, only dreadfully conscious that they were divided.

As soon as it was light enough to see, a pale and heavy-lidded Natalie crept noiselessly out of her tent. In front of the door she saw Garth on his knees preparing to build a fire; but the hand that held the hatchet-helve had dropped nervelessly to the ground; and his eyes, fixed and staring in the torpor of miserableness, had forgotten what he had set out to do. At the sight, a rapturous peace came back to Natalie's harried soul; for, she thought, if he were so unhappy as that, he must love her in spite of all. And Garth, looking up, saw the tenderness break in her weary face, and he understood it all too. The forest sprang into leaf again for them; and presently the sun came gaily up. They became as wildly and unreasonably happy as they had just been miserable; and not a word was exchanged either way. It was not necessary. That they did not fling themselves into each other's arms at that

moment, must surely be written down to their credit somewhere.

They made but a leisurely progress this day and the next. The labour of the journey was greater than at any time hitherto, for in addition to the ordinary routine of making and breaking camp twice a day, Garth had now the four horses to look after. Catching them was a task of uncertain duration, even though they were turned out hobbled; in particular, the exasperating Timoosis developed the proficiency of a very circus horse, in walking on his hind legs. And once caught, there was all the business of saddling, packing and drawing the hitch.

Besides, there was that in both their hearts which delayed them even more. No ardently desired goal awaited them at the end of this journey; on the contrary they dreaded what they were to find. The last few miles of the way together, before the inevitable came between them, was therefore very dear; and it became ever easier to say "Let's camp!" and harder to say "Let's move!"

Their boisterous jollity on the trail gave place to much quiet happiness; and there was ceaseless friendly contention, where Garth's every thought was for Natalie; and hers for him. Each was on his mettle to be worthy of the other's best. Above all they avoided the insidious danger of contact; but inevitably sometimes in the business

of the camp, their hands did meet—and each to himself stored up and told over the events like secret treasures. In every labour Natalie insisted on taking her share like a man; and Garth never ceasing to upbraid her, yet loved her for it prodigiously.

Day by day, now, the leaves of the more exposed trees were yellowing; and on the second night of their journey across the portage, the first heavy frost of the season descended. Garth, under his sail-cloth at the door of the tent, awoke covered with rime.

Toward the end of the third day they had their never-to-be-forgotten first glimpse of the mighty Spirit, the dream river of the North, whose name evokes the thought of a garden in a bleak land. The unvarying flatness of the portage with its standing pools, and the interminable lofty wood that had hemmed them in for three days, had given them the sense of travelling on the bottom of the world, and that somewhere ahead must be a hill to climb. What then was their astonishment this afternoon, when, without warning they emerged from among the trees on an abrupt grassy terrace, and beheld the great river lying nearly a thousand feet *below*.

It was a view inimitably gorgeous and sublime. Coming so suddenly upon it they caught their breaths and gazed in silence;

for there was nothing fitting to say. The high point on which they stood overlooked a deep and narrow gorge at their left, through which a little river fell to the great stream; and across this they could look up the vast trough for miles. In the distance the river seemed to rise, until one would say it issued molten from the low-hung sun itself.

It had an individual and peculiar look, like no watercourse they had seen. Its course drew a sharp line between the wooded country and the prairie. Like a figure dressed in motley, the steep southern bank was everywhere dark and wooded, while the other side, sweeping up in countless fantastic knolls and terraces, was bare, except for the brown grass, and patches of scrub-like hair in the hollows. Far back from the opposite rim of the vast trough swept the unmeasured prairie, as flat, in the whole prospect, as the country they had lately traversed.

It was the wealth of colour that most of all bewitched their eyes. The river itself was of an odd, insistent green—emerald tinged with milk; the islands on its bosom hung out the rich bottle-green of spruce; the grass on the north bank was beaver-brown; the wild-rose scrub glowed blood-crimson in the hollows; and the aspen bluffs, touched with frost, were as yellow as saffron. The wild and beautiful panorama was made complete in their eyes by a great golden eagle perched on

the brink of the immediate foreground and, like themselves, gazing over. Though but a hundred yards or so distant, he contemptuously disregarded their arrival. When Garth, full of curiosity, came closer, he spread his vast wings and drifted indifferently out into space.

For a long time they gazed at the scene without speaking. It was Natalie who finally expressed their common thought.

"Wouldn't it be sweet," she said wistfully, "if our journey had no other object but to see this! With what satisfied hearts we could now turn back!"

Skirting the edge of the steep, presently the Settlement came into view far below, a hut or two along the river, hugging the base of the cliffs. The trail zigzagged gradually down, frequently doubling on itself; and whereas the eagle might have descended in a minute, it promised to be more like half an hour for them.

Garth, following his previous policy, did not intend to expose Natalie to the stares of the Settlement, until he had at least reconnoitred. Before coming on the houses, therefore, he led his little caravan off through the bush to the left; and descended to the shore of the smaller stream they had seen from above. Here, in a private glade beside the noisy brown water, they pitched their camp; and Garth, leaving Natalie armed against all eventualities, proceeded into the

Settlement.

His inevitable first question at the store elicited the information that the Bishop had gone up the river to Binchinnin, Ostachegan Creek and Fort St. Pierre. Next, the name of Herbert Mabyn called forth contemptuous shrugs. None of the men could give certain information of his whereabouts, though Clearwater Lake was mentioned again. He had not been in to the post for four months; and there was a handful of letters waiting for him. Garth was referred to the breeds across the river for better news. It was clearly intimated that all self-respecting white men had cast Mabyn off.

Inquiring the means of crossing the river, the ferry was pointed out to Garth, a barge propelled with sweeps. It must be tracked up-stream for a quarter of a mile before starting across, to allow for the current, he was told. The trader offered to help him when he was ready. Garth thanking him, privately resolved to cross before the Settlement was astir next morning. He saw that his own reticence in answering questions inspired the three simultaneously with the idea that he was a detective from outside, in pursuit of Herbert Mabyn for some early sin; and he let it go at that.

Garth roused Natalie long before dawn;

and they crossed the river by the first greenish light of the East. Garth handled one sweep, Natalie the other; and their labour was great. The incorrigible Timoosis, who never neglected an opportunity to make trouble, balked furiously at the ferry; and, finally driven on board and tied, managed to work the other horses up to a high state of excitement during the passage.

Finally, when they had almost made the other shore, he succeeded in breaking his halter; and, leaping over the stern, perversely struck out for the shore they had left. Cy and Caspar, horses of no character, blindly leaped after him. For a moment a dire disaster threatened; for Timoosis, borne down by the weight of his pack, could scarcely keep his head above water; and they thought they had lost both their horse and their camp equipment. But the self-contained Emmy, who had not budged during all the excitement, merely turned her head, and sent an imperious whinny in the direction of her offspring; whereupon Timoosis, with true coltish inconsistency, turned about, and came meekly swimming after the barge, followed by the other two. Since the shore was not above twenty-five yards off he managed to win it pack and all, and staggered up on the beach, chilled, exhausted, and much chastened in mind. Warned by previous experiences, they never trusted him with anything perishable, so the damage to his pack was

slight.

After an hour's travelling, they halted by the trail at sunrise to eat, and to dry out what had been wet. This part of the trail traversed the heavily wooded bottom-lands, before starting to climb the grassy steeps of the further bank. As they sat on a log discussing their bread and cocoa, a rollicking song came, as a sound comes fluctuating through the woods, now from this side, now from that, and curiously deadened. It finally resolved itself into the air of *Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay* with words in Cree. While it still seemed some distance away, suddenly the singer rode upon them; and reining up his horse, called the song into his surprised throat.

He was the handsomest native they had met, a young fellow of twenty-odd, lean and broad-shouldered, with flashing black eyes and high-bridged nose. His stiff-brimmed "Stetson" was tilted at a dashing angle; he had a scarlet silk handkerchief about his throat; and he sat his horse like a young prince of the woods. Whether pure redskin or breed it was impossible for them to tell; certainly there was no visible evidence of a white admixture; but in spite of his strange and savage air, there was something instantly likeable about the young man—according to Natalie he was the first native they had met who seemed human. He rode a fine black horse as bravely accoutred as would become the captain of a round-up.

He seemed disposed to be friendly; and Garth invited him to share their meal. As politeness demanded, he broke a small piece of bread, and drank some cocoa, which was plainly not at all to his taste. When he sat down he had the grace to take off his hat, something else they had not seen before in a native.

His name, he volunteered, was Gene Lafabe. Since his English was about on a par with Garth's Cree, communication was difficult. In his simplicity, the young man was continually forgetting they could not understand his language; and when Garth shook his head, only shouted the louder.

"You know Herbert Mabyn?" Garth asked.

Gene vigorously nodded his head, adding a stream of information, which, had they only understood, would have materially altered their subsequent line of action.

Garth shook his head hopelessly. "Where is he?" he asked.

Gene pointed north. "Clearwater Lake," he said; and in the twinkling of an eye, counted seventy-five with his ten fingers.

"Where is the trail?" Garth asked.

Gene shrugged. "Nomoya!" he said. "No trail!"

Garth had an inspiration. "Can you take us there?" he asked.

Considerable patience and good-humour

were called for from both sides, in the arduous course of arriving at an understanding; but finally a bargain was struck. Gene, in addition to the credentials of his person, bore a highly satisfactory letter of recommendation from the company trader at the Crossing. Whatever his errand in the first place may have been, he never gave it another thought; and in half an hour blithely turned his horse's head, and took the lead on the trail.

Gene looked at every considerable tree, every little gulley, and every rise in the ground with the eye of an old friend. In a mile or so, at a place marked in no way that Garth could see, he abruptly turned out of the trail; and led them with an air of certainty through the apparently trackless woods. The trees ended at the steep rise that marked the bottom of the northern bank; and thereafter they climbed the grass.

By a devious route known to himself Gene led them through many little grassy ravines, and over ridges, gradually upward. There was no sense or order in the arrangement of the knolls and terraces and spurs of turf—the ground seemed to be pushed up anyhow, like bubbles on the surface of yeasty dough. For a while they would be swallowed in a cup-like hollow; then, surmounting a ridge, they would have a brief glimpse of the distant river behind. It was only when they reached the

top that, looking back over the turbulent rounded masses of earth, they were able to comprehend the great height to which they had climbed.

Reaching level ground, Gene with a shout set off at a lope in a bee line across the prairie; and Garth bringing up the packhorses in the rear, caused the sedate Emmy to put her best foot foremost. Meanwhile, with pocket-compass and memorandum book, he made notes of the route they took; and when opportunity offered tied a strip of white cotton to a bush. It was his intention to dismiss Gene before coming to Mabyn's hut; and he wished to be sure of the way back. The guide, comprehending what he was doing, gave him to understand that Emmy could bring them back over their own tracks—unless snow should fall. But Garth was neglecting no precautions.

Garth and Natalie deplored to each other the inadequacy of their means of communication with their guide. The bright-eyed Gene had a hundred things to point out to them on the prairie, most of which they could only guess at. For one thing, he made them understand he was following in the tracks of two cayuses that had gone that way three days before. One was lame, he said, and the other dragged a travoise. All this he learned from certain marks in the grass, which the other two could not see at all. In all ways Gene proved himself a very pearl among guides.

Garth, merely from watching him, learned as much trail-craft these two days as he had picked up during the weeks preceding; and Natalie confessed that his cooking put her utterly to shame.

Such was the energy of their pace that they reached the last waterhole before coming to Clearwater Lake early next afternoon. Here Garth decided to camp; for he had determined with Natalie to time their arrival at Mabyn's hut for the morning; so that after the briefest stay, they could immediately start back. Clearwater Lake was only three miles distant; and Gene was able to point out a poplar bluff marking the rise behind which it lay.

Neither Garth nor Natalie obtained much sleep that night; only Gene, wrapped in his rabbit-skin robe beyond the fire, slept the sleep of the savage or the child. They were all astir at dawn; and after eating, they parted; Gene careering south without a care on his mind; while Garth and Natalie turned their apprehensive faces toward the lake. What they were to find there they did not know; but intuition warned them it would be sufficiently painful.

When they reached the brow of the last hill, and the lake stretched vividly below them, they had no eyes for the loveliness of the prospect. The little hut at the head of the water far to the left was the first

thing they saw; and it was charged with a significance that obliterated everything else. Facing the early sunlight it stood revealed with startling distinctness; and even at the distance had a ghastly look; gray, artificial and decayed in the midst of the mellow autumn loveliness.

"I will picket the packhorses down at the edge of the water," Garth said; "and we'll ride on without them. It will provide us with an obvious excuse to return immediately."

Natalie scarcely heard. Her eyes were fixed on the distant shack. "What do you suppose it hides from us?" she whispered. "Death, misery, or disgrace?"

Garth could scarcely forbear groaning in the pain of his solicitude for her. "Oh, Natalie!" he said hoarsely, "I haven't done right to expose you to this!"

"I made you!" she said quickly. "Besides, it's not a question of right or wrong. As you said we would, we have only done the best we could, under the circumstances that arose."

"At least let me ride on ahead a little," he begged. "You stay with the outfit. I will hurry back."

She shook her head. "I couldn't stand the suspense," she said simply. "Do not be afraid on my account," she added; "merely looking with my outward eyes at

something that always faces me within won't hurt me. Come on!"

But presently she reined up her pony again, and turning a pair of brimming eyes on him, extended her hand. "Garth!" she murmured, "I—I would like to thank you—but I can't!"

"Oh, don't!" he begged.

"Whatever we find down there," she said wistfully, "it can't make any difference, can it? We will still be the same partners of the trail?"

Garth went pale to his lips—but he contrived to smile at her. He took her hand and looked at her full. "Until death," he said quietly.

She drew her hand away, with a deep breath. "Come on," she said. "We've got to face it!"

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XV

THE MEETING

The spot of the lake shore where Garth picketed the two horses was something under two miles from Mabyn's hut. The way led among the trees which filled this

part of the valley of the lake; and underfoot they could distinguish traces of an old trail. The growth ended abruptly at the edge of a small, dry watercourse, which came down to the lake; and issuing into the open here, the riders beheld the dreaded goal of their long journey immediately before them.

As they crossed the stones, they were ready to fancy they could hear, each the beating of the other's heart; and the scene before them was bitten into their brains, to endure hideously vivid and minute while life endured. The shack presented a three-quarter view, front and side. It topped a gentle, uneven acclivity of grass, rising from the watercourse at its side; while in front, the ground extended level a hundred feet to the edge of a cut-bank. This bank rose out of the lake sheer and loamy, to the height of a cottage roof; and over the edge hung a tangled fringe of grass-roots.

Desolation was the cry of it all; winters upon winters had bleached the logs of the shack silvery like old hair; the chimney had fallen; and all four quarters of glass in the single window were out. At one time the slope between the hut and the bed of the stream had evidently been a theatre of industry; for the ground was pitted and hummocked and rutted; but long ago the grass had indifferently muffled it over, like graves in an old cemetery. In the centre of this waste stood, the picture of

dejection, an Indian-bred cayuse, miserable burlesque of the equine species, no bigger than a donkey, and incredibly hairy and misshapen. His back was galled; and one leg, which he painfully favoured, puffed to treble its size at the hock. Even the great cottonwood trees springing beyond the hut, with their shattered branches, and blotched and greenish trunks, breathed decay. An ancient dugout, lying at the mouth of the watercourse, was, like everything else, rotting and seamed.

And on the bench at the door of the hut sat the evil genius of the scene; a man with his legs sprawling in front of him, and his head fallen over and back against the wall. He made no move at their approach; and when they came close, they saw that he slept. Pitilessly revealed in the strong sunlight, he made a spectacle at which the most indifferent stranger would have shuddered and sickened—and it was reserved for the woman who had exalted him in her maiden's heart, to see him then. His mouth hung open; he breathed stertorously; and the flies, buzzing in and out of the open door beside him, crawled at will over his ashen face. That his chin was freshly shaven, and his hair brushed, added to the ghastliness. The whole picture was horribly vivid; the littlest details of it struck on the retinas of the two observers like blows—the oblong patch of sunlight cleaving the gloom of the shack inside the door; six muskrat

pelts above the man's head, tacked to the logs to dry; an old foul pipe with a silver mounting, half fallen from his relaxed fingers and spilling ashes on the bench; his old-fashioned rifle leaning against the door-frame. Garth could have furnished the size, the style and the make of that gun.

Natalie turned a stony face to Garth. "It is he," she whispered.

Garth thought of an old photograph she had shown him of a dark-haired youth sitting on a horse, with a charming, imperious grace of body and feature, in which there was something godlike and unanswerable; and looking at this wreck of a man, toothless, bald and livid, he was struck with awe.

"You have seen," he whispered to Natalie. "Let us ride back."

She shook her head. "I must say what I came for," she said.

"Will you dismount?" he asked.

Natalie shuddered. "Never, here!" she whispered.

In a moment she had commanded herself again. "Please speak to him," she said.

"Mabyn!" called Garth peremptorily.

The man's lids parted. Natalie was directly in front of him. As his sleep-stupefied eyes slowly took her in, he raised himself to an

upright position, and struck his eyeballs sharply with his knuckles.

Garth instinctively drew away a little.

"A white woman!" muttered the man, lost in amazement.

Natalie, her head slightly averted, sat her horse like a carven woman.

Fear grew apace with wonder in Mabyn's eyes; his breath quickened; he ceaselessly passed his hand in front of his face. "Natalie!" he muttered, still in the toneless voice of one who sleeps. "Oh, my God! It's Natalie!"

Grasping the edge of the bench, he pulled himself to his feet; and took a few uncertain steps toward her. He put out his hand fearfully.

Natalie sharply reined back her horse. "Don't touch me!" she said.

It broke the spell that held him—but not wholly. His hands dropped to his sides; a saner light appeared in his eyes; and he looked all around, as if to convince himself of the realness of his surroundings. On Garth his eyes lingered stupidly for a moment; then impatiently returned to Natalie.

"If it's you, how did you get here?" he asked quietly enough—still bemused.

"I came over the prairie, as every one comes," she said sharply.

Mabyn frowned. "I'm wide awake," he said irritably. "I know where I am. I fell asleep on the bench half an hour ago—but," his voice deepened and swelled on the note of awe, "*you*, Natalie! You or your wraith! I —I can't take it in!" The faded eyes bolted, and swept wearily and unseeingly over the lake.

Natalie winced every time he spoke her name. "Try to collect yourself," she said coldly. "There is no doubt of its being I."

"The voice too!" he muttered, struck with the new thought. His eyes returned to her. "Natalie—and not changed at all!" he murmured dreamily. "But more beautiful!"

"If you please!" said Natalie haughtily.

He still stood looking at her with something the air of a bewildered child, but more of the aged lunatic. "The first time I saw her, she was on a horse," he said in his dull voice. "But she was better dressed. Where did you get those clothes?" he asked suddenly.

Natalie shot an appealing glance at Garth.

He, in his over-mastering disgust of the man, could not put away the thought that there was something feigned in this excessive bewilderment. "Come to yourself, Mabyn!" he said sharply. "We can't stop here!"

Mabyn darted a startled, spiteful glance at the new speaker, and without another

word, turned and went back to the bench, where he sat, burying his face in his hands. Natalie and Garth looked at each other, scarcely knowing how to act. But presently Mabyn lifted his head again; and, spying his pipe where it had fallen, picked it up, and attentively knocked out what remained of the ashes in the bowl.

Natalie thought she might venture to address him again. "I have something important to tell you," she began.

Mabyn darted a queer, furtive look at her; shame, suspicion, obsequiousness and a sudden, reborn passion all had a part in it. "Won't you shake hands with me?" he asked suddenly.

Natalie drew the long breath that invokes Patience and looked elsewhere.

"You've changed toward me," the man whined.

Indignation suddenly reddened her cheeks, and she levelled her blue eyes upon him in a glance that should have struck to his soul.

But it failed to penetrate very far. "I know I've treated you badly," he went on. "I was coming out in the spring, though; just as soon as I got things straight. I've worked like a son-of-a-gun too, but luck has always been against me." His voice gathered assurance from his own excuses.

"Never mind that now," said Natalie.

"Please listen to what I have to say."

But the man, shrinking from matter hateful to his ears, strove to divert her. He struck his forehead with his knuckles, and jumped up. "By Gad! What's the matter with me!" he cried. "I never asked you in! It's a wretched hole, but such as it is——" He had turned to the door. Sudden recollection chopped off the speech midway; and he turned a furtive, frightened face over his shoulder to Natalie.

"N-never mind," he gabbled hurriedly. "Don't come in! It's not fit to receive you! It's better out here!" Little beads of sweat were springing out on his forehead.

His whole bearing had been so wild and stupefied since his waking, that they attached small importance to this display of terror. Natalie patiently essayed to speak again; but again he interrupted.

His face cleared. "You've left your outfit somewhere back on the trail," he said eagerly. "I'll go back with you; and we can talk things over quietly there!" He actually started toward the watercourse, walking with jerky, uneven steps.

Natalie made no move to follow. "I will say what I have to say here," she spoke after him.

Mabyn was voluble, scarcely coherent in his incontinent desire to take her away

from the hut. Natalie waited, letting him talk himself out. Finally compelled to give in, he returned with strange, apprehensive glances around the hut, and over the summits of the hills behind. Garth thought his brain was beginning to be affected by a solitary life.

However, he now listened patiently enough.

"You have not written to your mother or to me in many months," began Natalie coldly; "and your letters for three years past have given us no information. Your mother's whole thought is of you; and through her anxiety and suspense she is worn to a shadow of what she was; the doctors tell her she has a mortal disease that must soon prevail."

In spite of herself Natalie's voice softened as she delivered her pitiful plea; but it was not from any kindness for him. "She has been very kind to me all these years," she went on, "and I, to ease her what I could of the torment of her mind during her last days, volunteered to go with her to find you. Her age and her infirmities prevented her from coming any farther than Prince George. I have been fortunate in finding friends who have assisted me the rest of the way. I have come to beg you, on behalf of your mother, to let her see you before she dies. She is waiting in Prince George. She bade me tell you that neither poverty, misfortune nor disgrace could

abate any of her love for you; that she would die happy if she might once more press your hand against her cheek."

Garth watched Mabyn narrowly while Natalie was speaking. He saw by the man's rapt expression that her voice charmed his senses, while the purport of what she said was wholly lost on his consciousness. When her voice broke a little at the close, Mabyn's lips parted, and his breath came quicker—but it was no tenderness for a devoted parent, only a passion purely selfish, that caused his lack-lustre eyes to glitter again.

"These letters," concluded Natalie, drawing them forth as she spoke, "three of which I have brought from the post office, and the fourth which she gave me herself, will let you know, better than I can tell you, what she feels."

Mabyn took the letters; and thrusting them carelessly in his pocket—one fell to the ground and lay there unheeded—snatched back at Natalie's hand, and attempted to retain it. Reining her horse back, she wrenched it free.

A little shame reached the seat of Mabyn's consciousness. He reddened. "I'm not a leper," he muttered. "You came to me of your own free will, didn't you?"

