

THE
MAN
FROM
PEACE
RIVER

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THE MAN FROM PEACE RIVER

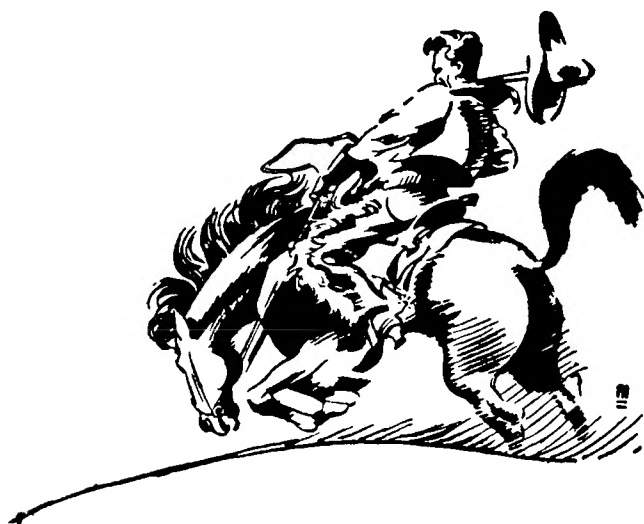
THIS IS THE STORY

A ROMANTIC story of love and adventure in the Far West, but it starts from Piccadilly. Jim Wallace, the Man from Peace River, while on a visit to the old country, falls in love with, and marries, a young society girl. Back in their shack on Peace River, the girl finds that nature in the raw is seldom mild! An excellent story by a writer new to our list of whom great things are confidently expected.



THE MAN FROM PEACE RIVER

WALLACE Q. REID



WILD WEST CLUB

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CHAPTER ONE

"So you're from Canada?"

The big bronzed-faced man who was addressed raised his eyes and smiled as he recognised the questioner. They were staying at the same London hotel, and for some days the short wiry man had displayed a decided desire to talk. Jim Wallace, the man from Canada, nodded his head.

"That's so. But you're a good guesser."

"I didn't guess. I saw a label on your luggage. But I shouldn't have been far wrong if I had guessed. My name's Larkin. Like you I'm from abroad—having a look at old London. What do you make of it?"

"Pretty good!" said Wallace. "But it sure takes a lot of getting used to after Peace River."

"Too fast for you?"

"Too slow."

Larkin laughed amusedly. He had a shrewd suspicion that the Canadian was trying to take a rise out of him, but Wallace was quite serious—to judge from his expression.

"You don't get that?" he asked.

"Not quite."

"Wal, it's kinder like a dog that goes round and round after his own tail, or a machine that whirls but never gets anywhere. Nothing ever seems to happen but the same darn thing."

6 THE MAN FROM PEACE RIVER

"I never looked at it in that light," said Larkin. "Peace River—that's a pretty isolated spot, isn't it?"

"Depends where you are on Peace River. It's big enough to make the Thames look like a trickle. I'm from Eagle Fork—sort of place where you see a white man every two months."

"Ranching?"

"Gee—no, trading. Furs and grub. Where do you hail from anyway?"

Larkin gave a brief description of his own life in Egypt, and thereafter the two saw a great deal of each other. Larkin was of a rather common type—the efficient Englishman whose work took him abroad for long periods, without ever making the slightest change in him. Back in London he was the born cockney again, treading the old haunts and loving it.

Jim Wallace was different. Amid a thousand men he would have been picked out as something different. This London was to him a new thing—something he had only read about. As a trader of sorts the vast stores intrigued him—dazzled him with their multifarious wares. It was his first sight of a real city, for he had come straight from England without even spending a night in any place that could really be called a city.

For a week he had been thrilled to the quick, but now a queer reaction was setting in. He did not seem to fit in anywhere. Millions passed him in the streets, with never a glance at him—except perhaps out of curiosity, since his tanned skin and the cut of his clothes gave him away as a visitor. He felt that all these people were ghosts—and not men and women of flesh and blood.