"Build nothing on that!" said Natalie instantly and clearly. "I allow no claim on me!"

Mabyn quickly changed to obsequiousness. "I don't want to quarrel with you, Natalie," he whined. "Especially not after what you've just done!"

He went to his bench again; and sat heavily. Again he struck his forehead with his knuckles. "Gad! I can't yet realize it is you that is here!"

Natalie looked at Garth as much as to say that she had accomplished what she came for.

The look was not lost on Mabyn. He sprang up. "I'll do just what you want!" he said hurriedly. "I'll start for Prince George at once—to-day—this minute! God knows there's nothing to keep me here! You have a spare horse, I suppose. I've nothing but that galled cayuse and another as bad!" He uttered his cracked laugh in a tone that was intended to be ingratiating. "That's the advantage of poverty! I've no preparations to make; so lead on!"

Natalie paused irresolutely. This was a contingency she had not foreseen. She shuddered at the possibilities it opened up. In her perplexity she looked again at Garth.

"We will leave you a horse," said he curtly. "And your passage out from the lake Settlement will be arranged for."

"And what money you need," added Natalie in a low tone, and blushing

painfully.

But Mabyn's feelings were not hurt. "I can go with you just as well," he blustered.

Natalie looked at Garth once more.

"You may follow us as soon as you choose," said Garth coolly. "We do not desire your company on the way."

For the first time Mabyn appeared to recognize Garth's presence on the scene. He turned a baleful eye on him; and his lips curled back over his gums. "Who are *you*?" he snarled, adding an oath.

"That is neither here nor there," said Garth. "I speak for Miss Bland."

"Mrs. Mabyn, you mean," sneered the other, thinking to crush him with the information.

"She does not use that name," returned Garth imperturbably.

Mabyn turned furiously to Natalie. "Who is this man?" he cried, his cracked voice sliding into falsetto; "this sleek young sprig that rides alone with you through the country! I demand to know! I have a right to know!"

"I admit no right!" Natalie said firmly.

Mabyn, beside himself with jealous rage, no longer knew what he said. "You won't explain!" he cried. "You *can't* explain! Here's a nasty situation for a married

woman!"

Garth's self-control, stretched on the rack through all this scene, suddenly snapped in twain. Temper with Garth took the form of laughter; mocking, dangerous laughter, that issued startlingly from his grave lips.

He laughed now. "You scoundrel!" he said in cool, incisive tones—though he was not a whit less blinded by passion than Mabyn himself—"after the kind of life you've been leading up here, have you still the assurance to lay a claim upon *her*! And to cast a reflection on *her* good name! Have you no mirror to see what you are? Go in the lake, then, and see the vile record written on your face!"

Mabyn was staggered. Garth's terrible scorn penetrated the last wrappings of the warmly nurtured ego within. He shot a startled glance at Garth; and from Garth to the hut and behind, as if wondering how much he knew.

Garth was not through with him. He slipped his stirrups, preparatory to leaping off his horse. Natalie trembled at the quiet man's new aspect.

"Garth!" she entreated urgently.

The sound of her voice recalled him to himself. Settling back in his saddle, he abruptly turned his horse, and went off a little way, struggling to regain his self-

command.

Mabyn, misunderstanding, was vastly lifted up by this word of Natalie's, and the writhing ego within hastened to repair the horrid breach Garth had made. He approached her, hidden by her horse from Garth.

"Oh, Natalie!" he gabbled whiningly; "don't listen to him. He's a low cur! But he can't make trouble between you and me! Send him away! Natalie, I seem to have acted badly; but I can explain everything! Circumstances were all against me! In my heart I've never swerved from you! I dream of you every night in my lonesomeness! Wherever I look I see your face before my eyes!"

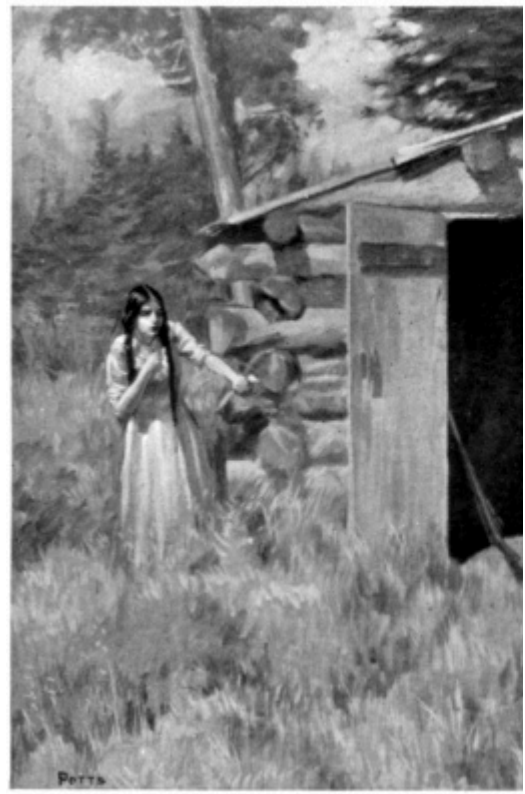
It was the old trick of passionate speech; Natalie remembered the very words of old; but the man—she averted her head from the hideous spectacle. She was afraid to move or cry out, sure that Garth in his present mind would kill him if he heard.

Mabyn, conceiving nothing of the sublime irony of the figure he made, continued to plead. "Natalie, don't turn away from me! You took me for better or worse, remember! You found me at a disadvantage to-day; I don't look like this ordinarily. And you can make whatever you like of me! Remember the old days at home! I am the same man—Bert—your Bert! Look—he can't see us—I kneel to you as I did then!"

And down he went on his knees, stretching out his arms to her.

There was an odd, slight sound behind him. They both looked—and froze in the attitude of looking. Garth from his station, seeing the new look of horror overspread Natalie's face, spurred to join her.

There, clinging to the corner of the cabin for support, stood the figure of a woman. Her brown skin was blanched to a livid yellow; and her eyes were the eyes of one dead from a shock. She swayed forward from the waist as if her backbone could no longer support her. At her feet a tin pail emptied wild cherries on the ground.



There, clinging to the corner of the

Mabyn scrambled to his feet, shamed, chagrined, furious. "What do you want around here?" he cried brutally—even now seeking to outface her.

The piteous, stricken girl moistened her lips; and essayed more than once to speak, before any words came. "'Erbe't, who is this woman?" she said quite simply at last.

"What is that to you?" he blustered roughly, thinking to beat her down; perhaps to kill her outright with cruelty.

"This is my wife!"

"Oh, no! no!" whispered Natalie, sick with the sight of so much misery.

It is doubtful if the girl heard her. She tottered forward; and seized and clung to Mabyn's arm. Her breast was heaved on hard, quick pants like a wounded animal's; and her eyes were as frantic, and as inhuman.

"'Erbe't, who am I?" she breathed.

Mabyn, seeing that Natalie heard and understood, beside himself, and reckless with rage, flung out his arm, throwing her heavily to the ground. "You! damn you!" he cried. "You're just my——"

Natalie, with a low cry of horror, instinctively clapped her heels to her horse's ribs, and set off down the hill. Garth wheeled after her.

"Oh, stay—stay and help her!" she gasped.

"You come first!" said Garth grimly.

Mabyn, as Natalie turned, sprang after her; and running desperately, managed to cling to her stirrup. Casting off the last vestiges of manliness he wept and prayed her to wait for him. Her horse, Caspar, kicked out wildly, and struck him off. He lay on the ground sobbing and cursing; striving to drag himself along with clawing hands.

Just before they gained the watercourse,

Garth looked over his shoulder; and his heart leapt into his throat. The brown woman was reaching for Mabyn's rifle. He shouted a warning; and desperately strove to throw his horse behind Natalie. But it was too late. Hard upon his voice, the shot rang. A strange, low cry broke from Natalie; and she reeled in her saddle. Garth, spurring ahead, grasped Caspar's bridle, and caught her from falling. A pang, far more dreadful than the hurt of a bullet, smote his own breast.

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XVI

NATALIE WOUNDED

The frightened horses struggled over the watercourse, and gained the trees before Garth, hampered as he was, succeeded in drawing their heads together, and stopping them. Slipping out of the saddle without loosening his grasp of Natalie, he lifted her off, ever careful to shield her from possible further shots with his own body. He remembered Mabyn's was a single-shot weapon; and he counted on the time it would take the Indian woman to obtain ammunition, and reload. Quickly and tenderly laying Natalie on the ground under shelter of a stump, he unslung his

own rifle. But as he dropped to his knee, and raised it, he saw the woman on the edge of the cut-bank swing the stock of her gun around her head, and send the weapon spinning out over the water. Meanwhile Mabyn was running up the hill toward her with significant action. No immediate further danger threatened. Garth put the pair out of his mind, and bent over Natalie. What happened to the woman at Mabyn's hands was a matter of indifference to him now.

Natalie's left arm hung useless; and a soaking crimson stain spread broadly on her sleeve between elbow and shoulder. Her face had gone chalky white, her eyes were half closed, and her teeth were set painfully in her blue nether lip. To see his sparkling, vivid Natalie brought so low, was a sight to open all the doors of Garth's brain to madness. His heart swelled suffocatingly with rage and grief, but there was no time for that, when every faculty he possessed must be concentrated on saving her; and forcing it back, he picked her up again with infinite tenderness. His first and instinctive thought was to return and seize the hut; so that he might at least have a roof to cover her. He suspected the other two were now without arms; but even if they had a weapon, he had a better one; was a sure shot; and was on his guard.

At the first move he made in the direction of the hut, Natalie, whom he had thought

unconscious, divined his intention.

"Garth! Not in his house!" she murmured feverishly. "I will not go in there! I will not!"

He paused in a painful perplexity. "But dearest, there is no other house," he said.

"Put me down in the open air," she begged. "It would suffocate me! I will not endure it!"

So Garth turned back among the trees. He strode over the dead leaves and the pine needles to the lake shore. Here, between the willows that grew thickly at the water's verge, and the heavier timber, extended an open strip of grass, still fresh and green. He laid his burden down upon it; and, rolling up his coat, put it under her head for a pillow.

He hastily cut away her sleeve, exposing the injury. The ball had passed through, making a clean opening where it entered, and a jagged wound whence it issued. It was clear the bone was broken; but from the character of the bleeding, even Garth could see that the artery was uninjured. He brought water from the lake in his hat, and gently washed the wound; but even in this he doubted if he did right; for the water was cold—but he had nothing in which to heat it. The best he could do was to take the chill out of it by pressing the handkerchief between his hot hands.

Everything they possessed that might have been of service was two miles off; and might just as well have been a hundred; for Garth could not think of leaving her; and he shrank from the thought of inflicting the agony it would cause her to be carried so far. And even suppose they gained their own camp, the situation would be little improved; for how was he in his ignorance to undertake the delicate task of setting the shattered bone; of improvising splints and bandages; and supplying, what a glance at the ugly wound showed to be needful, antiseptics? A surgeon, whatever his skill, rarely dares trust the steadiness of his hand on the bodies of those he loves; what then was Garth to do, who had no skill at all?

He had his dark hour then, tasting ultimate despair. He sat beside her, gripping his dull head between his hands, and striving desperately to contrive, where there was nothing to contrive with. Oh, the pity and the wrong of it, that it was *she* who must be hurt! he thought; and how joyfully he would have taken it himself to relieve her. *He* bled inwardly; and the physical pain of the most hideous wounds could not equal the agony he experienced in his helplessness.

Meanwhile the wound momentarily changed. The arm began to swell and darken; and Garth knew there was no time to lose. He made one attempt to proceed, kneading the flesh of the arm very gently

to explore the broken ends of the bone—but Natalie's piteous cry of pain completely unmanned him. He desisted, shaking like a leaf, and sick with compassion; and he knew he would never be able to do it.

What seemed like an age passed; though it was no more than a few minutes. He was bending over her, doing what little he could to ease her pain; and with knotted brows rapidly considering, and rejecting, one after another, the desperate expedients that suggested themselves. Suddenly looking up he perceived among the trees, at the distance of a few paces, Rina standing. Hot anger instantly welled up in his breast, and made a red blur before his eyes. Rina's sex was no protection to her then. He picked up his gun.

Observing the action, Rina mutely spread her hands, palms outward. Her entire aspect had changed; the storm of passion had passed; and she stood contrite and sullen. It was impossible for the blindest passion to shoot at a figure in such an attitude. Garth lowered his gun; but he still kept it across his knees, and his face did not relax. The woman was loathsome to him.

"What do you want?" he demanded coldly.

Rina came a little closer. "I sorry," she said sulkily—like a child unwillingly confessing a fault. "I t'ink I go looney for a

while. I not hear right. I t'ink she try to tak' my 'osban' from me!"

Garth glanced at the suffering Natalie with contracted brows. "That's all very well!" he said bitterly. "But it can't undo what's done!"

"I can mak' her well, maybe," said Rina, still affecting indifference. "I know what to do. My mot'er, she teach me. If you let me look at her, I tell you."

A wild hope sprang up in Garth's breast. If the girl were only able to help Natalie, his hate of her could very well content itself a while. But dare he trust her? With keen, hard eyes he sought to read her face. Her own eyes avoided his; and she made a picture of savage indifference; but as he looked he saw two great tears roll down her cheeks. In his desperate situation it was well worth the risk.

Raising his gun, he said coldly: "You may look at her. If you try to injure her, I will send a bullet through your head."

Receiving the permission, Rina came forward, careless of the threatening gun; and dropped to her knees beside Natalie. She examined the wound on both sides; and felt of the fracture with delicate fingers. To judge of the normal position of the bones, she manipulated her own arm. Garth never took his eyes from her; but she was tenderer with the patient than he could have been.

Finally she raised a mask-like face to Garth. "I can fix it," she said. "If you let me."

Whatever her private feelings were, she had a confident air, that could not but convey some assurance to him. He nodded silently; after what he had suffered, he scarcely dared believe in such good fortune.

Rina quickly rose. "You mak' a fire to heat water," she said coolly. "I go to bring everyt'ing."

With the words, she was gone among the trees; and Garth, overjoyed to be able to do something with his hands, hastened to build a fire.

Before he really expected her, she was back with what she needed, a pot for heating the water, a basin, several kinds of herbs, some strips of yellowed linen for bandages, a blanket and a knife. While the water was heating, she cut a deep segment of the smooth white bark of a young poplar for a splint—the curve of it was judged to a nicety to fit Natalie's arm. During the operation of setting the bone, Garth watched her unswervingly, clenching his teeth to bear the spectacle of Natalie's agony. For every pang of hers he suffered a sharper; the sweat coursed down his face.

But at last it was over; the wound washed and fomented with bruised leaves, the

splint fitted snug, and the whole neatly bandaged. Natalie, wrapped in the blanket, soon fell into the sleep of exhaustion.

Rina looked at the pale and shaken Garth with an odd expression. "If you have whiskey, better tak' a drink," she suggested.

Garth had his flask; and he obeyed without question.

Throughout the operation, Rina had preserved an admirable, professional air, intent and impersonal; and when necessary she had brusquely ordered Garth to help her. Now that it was all over her face altered; she continued to kneel at Natalie's side, gazing at her soft hair, and the whiteness of her skin with a kind of sad and jealous wonder.

Garth on the alert at the change, which portended he knew not what explosion of passion in the savage woman's breast, ordered her from Natalie's side. She obeyed, resuming her sullen mask, but lingered near him, plainly full of some question she desired to ask. He observed for the first, a purpling bruise above her temple. Rina saw his eyes upon it, and her colour changed.

"I run against a tree," she hastily volunteered.

At the same time her hand stole to her

throat to hide certain marks on its dusky roundness. Garth knew instinctively that she was loyally lying. Mabyn had beaten her. He wondered how far the wish to serve the woman she had injured was Rina's own impulse and how far she had been forced to it by Mabyn. He began dimly to conceive that the red woman had good qualities.

At last the question on her breast was spoken. "Who is she?" she asked, pointing sullenly at the sleeping Natalie.

Garth rapidly considered what he should answer. He could not pretend to himself that he had forgiven the woman; but since Natalie's pain was mitigated he was cooler; and his sense of justice forced it home on him that Rina, too, had been through her ordeal. In his present desperate situation, his only chance of assistance lay in her—Mabyn was an egomaniac, and utterly irresponsible. Frankness had served Garth in good stead before this; and finally he told her the plain truth in such terms that she could understand.

"This feeling Mabyn has for her," he insisted in the end, "is only a passing one. If we can get her out of his sight all will go on as before."

Rina nodded. Her inscrutable face softened a little, he thought. "I on'erstan' now," she said quietly. "So I not go crazy wit' t'inking about it."

Garth was glad he had told her.

Rina stood studying him with her strange and secret air. "You love her ver' moch," she said suddenly, pointing to Natalie.

Garth bent over the sleeping figure in a way that answered her better than words.

"I t'ink she love you too," said Rina gravely. "When I 'urt her, she try not to cry because it 'urt you so bad."

A slow red crept under Garth's skin. He hated to betray himself under the eyes of the red woman; and he bustled about, averting his face from her. "When can she be moved?" he asked, brusquely changing the subject.

Rina shook her head. "I not know," she said. "Maybe she have fever. Three, four week maybe."

Garth's heart sunk heavily, as he considered their scanty supplies, the approach of winter—and, more dangerous still, the fruitful opportunities of conflict the weeks would offer to four souls so strangely opposed, and so strangely bound together in the wilderness.

"What is Mabyn doing now?" he asked suddenly.

Rina's face instantly became as blank as plaster. "I not talk to you about him," she said coolly.

Garth was conscious of receiving a rebuke.

"But I help you," she added presently. "I go bring your outfit in."

Before she went, she brewed a draught for Natalie with some of the herbs she had brought; and instructed Garth to administer it when she woke. For an instant all Garth's suspicions returned; and he looked at her hard. Rina, divining his thought, coolly lifted the pail to her lips, and drank of it. Once more he felt himself rebuked.

Left alone, his thoughts reverted to Mabyn. What would he have been plotting all this time? he wondered; what stand would he take in this new posture of affairs? It was too much to hope, he decided, that one so selfish and so jealous could be persuaded to sink his animosity against Garth, for the purpose of serving Natalie while she lay injured. Garth's business had made him more or less familiar with the workings of the diseased ego; and he was convinced that Mabyn, if for nothing else, hated him intolerably for having been the spectator of his repulse by Natalie.

As time passed, Natalie began to stir and mutter in her sleep and Garth, bending over her, fearful of fever, put the man out of his head. Returning to her from the edge of the lake, with cloths wrung out of cold water, he found her with wide eyes and flushed cheeks.

"Send him away! Send him away!" she

muttered. "I cannot have him near me!"

At first he thought her mind wandered, but following the direction of her eyes, he saw the figure of a man skulking among the trees; and his face grimmed. Soothing her, he offered Rina's drink; and it had an immediate effect. She dropped off to sleep again. Then Garth picked up his gun and strode toward Mabyn.

The man waited for him with an air oddly mixed of fear and bravado. As Garth came close he smiled in a way that he intended to be ingratiating—but Mabyn's smile only rendered him more hideous. Garth's first look made sure that both his hands were empty.

"Is there anything I can do?" Mabyn asked with apparent solicitude.

"Yes, keep away from here," returned Garth curtly. "If I catch you within a hundred yards of my camp, I'll wing you so you won't move again as long as we're here."

Mabyn assumed an aggrieved expression. "You needn't take that tone," he grumbled. "I came in friendliness. I want to have a talk with you."

"I'm listening," said Garth.

Mabyn twisted uneasily. "Damn it! How can a man make friendly advances when you're standing over him with a gun!" he said.

"Say what you've got to say, or clear out," said Garth.

The aggrieved air proving ineffectual, Mabyn substituted offended silence; offered to go; and came back. "Well, look here!" he said at last. "This is it. Here are the three of us up here——"

"Four," amended Garth.

"Well, four if you like," said Mabyn. "We're stuck here together. We can't afford to quarrel. We've got to have some working agreement."

"Is that all?" said Garth uncompromisingly.

Mabyn looked around with the air of a much-tried man, appealing to the bystanders—that they were only indifferent trees, rather spoiled the effect. "I wouldn't take this from any man if it wasn't that I was bent on avoiding trouble," he blustered.

Garth suppressed the scornful inclination to laugh.

"Look here," began Mabyn afresh, with a reasonable air. "I came to offer you the shack for Natalie. She can't sleep in the open in her condition."

"Much obliged," said Garth coolly. "I intended to take it in the first place. But Miss Bland refused to allow herself to be carried there."

Mabyn's eyes bolted. His control over his facial muscles was imperfect; and the struggle between the open character he desired to convey, and the secret feelings that tortured him, was plain. "What are you going to do?" he asked.

"Build her a house," said Garth.

Mabyn, turning his back, appeared to be considering.

"Is that all you have to say?" asked Garth.

The other turned a face of obstinate friendliness and good will. "Look here—" he began all over. "I don't know your name——"

Garth informed him.

"Well, Pevensey, I'm sorry for what passed this morning. I regret what I said. I was only half awake; and scarcely knew what I did. Will you overlook it?"

"Talk is cheap," said Garth guardedly. "I will be guided by your actions henceforth." But his voice was milder; for an apology could not help but speak to his sense of generosity.

Mabyn, encouraged, amplified his penitent, ingratiating air. "As to the future," he said, "I mean to show you. You'll soon be satisfied!" He came closer. "In the meantime let's make a truce! Shake hands on it!"

Garth thoroughly distrusted the man; but

he could see no harm to Natalie in accepting his offer, while privately determining to relax none of his vigilance. It was only too true, as Mabyn had said; neither could afford to quarrel. Mabyn had no gun, and Garth could not leave Natalie's side for an instant.

"I am willing," said Garth readily. "But it's understood this doesn't affect what I said before. You are not to come within a hundred yards of this camp!"

Mabyn shrugged, as at the unworthiness of Garth's suspicions.

"You agree to it?" Garth persisted.

"All right!" said Mabyn—a shade too readily. "Shake!"

Garth shifted his gun; and advanced to take Mabyn's hand. The man could not keep an ugly little gleam from showing in his shifty gray eye; and Garth stopped abruptly. Mabyn sneered. Garth, fired by one of the imperious impulses of the blood of youth, strode forward and grasped the extended hand defiantly.

He saw instantly his mistake. Mabyn's face was suddenly transfigured by the deadly hatred he had long repressed. His right hand closed on Garth's like a vice; and at the same time a knife slipped out of his sleeve into the other hand. He jerked the surprised Garth halfway round; and aimed a blow between his shoulders. Garth was

oddly conscious of the fresh marks of the whetstone on the blade of the knife. With the incredible swiftness of our subconscious moves, he dropped his useless gun; and twisting his body around, flung up his free hand, and warded the descending blow. Seizing Mabyn's wrist, he flung himself forward to bear the other back.

It was all very brief. Mabyn, braced to receive Garth's weight, held his ground. Inspired with a febrile strength, he enjoyed a temporary advantage. Unable to reach Garth's back, he thrust desperately at his face, his neck—but only stabbed the air. They were locked together with their arms crossed—surely as strange a posture as ever men fought in! But Mabyn had staked all on the first blow; and that failing, there could be but one result. His fictitious strength suddenly failing, he collapsed in Garth's arms. Garth wrenched his hand free and hurled him to the ground, where he lay, livid and sobbing for breath. The attack had been contrived with devilish cunning; but every design this man undertook in life was foredoomed to failure.

Garth secured the knife; and stood looking down at the broken wretch, with strong waves of disgust welling over him. He laughed briefly.

"Too contemptible to kill!" he said; and turned on his heel.

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XVII

THE CLUE TO RINA

Rina brought all four horses handily through the wood, bringing up the rear on the back of old Cy. She slipped off beside Garth, and looked in the direction where Natalie lay.

"Still sleeping," Garth said.

As Rina's eyes fell on him, they suddenly widened; and plain fear broke through the mask of her face. "'Erbe't been here!" she said breathlessly.

"How do you know?" he said in surprise.

Rina pointed to his belt. "You got his knife!" she said. "How you get his knife?"

"He tried to murder me with it," said Garth, watching her face narrowly.

Rina had no more thought for Natalie. "Where is he?" she said agitatedly. "W'at you do to him?"

"I let him go," Garth said carelessly. "Murder is not exactly in my line."

"He try to kill you an' you let him go!" she

breathed incredulously. Plainly such magnanimity was outside her ken. She walked away from him, considering it.

Presently she came back with a swift glide. "You got to promise me not to 'urt 'Erbe't!" she said, threateningly and passionately.

"If he attacks me, I defend myself—and her," Garth said coolly.

Rina studied the ground. It was impossible for him to tell what was going on behind her inscrutable eyes. In a moment she went to Natalie as if nothing had happened; and dropping beside her, listened attentively to her breathing. Garth, ever watchful, followed her close. When she arose, they moved off a little to avoid disturbing the patient; and Rina briefly instructed Garth what he should do during the night.

Garth, not satisfied with merely knowing what to do, asked the reason of her various measures; whereupon Rina became suddenly evasive.

"But I must know why you do these things," he insisted.

Rina looked away. "I not tell you," she said coolly.

"What does this mean?" he demanded, surprised and frowning.

Rina met his eyes. "Nobody but me can

mak' her well," she said boldly. "I mak' her well if you not 'urt 'Erbe't. If you go after 'Erbe't, she can die. I not look at her no more!"

This at least was honest; and Garth could respect such an opponent. "He's safe!" he said coolly. "Provided he keeps away from here."

Rina vouchsafed no comment. "I come to-morrow," she said and disappeared through the trees.

The horses offered Garth his next problem. Since immediately they were turned out they would bolt for the sweet grass of the prairie above, there was no way in which he could secure them from Mabyn, or keep them within reach against a time of need. They might stray for miles over the plains before he could leave Natalie long enough to round them up. But there was no help for it; the beasts would all die of starvation, if he attempted to keep them in his camp. There was a little grass between the willows and the timber; and he determined to keep old Cy picketed nearby, to be sure of one mount in the case of an emergency. The other three he hobbled, hung a bell around Emmy's neck, and turned them loose.

He was now able to make Natalie more comfortable. Putting up her tent, he

spread a bed of balsam within, and her own blankets upon it. The next time she awoke, he carried her inside; and at the door of the tent, where he could look at her, and speak to her, he cooked her the best invalid's supper the grub-box and his own skill could afford. This same grub-box was an ever-fresh cause of anxiety to him; allowing for liberal contributions from his own gun, he could not see much more than a week's supply for two. This he kept to himself, however, while he joked and made light of their situation for Natalie's benefit. She was very quiet; she did not suffer much, she said; but she had little humour to talk. When Garth thought of her, only the day before, galloping over the prairie, he ground his teeth afresh. But the silver lining of this blackest cloud of his was that in her weakness she clung to him unreservedly.

Some time after supper she fell asleep again; and Garth prepared for his night-long vigil. His head was much too busy to allow of any desire for sleep. Sitting in the dark, he faced the situation open-eyed. There they were in the remotest wilderness, imprisoned in the narrow valley by Natalie's injury for weeks to come; with insufficient food and inclement weather in prospect, and without the remotest chance of succour from the outside. Moreover, there hovered about them an implacable and half-insane enemy, whose busy brain was bent on Garth's destruction. The outlook was

enough to unnerve the strongest; there were things in it that Garth in his courage could only glance at, and hurriedly avert the eyes of his mind.

The night was so still he could hear the breathing of the horse at fifty paces. He had let the fire die down, for fear its loud crackling would awaken Natalie. Overhead the Northern lights flung their ragged pennons across the zenith, with a ghostly echo of rustling. He suddenly became conscious of distant human voices in the void of stillness; and presently distinguished the voice of Mabyn. Rina's answers he could not hear, though he sensed a second voice. The sound was from the neighbourhood of the hut.

Garth was tempted by the opportunity to discover at the same time the plans of his enemy, and Rina's true disposition toward himself. He glanced at Natalie; she had but lately fallen asleep, and was sleeping soundly; there were no animals abroad that could harm her; he need be gone but half an hour. The rôle of eavesdropper was not at all attractive to him; but he felt he had no right to refuse to use any weapon that offered. Finally he fastened the flaps of Natalie's tent, replenished the fire, and stole away through the trees.

He crossed the stony watercourse to the left of the usual place and mounted the slope. Coming closer, he satisfied himself that the speakers were sitting on the

bench at the door of the shack. In the darkness he almost fell across the figure of the little cayuse, prone in the grass. The animal scrambled to its feet and trotted away. Garth paused, listening, his heart in his throat—but Mabyn's voice presently went on undisturbed.

He finally gained the top of the rise; and let himself down in the grass, distant some thirty feet from them. A flash of lightning —or even the lighting of a lantern would have revealed him clearly.

He instantly understood that he was the subject of their talk.

"It's his life or mine," in Mabyn's blustering whine were the first words he distinctly heard.

"He could kill you to-day, and he let you go," Rina quietly returned.

"That's a lie!" blustered Mabyn. "How do you know?" he added inconsequentially.

"He tak' your knife from you. I saw it in his belt," said Rina. "And he let you go."

Mabyn made no reply.

"He say to me he not 'urt you, if you keep away from there," Rina went on.

"Keep away!" Mabyn fumed. "This is my place! I'll go where I choose on it! He's trespassing on my land! I've a right to drive him off! I've a right to kill him if he doesn't go!"

"He will hear you!" said Rina warningly.

"Let him hear me!" said the man—nevertheless he lowered his voice. "They're a quarter-mile off," he added.

"Listen!" said Rina.

Over the lake, from an immeasurable distance, came throbbing the imbecile laughter of a loon.

"Loon, him three miles off," said Rina significantly.

Thereafter, Mabyn spoke in a whisper; a wheedling note crept into his voice. "That was a good scheme of yours, going to the camp to set the girl's arm," he said. "Now we can find out all they do!"

"I not go to find out," said Rina sadly. "I go for I sorry I 'urt her. I shoot her jus' lak a breed I am!"

Mabyn paid no attention to this. "Keep your eyes open when you're in their camp every day," he urged. "See how much food they have; find out where he keeps the shells for his gun. If you could only steal the gun!"

"He carry it always on his back," said Rina. "He never put it down."

"I know, he's on his guard now," said Mabyn. "But if you act friendly all the time, he'll forget. We've got plenty of time; do nothing for a few days. I'll keep away from there too. He'll think it's all right.

Then"—Mabyn's whisper was pure venom —"sneak up behind him and knock him on the head with an axe! Choose a moment when the girl is asleep or delirious. We will throw his body in the lake. No one will ever know how it happened!"

There was a pause.

"Will you do it?" said Mabyn eagerly.

Rina remained silent.

Mabyn cursed her under his breath. "I believe this smooth-faced young whelp has cast an eye on you too," he snarled. "You're false to me!"

A low cry was forced from Rina's lips; she made a rapid move; and Garth understood that she had thrown herself at the man's feet. "'Erbe't, you know you don' speak true," she whispered painfully. "You my 'osban'! All men I hate, but you!"

"Then do what I tell you," snarled Mabyn.

"'Erbe't!" she pleaded rapidly and urgently. "Let them go! What have they got to do with us? To-morrow I go to him. I tell him how to mak' her well. The man will give me a horse and things. An' you and I will ride to the Rice River people. They are my people. They will give me a gun. We will be so ver' happy, and not think of this man and this woman any more!"

"You can go, and be damned to you!" said Mabyn sullenly. "I stay on my own place!"

Garth understood then, that she drew very close to the man, lavish in the expression of her sad love and timid caresses, in a desperate effort to move him. He could not hear it all; but his cheeks burned to be the intruder on such an exposure of a woman's soul—a white soul, he thought, whatever the colour of her skin.

Mabyn was utterly insensible to it all. In the end he became impatient, and flung her away from him with an oath. She fell to the ground with a soft thud; and for a while there was no other sound, but the dreadful, low catch of her breath, as she sought to strangle her sobs.

"'Erbe't, if you no love me I die," she breathed.

"Rid me of this man and I'll love you fast enough!" said Mabyn eagerly. His breath came thick and stertorous. "Ah! Let me once grind my heel in the smooth, sneering face of him! and you shall do what you like with me!" Rage robbed him of speech; he made mere brutish sounds in his throat.

By and by he managed to control himself; and his voice resumed its crafty, wheedling tone. "Only do what I tell you, my Rina, and you shall know what it is to be loved by a white man. I shall have no thought all day, but of you! Up to now you have done all the loving; I will repay it twice over! You shall be loved as no red woman was ever loved before!"

"'Erbe't! 'Erbe't! Don't mak' me do it!" she whispered terror-stricken.

Garth could stand no more. Springing to his feet, he strode forward, grasping the barrel of his rifle to use it for a club. Shooting was too merciful for such a creature.

"You damned scoundrel!" he cried.

Mabyn fell back against the wall with a gasping cry of fright. Quick as Garth was, Rina was quicker. Before he could reach the man, she scrambled over the ground, and clutched him by the knees.

"Let him be!" she screamed. "I kill you!"

Garth struggled vainly to free himself. Finally bending over and seizing her shoulders, he thrust her away. But the blow he again aimed at Mabyn never descended; for with incredible swiftness Rina gained her feet, and darted down hill.

"I kill *her!*" she shrilled.

A sickening fear gripped Garth's heart, instantly obliterating all thought of Mabyn. He dashed after Rina, nerved to a desperate fleetness. She knew the ground better than he; and hampered, moreover, by the weight of his gun, he despaired of overtaking the moccasined savage. But at the watercourse the strange creature stopped dead; and waited for him to come up.

"Go back to your white woman!" she cried stormily. "If you 'urt him, I pull her bandage off, and beat her arm till she die of pain!"

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XVIII

MABYN MAROONED

When Natalie awoke, it was a gray and haggard Garth she saw through the raised flaps of her tent. His arms, folded on his knees, bore up his chin; and he stared before him, still pursuing the narrow round of his troublous thoughts. He was the gainer for his excursion, by valuable information—but he was no nearer the solution of it all.

Natalie partly raised herself on her good arm. "My poor Garth!" she said softly. "How very tired you are!"

His weary eyes lighted up. "I'm all right," he cried. "And how are you?"

"Splendid!" she said, matching his tone—while her face was drawn with pain. "Come in," she added softly.

He sat a little diffidently on the ground beside her; Natalie's room—though its

walls were of canvas—was a sacred place to him when she was in it.

"Look at me!" she commanded.

He turned his grave, smiling eyes down on her. In spite of difficulties, dangers and weariness, he had to smile when he looked at her; he loved her so! His eyes were full of it.

Natalie's eyes fell; her hand crept into his. "You may tell me to-day," she whispered.

He understood. "Oh, my Natalie!" he murmured deeply. "I love you! It breaks my heart to see you suffer!"

She caught up his hand, and pressed it to her cheek. "I am cured!" she whispered with a lift in her voice.

"There is something I want you to do for me," she said presently.

"Anything in the world!" he cried.

"No!" she said. "This is only a little thing—but you mustn't laugh!"

He immediately smiled.

"I want to feel, for a moment, that I have helped you too," she whispered. "Put your head down on my good shoulder."

He flung himself down beside her, and laid his head where she bid. Her breath was warm on his cheek. He slipped his over-heavy burden, and glided into

Paradise for awhile.

"My brave, brave Garth," she whispered in his ear. "All my heart is yours! I thought about this last night—every time I woke. I thought we might steal one such moment. I thought, what if something happened to you, or to me, and we had never known it!"

She tried to tempt him to sleep a while, but Garth, fearful of tiring her, and with his responsibilities pressing on him, drew himself away. He arose, better refreshed, he vowed, than by all the nights of sleep he had ever had in his life.

As he rose, their lips met, once and briefly.

Garth's first task after breakfast was to clear the growth of willows that obstructed their access to the lake. The little island was framed squarely in the centre of the opening made by his axe; and off to the left, across an estuary formed at the mouth of the watercourse, Mabyn's shack stood on top of its cut-bank in plain view.

At sight of the convenient island, Garth was struck by an idea. He examined it attentively. It lay something less than a quarter of a mile off shore; and a triangle might have been drawn between his camp,

the island and Mabyn's shack, of which the three sides would have been of about equal length. The island was about three acres in extent; and completely ringed about with willow bushes. In the centre, two or three cottonwood trees elevated their heads above the willows.

Later, he asked Natalie casually: "Could Mabyn swim, when you knew him, do you remember?"

"He could not," she said instantly. "In fact he had a childish horror of the water."

Garth turned his head to hide his satisfaction; and his plan began to take shape.

While the sun was yet low, Rina, true to her promise, came to attend upon Natalie. There was no change in her manner; her unreadable eyes expressed no consciousness of the events of the night before. She questioned Natalie in her best professional way. It was not yet necessary to disturb the dressings on the arm; but she volunteered to do Natalie's hair; and what other offices would contribute to her comfort. Garth, convinced now that he had as sure a hold on her as she on him, unhesitatingly allowed her to enter the tent alone. But he kept within earshot.

He necessarily overheard part of their talk. Natalie, it seemed, had a method of her own with Rina. Obliterating the fact that she had received her injury at the

breed's hands, she was unaffectedly grateful for all that was done for her; and what was more subtle—or kinder—she treated Rina as her equal, as one who understood in herself the thoughts and the instincts of a lady. Garth, with the clue he possessed to the unhappy heart of the girl, could not tell which he ought to commend the more, Natalie's mother-wit, or her generosity.

Rina apparently sought to steel her breast against the other's overtures. For the most part she maintained a hardy silence; and when she did speak, it was in sullen monosyllables.

Issuing out of the tent, she surprised Garth by asking, as one who demands a right, to take old Cy. She needed an herb for Natalie, she said, that could only be procured on the shore of a slough five miles away. Garth was prompt with his permission. There was a possibility that it was merely a pretext to deprive them of the horse; but his heart leaped at the chance of getting Rina out of the way for an hour. It was all he needed to complete his plan; and it had seemed an insuperable bar. If she turned the horse out, he would come back anyway; for Cy was the town-bred horse, always waiting anxiously about camp for his vanished stable; and Garth had further trained him to stick to the outfit, with judicious presents of salt and tobacco.

Rina, disdaining a saddle, scrambled on his back, and rode off. Garth waited, not without anxiety, to see what direction she would take. She presently reappeared, mounting the rise to the shack. Pausing briefly at the door, apparently to speak within, she continued her way up the slope behind; and, gaining the prairie, disappeared over the brow.

Garth instantly put himself in motion. He had his compunctions in thus moving against Rina while she was absent on an errand for Natalie; but he consoled himself with the thought that Rina, with all she could do, had still a heavy score to pay off. He told Natalie what he was about to do; and at her earnest pleading carried her out of the tent, and propped her partly upright at the edge of the lake where she would be able to see him. Then, looking to his gun, he set off a second time for the shack.

From the circumstance of Rina's pausing at the door, he was well assured that Mabyn was within. He had marked that the door stood open. On his way, he paused to examine the ancient dugout lying at the mouth of the watercourse; and found it in a sufficiently seaworthy condition to answer his purpose. A paddle lay in the bottom.

Garth ascended the grassy slope swiftly and noiselessly; and making a détour around the window, presented himself

suddenly at the door. Mabyn was revealed to him sprawling on his blankets in the corner, plucking at his face, and scowling at the rafters, he, too, no doubt, plotting and scheming. When the armed shadow fell across the floor of his shack, he started to his elbow; his eyes widened, his flesh blanched and a visible trembling seized his limbs.

"What do you want?" he contrived to stammer.

Strong disgust seized Garth again; so despicable an adversary shamed his own manhood. He shifted his gun significantly.

"Get up!" he said.

Mabyn dragged himself to his hands and knees. It was some moments before he could control himself sufficiently to stand upright.

"What are you going to do with me?" he kept muttering.

Garth stepped backward. "Come outside!" he commanded.

Mabyn obeyed, making a circuit of the walls for support. His eyes were always riveted on the gun; and however slightly it was moved, he experienced a fresh spasm of fear.

"Face about!" ordered Garth; "and walk to the mouth of the creek!"

Mabyn became even paler. His skin was

like white paper on which ashes have been rubbed, leaving streaks and patches of gray. "Would you shoot me in the back?" he said shrilly. "An unarmed man! I will not turn my back!"

"Then walk backward!" said Garth, with his laconic start of laughter.

Mabyn went like a crab down the rise, with his head over his shoulder, a ludicrous and deplorable figure. He was unable to drag his eyes from the gun, consequently he stumbled and lurched over every obstacle. Once he fell flat; and a sharp scream of fright was forced from him. Garth sickened at the sight, while he laughed. He had to give him a minute in which to recover himself.

Mabyn, scarcely coherent, ceaselessly begged for mercy. "Do not kill me!" he whimpered. "I *can't* die! Oh, God! Not like this! I never had a chance! You kill Natalie if you kill me—the breed will fix her!—and my mother! You'll have three murders on your soul! I *can't* die yet!"

"Get up!" commanded Garth.

Reaching the edge of the water, he ordered him into the dugout.

Mabyn fell on his knees on the stones. "Not in the water! Not in the water!" he shrilled. "Kill me here!"

"No one is going to kill you," said Garth with scornful patience. "Do what you're

told, and you'll not be hurt!"

Mabyn darted a furtive look of hope and suspicion in Garth's face. He got up.

"What are you going to do with me?" he muttered.

"Put you on the island," said Garth coolly.

"I'll starve," he whined.

"Food will be brought you regularly, as long as you obey orders," said Garth.

Mabyn, his extreme terror subsiding, showed an inclination to temporize. "Let me get a few things," he begged. His eyes wandered to the hill over which Rina had disappeared.

Garth was anxious on the same score. He fingered the trigger of his gun. "In with you!" he said.

Mabyn jumped to obey.

Garth, sitting in the bow with his weapon in his arms, faced Mabyn; and forced him to wield the paddle. Mabyn, seeing that he did mean to put him on the island, realized there had been no occasion for his brutish terror; but instead of feeling any shame for the self-betrayal, he characteristically added it to his score against Garth. His gray eyes contracted in an agony of impotent hate. At that moment unspeakable atrocities committed on Garth's body would not have satisfied Mabyn's lust to destroy his flesh. Any

move on his part would have overturned the crazy dugout, but, shivering at the sight of the water, he was unable to take that way.

Garth, wary of the furtive gleam in the man's eye, sprang to his feet the instant they touched the island, and leaped out, careful never to turn his back. He forced Mabyn to retire a dozen paces, while he took the place he vacated in the stern; and then he ordered him to push off.

At the prospect of being left alone, Mabyn's flesh failed him again. He clung to the bow of the canoe, and gabbled anew for mercy. Garth, wearying of it all, suddenly sent a shot over his head. His weapon, silent and smokeless, had an effect of horrible deadliness. Mabyn, with a moan of fear, pushed the canoe off, and sank back on the grass of the islet.

Exchanging his gun for the paddle, Garth hastened back to the mouth of the creek, pausing only to wave his hat reassuringly at Natalie, whom he could see reclining on her grassy couch. An essential part of his plan was yet to be effected; and he knew not how soon Rina might return. Hastily ransacking the cabin, he gathered together all their meagre rations; flour, sugar, beans, tea and pork; and he likewise commandeered everything that might be turned to use for a weapon; an axe, a chisel, and all knives. Three trips up and down the hill conveyed it to the dugout.

Reëmbarking, he had no sooner brought it all to his own camp than Natalie's sharp eyes discovered Rina returning on the distant hill.

Garth carried Natalie into the tent again; and nerved himself to await the inevitable scene. Meanwhile he could see Rina alight at the door, search the cabin hastily, and dart about outside, like a distracted ant returning to find her dwelling rifled. She followed the tracks down to the water's edge, dragging the horse after her. Seeking over the water, she soon discovered the dugout lying at Garth's camp; whereupon she clambered on the horse again. Presently she came crashing through the bush.

This was a vastly different kind of antagonist, that slipped from the horse and faced him with blazing eyes. Rina regarded the weapon in his hands with as little respect as if it had been a pop-gun. But there was nothing baffling about her now, she was just the furious woman common to any shade of skin.

"Where is he?" she cried—and without waiting for any answer, emptied the hissing ewer of her wrath over Garth's head. Her careful English was drowned in a flood of guttural Cree—she fished it up only to curse him.

Garth received the impact in silence, for at first she was in no condition to take in the answers she demanded. He suddenly

realized, as a man thinks of an interesting circumstance that does not concern him at all, how beautiful she was; and the thought gave him greater patience.

Rina, bethinking herself at last that her Cree was wasted on him, went back to English. "You wait!" she cried threateningly. "Bam-bye, her bone, him grow together, and she all the time cry of pain! Then you want me bad, and I not come! She will have fever and die!" She passionately threw down the leaves she had brought and ground them under her heel.

"Mabyn is unhurt!" Garth repeated patiently more than once. "I put him on the island."

At last it seemed to reach her. "What for you do that?" she demanded.

"He is always trying to kill me," he said. "I have only put him where he can do no harm!"

"I tak' him off!" she cried defiantly. "I mak' a raft! You can't stop me!"

"I have seized all the food," said Garth quietly. "You will get none for him unless he stays where he is."

Rina's anger stilled and concentrated. "You devil!" she hissed.

Garth turned away. "When you are yourself," he said coolly, "I will talk to you

plainly and honestly about us all."

"I not talk with you!" she stormed. "You tell lies to me! I not come again—till some time you sleep—then I come and kill you!"

He faced her with a sudden imperiousness she could not ignore. "Then the way is made open for Mabyn to come to *her*!" he cried. "Where will you be then?—thrown on the ground, as you were yesterday!"

The shot told. Her arms dropped, she visibly paled. The white man's blood in Rina's cheeks betrayed her at the moments when most she desired to secrete her heart. She lowered her head to hide her stricken eyes from him. Suddenly she turned and fled through the trees.