This holiday had been dreamed about for years. He had promised himself that he would do it in the right way—stay at a first-class hotel, dress well, dine well, in short, behave like a civilised and prosperous human being. This he had done, and was still doing, but the passing days found his interest diminishing. There were times when the sights and sounds of London vanished, and in their places came music of Peace River, the blue mountains and the vast forests of the land that had bred him.

"They sure told me it wouldn't last long, and it hasn't," he confided to Larkin.

"What is it that rubs, old man?" asked Larkin.

"Dunno—quite. I jest can't sing this tune—and sometimes I feel I can't breathe."

"You look pretty good on it anyway."

Wallace expanded his great chest, and blinked his arrestive deep-set blue eyes.

"I'm a bull in a drawing-room. I have to watch where I step in case I knock something over. Maybe I shouldn't have come further than Winnipeg."

"Well, why did you?"

"I wish I knew."

It was on the following evening that Wallace picked up the thread of a romance that was destined to alter his whole life. He had left his hotel late in the evening, and was strolling along Piccadilly to get a breath of fresh air before going to bed, when he observed something lying in the gutter. It glittered in the lamp-light, and on going closer to it he found it was a woman's shoe—a very dainty affair enriched with a magnificent buckle. His first thought was to take it to a police

station, but as he had no idea where the nearest police station was, he slipped it into his pocket and continued his walk.

It was only when he was back in his bedroom and undressing that he remembered the shoe. He took it from his pocket and examined it. It was comparatively new, and the buckle had obviously been bought separately, for it was undoubtedly of considerable value. He tried to imagine the kind of person who had worn it. Was she small, dainty and beautiful—to match the shoe, or an old lady who was attempting to revive her youth by squeezing her foot into this beautiful creation?

He decided to send it round to the police station the following morning, and have done with romantic fancies. Half an hour later he was sound asleep, but somehow the shoe got into his dreams, and half the night he was chasing old hags and fairies, like a modern Prince Charming seeking his Cinderella.

* * * *

Two evenings later Diana Cunningham was sitting in her bedroom in Sloane Square, sorting out dresses. Her wardrobe was on the luxurious side, for the Cunninghams had always been well provided with this world's goods, and David Cunningham, her father, believed in turning out his one and only daughter well. She chose a confection in pink and gold and laid it on the bed.

On the dressing table were numerous knickknacks, and backing them a gold-framed portrait of a young man, across the bottom of which was written "Yours ever—Frank." She smiled at it as she commenced to disrobe, but a little later her beautiful face became serious.

She was not quite sure of Frank Summers, despite

the fact that her engagement to him was expected by all who knew them. It was difficult to put her finger on the rift in the lute. Summers was an excellent companion—refined, good-looking, young and wealthy. Certainly he was prone to fits of bad temper, but that she could overlook. It seemed to her that he was taking too much for granted—that his wooing was less ardent since he had cause to believe that he had overcome the last barrier.

This had been most noticeable on their last excursion together—two nights before. They had brought a girl friend home from a dance in Summers' car, and he had paid her a great deal more attention than courtesy and the circumstances demanded. Diana tried to persuade herself that it meant nothing, but at heart she remained disturbed.

She was still in negligée when Rosie, the maid, knocked and entered, and announced that Summers had called, and would like to see Diana for a moment.

"Where is he?" she inquired.

"In the library, Miss."

"I'll come down."

She slipped a kimono over her semi-clad form, and went downstairs pondering the meaning of this summons, for Summers had arranged to take her out to dinner, and then to a theatre, and was not due to arrive for at least three-quarters of an hour. She found him in the library idly turning over the pages of a book.

"Hullo, Frank!" she said. "What is the meaning of this?"

He came to her and took both her hands, then looked into her eyes with a smile.

"A slight hitch in our arrangements, old thing. I thought I would come and tell you in person."

"You don't mean about to-night?"

"Yes, worse luck. I've just had a message to the effect that I must attend a special meeting of the Board of Directors—to discuss some new project that has suddenly been hurled at us."