Garth was beginning to believe that Rina after all was not so different from her white sisters; if so, he thought she would come back. Natalie, who had overheard all that passed, said so too. Garth wished to carry Natalie out of the tent, that she might help him work with the girl; but Natalie, with better wisdom, said no, that Rina would be more tractable if she were out of sight.

Meanwhile he set to work with an air of unconcern he was far from feeling—there were a hundred ways this plan of his might miscarry, and only one way it could succeed! He tied old Cy to his stake again; and carefully gathered up what remained of the herbs Rina had cast on the ground.

He unloaded the seized supplies and made a temporary cache under a piece of sail-cloth.

By and by, while he was so engaged, he became aware that Rina was hovering about among the trees. He went on with his task, carefully avoiding any notice of her. She approached by devious stages, like a child drawn against its will. When it became impossible longer to conceal herself, she came into the open with her old, wistful, sullen, inscrutable face. Garth went about his work, displaying no anxiety to treat. He made her speak first.

"What you want say to me?" she asked at last, feigning supreme indifference.

"Sit down," he said.

She dropped obediently on the grass; and averted her head. She did not squat like the other red people; but reclined, supporting herself on one hand, much as Natalie might have done.

Garth lit his pipe, considering what simple, figurative form of words would best appeal to her understanding.

"I do not wish Mabyn harm," he began mildly. "He is nothing to me. My heart knows only one wish—to make her well, and to take her back safely to her friends outside. To accomplish that, I will let nothing stop me!"

He paused to let it sink in. Rina gave no

sign of having even heard.

"That is your wish, too," he continued. "You want her away from here. She and I are nothing to you. You were happy before we came!"

She darted a startled look at the man who could so well read her feelings.

"Mabyn is mad because she will not have him!" Garth went on. "He is always crazy for what he cannot have."

She turned her head again with the look that said so plainly, "How did you know that?"

"When we get her away, he will soon forget. All will be as it was before!"

She maintained her obstinate silence.

"Do I not speak true words?" Garth challenged.

She evaded the question. "If you go out, you send the police after him," she muttered.

He saw Mabyn's hand here. "I will not," he said quickly. "I give you my word on that!"

She looked at him incredulously. She did not understand the pledge.

"There's my hand on it," said Garth, offering it.

Rina gravely laid her own in it, and let him wag it up and down. This form of

binding an agreement she knew.

Still she had not committed herself to anything; and Garth paused, determined to make her speak before he went on.

She favoured him at last with a walled glance purely savage. "Let 'Erbe't go off the island," she said indifferently. Clearly she asked it more with the idea to see what he would say, than with any hope of his agreeing.

"I will not do that," said Garth firmly. "Night and day he would be plotting to kill me. Night and day he would be driving you on to do it for him. You would try to do it. You cannot say no to him! And if you did bring me down—" Garth sunk his voice—"all, *all* would be lost!—Mabyn and you and Natalie and I!"

Her eyes sought his with a poignant glance; and she paled again. He felt he had made an impression.

"I will treat him kindly," he said, seeking to follow up his advantage. "You shall go to the shack now for everything he needs; and we will take it to him."

"Can I spik with him?" asked Rina in a low tone.

Garth rejoiced—it was the first token of submission. "For five minutes by my watch," he said.

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XIX

GRYLLS REDIVIVUS

On the next day but one Natalie's condition took a sharp turn for the worse; and for many days thereafter, Garth put every other thought out of his head. She fell into a high fever and suffered incessantly and cruelly. At this call, Rina showed forth in colours wholly admirable; day or night she seldom left her patient's side; she was never at a loss what to do; and Garth comforted himself with the thought that Natalie could scarcely have had better care anywhere.

During these busy days Rina appeared to forget her own heartache in a measure; and never once on the occasion of their daily trip to the island (Garth forcing her to accompany him) did she again express a wish to speak to Mabyn. At their approach Mabyn always retreated; and they were accustomed to set his rations down on the shore and immediately go back.

But Garth could not trust the breed unreservedly, and unceasing vigilance was his portion. He had little enough sleep before, and now he strove to do without it altogether. For three days and three nights he did not close his eyes. On the fourth day, warned by his tortured, wavering brain that it must be either sleep or

madness, he took his fate in his hands and lay down on top of the cache, with his gun beside him.

He was unconscious for nearly twelve hours. When he awoke it was to find Rina's eyes fixed upon him strangely. He sprang up, and she turned away her head. He could not read that expression—still he had lain there at her mercy and she had spared him. Neither had she liberated Mabyn from the island, for Garth could see him moving about. He began to hope that his arguments had real weight with the breed; and little by little, under pressure of his great need, he began to trust her.

But when the dread promontory was weathered at last, and Natalie, a wraith of her blooming self, awoke in her right senses, Rina changed again, resuming her old sullen, moody self; and all his work was undone. It was clear the unfortunate girl was dragged ceaselessly back and forth between her new-fledged soul and the old savage impulses of her blood. She learned to love the irresistible Natalie whom she had snatched back from death —but she likewise hated her; hated her blindly because Mabyn loved her; and inconsistently, but naturally, too, hated her because she despised Mabyn. The same with Garth; over and over she unconsciously showed she trusted him; but her blood still rebelled because he was Mabyn's enemy; and he would sometimes

find her eyes fixed on him in a quickly veiled expression of savage, implacable hatred.

On the first day of his imprisonment, Garth, under threat of withholding supplies, had forced Mabyn to cut down the willows fringing the hither side of the island; and his movements about his fire and tepee were in plain view of those on shore. Concealed from him by a tree, Rina would often sit by the hour, watching him wistfully. "God knows what course her harried brain pursues!" Garth, observing her, thought—"if she thinks at all!" One thing was sure: under the strain of continued separation, her resistance to Mabyn's evil suggestions was gradually breaking down.

Meanwhile Garth was straining every nerve to complete the shack that was to be at once their habitation and their fortress. Within the shelter of its walls he hoped to sleep at peace again. His nerves were stretched like violin strings from the lack of it; for all he could permit himself was an hour or two in the morning while Natalie was awake and could warn him. All afternoon he chopped pine trees, which old Cy with an improvised harness dragged into camp; and far into the night, until overtaken with complete exhaustion, he trimmed his logs, squared the ends, and lifted them into place.

It was their second red-letter day, when

the last sod was dropped into place on the roof, and Garth carried Natalie inside. Strictly considered, the house was not very much to brag about, perhaps; for it slanted this way and that like the first pothooks in a child's copybook; but Garth, fired by Natalie's enthusiastic praises, could not have been prouder if he had completed the Taj Mahal.

One end had been partitioned off for Natalie's room; and in finishing this part Garth had spent all his pains. The floor was made of small logs, filled and plastered with clay, which he had hardened by building fires upon it; and had then strewn rushes over the whole. There was a rough bunk in one corner, with a low table by its side—the latest thing in rustics, the maker explained. There was a tiny window high up on the side overlooking the lake; it had no glass, but a stout shutter swinging on wooden pins, and which fastened with a strong wooden bar. But the crowning feature of the room, constructed with infinite pains after countless failures, was the fireplace in the corner. Garth deprecated it; it wasn't much of a fireplace; only a sort of little arched doorway of baked clay, so narrow the logs had to stand upright in it, making cooking very difficult—but when Natalie saw the flames curling up the chimney in the most natural way possible, she set up a feeble crow of delight.

The balance of the interior was to serve

for Garth's room and storeroom combined. It had a very small door, also on the lake side; but he could not afford a window beside; and he also saved himself the trouble of flooring it. The door was constructed in the same manner as the shutter, of matched poles strongly braced behind, and further strengthened with rawhide lashings.

Natalie had Garth hang a spare blanket over the doorway between the two rooms; and she produced a shawl to serve for a table cloth. After supper, when they locked themselves in and heaped up the fire, Natalie propped up on her couch, and Garth sitting on a stool, smoking by especial request—it was as snug as Heaven, Natalie said. The nights had been growing dreadfully keen of late; and poor Natalie wrapped in all the blankets they possessed had nevertheless more than once lain awake with the cold. But now, within thick walls—what matter if they were out of the perpendicular?—and under a tight roof, with the flames leaping briskly up the chimney, no king in his palace ever experienced such a sense of opulent and all-sufficing luxury as Garth and Natalie the first night in their miserable shack.

This was the fourteenth day after Natalie's accident. Every day after the first week had shown a slight improvement in her condition; and every day had therefore lessened the hold Rina had over them;

until now Garth felt, should it be necessary, he could bring the patient safely back to health unaided. Rina knew this too; and became daily more morose and sullen in her demeanour. To separate her longer from Mabyn would be, Garth felt, simply to promote an explosion. Besides, sufficiently housed now, well armed, and with the food safely stored, he felt strong enough to be merciful. On the night they moved into the shack he pointed out the canoe to Rina, telling her that henceforth she was free to use it as she would. He would go to the island no more, he added; but Rina might come every day for rations for both—as long as Mabyn remained where he was.

He hoped by this to incite the energetic Rina into planning Mabyn's escape from the island. They could catch a couple of horses and ride to their friends at the distant Settlement, or where they would. He felt he could trust Rina, if she ever got Mabyn among her own people, to keep him from coming back. Thus he would at the same stroke be rid of them, and conserve his rapidly diminishing stores. It was no great matter if they drove off all the horses, for he still had old Cy under his eye for Natalie to ride; and their own journey back would have to be undertaken at a walking pace, anyway. He had learned enough of Rina's mixed character to be sure that this would have a greater chance of coming about if he let her think of it for herself, so he said nothing to her.

He was disappointed. Mabyn, too timid to undertake so long a journey without ample supplies, or perhaps too obstinate to go, they remained on the island; and Rina came every day for food. If she was grateful for being allowed to join Mabyn she did not show it. Every trace of her better nature rapidly disappeared, and she seemed wholly the sullen savage. Bad treatment was the explanation they thought; and they pitied her.

Garth waited five days more. Natalie was by that time moving around freely; and they had begun to count the days to their ardently desired retreat from that unhappy valley. The question of food became more and more pressing—their journey would have to be spread over many slow stages; and he finally decided to drive Mabyn and Rina away.

So the next time Rina came, he told her he would give her two days' rations for two persons the following day; and after that they need expect no more. In the meantime, he said, she was free to go up on the prairie and catch the first two horses she met. He even offered her old Cy to round them up, secure in holding the dugout for a hostage. Rina betrayed not the least surprise, or any other feeling at his ultimatum, but coolly rode off as he bid her. She returned within an hour driving Emmy and Timoosis, which she picketed below Mabyn's hut.

What passed between Rina and Mabyn when she returned to the island, the other two could only guess at. However, Garth, up at dawn next morning, saw them striking the tepee. They made two trips back and forth between the island and the mouth of the creek; and afterward, while Mabyn saddled and packed the horses, Rina paddled to Garth's camp to get the promised rations. They both awaited her on the bank.

Rina presented the mask-like face they had grown accustomed to, and maintained a dogged silence. The only sign of feeling she gave was a shadow-like pain drowned deep in her dark eyes. Natalie's own eyes filled at the sight of her stubbornness; in the days of her suffering she had grown very fond of her dark-skinned nurse; and it was she who had insisted throughout on the existence of Rina's better nature, and had never given up hope of reclaiming the worser part. And now it seemed, she must admit herself defeated.

Garth laid out the food he had allotted them; and packed it in a flour-bag convenient to carry. He also gave Rina an open letter he had written, setting forth their situation (without implicating Mabyn or Rina) and asking that food and an escort be sent. That it would ever fall into responsible hands was problematical; but it was a chance. He refrained from any suggestion that it should be concealed from Mabyn, but Rina of her own accord

thrust it in her dress; and he argued well from the act.

Rina turned to go without a word; but Natalie called her softly. In her hand she was holding a round silver locket, in which she had put a tiny picture of herself. She held it out to Rina with a wistful smile.

"For you," she murmured. "Keep it because I love you."

Rina looked at the little picture, struggling to maintain her parade of unconcern. But suddenly she snatched it out of Natalie's hand; and thrust it in her own bosom. Her face worked with the pain of those who weep with difficulty; her eyes filled and overflowed at last. With a wild, brusque abandon, she flung herself at Natalie's feet and pressed the hem of her dress to her trembling lips.

"You good! You good!" she sobbed. Then springing to her feet as abruptly as she had fallen, she flew away among the trees.

Half an hour later they heard the two horses passing the trail behind their camp; the same trail by which they had all first entered the valley; and the way to Spirit River Crossing.

At first they dared not believe they could really be free of their enemy so easily; and they continually found themselves listening for the sound of their return.

Garth saddled Cy at last; and rode along the trail to the top of the bench. He saw Mabyn and Rina two specks in the distance; and still travelling south. When he returned with the news to Natalie, they allowed themselves to rejoice at last; and they were filled with a great peace.

Going home! was the burden of their happy speech; home to the land of friendly faces, the urbane land, the place of comfortable little things, where life was lapped in ease, sane and well-ordered! How their ears ached for a human noise again! the bustle of crowded sidewalks, the clang of gongs, the fall of hoofs on asphalt! How their flesh yearned for the creature comforts! delicate feasting and good clothes to wear! One must be plunged into the wilderness for a while to sense the gifts of civilization at their true value.

"I can understand now why men are so crazy to be explorers and things," said Natalie. "They go away just for the tremendous fun of coming back to it all! Oh-h! Think of dances—and even despised tea-parties now! Think of theatres and restaurants and going to the races!"

"And wouldn't I like to take you straight through to New York, though!" sang Garth. "Oh! Broadway and the Avenue in September! Everything getting under way again! And Coney Island is still going! Picture Luna Park dropped down on the

island out there!"

They laughed at the incongruous picture.

"Where would we dine the first night?" asked Natalie.

"Martin's," said Garth. "Fancy us in the balcony looking down on the giddy crowd; and the orchestra sawing off the sextet from *Lucia* for dear life!"

"Lobster à la Newburg and a *pèche Melba*!" cried Natalie in an ecstasy.

"Not on your life!" said Garth. "Just like a girl's bill-of-fare. Something sensible for yours when you go out with me! How about a filet *dernier cri*?"

"Don't know it," said Natalie. "Besides, I refuse to be sensible in my imagination," she added.

Garth described the delicacy. "And a cheese sauce on top all browned, with strips of red pepper laid criss-cross; and it comes steaming hot under a little glass cover!"

Natalie groaned. "Oh, talk about something else!" she said faintly.

"What will you wear?" asked Garth with a grin.

Natalie drew a long breath and plunged forthwith into elaborate, excited descriptions.

Their respite was very short—only to the middle of the following morning. They were still dwelling on the subject of home. Garth had carefully lifted Natalie into the saddle; and was leading the horse up and down the strip of grass to see how she bore it. Suddenly she bent her head, and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Horses!" she said.

Garth sharply pulled up old Cy. "The Indian cayuses, perhaps," he said.

Natalie shook her head. "Heavier animals than that," she said. "And more like the steady trot of ridden horses!"

They listened with strained attention; and presently the pound of hoofs was clearly audible returning on the same trail through the woods of the lake shore. The approach of strangers is charged with a tremendous significance to those immured in a wilderness. They bated their breaths to hear better.

Garth scowled. "If they come back they can starve!" he said shortly. "They'll not get another stiver's worth from our store!"

Natalie's ears were very sharp. "There are more than two!" she said suddenly. "Four —six—more than that!"

Garth's face cleared. "Friends, undoubtedly," he said. "Mabyn could

never enlist anybody, not even breeds, against us!"

But this was only for Natalie's benefit. Even while he spoke another thought struck a chill to his heart. Lifting Natalie off the horse, he sent her into the house; and taking his gun, he struck back through the woods to the side of the trail, to reconnoitre. He dropped behind a clump of mooseberry bushes where he could see without being seen.

The cavalcade was close upon him. The first to ride past was Herbert Mabyn. His livid face was alight with triumph; and he carried a new Winchester slung over his back. An ill-favoured breed youth followed; his face struck a chord in Garth's memory; but so hard is it to distinguish alien faces that for the moment he could not place him. Next there came six packhorses, laden with food and camp outfit, and driven by the next rider, a breed woman, whose face happened to be turned from Garth as she passed. He had an uncomfortable sense that he knew her too. Rina followed, turning a sad and troubled face in the direction of their camp as she rode by.

This seemed to be all; and Garth was about to rise, when he heard still another rider approaching. He crouched back with a sure foreboding of who it was; hence there was little surprise in the actual sight of the faded check suit enwrapping the

burly figure, the broad-rimmed "Stetson," and the ragged cigar ceaselessly twisted between fat lips. He looked older, that was all; and he bore marks of illness. Nick Grylls had found them out.

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XX

SUCCOUR

Garth was thankful he was alone when it happened. The reaction after their day of joyous hopefulness was too sudden to be borne. Crouching behind the bush, he dropped his head in his arms. What could he hope for, single-handed against such overwhelming odds? For a while his heart failed him utterly, and all his faculties were scattered in clownish confusion. He knew not which way to turn. At last one thought shone through the murk of his brain like a star: Natalie must not be rudely frightened. He got up; and composing his face with a great effort of will, he hastened back to her.

But the riders having crossed the bed of the stream, and mounted the rise, Natalie already knew as much as he. Her first thought was likewise for him. She turned a solicitous face.

"My poor Garth!" she said. "More care and danger for you!"

The simple words acted on him like a strong tonic. His brow smoothed; his mouth hardened; and he was mightily ashamed for his moment of weakness.

"More fun!" he said with his dry, arrogant note of laughter. "Act four of the drama begins!"

Natalie caught his spirit and laughed back.

"Who was the half-breed, do you suppose?" he said. "Whitey-blue eyes, ugly scar!"

"Don't you remember?" she said quickly. "The stage to the Landing——"

"Xavier! Of course!" he cried.

"And the second woman?"

"I only saw a ring of gray curls under her hat."

"Mary Co-que-wasa!"

"Hm! The entire *dramatis personæ*?" said Garth.

Natalie, not to be outdone, saluted with her good arm, and asked: "Orders of the day, Captain?"

In a truly desperate pass one breaks down —or laughs. Youth laughs. They bolstered each other's courage with their jests, each secretly wondering and admiring of the other.

"We have the house, anyway!" said Garth. "Good old tumbledown shanty!"

"No! Fort Indefatigable!" amended Natalie.

"It'll be besieged all right," said Garth. "We

must carry in everything we own, and fill up the rest of the space with wood for the fire. I would share my room with Cy, but the old boy couldn't get his ribs through the door!"

Natalie was told off for sentry duty. She took up her position at the edge of the shore, where she could report on all that transpired in the other camp. It seemed to be the design of these people first to overawe them with a display of force. They pitched camp openly, in and around Mabyn's hut; and moved about all day in plain view. The men amused themselves by shooting their guns at various marks, clearly to show the number and strength of their weapons. Up to dark, Natalie was able to report that none of the five had left camp.

Garth, meanwhile, worked like a Trojan. All the wood cut for the fire was carried inside, and he had, besides, a quantity of logs left over or discarded from the building of the shack; and these were likewise stored. The hut was built so near the edge of the bank there was little possibility of an attack from in front; in each of the other three sides he cut a loophole for observation and defense. The last hours of daylight he spent in hunting near camp; and in setting snares to be visited later. Two rabbits were all that fell to his bag.

At nightfall they locked themselves in.

Garth did not stop then, but worked for hours piling the spare logs around the three vulnerable sides of the shack; so that if the bullets should fly, they would be protected under a double barrier.

The night passed without alarms.

In the morning Garth wished to venture forth as if nothing had happened. Inaction was intolerable to him. He insisted it would be fatal for him to act as if he were afraid.

Natalie was all against it.

"But this is the twentieth century after all," he said; "and we're under a civilized Government. They would never dare shoot me in cold blood!"

"Not kill you, perhaps," she said; "but bring you down, helpless!" Tears threatened here; and Garth was silenced.

Opening the shutter in Natalie's room, they could still command a view of the other camp. Grylls and Mabyn were visible; and at intervals the two women appeared. Xavier was missing.

"He will be watching us," Natalie said.

As if to give point to her words, a rifle suddenly barked its hoarse note, close outside. Garth sprang to the loophole in Natalie's room; and was in time to see the poor, stupid, faithful old horse, tethered outside, sink to his knees, and collapse on

the grass.

He leaped up, turning an ominous, wrathful face.

"Oh! The damned cowards!" he muttered.

Natalie flew into the adjoining room, and flung herself in front of the door. "You must not go out!" she cried. "What would I do, if you were hurt?"

She was unanswerable, and he turned from the door, sickened with balked wrath, and flung himself face down on his blankets until he could command himself.

As if to give this act time to sink in, nothing further was undertaken against Garth and Natalie all day; though they were undoubtedly under surveillance, because the five were never about their own camp at the same time. It was a bitter, hard day on the besieged; Garth, chafing intolerably, paced the shack like a newly caged animal; and even Natalie suffered from his temper.

At nightfall he eased his pent-up feelings by a cautious sally. He filled all their vessels in the lake; and revisited his snares, which, however, yielded nothing. They were too near camp. He saw no sign of any adversary; but some of them came about later in the night like coyotes; for in the morning Garth saw that the body of old Cy had been dragged away—in the fear, perhaps, that his flesh might furnish

them with food.

After breakfast Garth took his pipe to the window, and folding his arms on the high sill, watched the movements in the camp across the little bay. They were watching him too; he presently sensed a pair of field-glasses in Grylls's hands. Garth laughed and obeying a sudden, ironical impulse, waved his hand. Grylls abruptly lowered the glass and walked away.

Garth was still smiling, when all at once, without warning, Rina came around the corner of his shack and faced him point blank. The smile was fixed in astonishment; Rina was unperturbed.

"What do you want?" he demanded, picking up his gun.

"I got no gun," she said, indifferently, exhibiting her empty hands. "Nick Grylls, him send you letter."

Garth reflected that by letting her in, he stood the chance of getting much useful information; so bidding Natalie stay in her own room, he opened the door.

Rina handed him the note from Grylls. It was scribbled in a small, crabbed hand on the back of a business letter. On the other side Garth had a glimpse of the time-honoured formula: "*Dear Sir: Yours of the first instant to hand, and contents noted. In reply we beg to say*——" It gave him a queer, incongruous start: outside, it

seemed, people still went to and from their offices, absorbed in their inconsequential affairs—while here in the woods he was fighting for his life, and Natalie's honour!

"Where is *she*?" Rina asked—she had never referred to Natalie by name. "I will fix her hair for her if she want," she added humbly enough.

Natalie immediately came forward, offering her hand. Rina clung to it without speaking, turning away her head to hide welling tears.

"Where did you meet these people?" Garth asked her.

"On the prairie," she answered, low-voiced. "Yesterday, noon spell. They coming this way. Nick Grylls, him mak' moch friend with 'Erbe't, and 'Erbe't, him glad. Nick Grylls big man, rich man, everybody lak to be friend with him. Nick Grylls say him come to help 'Erbe't. Him give 'Erbe't ver' fine gun."

"Humph! Mabyn will pay dear for it!" Garth exclaimed.

"I say so him," Rina said eagerly. "Me, I tell 'Erbe't everybody see Nick Grylls him jus' mak' a fool of you. What he want with you? He want her for himself. 'Erbe't on'y laugh. 'E say—" Rina's voice sunk very low —"'Let him help me get her, and I'll keep her, all right!'"

Garth frowned and clenched his fists. His gorge rose intolerably, at the thought of this precious pair contending which was to have Natalie.

Rina went on: "Nick Grylls say to 'Erbe't, mustn't let her get out of the country. He say 'If she go out she divorce you.'" Rina pronounced the word strangely. "Nick Grylls say he know a place to tak' her all winter, Northwest, many days to Death River, where no white man ever go before. Him think I not hear what he say."

This was valuable information indeed.

Garth opened the letter. It was a curious document, for while the thoughts were like Grylls's, they were clothed in a certain smoothness of phrase more likely supplied by Mabyn:

> MR. GARTH PEVENSEY, SIR: (Thus it ran) I am astonished beyond measure at the story I have learned from the lips of my good friend, Mr. Herbert Mabyn. I assure you, sir, that, though this is an unsettled country, we are not accustomed to lawlessness; nor do we propose to stand for it from strangers. You have twice attempted Mr. Mabyn's life; you have stolen and converted to your own use his household effects and supplies; you have unwarrantably imprisoned him on an exposed island to the great detriment of his health. Your

> purpose in all this is transparent. You seek to part him from his wife; and you are at this moment detaining Mrs. Mabyn in your shack.
>
> I flatter myself I am not without weight and standing in this community; and I hereby warn you that in the absence of the regular police, I mean to see this wrong righted. If Mrs. Mabyn is immediately returned to her husband, you will be allowed to go unmolested. If you still detain her, we will seize her by force, as we have every right, moral and legal, to do. We know you have only food enough for a few days, so in any case the end cannot remain long in doubt.
>
> NICHOLAS GRYLLS.

Scorn and amusement struggled in Garth's face. His nostrils thinned; he suddenly threw up his head and grimly laughed.

"Well, this beats the Dutch!" he said feelingly.

Natalie, reading the cunningly plausible sentences over his shoulder, was inclined to be anxious. "Surely he has no legal right over me," she said.

"Not a shadow!" Garth said.

"Grylls may have believed this story Mabyn told him," she said.

"Not a bit of it!" Garth said quickly. "Grylls is not so simple." He stuck the letter sharply with his forefinger. "I'm a newspaper reporter," he went on dryly, "you can believe me, this is a perfect, a beautiful, a monumental bluff! I'm almost inclined to take off my hat to him! But the length of it gives them away, rather; they must have spent all day yesterday cooking this up."

"What will you do?" Natalie asked.

A wicked gleam appeared in Garth's eyes. "Oh, wouldn't I love to answer it in kind!" he said longingly.

"An innocent, simple little billet-doux that would make them squirm. Why, that's my business!"

"Better not," said Natalie anxiously.

"You're right," he said with a sigh. "It's the first thing you learn: never to write when you feel that way. But it's mighty hard to resist it!"

Rina understood little of all this. "You send answer back?" she asked.

"No. Tell him there's no answer," said Garth. "Tell him we nearly died laughing," he added.

That night Garth determined not to leave the cabin until shortly before dawn. He had seen Xavier leave the other camp before dark; and he guessed the breed youth had been told off to watch them. From what he had observed of the incontinuity of the breed mind in any given direction, he strongly suspected if they kept still throughout the first part of the night Xavier would fall asleep before morning. He had a little plan in his mind, which he did not confide to Natalie. About three o'clock, therefore, he called Natalie to bar the door after him; and he sallied forth, concealing from her that he carried a coil of light rope.

He was gone more than an hour, of which every minute was an age to poor Natalie crouching over the fire and straining her ears. She had successively pictured every possible accident that might have befallen him, before her heart leaped at the sound of his signal at the door.

Garth was for sending her back to bed forthwith, but Natalie apprehended he had not been gone so long for nothing; and presently she heard him stand two guns in the corner.

"What have you got?" she asked eagerly.

"Oh, I just made a trade." Garth airily returned. "Thirty feet of clothesline for a Winchester and a bag of cartridges. I threw in a handkerchief to boot. Pretty good, eh?"

Natalie pulled him in by the fire, and made him light his pipe and tell her what had happened.

"Well, I had a hunch Xavier was watching us to-night," he began. "I bore a grudge against Xavier's pretty face, and I thought I'd have a little fun with him, you see."

Natalie glanced up in alarm.

"A fellow would go mad, if he couldn't do *anything*," Garth apologized. "I'll be good now for a week."

"Xavier?" said Natalie inquiringly.

"I wouldn't have minded a little bit, giving the brute his quietus," Garth said coolly. "He killed my horse. But he had no chance to put up a fight; and I couldn't murder him; so at this present moment he's unhurt —except his feelings. But Grylls will half kill him in the morning!"

"What did you do to him?" she demanded.

"I was pretty sure he would be watching the path we have made to the trail," Garth went on. "I figured he would be on my left hand—his right; it's the position a man instinctively takes. You can't shoot so well over your right. So I crawled along the path, inch by inch on my stomach——"

"Garth!" she cried in horror. "If I had known!"

"Exactly!" he said. "So I didn't tell you. But there was no danger, really. It was too

dark for him to shoot me—pitchy dark there, under the trees. I couldn't see an inch before my nose; and as I went I felt with my hand out in front of me, both sides the path. Thistledown was nothing to the lightness of my touch.

"Sure enough, no more than thirty yards behind the house here, I touched his moccasin—you couldn't mistake the feel of a moccasin. And, just as I expected, he was sitting on my left. That was a pretty good guess if——"

"Oh! Go on! Go on!" she begged.

"He had his back against a tree. I listened for his breathing. They breathe very light—tubercular, probably. Finally, I decided he was asleep.

"Well, I mosied around behind him; and then I grabbed him. He let out just one little squawk; and then he shut his mouth. He struggled; slippery as an oiled cat, but not very strong. Finally I got him gagged with my handkerchief. Then I tied him up with my rope; round and round; just like the stories we read when we were kids. I expect I pinched him some; that was for poor old Cy.

"Afterward I sat down opposite him; and lit my pipe; and thought over what I'd do with him, now I had him. We certainly weren't going to feed his ugly phiz; and he was no use as a hostage, for Grylls wouldn't give a hang what became of him.

Meanwhile I was relieving my mind, by telling him a few plain truths about making war on dumb beasts. Hope he understood!"

Natalie concealed a smile. "What did you say?" she asked.

"Never mind," said Garth. "It was more forcible than polite. It's been sizzling inside me for two days. Finally I decided to return him to his own camp."

"Their camp!" exclaimed the startled Natalie.

"Not all the way," he said; "but just where they'd see him in the morning. Horrible example, and all that, you know. So I hoisted him on my back, and carried him around to the brook. I propped him against a tree there, with his face turned home." Garth chuckled. "To finish the thing up brown, I suppose I ought to have pinned a placard on his breast: Notice! This is the fate that awaits all who—*et cetera*. But I didn't think to take any writing materials along with me!"

"Oh, Garth!" said Natalie reproachfully, as he finished.

He turned a face of whimsical penitence. "Honest, I won't do it again!" he said. "But I was under two hundred pounds pressure. It was a case of blow off or bust!"

They could joke for each other's benefit; but privately neither attempted to disguise from himself what a desperate pass they had reached. When they parted for the night, Natalie would lie staring wide-eyed at the fire, and ceaselessly reproaching herself for having drawn Garth into the sad tangle of her life; while he, tossing on his blankets on the other side of the partition, blamed himself no less bitterly for having allowed her to run into danger; and wrung his exhausted brain for an expedient to save her.

A little beleaguered garrison watching its small store lessen day by day, and counting the crumbs—this is the situation of all to try the soul. But a garrison is always buoyed up by the hope of succour; and Garth and Natalie could expect none. On the other hand there was no possibility of treachery within this garrison; no need to measure out the rations, or to guard the store; for each was jealous of the other's having *less*; and each sought to give away his share.

There was no variety in those days. They waited in vain for an attack—even longed for it; for behind their walls, the odds would be more nearly equal. But the other party knew this too; and preferred to starve them out. Garth's snares yielded nothing in four days; the only flesh they ate during that time was a fish he caught with a line set at night in the lake. Their stores were reduced to a few handfuls of

flour and a little tea. Meanwhile their enemies feasted insolently all day about their fire; this siege was child's play for them; they were so perfectly sure of their prey in the end.

There came a night at last when Garth and Natalie no longer cared to keep up the show of joking; they liked to be quiet instead; and they instinctively drew close together. They sat in the inner room; her head dropped frankly on his shoulder; and her hand lay in his. It made his heart ache to see how thin it was. But her spirit was still strong.

"Garth!" she said suddenly. "Let's make a break for it! Anything would be better than this!"

He shook his head. "No go, dearest," he said. "I've been over that, over and over it, every night for a week!"

"Couldn't we start down the lake in the canoe?" she said. "And make our way from some point below? We could cover our tracks that way, and gain much time. You have a rough map and a compass."

"They would discover in the morning that the canoe was gone," he said.

"They might not miss it for a day or two."

"They have the smoke of our fire to go by, too."

"They're careless. We might get a good

start."

"Dearest, even if we had many days' start, they know we must make for the Settlement. How easy it would be to head us off!"

"But it *might* succeed," was all she could say.

"It's seventy-five miles," he said sadly. "You're not strong yet. How could you walk it, without food to support you on the way?"

"You have your gun," she said faintly.

"There's no hunting on the open prairie for a man on foot!"

Natalie dropped her head back on his shoulder; and said no more.

Garth's face grew grimmer and grimmer in the firelight. "Do not lose heart, dear," he said at last, in a gentle voice that was strangely at variance with his eyes. "Matters will take a turn to-morrow; I promise you that."

"What are you going to do?" she asked anxiously.

"I'm thinking it out," he said, evasively. "I'll tell you when it's pieced together."

She was too weary to question him further.

In the darkness of his own room, he faced

the thing. There was to be no sleep for him this night. The alternative had been there from the first; but hitherto he had averted his eyes from it, hoping against hope. Now it could be put off no longer. It was Natalie's life against theirs; and throughout the hours of the night, he steeled his heart to launch five souls to eternity—two of them the souls of women. Rina he knew would be transformed into a tigress by the death of Mabyn; so even Rina, whom Natalie loved, must go too. He found himself dwelling with horror on the harmony of her beauty, the deep fire of her eyes, the soft play of colour in her cheeks—which he was to mar!

Supposing he succeeded, the dreadful consequences were painfully clear to him; the hideous noise it would make in the world when they got out; the ugly look it would have, with no one to bear out his story but Natalie, and her lawful husband among the dead! Grylls's lying letter had shown him how easy it would be to paint that side of the story in the colours of justice. For himself, Garth cared nothing; but the thought of Natalie, the sport of a world of malicious tongues, maddened him. But there was no help for it; it had to be done.

His plan was simple in the extreme. He intended to cross the lake in the canoe; land well beyond Mabyn's camp; and fire the grass to the windward of the shack. No rain had fallen in weeks; the grass was as

dry as tinder; and the old bleached shack itself almost as inflammable as gunpowder. He had, moreover, a small quantity of oil among the things seized from Mabyn. The night itself seemed to speak for the deed; it was as dark as Erebus; and there was a blustering, raw wind from the north, presaging snow.

After starting the fire, he meant to climb the rising ground behind; and when they ran to beat out the flames, he would pick them off one by one. His gun would shoot as fast as he could think; he might get all five then. And if any regained the hut, they would soon be driven out again. Whichever way they ran, Garth could run as fast on the higher ground; and none of them was such a shot as he. Grylls first; then Mabyn; then the breeds. He meant to wait until dawn, so that if any escaped the radius of the fire, he could get them by daylight.

But no executioner may have imagination; in the darkness of his room the attitudes of the slain were pictured to Garth as clearly as if they already lay before him: Grylls's gross body huddled in the grass; Mabyn hideous in death; and Rina cold and still in her wistful beauty. Cries of terror and agony rang in his ears; and he saw himself afterward burying the bodies —partly eaten by the flames. Small icy drops broke out on his forehead. Though he was doing it for her, when it was done, Natalie could not but shrink from such a

bloody wretch. It would part them forever. But it must be done!

When his watch showed half-past four—the dawn was later now—he arose to start. He called Natalie to bar the door after him. He told her he was going merely to look about and that she must not worry if he was not back until daylight. Natalie was scarcely awake. He yearned mightily to take her soft, sleepy form in his arms for once before they were imbrued; but he dared not, knowing she would instantly interpret the act as a possible farewell.

When she closed the door behind him, he felt as one lost to hope.

As he grasped the canoe, preparatory to pushing it off, he suddenly became aware through his sharpened senses—he could not have said how—that some one was very near him. He noiselessly dropped to one knee; and unslinging his gun, waited. The wind was making confusing noises and he could not be sure. The suspense became too great to be borne in silence.

"Who's there?" he said sharply.

There came a strange, new, and yet familiar voice out of the darkness: "Garth, is that you?"

His heart began to beat wildly. "Who are you?" he whispered.

"Charley!" returned the voice with the

boyish break in it.

They sprang to their feet simultaneously, not ten paces apart in the grass.

"I've brought you grub!" sang the boy. "How's Natalie?"

In an instant they were in each other's arms. A swift reaction passed over Garth; his knees weakened under him; he clung to the boy's shoulders; and lowered his head.

"Oh, thank God! thank God!" he murmured.

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XXI

THE BROKEN DOOR

Garth beat recklessly on the cabin door crying:

"Natalie! Natalie! Good news!"

She was not long in opening.

"See what I've brought you back!" he shouted.

They slammed the door shut; and together pulled Charley in by the light of the fire.

"Charley! *Charley!*" cried Natalie, quite beside herself with delight; and flinging her free arm around his neck, she pressed her lips full on his.

The honest full-moon face of the boy turned as red as a peony; but his arms closed around her too, with a right good will; and it was Natalie in the end, who was obliged gently to disengage herself.

They all talked at once; they laughed and wept in concert. As soon as they finished shaking hands all around, they began again. Whenever Garth was at a loss to express his feelings, he whacked Charley between the shoulders, until the boy coughed. In the end, speech failing them completely, they whooped and capered about the shack like wild things.

"I say!" said Garth suddenly. "We're giving ourselves away nicely! The news has reached Mabyn and Grylls by this time."

They quieted down.

"Tell us your adventures, Charley dear," said Natalie.

"I'd better bring my stuff in first," said he.

"Where is it?"

The boy unslung a bundle from his back. "Thought you might be hungry, so I brought enough for a couple of squares," he said; "sugar, and tea, and bacon, and flour. And say, I thought something fancy

would go down good; so there's a tin of sardines and a box of biscuits."

"Oh! you darling!" said Natalie.

Charley was much embarrassed. "The rest of the stuff's cached two miles down the shore," he went on hastily. "I'll trot along and bring it in."

"Take the canoe," said Garth; "and they can't hold you up."

"What will I do with the horses?" asked Charley.

This was a problem. "How many?" Garth asked.

"Three."

"How will we keep them out of Grylls's hands?"

"Why wait at all?" asked Natalie. "Let us all get in the canoe, and start for home. It will take me just five minutes to get ready!"

But Garth shook his head. "You can't ride above a walk yet," he said. "It would mean a running fight all the way. The odds are still too great against us in the open!"

"The fellows from the Settlement promised to come look for us in a week if we weren't home," said Charley.

"Good!" said Garth. "Then we'll wait for them!"

"And the horses?" said the boy anxiously. "They're not much to brag about; but I'm in debt a hundred bones for them."

Garth clapped him on the back again. "Don't you worry about that, old boy!" he cried. "The debt is mine! Tell you what we'll do!" he added, "We'll bring them up here, and swim them off to the island. There's forage enough over there for a day or two, and they will be right under our eyes!"

They set off immediately in the canoe; and it was all accomplished as planned. Charley brought the precious grub back by water, out of Grylls's possible reach; while Garth drove the horses in over the trail at a smart pace. Nothing happened en route; it was probably all done before their adversaries had time to plan an attack. They swam the horses to the island, and were both back in the shack, before it was light enough to aim a gun.

Breakfast followed; and such a breakfast! They both helped the one-armed cook. There was bannock light and snowy; bacon fried crisp—"breakfast" bacon, very different in the North from plain "bacon"; and fried sardines—delectable morsels! and coffee, and jam. All the delicious things Garth and Natalie had dreamed of paled beside this homely reality. Each of the three was delighted, moreover, to see the others eat; Charley in especial, at the sight of the good he had brought, could

scarcely stop grinning to chew. Afterward he had to be told all that had happened; and he in return related his adventures.

"Tell you what! I was sore when Garth sent me back!" Charley began. "'What's the use!' I thought. 'I can't do any work, not knowing what's come of them.' In the end I just didn't go back. I had all kinds of crazy ideas about following you along the trail; but at last I thought maybe I could be some real use by hanging round the Settlement, and keeping an eye on Nick Grylls. And I did.

"Say, he really was knocked out all right, all right. They carried him in from the lake; and the sisters nursed him in the Convent. Construction of the brain he had, or something like that. Seems he got up when he first come to on the shore, walked ten miles, and then collapsed right near Grier's Point. But they kept that low. Hooliam gave out a great story, how a big storm came up on the lake, and how Nick fell overboard, *et cetera, et cetera*; Garth wasn't mentioned in it at all!

"Long before Nick was able to be around, he sent down for Mary Co-que-wasa and Xavier; and then I knew there was more mischief brewing. Say, those two are the toughest of the whole tough bunch. They say Xavier is Mary's son. All this time I was getting mighty worried myself, why you didn't come back, and I was going to look for you anyway. However, as soon as

he was up, Grylls got a big outfit together, and started over the portage with the two breeds. He gave out that he was going up to Ostachegan Creek—but I knew! I got a couple of cayuses on credit, and a little grub; and followed him inside three hours.

"He beat me by a day to the Crossing, and went right through. Over there I heard about you from the fellows; and say, I was scared for fair, when I counted up the grub I knew you had, and then thought how long you'd been away! I hustled and got another horse and all the grub they would trust me for. I tried my darnedest to get some of the fellows to come with me. They laughed at me! They said I'd been reading too many dime novels—I never read any! You see, every one knows Nick Grylls so well, and nothing like this ever happened before. Jim Plaskett, the policeman, would have believed me; but he was away. I left a letter for him. I lost a couple of good days at the Crossing over this. The most the fellows would say was, if I didn't bring you back in a week, the bunch would ride up here.

"I was so excited with it all, I lost myself like a bloody fool for two days on the prairie; and I just ran on the lake, by accident, yesterday afternoon. Say, I almost gave the whole snap away, for I came over the hill right above Mabyn's shack. Maybe I didn't duck in a hurry! There was the whole bunch below me! Across the corner of the lake, I could see

this house too. I know it must be yours because it was just built; and it had a sort of tenderfoot look to it. Say! I wasn't glad to see smoke coming out of the chimney! Oh, no!

"Well, that's about all. I took a long sweep around the prairie, and came down at the place where we got the horses. I thought they would have you watched, so I figured I'd better wait for night, before trying to open up communications. When she got good and dark, I crawled around the shore of the lake. But when I got here, I didn't know how in thunder to let you know it was me, without bringing down the bunch on us. So I decided to lay low till morning, and show myself to you, the first chance I got. Then Garth came out and it was all right!"

"Just in the nick of time!" said Garth grimly.

"What were you going to do?" asked Natalie quickly.

But he never told her.

They settled down with what patience they could muster, to wait for their relief. Two days passed without any hostile demonstration from the camp on the hill; but that their enemies kept themselves well informed, they had the best reason to

know; for it snowed on the second day, and on the following morning there were moccasin tracks around the house, and the rounded marks of two knees under the loophole in Natalie's room. Garth had taken the precaution to hang a piece of canvas over the hole; nevertheless, the discovery made them decidedly uncomfortable. Garth nailed a board over the hole; and they searched the walls anew for any tell-tale crack that might betray them.

It grew warm again; and the snow melted off the ground. Frequent observations of the other camp taught them nothing. This apparent inactivity puzzled Garth, since the others must know that the game of starving them out was blocked with the arrival of Charley. They waited in momentary expectation of attack, or a proposal; but none came.

Garth's only serious anxiety now was for the three horses. They must by this time have cropped the limited herbage of the island; and in another day, when they began to suffer with hunger, they would undoubtedly swim off; and all his trouble to save them would be lost. He was greatly tempted by the recollection of a wide, low meadow on the edge of the lake below, where the blue-joint grass grew as high as a man's thigh, curing naturally in the sun. With an hour's labour, he reflected, he could cut enough to last them for a day.

There was a risk, of course, in depriving the cabin of its principal defender for even so long; but he would not be at any time more than half an hour's journey from them; and Charley ought surely to be able to hold the fort for that time. In case of an attack it might even be an advantage for him, Garth, to be on the outside of the cabin, where he could flank the attackers with his gun.

In the end he went; setting off two hours before dawn, according to his custom. On issuing from the shack, he found with some anxiety that the sky had become heavily overcast, and an east wind had sprung up. This would prevent his hearing as well as he wished; however, he considered that if Grylls intended a night attack, he would scarcely wait until so near morning: and he kept on.

He sat in the stern of the canoe pushing hard against the opposing wind. The raised bow danced over the water, slapping the little waves, and sending out musical cascades of drops on either side. The wind had the same cool, damp smell of the east winds at home; and he was reminded of a score of nights when he had nothing heavier on his mind than the approaching end of a vacation. After two days' imprisonment in the shack, the tussle with the wind was highly exhilarating; and it was very good to measure the strength of his arms. He sang under his breath as he worked. Black as it was, he

could guide himself by the dimly-sensed outline of the tree masses; and when they receded he knew he had arrived opposite the meadow.

It took him longer than he had counted on to gather what he could carry; for he was hampered by the intense darkness. He collected the hay into small armfuls, which in turn he tied into great bundles; and wedged them into the canoe. Embarking again, he raced back before the wind at double the speed he had made against it.

On the way, a single, dull sound, coming muffled through the night, brought his heart into his throat. He paused; but no other sound followed, except the song of the water, and the sweep of the wind through the branches on shore. He redoubled his strokes, filled with a vague anxiety; and pausing only to cast out his bundles on the shore of the island, hastened back to the camp. He heard no other untoward sounds; but crossing from the island, he saw that the fire in the other camp had died down. This had never happened any night before; and it added to his uneasiness. The increased chill of the air now heralded the approach of dawn; but it was not yet any lighter.

As he landed, the familiar outline of his own house, just as he had left it, allayed his fears. Everything about the camp was still. Cautiously drawing up the canoe, he

advanced with confidence to give the prearranged knock on the door. His knuckles beat upon the air. The door was wide open.

Then Garth's heart shrivelled in his breast; and his throat was constricted as by sudden deadly fumes. He staggered in. There was a stale odour of gunpowder in the room.

"Natalie! Charley!" he called, in a choked whisper.