"But will it keep you all evening?"

"Yes, the beastly thing starts at eight o'clock, and I shall be lucky if I get away before eleven. I hope you are not going to be very disappointed?"

"I am. It has been a beastly day, and I was looking forward to going out somewhere. Can't you possibly raise an excuse?"

"I am afraid not. Things are not happy in the business world at the moment, and I understand that this meeting is of the utmost importance."

"Where is it to take place?"

"At the office. There, cheer up. I'll make amends to-morrow night."

"Is that absolutely definite?"

"Yes. Nothing but an earthquake will prevent that. Did I interrupt your dressing?"

"Yes. Now I suppose I must dine at home alone—with nothing to look at except the servants and the furniture. I've been terribly bored, Frank."

"That's a horrible confession for a young girl to make. By the way, did you recover that shoe you lost on Wednesday night?"

"No. There is no doubt it fell out of the car when we dropped Ethel at her flat. I have advertised for it, but have had no luck so far. I don't mind the loss of

the shoe, but the buckle was one of the pair you gave me at Christmas. I expected it would turn up, seeing that I offered five pounds for it. I can't imagine anyone preferring an odd dancing shoe to a five pound note."

"Well, I must go. You do forgive me, dear?"

"I suppose I shall have to."

"Then until to-morrow—*au revoir!*"

When he had gone she felt very depressed. During her father's absence on business abroad the house seemed uncommonly lonely. There were five servants, but they were as quiet as mice. She dressed with none of the enthusiasm with which she had started, and then had dinner alone. Afterwards she went into the library with the intention of getting a book to read, but immediately she turned on the light she noticed a card just under the central table. She picked it up and found it bore Summers' name. On the back of it was some writing in pencil. She held it nearer the light:

"MEM. TICKETS FOR SPHINX BALL."

Her brow became furrowed. The card had obviously dropped from Summers' pocket—probably when taking out his cigarette case. She recalled that he was smoking when she entered the room. The note about the Sphinx Ball troubled her, because she had observed an advertisement of the Ball in the morning newspaper. It was to be held that evening. Was it possible that—?

To settle her doubts she got the telephone book and looked up the telephone number of Summers' offices. He had said the meeting was to take place at eight

12 THE MAN FROM PEACE RIVER

o'clock. It was now nearly half-past. On putting the call through there was no reply for some time, and then she was relieved to hear a male voice. But it proved to be that of the caretaker, who stated that there was no one in the office, and that he was not expecting anyone.

Diana felt the hot blood rush through her veins. Summers had lied to her. The meaning of the memorandum on the visiting card was plain enough. He had planned to attend the Ball, and had put forward that miserable story to deceive her. Then came a stab of jealousy as she remembered that the memorandum stated "tickets." It signified he was taking someone with him.

She was still fuming over the incident when she heard a ring at the bell. Rosie came in a few seconds later with a card in her hand. It bore the name of Jim Wallace, Eagle Fork, Peace River, and it puzzled her considerably.

"I don't know this gentleman," she said. "What does he want?"

"He says it is in connection with your advertisement."

"Oh, yes—my shoe. Ask him in, Rosie."

CHAPTER TWO

JIM WALLACE was shown into the room. He stood just inside the door somewhat awkwardly—apparently amazed at the luxurious interior and at its occupant. Diana on her part was also surprised. She sized him up at once as a very unusual personage—a man of enormous personality, yet slightly overawed by surroundings which were strange to him. He seemed to be nervous—though not exactly shy. On the contrary when his eyes met hers they stayed focused on her.

“Please sit down, Mr. Wallace,” she said.

“Thanks!” He sat in a deep armchair opposite her. “You are Miss Diana Cunningham?”

“Yes. I understand you have called in reference to my advertisement? Does that mean you have found my shoe?”

“Sure! Here it is.”

He extracted a small parcel from his overcoat pocket. It was wrapped up in tissue paper, which he removed and displayed her missing property.