The stillness mocked him.

He ran into Natalie's room, still faintly illumined by the embers of the hearth. A glance told him it was empty; but he felt with his hands in all the dim corners, agonizingly whispering her name. There was no evidence here that any struggle had taken place.

Running out to the outer room toward Charley's bed, he fell over a body lying on the floor. A touch told him it was the boy. He disregarded it, until he had made sure Natalie was not there. Then dragging the body into the inner room, he built up the fire. He saw the boy was not dead; he could find no wound on him. He worked desperately to bring him to.

Charley stirred at last, and opened his eyes.

"What happened?" besought the distracted Garth.

The boy only looked at him stupidly.

"For God's sake collect your wits, and tell me!" he cried.

Charley, suddenly clutching Garth's arm, raised himself on his elbow. "Garth!" he cried wildly. "Natalie! Where is she?"

"God knows!" groaned Garth.

Terrible recollection returned to the boy's eyes. He sat up dizzy and nauseated. "I remember now!" he stuttered.

"Quick! Quick!" implored Garth.

"It was a little while after you went," Charley continued, getting it out with difficulty. "Natalie came and shook me. She said she heard a sound outside.... We waited and listened—a quarter of an hour it seemed.... We heard nothing.... Then suddenly with one big crack, the door flew open. They drove a log against it.... I couldn't tell how many came in—maybe three.... I shoved Natalie behind me in the farthest corner. I had the Winchester ready in my hands.... They dropped to the floor when they came in; and scattered. I couldn't tell where they were—I don't know how long it was.... Suddenly I heard something close to—somebody breathing. I fired. In the flash I saw them all, Xavier, Mary, and right over me, Nick Grylls, swinging the butt of his gun—then my head split in pieces ... and you came!"

"Oh, my God!" cried Garth.

He picked up his rifle, and ran like a madman from the cabin.

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XXII

THE BLIZZARD

Garth had no conscious design in running; his muscles merely reacted in obedience to the grinding tumult in his brain. His eardrums rang with the fancied sound of Natalie's cries; and his eyeballs were seared with the picture of her shrinking in the brutal hands of Grylls. As he crashed through the wood, the little branches whipped his face unmercifully; and the spiny shoots of the jackpines tore his clothes. He ran full tilt into unyielding obstacles; and was flung aside, unconscious of the shock.

He instinctively sought the other camp. He found it deserted; the tent gone; the door of the empty cabin swinging idly in the wind. He came to a stop then; and his arms dropped to his sides: without knowledge of the direction they had taken; and without the craft to follow their tracks in the grass, in his helplessness he hovered on the brink of sheer madness. He was sharply called back

to himself by the sound of a faint groan from the edge of the cut-bank. A tinge of gray had by this time been woven into the unrelieved blackness. Running toward the sound, he found a human form prone in the grass; and he saw it was a woman lying on her face. Grasping her shoulders, he rolled her over. It was Rina.

A tiny hope sprang in his breast. Here at last was a clue.

"Get up!" he said roughly.

She made no answer. From her limpness, and her cold, moist hands, Garth apprehended that she was physically sick. Partly raising her, he poured part of the contents of his flask down her throat. She choked, and turned her head away.

"Let me be!" she murmured. "Let me die!"

The wildness in Garth's veins subsided. Here he had something tangible to work upon; and his conscious brain resumed operations; prompting him at first like a small, strange voice at an immense distance.

"Tell me what happened!" he said hoarsely. "If they have wronged you, too, help me to find them, and we'll pay them off together!"

"No! I want die!" whispered Rina in a voice as dull and hopeless as the sound of all-day rain in the grass. "I say I kill myself. He laugh. He see me tak' bad

medicine. He don' care. I fall down. He leave me. I t'ink I die then. I ver' glad. But I tak' too much; and it only mak' my stomach sick. Bam-by I try to go to lake and jomp in—but my head go off!"

In spite of her unwillingness, Garth forced more of the stimulant down her throat. Presently she was able to sit up. She bowed her back, and buried her face in her crossed arms.

"Ride with me after them!" urged Garth. "They have less than an hour's start! We will overtake them at their first camp. Rouse yourself!"

But Rina only shook her head; and continued to murmur: "He want me die! He glad I die!"

Garth's desperate need brought craft to his aid. "Very well," he said coolly. "I shoot him on sight! Mabyn goes first!"

Rina, touched home, raised an agitated face. "No! No!" she said tremblingly. "Grylls, him took her—not 'Erbe't!"

"No matter!" he said, feigning to leave her. "Mabyn dies like a dog—unless you come with me."

Rina struggled to her knees, and clutched at him. "Wait a minute!" she stammered.

"Come with me, and I promise you his life, if I can save it," he urged. "I will give it to you!"

She attempted to rise; and he lifted her. She stood swaying dizzily, clinging to his arm for support.

"I come," she said faintly at last. "Tak' me to the water, then go get your horses. When you come back I ride with you."

She stopped in the cabin, and got an herb she knew of to restore her. Garth then carried her down the hill, and laying her at the brink of the water, where she could drink and bathe her face, he hastened back to his own shack.

It was now light enough to see a way through the wood. A spectral mist hung suspended a few feet over the lake; beneath it the water was like a steel cuirass, reflecting bordering foliage as black as jet. Charley had gone for the horses as a matter of course and was even now landing them. The boy's whilom rosy cheeks were as white as the mist; and his face was twisted with pain. His jaw was set doggedly; and he worked ahead without question or comment.

No orders were required; they laboured instinctively. Saddles were carried out, and flung on the dripping beasts; and while Charley girthed them, Garth rolled the blankets, and made three bundles of grub, as heavy as he dared ask each horse to carry, in addition to his rider. Natalie's little rifle he gave to Charley; the second Winchester had been won back in the raid, and the twenty-two was the only

other weapon they possessed. In twenty minutes they were ready. Securing the door of the hut against the entrance of animals, they hastened to pick up Rina.

They found her waiting, outwardly collected; her old walled, sullen self—but in the early light her skin showed a deathly, yellowish gray. Refusing any assistance, she climbed into the empty saddle without comment; and mutely pointed the way over the hills to the west. Garth lingered to affix a note to the door of the shack for those they expected to follow.

As he caught up to them again, he overlooked his little party with the eye of a commander. It was not a hopeful view: three wretched, half-fed beasts he had, complaining at the very start under their loads; and for his aids an injured boy and a sick girl; with one first-class weapon and a toy among the three of them. This was all he had with which to meet and overcome Grylls's strong and well-provided party. The odds were so preposterous, he put the thought out of his head with a shrug. At the last there is a moment when the hard-pressed commander must wall up his brain; and let the tide of his blood carry him. The daylight revealed Garth's face gaunt and sunken; his lips a grim stroke of red; and his eyes contracted to two icy points.

As they climbed the hill Rina said: "They

got fourteen horse. Nick Grylls bring nine, three yours, and two cayuse 'Erbe't's."

At the top she halted them, while she walked her horse back and forth, searching the grass. Garth's eyes meanwhile swept the wide, brown, undulating sea, seeking in the hollows and the coppices for any sign of motion. But the plain was as empty of life as the gray sky.

Rina rejoined him. "They break up so we can't see them so good," she said in her indifferent way. "Seven horse go by the edge of the coulée, southwest. Five horse go west. Two horse go northwest. Bam-by I t'ink they come together."

"What horse was *she* on?" Garth demanded.

"Nick Grylls's big roan," she answered. "They mak' a bag for her to sit in. She sit one side; Mary Co-que-wasa sit the other."

"Find the roan's tracks," ordered Garth.

Rina shook her head. "I never follow that horse," she said.

"Find the heaviest tracks then!"

She obediently wheeled her horse; and searched the turf again; riding around them in wide fanlike sweeps, while Garth waited with a deadly patience. At last she struck off to the northwest, calling to them, and Garth and Charley spurred

after.

"'Erbe't, Mary and her, go this way," she said briefly, as they came up. "Nick Grylls take six horse west, and Xavier take four by coulée."

"If we can overtake her before the others come up!" muttered Garth.

Rina, looking at their horses, shrugged significantly.

For half an hour they loped over the prairie without speech. A chill, damp wind stung their faces. The immense and empty plain with its cold shadows wore an ominous look under the lowering sky; a look that clutched at the breast.

"I t'ink it snow bam-by," Rina had said.

It would need only snow to complete their difficulties. Garth ground his teeth; and urged his horse afresh up every little rise, eagerly searching the expanse ahead from the top. A glance at last at the stretched nostrils and wet flanks of their mounts told him plainly such a pace would be slowest in the end. Hardest of all to bear was the necessity of going slowly.

"What do you know of their plans?" he demanded of Rina.

She shook her head. "They not tell me moch," she said. "They t'ink I too friendly for you!"

Little by little as they rode, the story was

drawn painfully out. "Soon as Charley come to you, they get ready right away," said Rina. "They catch all horses, and keep them up coulée, and pack everyt'ing. Mary Co-que-wasa, her go down and watch your house all the time, for good chance to tak' *her*. When you go out she mak' little fire under the bank for signal; and Nick Grylls and 'Erbe't and Xavier, them all go down. They not tak' me."

Garth cursed himself to think how he had played directly into their hands.

"I wait, and bam-by they bring her back," continued Rina in her toneless voice. "She ver' quiet. She mak' no cry. By the fire I see her face. It is the face of a dead woman."

A groan was forced between Garth's clenched teeth. "Did they hurt her?" he demanded, waiting for the answer like a condemned man waits for the final stroke.

But Rina shook her head. "Nick Grylls, him tak' off his hat, polite," she said. "'Erbe't not say anyt'ing to her."

He breathed again. "Did they refuse to take you along?" he asked.

The stolid brown face was twisted with pain again. She lowered her head, and clung to the horn of her saddle. "No," she said very low. "They 'fraid to leave me be'ind. But they don' want me. And I want to die when I see 'Erbe't with *her*. They all

glad when t'ink I to die!"

Garth forbore to question her further.

His impatience could scarcely brook the necessary pause to let the horses feed at noon. It was a camp of wretchedness; none of the three riders thought of eating. All the while the horses cropped, Garth strode ceaselessly up and down, biting his lips; while the white-faced boy, who had not spoken all morning, sat holding his bursting head between his hands; and Rina, crouching apart, gazed over the prairie with unseeing eyes.

Garth had it ever in mind to save the horses, but his impatience was incontrollable; he made them start too soon; and throughout the afternoon he urged them more than he knew. The animals failed visibly, hour by hour. It was more than three hours before they came upon the site of the noon camp of those ahead, showing that they were steadily losing in the chase.

To be obliged to stop again two hours short of darkness was a crushing disappointment to Garth; but the horses could go no farther. He could never have told how he curbed his impatience throughout that age-long night. He did not sleep: but an excess of suffering is in the end its own merciful opiate; and he was not always fully conscious.

With the morning a fresh blow awaited

them. Daylight revealed Garth's mount lying dead of exhaustion fifty yards from camp. In a wide circle on the neighbouring heights, the coyotes were squatting on their haunches, waiting for the sure feast. It was colder than the day before; and the clouds hung thicker and lower. The three of them approached the dead animal, and looked down upon it stolidly.

Garth set his teeth, and laughed his harsh note. "I will walk," he said shortly. "I can keep going while you are spelling the horses."

Charley, for the first time, questioned a decision of his leader. "We can't spare an hour!" he said with a dull decisiveness, in which there was nothing boyish. "You have got to keep on ahead. Besides, you can't follow the tracks as well as I can, you would lose yourself. I will walk."

Of the two desperate expedients it was clearly the better; and Garth instantly acquiesced. Possessed by a master idea, he was incapable of feeling any great compunctions at the idea of the injured boy setting forth on the prairie alone—that would come later. At present he stood equally ready to sacrifice Charley, or himself, or all three of them together, if it would save Natalie.

The boy doggedly busied himself making a bundle of his blankets, and food enough to last him three days. The rest of his pack

was added to the complaining backs of the other two horses.

Garth did not neglect to consider what he could do to ensure the boy's safety. "Better return to the shack," he urged. "You can do it in two marches. There's plenty of grub there."

But Charley flatly refused.

"Very well," said Garth. "I'll leave a note for you every time we stop, telling you what time we passed. If you don't overtake us to-night or to-morrow, I'll leave more grub for you. If we don't catch them in a day or so," he added with a look at the remaining horses, "we'll all be in the same boat again."

It was a grim, brusque leave-taking. The boy averted his head as they left him, to hide the look of despair in his eyes. He knew what the lowering, wintry clouds portended on the prairie; and in his heart it was a final farewell that he bade them. But he kept his chin up, and strode manfully after.

Garth did not suspect what was passing in his mind; the city man had never seen a snowstorm on the prairie. Topping every rise, he looked back, and waved his hat at the plodding figure, slightly bent under the weight of his pack.

"He's tough! He'll come through all right!" he said to Rina more than once—perhaps

because he needed secretly to reassure himself.

Rina, preoccupied with her own heavy thoughts, did not seem to care either way.

About ten o'clock they descended into a considerable coulée whose stony bed still contained some standing pools. Here, by the water, Grylls's party had encamped for the night; and the ashes of their fire were still warm. From the extent of the trampling in the mud, it was clear the whole party had made a rendezvous here; and beyond the coulée, even Garth had no difficulty in following the trail of the fourteen horses over the turf. He rode ahead now; consulting his compass, he saw that the way always led due northwest.

Some time later his eye was attracted by a splash of white in the grass. Throwing himself off his horse, he pounced upon it. It was a plain little square of linen; and in the border was printed in small neat characters "N. Bland." The find nearly unmanned him; he fancied the scrap of linen was still damp with her tears; and the old madness of desperation surged over him again. He forced his weary horse into a gallop. Rina indifferently followed.

Pretty soon the snow began to fall in large, wet flakes, drifting down as idly and erratically as the opening notes of one who dreams at the piano—large flakes falling direct to the ground and lingering

there like measured notes; and little white coveys suddenly eddying hither and thither, like aimless runs up and down the keyboard.

Rina lifted her brown face to the darkening sky. "We better go back to the coulée," she called after Garth.

He frowned. "Nonsense!" he cried irritably. "A flurry of snow can't hurt anybody! It'll turn into rain directly!"

She shrugged, and said no more.

The mute symphony of the snow was played imperceptibly accelerando. The flakes became smaller, and thicker, and dryer; and each gust of wind was a hint steadier and stronger than the last. Their radius of view was little by little restricted: the distant hills faded out of sight, and the white dome closed over and around them, until at last they seemed to be traversing a little island of firm ground, with edges crumbling into a misty void. Presently the ground, too, was overlaid with white; earth and sky commingled indistinguishably; and all that held them to earth was the quadruple line of black hoof-marks extending a little way behind. The horses sulked and hung their heads.

They came to another and a shallower coulée, which seemed to take a northeasterly direction across the prairie; whereas all the watercourses they had crossed hitherto tended to the southeast.

Garth, on the watch for any such evidences, suspected they had crossed a height of land. On the other side of this coulée he found he could no longer trace the passage of the preceding cavalcade under the thickening snow. He impatiently called on Rina; but she merely shrugged, refusing to look.

"No can follow in the snow!" she said contemptuously.

At every hint of stoppage, Garth's blood surged dangerously upward. He pressed his knuckles against his temples, and strove to think. The two horses, instinctively drawing close together, turned their tails to the driving flakes. Rina sat hunched in her saddle, as indifferent as a squat, clay image.

"I will ride on," he said thickly.

She gave no sign.

He consulted his compass. "We have ridden due northwest all the way," he said. "Where are they heading for?"

"Death River, I guess," she answered, pointing. "The crossing is northwest."

"How far?" he demanded.

"Two days' journey, maybe seventy-five miles."

"You wait for the boy in the shelter of the poplar bluff across the coulée," he said. "When the snow stops, follow on as well

as you can."

"Charley not come any more," said Rina in a tone of quiet fatalism. "When snow hide our track, he walk round and round. Bam-by he fall down, and not get up. He die. He know that."

Garth, ready to push into the storm, reined up again. Her sureness chilled his impatient hurry; and the oft-told tragedies of prairie snowstorms recurred to him.

"Die in the snow!" he repeated dully, hanging in agonizing indecision between the two images; Natalie ahead, and the solitary boy plodding behind. On the one hand he thought: "The storm has held them up, somewhere just ahead! It is my only chance of overtaking them!" and then he turned his horse's head north. But the other thought would not down. "The kid knew it meant death to walk; and he chose it!" Garth finally led the way back over the coulée.

Rina had no difficulty making herself comfortable among the young poplar trees. She improvised a shelter out of a blanket stretched over two inclined saplings; and in front of it she built a fire. Garth meanwhile changed to the fresher horse, and started back over their own dimming trail.

"You never find him now," Rina said hopelessly, as he left her.

Garth merely set his jaw.

His watch told him it was past eleven. He calculated they had covered five miles between the two coulées, and that it would be about twenty-five miles all told back to their own camping-place. Supposing the boy to have averaged three miles an hour, he would now be some twelve miles away, and if he kept walking, Garth, at his present pace, should come upon him in an hour and a half's riding.

The marks of their previous passage were soon completely obliterated; and thereafter Garth rode compass in hand. With the wind behind, his horse showed a better stomach for travelling; and he made the first coulée in something under an hour. Here a little search revealed the half-burned logs of Grylls's fire under the snow; and this put him directly in the path again. He stood up the logs, to make a better mark against his return.

He began to keep a sharp lookout for the boy, frequently shouting his name. His voice, muffled by the thickly falling flakes, had an odd, deadened ring in his own ears; and he doubted if he could be heard very far. When he considered the vast width of the prairie, and the extreme improbability of two figures, shaping opposite courses, meeting point-blank in the middle of it, he was ready to despair of finding the boy. It maddened him to think how close they might pass, without

either being aware.

Later, he adopted another expedient. Every fifteen minutes he turned his horse at right angles to his course, and galloping far to the right and left searched the snow for human tracks; then, picking up his trail where he left it, he would push a little farther ahead. In this way he could sweep a path about a mile wide on the prairie.

But the hours passed, and the snow deepened, and there was neither sight nor sound of the boy. Garth was not sparing of his bitter self-reproaches then, for having abandoned him. It seemed to poor Garth in his hopelessness, as if his whole course through the country had been marked by a series of hideous blunders.

Less than three hours of daylight now remained to him, and he was all of ten miles from his own base. He dared not push farther away, for, little as he regarded himself, he could take no risks while Natalie's fate still hung in the balance. But before giving up, he determined to make one last sortie back and forth across the prairie. Far to the right, just as hope was expiring, he saw, crossing the white expanse, a crooked, double row of slight depressions, like little moulds, slowly filling with powdery snow.

Flinging himself off his horse, with a beating heart, he hastily scooped out the snow. A man's footprint was clearly

revealed. With a shout, he mounted again and jerked his horse's head around. The weary animal balked flatly at facing the storm, but Garth, beside himself, lashed him until he plunged into it. The tracks momentarily grew plainer. While they had strayed far to the left of his own course, he wondered to see that they still held the right direction in the main.

He redoubled his shouting. At last a muffled, indistinguishable sound answered him from ahead; and presently out of the wild whirl of flakes, a spectral figure was slowly resolved—as poignant a symbol of humanity as the last man on earth.

"Charley! Charley!" shouted Garth.

The figure turned uncertainly. Under the snow-laden lashes the eyes were vague.

Garth slipped out of the saddle; and, throwing his arm about the boy's shoulders, caught him to his breast. "Thank God! I was in time!" he cried in a great voice.

"It's really you!" the boy murmured. "I thought I was hearing things."

Garth clapped him between the shoulders. "Buck up, my hearty!" he cried. "It's all right now!"

"Have you got Natalie?" the boy said quickly.

Garth sadly shook his head.

"You shouldn't have come back then," he said dully. "I didn't expect it!"

Garth hugged him anew. "Dear lad!" he cried with a break in his voice. "I couldn't let you die in the snow!"

The kindness brought fuller consciousness back to the boy's eyes. He clung to Garth then; and lowered his head; and whimpered a little. After all he was only seventeen.

Garth hoisted him to the saddle; and headed into the storm again. The horse balked continually, sorely trying his patience. Their progress was very slow. Garth sought to keep Charley up with cheerful speech.

"Bully for you to keep going!" he cried.

"It was because—Natalie might need me," the boy's voice trailed.

"And right on the course!" Garth sang. "How did you keep it?"

"When the snow hid your tracks—I remembered—to keep the wind on my right cheek," he murmured.

That was the last Garth could get out of him. He was presently alarmed to find the boy growing increasingly numb and drowsy; even he knew what this portended in the North. He pulled him out of the saddle; and made him walk; supporting him with one arm, while with

the other he led the horse. The animal took advantage of his partial helplessness, to plant his legs and pull back anew. If there was ever an excuse for anger against a dumb beast, surely hard-pressed Garth had it then. The horse was crazed with exhaustion, and terror of the storm; and tugs and kicks were of no avail. Garth could not bring in both boy and horse by main strength; and in the end, with hearty curses, he was obliged to abandon the beast to his fate.

Garth, pulling his hat over his eyes, and drawing the boy's arm across his shoulders, doggedly pushed into the storm. He thus half supported, half dragged his companion, who was, nevertheless, compelled to use his own legs. Charley never spoke except now and then to beg drowsily to be let alone. In Garth's flask was about a gill of precious stimulant, and, when the boy's legs failed him, he doled it out in sips.

They had at least nine miles to cover—and only two hours of daylight left. Try as he would to banish it, the sense of nine miles' distance would roll itself interminably out before Garth's mind's eye. Nine miles into two hours—the sum had no answer. Afterward night and storm on the empty prairie—what was the use? But when he reached this point, he would grit his teeth and take a fresh hold of the boy. If he had any other defined thought besides this painful round, it was to thank God that he

was strong; he needed every ounce of it now.

Instead of attempting to pick up his own trail—surely obscured by now in the snow—he shaped his course northwest, trusting to strike the coulée at its nearest point, and travel down until he hit the mark he had set up. It was a little longer so; but the result justified it, for there was some shelter in the coulée; and working down the bottom, they could not miss the mark.

It was half-past four by Garth's watch when they laboriously climbed up the other side; and set their course by compass again for Rina's camp. It grew colder hourly; and the snowflakes became as hard and sharp as grains of coarse powder. Charley was kept going automatically by frequent small doses of the spirit from the flask. Garth dared not spare any of it for himself. It soon began to grow dark; and long before Garth could hope they had nearly covered the distance between the two coulées, it became totally dark; and he could no longer read the face of his compass. Fortunately the wind held steady from the north; he struggled ahead, keeping it on his right cheek as Charley had done before him.

Garth's head became confused; he was no longer sensible of the passage of time. Only his will kept his legs at their work. Drowsiness crept over him; and with it a growing sense of the uselessness of

struggling further. He fought it for a while, but with subsiding energy. His knees began to weaken under him; he sank down. With a desperate effort, he struggled up again; and won another painful hundred yards. He was falling again—and this time he did not care—when suddenly the ground fell away from under his feet, he pitched forward, and he and the boy rolled down a steep declivity together.

Garth instantly knew they had reached the second coulée; and the thought cleared his fogged senses like the draught from his flask which he could not spare himself. He poured the last drops between Charley's numb lips; and turned to the right over the stony bed of the watercourse. He remembered Charley had strayed far to the left of his true course when guiding himself by the wind; and he had also observed in himself a tendency to swerve to that side, when working by compass. So he was sure they were somewhere above the poplar bluff—how far he dared not guess.

He was right. Utterly worn out by a seeming interminable struggle through the drifts in the bottom of the coulée, at last a misty, pinkish aura blushed in the snowy night. It was Rina's fire—warmth and shelter! and before it a little animal was roasting on a spit. Garth's senses slipped away in rapture at the smell it sent forth.

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XXIII

THE SOLITARY PURSUER

Sometime during the course of the night the snow ceased to fall; and morning broke clear and cold. Garth had turned in, intending to rise at four; but Nature exacted her due, and it was seven before he awoke. The sky was a bowl of palest, fleckless azure; the sun shone gloriously on the field of snow; and the air stung the nostrils like the heady fumes of wine. But he was in no temper to take any delight in morning beauties; he ached in every bone and muscle as if he had been beaten with a club; and at the sight of the mounting sun, he bitterly reproached himself—and Rina, for the lost hours.

As for Charley, a glance at the boy showed that he was quite incapable of further travelling for the present. He suffered as much from the blow on the head as from the exposure in the snow. His mind was hopelessly confused and wandering. In any case they had but a single horse left; and only the one course of action was open to Garth. He instructed Rina to remain where she was and care for the boy, while he pushed ahead.

Even Rina betrayed some surprise. "What you do?" she said. "Three men to shoot, and Mary to watch *her*. You got no chance!"

"I'll find a way!" he said desperately. "This Death River, tell me about it!"

Rina pointed northwest. "Big river, moch water," she said. "Come from mountains. Ver' moch high falls; mak' lak thunder! Above falls, ver' rough rapids, no can cross. Below falls, deep black hole; breeds say bad spirits go there. Only one place to cross, half-mile below falls."

Garth caught the horse, who had fed himself as best he could by pawing the snow off the grass, and packed his blankets and a supply of food, including what was left of the little carcass Rina roasted. He learned it was a lynx; but the flesh was sweet, and he was too thankful for fresh meat to quarrel with the nature of it. He left Rina and Charley with a better will, knowing she could doubtless get others, as she had snared the first.

There was about ten inches of snow on the flat, with deep encumbering drifts in the hollows; and his advance was very slow. The ill-nourished horse wearied immediately; and any pace beyond a walk was out of the question. Had Garth only possessed snow-shoes he could have made much better time on foot. The vast expanse was as empty as a clean sheet of paper; nevertheless, he saw the prairie was not without its busy population, as evidenced by the number of tracks of little furry paws that had crossed his course already since the snow finished falling.

At noon, having made about eleven miles (he figured), he came to the brink of a coulée wider and deeper than any they had crossed hitherto; and which contained a stream in the bottom, running blackly around snow-capped stones. As he refreshed himself, and allowed his horse to drink, he reflected that Grylls would have reached this stream the day before about the time the snow commenced; and that it was likely the outfit had camped on its bank until the storm passed. He determined to search up and down before pushing ahead.

Sure enough, no more than two hundred yards down-stream he began to come upon the tracks of horses and saw the bare patches they had pawed to reach the grass; and a little farther he ran plump upon the fresh remains of the camp; two bare spots where tents had been pitched, the ashes of a fire, and innumerable tracks of men and horses—the whole startlingly conspicuous in the sweep of unbroken snow.

Garth's heart swelled with rage and mortification to think what a little distance had separated them during the night; and how by rising only three hours earlier, he might perhaps have caught them. But presently cooler counsels came to his aid; and when he considered the well-beaten track that led over the hill beyond, he was thankful for so much luck. He knew that at least until more snow

should fall, they could never shake him off again; and he rode after with a renewed courage. His horse, too, freed of the entangling drifts, and sensing the other horses ahead, seemed to overcome his weakness for a while; and loped over the beaten trail with a good will.

Beyond this coulée the character of the country began to change. Crossing a height, Garth saw a range of gleaming mountains off to the west at no great distance; his course was heading him obliquely into the foothills. The prairie gradually broke up; the mounds became hills; and the hollows deepened into valleys. With every mile, almost, the hills became higher and more conical; outcroppings of rock began to appear; and the little streams ran in gorges now, instead of coulées.

In the rougher country the horse's access of courage soon failed. His wind was gone, he sobbed for breath; and Garth was presently reduced to the necessity of leading him up every incline. On a wide flat between two ranges, he mounted after a long walk, and urged him into a run over this easy piece. The slack-twisted animal was not equal to the effort; halfway across, his heart broke; and he collapsed in a heap, ploughing up the snow, and flinging his rider over his head. When Garth returned to him, he was stone dead. In the midst of his chagrin the man could spare a glance of pity for the

shaggy, misshapen beast. One of the vulgar equine tribe, at his best neither beautiful nor courageous, he had nevertheless given his life to the journey.

Beside the stony watercourse that traversed this little plain, he made a cache of saddle, bridle and what food he could not carry on his back. Over the spot he piled a cairn of stones to mark it, and protect the little store from marauding animals. In addition to blankets, rifle and ammunition, he carried with him food sufficient for about five days. In an hour he was on his way again.

During the rest of the day, and the following day, the character of the country changed only in degree. The trail never carried him directly into the mountains, but skirted among the foothills, which raised strange, abrupt, detached cones on either hand—steep, naked, unreasonable shapes of earth, like nightmare forms. Each day Garth plodded to the limit of his strength, reckless of what lay before him, regarding only the beaten trail which led the way. From various signs it was clear those ahead ever gained on him; but he kept himself up with the thought that they must sooner or later make an extended stop to recuperate their horses. Each night he made his tea with snow-water; and, rolling up in his blankets beside the fire, slept under the stars; and at dawn he was astir again. Hard work was his beneficent sedative.

On the second night as he lay down he heard, or fancied he heard in the stillness, the breath of a far-off, heavy sound. He ascribed it to the roar of the great falls Rina had told him of; and the thought lent new vigour to his limbs next morning. He had another reason to hurry his steps; for each day had waxed a little warmer; and to-day the snow melted fast, threatening at last to obliterate the track he followed.

In the afternoon the going became harder, for the mountains reached down long spurs athwart his path, over which he had to toil. Like the conical hills they were bare of all timber; only the valleys and gulches were wooded. On the first of these ascents, burdened as he was, over-exertion and insufficient sleep began to tell on Garth; and he became conscious, for the first, of a terrible weariness in his back. He crushed it down; he could *not* fail; he *had* to keep on. But the next ascent was harder still; and the shape of fear grew in his breast.

The third long climb was nearly his finish. He would not allow himself to pause on the way up, though his heart knocked sickeningly against his ribs, while flames danced in front of his eyes, and there was a roaring in his ears. Gaining the summit at last, he flung himself down, afraid for the moment to look at the obstacles beyond. As he slowly recovered, a real booming disassociated itself from the noises in his head; and he eagerly raised

his head. His eyes swept over a far and wide expanse of snow, a dish-like plateau among the hills. His heart leaped; for through the centre of the plateau ran a black fissure, like a crack in the dish; and off to the left a fleecy cloud rose lazily from the gorge, blushing pinkly in the light of the setting sun. This must mark the falls; the Death River lay at his feet.

The excitement of this discovery was immediately superseded by a far greater. In a direct line with him, on the plain beyond the gorge, he presently distinguished a few scattering, black objects like insects on the snow—but insects of the shape of horses. From the gorge itself, perfectly distinct in the crystalline air, rose a thin, blue column of smoke!

The haggard furrows in Garth's face smoothed out; his weary eyes shot forth a quiet glint; and he slowly and grimly smiled. He arose; and instinctively unslinging his gun, examined the mechanism. A goodly warmth diffused itself throughout his veins; and he felt strong again. The end of his journey was in sight.

Darkness had fallen before he reached the lip of the canyon. With bated breath he crawled to the edge and looked over—there was a chance they had escaped him again—but in the bottom of the pit, on the other side of the river, a fire was flickering

redly in the darkness; and there was a hint of figures sitting around it. His heart beat strongly at the reassuring sight.

The tracks in the snow led him to the top of the path, which descended into the gorge. This path was steep, narrow, tortuous and slippery; and he knew not what conditions awaited him at the bottom. Prudence counselled him to wait for daylight to reconnoitre; but it was not possible to contain his impatience the night through, with Natalie so near, and he not knowing if she was safe. He started down instantly, feeling his way foot by foot; and ever careful to dislodge no stone that might betray him. Within the gorge the boom of the falls was largely deadened by a bend in the walls above; and lighter sounds became audible: the lapping of the river on the stones; and, as he came nearer, someone breaking sticks for the fire below.

Between him and the fire rolled the river with a deep, swift current. There was no more than a scant fifty yards between wall and wall of the gorge at the bottom. Coming still closer, he saw by the light of the fire that their camp was pitched on a triangle of flat ground, formed where a steep watercourse had made a perpendicular fissure in the opposite wall of the gorge. On one side of the fire was pitched a small "outside" tent—the same tent Garth had watched so long when it stood outside Mabyn's shack—and on the

other side stood a tepee. A small raft, half drawn out of the water, explained their means of crossing the river.

The descending path finally landed Garth on a precipitous incline of broken rock at the water's edge; and there, across the stream, so close he could have tossed a pebble into their midst, sat those he had tracked so far, all unsuspicious of his nearness. They were having their evening meal. Natalie was among them, facing him, the firelight strong on her. Her face was set and sad—but still unhumbled; and from this and the obsequious poise of Grylls's head, when he turned to her, Garth knew she was so far safe from him. His heart breathed a still hymn of thankfulness.

Grylls sat on the other side of the fire, with his back against a rock. He still wore the bewrinkled suit of store clothes which had become so hateful in Garth's sight; and the broad-brimmed hat was set at a rakish angle. He was in a jovial humour, judging from the thick unction of his speech; doubtless, though he seldom looked at her, in his own way he was seeking to charm his cold and silent prisoner.

Mabyn's back was turned to Garth; his attitude was furtive; and apparently he spoke little. Garth did not trouble about him; for he knew instinctively that so long as the stronger man was by, Natalie stood

in no danger from Mabyn. Mary Co-que-wasa, serving the food, hovered behind the fire, which threw a strange, exaggerated shadow of her hag-like form on the cliff. Nearer Garth, at a little distance from the others, Xavier sat on the ground, busy with his cup and plate.

Garth watched Natalie with a swelling heart. How brave she was! how noble and befitting the air with which she faced her terrible situation! The proud sadness of her face was infinitely more affecting than any extreme of distress could have been. Garth bled inwardly, to think of the torments of mind she must have endured. He yearned mightily to let her know he was near. He crouched at the edge of the water, willing a message of cheer to her; and heartened himself with the assurance that she could not but feel it.

She ate little; and, presently arising, disappeared within the tent. Grylls drew out the inevitable cigars, and, carelessly tossing one to Mabyn, lit his own. Mary went about collecting the dishes. Xavier carried his plate to the river side to wash it. Garth handled his rifle with fingers itching for the trigger. There were the four of them, all unconscious, delivered into his hands, it seemed.

But he spared them for a while. It was not that he shrank from shedding blood now; taking their lives troubled him no more than killing so much vermin. But, close as

they were, he could not be sure of nailing them all; a dive outside the firelight, and they were safe. And Natalie was in their hands; and he had no way of crossing the river. He must rescue her first.

Mary went into the tent, which she apparently shared with Natalie; and presently reappeared with a dishtowel. Lifting a pail of hot water from the fire, she prepared to wash the dishes. The fire was dying down, and gathering an armful of brush, she heaped it on to make a light.

Too late Garth appreciated the significance of this act. He turned to escape up the path again; and in his hurry dislodged a heavy stone, which rolled into the water with a splash. He faced about with his rifle ready. Only Xavier, at the water's edge, heard the sound, and looked up. At the same instant the fire sprang into a blaze, filling the canyon with light; and plainly revealing Garth and his shadow behind him on the rock. The breed sprang to his feet with a cry of warning. It was the last sound, save one, that he ever made. The sharp, light bark of Garth's rifle reverberated in the gorge; the breed spun around with a throaty, quenched cry, toppled over backward into deep water, and was swept away.

Before Garth could aim again, Mary Co-que-wasa seized her pail of water, and flung it hissing on the fire. Absolute darkness filled the canyon.

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XXIV

IN DEATH CANYON

Garth crouched at the water's edge, striving to pierce the murk with his eyes; but the blackness was like a wall. By and by the outlying embers of the fire began to glow faintly; but there was another splash, and every spark was quenched. Bending his head, he strained his ears. For a long time there was no sound from across the river; then little by little, and softly, he heard them set to work like mice behind a wainscot. There was a singular, measured falling of stones, which at first he could not interpret; then it suddenly occurred to him they were building a barricade across their little terrace; and he took heart; for the act was opposed to any design of immediate flight. But then, he thought, Mary, behind the wall, could easily hold the crossing by daylight, while the two men escaped with Natalie. Somehow, he must get across first.

He searched noiselessly among the stones above the water line for driftwood; and succeeded in picking up a stick here and a branch there. Four of the stouter pieces he tied in a square with the rope that bound

his pack; and upon this frame he piled a crib of sticks, of sufficient buoyancy to float his clothes, his pack and his gun. He stripped to the skin and waded cautiously into the water. It was of an icy coldness that bit like a great burn, and forced the breath out of his lungs like a squeezed bellows. But he set his jaws and struck out, towing his little raft with the end of the rope between his teeth.

He headed straight across, leaving it to the current to carry him safely below the camp. Ordinarily, fifty strokes would have carried him over, but the terrible cold congealed the very sap of his body; and the clumsy little raft offered as much resistance as a log. He could not tell how far he was carried down. Reaching the other side at last, he could scarcely crawl out on the stones. He was too stiff to attempt to draw on his clothes; the best he could do was to roll in his blankets, and writhe to restore the circulation.

His limbs were rigid; his feet and hands wholly numb—but the will rules even bodily exhaustion. He would not tolerate the thought of weakness; he *would* get warm; and his reluctant blood was forced at last to resume its course through his veins. Warmth returned with excruciating pain. He conceded his worn body a little rest—for he knew they could not get their horses before morning—but in an hour, dressed, and with his pack and his gun on his back, he was crawling back toward

Grylls's camp.

This shore of the river, like the other, was formed of fragments and masses of rock, which had fallen from the cliffs above. He made his way with infinite caution, giving heed to every foothold, and feeling before him with his hands. Fortunately there was little snow to obstruct him; for what had descended into the gorge was lodged in the crevices of the stones. He crawled over heaps of rubble, digging his toes in, to keep from sliding into the water; and there were great hundred-ton boulders, over which he dragged himself on his stomach. Above the canyon there were no stars visible; and below, it was wrapped in darkness, thick, velvety, palpable as lamp-black.

After measuring the inches of a long and painful journey over the stones, he sensed at last that he was drawing near the camp again. He redoubled his caution, hugging close to the wall of rock. Presently it fell away to the right; and before him he distinguished a faint whitish blur that he knew for the tepee. He stretched himself out to listen. Under all was the deadened boom of the falls; below him an indefinable murmur arose from the smooth river, and an occasional eddy slapped the stones; in front he was vaguely conscious of the three persons moving to and fro, and he heard the dull chink of each stone, as it ground its edges on the pile. They had relaxed their caution

somewhat; once or twice a stone, rolling out of place, plumped into the water. They were at work at the other end of their barricade from Garth.

He considered what he should do. His brain was working very clearly—dragging his exhausted body along after, as it were; for excitement and over-exertion had produced a curious feeling of detachment from it. As he waited there, the work on the barricade ceased; and a whispered consultation was held. If he could only hear! Afterward two figures approached the tepee and entered. Instantly Garth let himself down over the rocks behind, and snaking his body through the bit of herbage on the flat, applied his ear to the bottom of the canvas.

He heard Mabyn's voice ask querulously: "What was it you said to her?"

"Told her to sit on top of the wall, and watch," Grylls carelessly answered. "They can't cross the river until morning, but we're not taking any chances, just the same. She's to watch, too, that the lady doesn't try to sneak the raft across to her friends."

"You're going to clear out in the morning?" Mabyn asked anxiously.

"Not on your life!" the other coolly returned. "We got shelter and good water here, the horses are safe above; and we command the only crossing of the river.

We'll sit right here until their grub runs out. They can't have brought much!"

"The police may hear," Mabyn murmured.

"Let 'em come and welcome," said Grylls. "They know me! As for you, I guess a man can take a journey with his lawful wife, can't he?"

There was a pause. A match was struck. Garth guessed that Grylls was resuming his interrupted smoke.

"Seems to me we hold pretty much all the trumps," he went on complacently. "My idea is, Pevensey's all alone over there. That was a pretty smart rap on the nut, the boy got. But even if there's two of them, what can they do? We've got cover, and they've got to show themselves; it's a funny thing if we can't pot them easy. We got a right to; they killed our man first."

"Hadn't I better ride on with her to the Slavi Indians?" Mabyn suggested in a tone that he laboured to make sound off-hand.

Grylls chuckled fatly. "What! And deprive me of the pleasure of her company!" he said mockingly. "I guess not!"

Mabyn was silent. Garth dimly apprehended what a torment of impotent fear and rage the creature must be enduring. He had delivered himself hand and foot into Grylls's power; and Grylls no longer even kept up a pretense of hiding his own designs on Natalie.

"Better turn in," Grylls said indifferently. "No need for you to watch to-night. I'll have a snooze myself, and go out and relieve Mary before dawn."

Garth had heard enough; they were all placed for him; and his way was clear. He softly drew himself around the further side of the tepee, pausing long between every move, to listen. Both their lives depended on his making no sound now; every faculty he possessed was bent on it; he took half an hour to make thirty feet. He circled the inside edge of the little triangle of flat ground, keeping in the shadow of the piled rocks. Crossing the little stream that issued over the flat was hardest; but he managed it; patiently studying each move in advance. Finally he approached the tent. Beyond, he fancied he could distinguish the vague outline of the wall running across; and upon it a huddled figure, a mere hint of substance against the pit of darkness behind.

He felt his way around the tent. He found the canvas of the back wall was made in one piece. With shaking fingers, he drew his knife out of its sheath; and inserting the point in the centre of the stuff, softly drew it back and forth, a stroke at a time. His heart was beating like a steam drill; he swallowed his sobbing breath. Every instant he expected to hear Natalie scream from within.

He severed the last thread at last; and put

up his knife. He parted the flaps; and listened for sounds from within in an agony of indecision. He could not tell if she slept or was awake; he dared not so much as whisper her name; and if he touched her and she slept, how could she help but awake with a cry!

But she was not asleep; and she had all her wits about her. Close to his ear, a voice soft as a zephyr in the grass whispered his name. A trembling breath of relief escaped his lips; and instantly an arm was wreathed about his neck; and a soft cheek pressed against his rough one. He caught her to him; her slim frame quivered through and through. It was his own Natalie; the feel of her! the fragrance of her! Life holds but one such moment.

"I knew you'd come! I knew you'd come!" she breathed in his ear.

Her terrible agitation was the means of calming his own. He had to be cool for both. He pressed her close to him, stroking her hair.

"Brave, *brave* Natalie!" he whispered. "Not a sound, till we are clear!"

He gave her a moment to recover herself, letting his encircling arms speak the comfort and cheer he could not utter. Little by little the piteous trembling subsided and the rigid form relaxed.

"Ready, now?" he whispered.

She eagerly nodded.

"I lead the way," he breathed in her ear; "and you keep close at my heels. Take it easy. It must be hands and knees, and an inch at a time."

Natalie pressed his hand to her lips.

He crawled through the hole, and waited for her outside. She made no sound. He touched her reassuringly; and realized with a pang how she was handicapped, with one arm in a sling. They crept back around the foot of the piled rocks, dragging themselves with tense muscles, a foot at a time and waiting long between. By the touch of her hand on his foot he knew she followed close. Looking over his shoulder, he sensed the huddled figure still motionless on the wall.

He could not have told what gave the alarm. They had reached the rivulet, when suddenly Mary leaped off the wall with a cry that brought the two men tumbling out of the tepee.

Garth, springing to his feet, seized Natalie's hand, and pulled her after him.

"Come on!" he whispered cheerily. "We're safe now!"

They scrambled up over the stones of the watercourse, careless of the noise they made.

"What is it?" they heard Grylls shout

below.

A sentence in Cree explained.

"Watch the raft!" he shouted. "I'll bring her back!"

They heard him run heavily toward them. Hastily unslinging his gun, Garth sent a shot at random through the darkness. They heard the bullet spring off a stone. The steps ceased.

"By God! *he's* up there!" cried Grylls thickly. "Come back, Mabyn! We'll get 'em easy in the morning!"

There was no further sound of pursuit.

As they climbed, Garth searched from side to side, as well as he could in the darkness, for a suitable spot to make a stand. High above the level of the river, a huge cube of rock resting squarely in the bottom of the ravine, and forcing the stream to travel around it, offered what he wanted. One side of the boulder lay against a steep rocky wall; and in the angle was a secure niche for Natalie.

Her courage failed a little when she saw he meant to stop. "Not here! Not here!" she protested nervously. "We must put miles between us before morning!"

"The way home lies back across the river," Garth said gently.

"Then why did you come up here?" she said a little wildly. "They'll never let us

back!"

His heart ached for her, at the thought of what she must still go through. "Courage! for one more day, my Natalie!" he urged, drawing her to him. "We can't start without horses and food, and those I have to win for you!"

"You make me ashamed!" she whispered.

He heard no more whimpering.

Garth, appreciating the vital necessity of sleep, if he was to keep his wits about him next day, lay down in his blankets while Natalie kept watch. With the first tinge of gray overhead, she woke him, as he had bidden her.

"If we only had a good breakfast to begin on!" were his waking words; "and there's nothing but raw flour and water."

Natalie, in answer to this prayer, produced a flat package from her dress which proved to contain bread and meat. "I always kept something, in case I should be able to get away," she explained.

They ate, sitting quietly side by side in the darkness—they could even laugh a little together now—and they arose vastly refreshed.

Garth climbed the big rock to wait for daylight to reveal the strength and the weakness of the position he had chosen. The top of the rock formed a flat plane

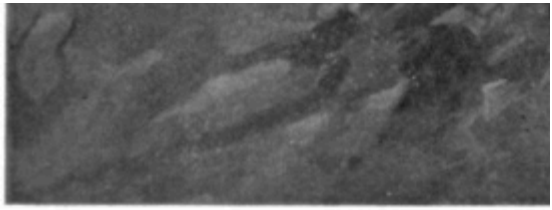
slightly inclined toward their rear; and, lying at full length upon it, he could shoot over the edge without exposing more than the top of his head. He lifted up a heavy stone or two; and stood them along the edge for further protection. Then he waited—waited for hours it seemed to him; looking and looking down the ravine until his eyes were fit to start out of his head; and he could see nothing; but lo! when he looked again the light was there!

On the whole he was satisfied. His rock commanded the entire ravine below; it was as steep as a pair of stairs. There was not a stick of herbage below; only a trough of heaped and broken rock masses. On either hand they were shut in by straight lead-coloured walls of rock; and at the bottom of the ravine, the forbidding, mist-gray wall of the main gorge cut off the view. In front and on the left they were amply protected; their right flank was the weak spot. Above them on this side, part of the wall of the ravine had given way some ages past; and a bit of the plain had sunk down. The hollow thus formed contained a grove of gaunt trees and underbrush. If their assailants, under cover of the rocks on the way, ever climbed to it, Garth and Natalie would be badly off indeed.

It was a grim figure that the first rays of light revealed sitting on the big rock. Garth had lost his hat long ago; and he was both unshaven and unshorn. He

crouched, hugging his knees, with his rifle across his thighs; and his sheepskin coat hung over his shoulders ready to fling off, when he needed to act. The flannel shirt beneath was in rags; and his moccasins, mere apologies for foot-coverings. But to Natalie, regarding the cool, bright shine of his eyes, as he smiled down on her, he was wholly beautiful. She was scarcely better off; her pale face was enframed in a sad wreck of a limp, stained felt hat; but she could smile too; and Garth had never found her lovelier in her bravery.





It was a grim figure that the first rays of li

The suspense was well-nigh intolerable—and so they fell to chaffing.

"If mother could only see us now!" said Garth with a grin.

"I feel like a white cat coming out of a coal-bin," said Natalie. "'What's the use!' she says, looking round at herself. 'The job is too big to tackle. If I was only a black cat it wouldn't show!'"

"You could walk right on as Liz, the girl bandit of the Rockies," said Garth.

"Don't you talk!" she retorted. "You look as if Liz had missed her cue, and you'd been through the sawmill!"

And then Garth saw a black sleeve sticking out from behind a rock in the ravine below; and he got down to business. A little sigh of relief escaped him at the sight of his enemies at last. He fired. The shot went wide.

Natalie sank back in her corner, deathly pale; and with a hand over her lips, to keep from crying out. Her part was harder than his.

He called down to her reassuringly. "All right! Only a try-out!"

Further down, a second figure showed briefly, scrambling up the right-hand side of the trough. Garth fired—a fraction of a second too late. He could scarcely credit such nimble agility in a figure so gross. It was Grylls. Thus two of them were accounted for. Searching for the third, he saw the black crown of a hat projecting above a stone on the other side of the ravine. This was an easy shot; he aimed and fired with a savage satisfaction. The hat disappeared; but again he knew, somehow, that his bullet had not found its mark.

At the same moment Grylls won a rock a yard higher up. He was not coming up the bottom of the ravine, but aiming obliquely up the side for the trees high above. Garth, grimly covering his shelter, saw him bob his head around; a bare, cropped, tousled head, like a hiding schoolboy's. Quick as he was with the trigger, Grylls was quicker. The bullet flattened itself harmlessly beyond.

As he shot there was a scramble across the ravine; and he saw the other figure had mounted. The hat, Mabyn's hat, again showed; and he took another shot at it. This time the bullet knocked it spinning off the rifle barrel which upheld it; and in a flash Garth understood how neatly they were fooling him. Each in turn drew his fire, while the other made an advance. He resolved to shoot no more.

Meanwhile the first one he had glimpsed, which must be Mary, had not moved from the middle of the ravine. Some of the stones were moved, and he guessed she had made a permanent shelter there. There was a shot from below, and the bullet spattered itself on the heavy base of rock. Holding his hand, Garth awaited a second shot. He saw a tiny white puff at last, and marked the aperture whence it issued. The bullet hurtled whiningly overhead. Steadying his gun on the edge of the rock, he took careful aim—but the other spoke first. It was a marvellous shot —or a chance one. The bullet splintered the edge of the stone protecting Garth's head, and sang off. A jagged sliver of stone ploughed across the back of his extended hand. He exclaimed as in casual surprise, and his gun exploded harmlessly in the air. He looked at his hand stupidly as at an alien member; then suddenly he understood; and whipping out his handkerchief, bound up the wound, knotting the linen with teeth and fingers.

Up to this moment Garth had been playing a dispassionate game; but he returned to his loophole conscious of a great surge of cold rage against those below. He yearned to get even; but he could wait for it. Mabyn exposed his hat tantalizingly; Grylls shot out a foot, or bobbed up his head—but Garth saved his bullets. He would not even try to pierce the sharpshooters' defenses again. An occasional shot came from there; but

never such another as the last.

Finally Grylls changed his tactics. From behind his rock he taunted Garth vilely. The walls of the ravine reverberated horridly with the sound of the sudden human voice.

But Garth still bided his time; merely adding the insult of the words to Natalie's ears, to the score of his rage.

Natalie in the meantime, thankful to have something to do, had been piling stones as heavy as she could lift, on the rock behind him. She had torn the sling from her arm; and was using the weaker member to steady the other.

Garth, fearful that Grylls might succeed in flanking them at last, ordered her to climb up behind him; and without turning his head, told her how to make a little parapet along the top of the rock on the exposed side.

Garth finally got his chance. A little stone rolled down from Mabyn's hiding-place; and he instantly trained his gun on the spot. Mabyn, miscalculating, or losing his head, suddenly scurried for the next rock. Garth had marked it. Mabyn gained it, but before he could pull his legs after him the rifle spoke. There was a scream of pain; and Mabyn's body, sliding from behind the rock, rolled and dropped heavily from stone to stone. A leg caught in a fissure and stayed him; he hung head downward,

writhing in hideous, theatrical postures of agony, and screaming like a woman. Garth, thinking of Natalie, longed to send a shot to still the noise; but his hand was held by his promise to Rina.

It was all over in a minute after that. Grylls, careless of the other's fate, scrambled up from stone to stone. Garth peppered his course with bullets; but the rocks were scattered so thickly, Grylls needed to expose himself for scarcely a second at a time. He gained the trees at last.

An instant of terrible suspense succeeded. Garth made Natalie lie close under the little wall she had been building. He crouched over her, himself fully exposed, searching the hillside with strained eyes. Suddenly he saw the bloated face not thirty yards away. Grylls had partly stepped from behind a tree and was deliberately taking aim. Garth sprang to his knees. The two guns spoke at once. Grylls pitched headfirst down the steep slope into view; and rolled down the bare rocks into the tiny stream.

"I've got him!" shouted Garth triumphantly.

Even as he spoke he toppled over sideways. Natalie clutched at him wildly; but his coat was pulled out of her grasp. He slid off the rock and dropped on the stones behind. In an instant she was at his side. He was already struggling to rise—

his teeth pressed into his lip until the blood oozed between.

"Only my left shoulder," he muttered. "I can still shoot. There's Mary, yet. Help me up."

Somehow, with her aid, he managed to pull himself back on the rock, one arm dangling useless. Through his loophole, he saw Mary toiling openly up the ravine. He showed himself. At the sight of him the old woman paused and held out her hands as if inviting him to shoot. She had left her gun. When he made no offer to fire, she quietly continued her climb. Garth watched her grimly.

Reaching Grylls's body, she unwound a woollen scarf from about her waist; and passing it under his shoulders, partly hoisted his great bulk on her back with an incredible effort; and started down again. Grylls was quite dead; his heels thudded limply from stone to stone.

Long before she reached the bottom, Garth lost interest in her progress. He had fainted.

Natalie, working to restore him, distracted, hopeless, crazed, suddenly heard a distant shout; and looking up distinguished a little cavalcade winding down the face of the great gorge. There was a red coat among them.

"Garth! We're saved! We're *saved*!" she

cried to his unhearing ears.

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XXV

EPILOGUE: SPOKEN BY CHARLEY

In the city of Winnipeg on a brilliant day toward the end of winter, a broad-shouldered, ruddy youth, with dancing blue eyes and a capacious smile, came running down a side street, and catching a certain fence-post at full speed, swung himself inside the gate with the dexterity of old practice; sprang up the steps and banged on the door.

It was opened questioningly by a little mouse of a woman, with great brown eyes, and gray strands mixing in her bright, brown hair.

The boy flung his arms around her like a bear. "Mother!" he cried breathlessly.

"Charley! My boy!" she gasped.

He picked her up bodily; and, kicking the door shut, carried her into the cheerful sitting room, where geraniums bloomed on the sunny window-sill, and a fire danced in the grate.

"I'm bigger than you are now!" he chuckled joyously. He put her in her chair; and waltzed about the room, touching the well-remembered objects. "By Jolly! the very same pictures, the good old sofa!" he sang. "Oh, it's good to be home!"

The mother held out her arms. "My boy! My boy!" was all she could say.

Dropping to his knees, he embraced her again. "You dear old lady," he cried. "What a trouble I always was! It's your turn to have a good time now!"

"It's enough to have you back," she murmured.

He gyrated about the room again. "Say, I feel as giddy as a puppy after a bath! Imagine trolley-cars and baby-carriages and show windows and silver knives and forks after two years in the North. Say, I've clean forgot how to eat stylish!"

"How long are you going to stay?" she murmured.

He came to a stand beside her. "I'm not going back," he said in a deeper tone. "It's a bully country and I had a whale of a time—but I belong here! I'm going to take care of you now, and bring up the kids. I'm a man now,"—his face changed comically—"Don't laugh!" he begged. "I used to say that all the time; but it's different now; you'll see! I've had experience!"

She held out her arms to him again. "Tell me, my son," she whispered.

He dropped to the floor beside her; and laid his head against her knee. There, in front of the fire, while the sun went down, and the early winter twilight gathered, he told her the story.

"When Garth rode away leaving me and Rina in the poplar bluff," he said—reaching that part in due course—"I didn't know much what was happening. But say, that Rina, she's an out-o'-sight nurse! She brought me around in great shape; and the second day afterward I was as peart as you please. That same day the fellows from the Crossing turned up; Jim Plaskett, the policeman, and three others. It was Jim made them come, soon as he heard the story. Jim's a peacherino! One of these lean, quiet chaps you can depend on; decent, too, clean-mouthed—Oh! Jim's looked up to, I can tell you!

"They wanted me to rest a while yet, till they came back. But they had plenty of spare horses, and Rina and I wouldn't stand for being left behind. We rode like sixty all next day, and camped only fifteen miles from Death River. We found the bones of Garth's horse on the way—picked clean; and the note he left every place he camped. You ought to have heard Jim Plaskett crack up Garth's pluck—and Jim knows!

"We reached the canyon about half-past

six in the morning. I'd heard of that place from the Indians. Say, it was a fearsome spot! a kind of crooked, gaping split in the prairie like the pictures in Dante's Inferno. The walls were as bare and hard and cold as black ice; and way down in the bottom there was a horrible jelly-like water swirling around without making any noise. Seems if you couldn't breathe good when you got into the place! Minded me of the receiving vault in the cemetery.

"There was a risky little path going down, and we kept right on. Across the river, there was a break in the wall where a creek came down a steep, wild-looking ravine. At the bottom of it we could see a tepee and a tent; but no people. Some said they saw a body in the ravine, but you couldn't rightly make out."

Charley paused and shuddered. "Say, it was horrible!" he whispered. "Glad I don't have dreams! When we got down near the water suddenly we saw old Mary Co-que-wasa come climbing over a heap of stones that was piled on the flat; and she was bent almost double, half lifting, half dragging a man by a rope under his arms. It was Nick Grylls. He looked dead.

"We shouted at her; and she looked up just once. I saw her face plain. It wasn't surprised or glad or anything—just stupid like a breed. She never stopped walking. She stepped right off the flat rock into the deep water with the man on her back; and

they went out of sight; and some bubbles came up."

He stopped, staring into the fire. His mother caught him to her breast. "Oh, my son! what sights were these!" she murmured.

"Mary was a deep one!" Charley said slowly. "You couldn't tell about her! I never heard her open her mouth!

"We hustled down to the edge of the water," he resumed presently. "Jim Plaskett threw off his coat; and went in after them. But it was no use; the current carried them down; and it was too cold to stay in more than a minute or two. We never saw them again.

"Jim landed on the other side; and brought us back the raft that was there; and we all crossed. There was nobody in the tents—blankets in a heap, as if they'd sprung out of bed suddenly. We started to climb the ravine. It *was* a body lying there on the rocks; it was Mabyn. Rina was halfway to it, before any of us saw. He wasn't dead; but had a bullet through both legs.

"Say that place was full of horrors! It stunk of gunpowder; and there was little thin layers of smoke hanging quiet between the walls. I was near out of my head, thinking what had become of them. We shouted all the time; and by and by we got a faint kind of an answer back. By Jolly! I went

up those rocks like a cat! I found them behind a whopping big rock. Garth was stretched out all bloody and she was trying to get his coat off; and she couldn't. She looked up at me with a face like chalk; and when she saw who it was, she just gave a little cry like a baby, and keeled over. Oh, it was pitiful! I carried her down to the river. I wouldn't let anybody else touch her.

"Well, to make a long story short, we decided to raft it down the river to Fort Ochre, instead of trying to win overland to the Crossing. Garth had a ball through his shoulder and a gashed hand; and Mabyn was pretty low. It was longer that way, but we could carry them comfortable.

"We built another raft and started next morning. Jim Plaskett, Mabyn and Rina went on the first; and Sandy Arkess, Garth, Natalie and I followed on the other. The other two fellows were to drive all the horses back over the prairie. Say, that was quite a journey! Garth was getting better; and we all felt pretty good, sitting round and swapping yarns, and looking at the scenery, while the current carried us down. When we got out of the gorge, coming down so quietly as we were, we saw any amount of game. Got a moose right on the bank! Gee! that was good meat! And at night, say it was out o' sight! sitting there talking about going home, and watching the trees march past, and a bang-up show of Northern lights up

above! It was pretty cold.

"There was the Dickens of a pow-pow at the Fort, when we got there at last! It's great sport being a hero! The Bishop and his party were there, just ready to start for home, and you never saw such a surprised man, when he saw Garth coming in from the other direction. And the old woman—I mean Mrs. Bishop—took to Natalie like her long-lost mother.

"Their party was obliged to start at once for fear of the river's closing on them; and Garth insisted on sending Natalie out with the old lady. She kicked like anything at leaving him there wounded; and I braced him, too, to let her stay; but he told me it was for the sake of her good name. I didn't quite see that—why any one who *knew* Natalie!—but I suppose he knew best.

"Garth and I stayed at Fort Ochre. The Inspector came down the river; and there was an official investigation. I was right in the thick of it. Gee! but it was sport! Colonel Whinyates is a great little chap—cheeks as red as church cushions, and eyes that pop like gooseberries! It was great to hear him bawl at the witnesses. But he's all right. Him and I were good friends!

"Garth told his story and I told mine, and Rina and Plaskett. And Natalie had left what they call a disposition behind her. Everything was all straight, but Garth clinched the matter by calling Mabyn to testify. He was carried in on a stretcher.

And blamed if he didn't tell the truth! He'd had a close call, you see, and had what Garth called a change of heart. It was Rina did it; day and night she never left him!

"The investigation ended in a love feast—that's what Garth called it. Old Colonel shook hands with Garth and me, and said we were heroes, by Gad! He's a bird. Garth wouldn't prosecute Mabyn; and he was let out from under arrest.

"The winter had set in by that time; and Garth and I couldn't get out till the ice formed. It was pretty slow up there, you bet! and, as Garth said, our hearts were outside. We talked about Natalie all the time. Mabyn got well, and he and Rina set off for their place with a dog-train. Garth gave them a bang-up outfit! Mabyn was a decent head, after he got well; and Rina certainly was happy about it. I forgot to tell you that Mabyn's mother had died in the fall; and there was no need for him to go out.

"The first mail got through in January, and we heard from Natalie at last. Bully news! Garth had sent her another one of those dispositions—Mabyn swore to it—in the November mail; and it seems that was all she needed in order to have the courts annul the old marriage they had gone through together. Natalie has been a free woman since Christmas!

"We came out with the mail man next day, you bet! That was six weeks ago, and here

we are! Garth is waiting for me down at the station. I wanted him to come up; but he said he guessed you would want me to yourself for a while. Gee! I must be hustling! Train goes at six-thirty!"

"But where are you going?" she asked in dismay.

Charley kissed her. "East to Millerton, to the wedding, of course! Back in two weeks! Oh, what larks! What do you think! I'm going to be best man. Garth is getting me a silk tile and a frock coat! Oh, Crikey! Good-bye!"

The door slammed.

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THE END

Transcriber's Notes

The following typographical corrections have been made:

(page 41) "et'em" to "et 'em"

(page 73) "immeately" to "immediately"
(page 85) "dug-out" to "dugout"
(page 89) comma added after "into the light"
(page 119) added missing quotes after "came North"
(page 152) "heartbreaking" to "heart-breaking"
(page 163) added missing quotes after "Lillywhite"
(page 180) "Erbe't" to "'Erbe't"
(page 197) added missing quotes before "I haven't"
(page 200) "dug-out" to "dugout"
(page 216) "possesssed" to "possessed"
(page 227) "half-way" to "halfway"
(page 238) "," to "--" on 253 after "canvas"

(page 240) added a comma after "promise"
(page 269) quotation marks removed before "As if"
(page 278) "beleaguered" to "beleaguered"
(page 285) "!" to "?" after "hands"
(page 317) "downstream" to "down-stream"

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK TWO ON THE TRAIL: A STORY OF THE FAR NORTHWEST ***

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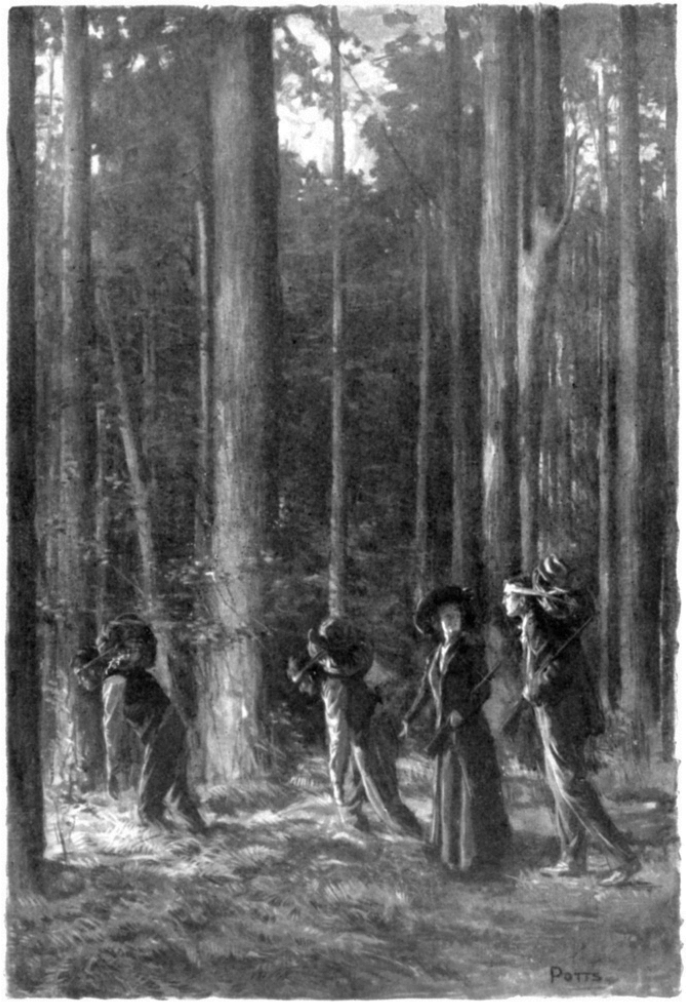
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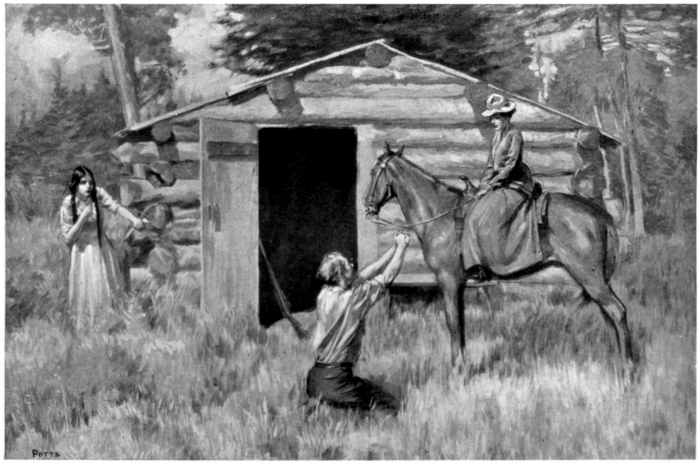
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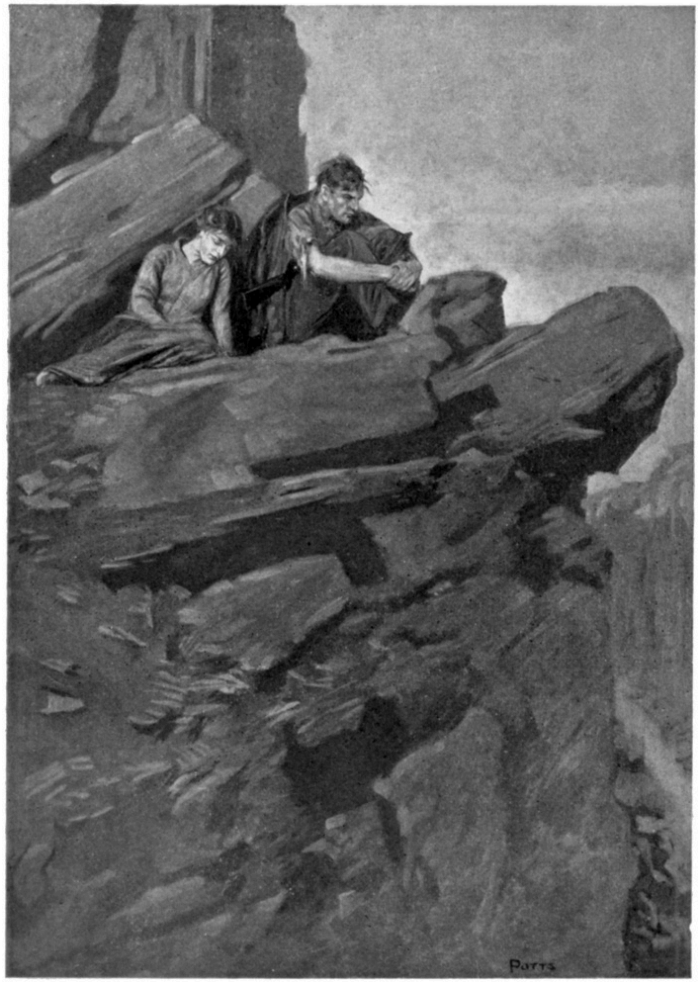
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