“How fortunate!” she said. “But where did you find it?”

“In Piccadilly—about half-way up.”

“I guessed as much. We had been to a dance, and we stopped the car along Piccadilly to put down a friend who lives there. I had changed my shoes after the dance

14 THE MAN FROM PEACE RIVER

because my feet were tired. It was very good of you to bring the shoe along in person."

"Wal, I had nothing to do."

"Nothing to do in London! And you presumably a visitor?"

"I seem to have done all that's worth doing. I reckon there are more things to do up at Eagle Fork."

"Eagle Fork? Oh, yes—the address on your card. But where is Eagle Fork?"

"Maybe you've heard of the Peace River?"

Diana became a trifle embarrassed. She did not like to admit that she had never taken the slightest interest in geography outside that of the British Isles. To save her reputation she made a bold guess—helped out by his accent.

"Oh, yes—America, of course."

Wallace laughed in a deep voice.

"Guess you mean the United States when you say America?—most people do. No—it's in Canada—God's own country. And it's some river, I'm telling you. This old Thames of yours—I don't want to draw no rude comparisons—but it ain't in the same class."

Diana's eyes twinkled at his enthusiasm. There was something in his voice which was like a breath from the great outdoors. He seemed to fill the whole house, and personality literally radiated from him.

"I know I'm very ignorant," she said. "Tell me about Peace River—what you do up there, and what the people are like?"

It was the first time anyone in England had displayed the slightest interest in Wallace's little paradise, and he needed no second invitation. Graphically he pictured

the place where his work lay. It was amazing what he could do with his limited vocabulary. Diana hung on every word—seemed to see the very place itself. While he spoke he gazed at her, until he could see nothing else but her interested eyes, her fresh complexion, the two little dimples that appeared in her cheeks when he made some humorous remark. At last he suddenly stopped.

"Gee, how I talk when I get going!" he said. "Naturally, you can't be interested."

"But I am. You made it all so real. I feel I have actually been to Peace River."

"I'd sure like to take you there," he said impulsively. "No—I mean——"

"Oh, don't spoil it," she protested. "I am awfully glad you called. I was feeling very bored with life."

"Bored!"

"My father is away—abroad, and to-night I had arranged to go out. Then something happened to prevent it. Oh, about my shoe—it is a little difficult."

"What is?"

"I offered—a reward."

Wallace winced at the suggestion.

"I didn't come here for that."

"Of course not—but a bargain is a bargain. I wish I could think of some way to express my gratitude."

A mad idea rose up in Wallace's mind. She had confessed she was bored. He too had been bored until he entered that house, but now he was thanking God he had come to London if only to see such a girl for a few minutes. He looked at her and thought he detected a slight blush on her cheeks. The idea grew and grew

16 THE MAN FROM PEACE RIVER

with remarkable speed. He decided to risk violent resentment on her part, having risked many worse things during his adventurous life.

"You meant what you said just now?" he asked.

"About expressing my gratitude? Why, of course."

"Then come out with me somewhere—anywhere. You choose the place and that's good enough for me——"

He stopped as he saw her amazement, and then waited for what he believed was coming to him.

"Say it," he said. "Let me have it flat. I deserve it. But a fellow never gets anything unless he tries."

Diana opened her mouth and then closed it again. He certainly had taken her breath away, and yet she was not entirely displeased. The bold suggestion had come at a moment which was most opportune. She thought of Summers and his deception. The Ball to which she believed he had gone was due to start at nine o'clock, but such affairs were never punctual. There was yet time to get there, and she had no doubt tickets could be obtained at the door. Moreover it was a masked affair.

"Would you really like to do that?" she asked.

"Would I? You try me."

"Then I will. There is a masked ball to-night at the Crillon Hotel. Do you dance?"

"Sure!"

"Then I should like to go there. Will you take me?"

Wallace could scarcely believe his ears. He looked at her searchingly but found she was serious.

"I'm ready," he said. "Lucky thing I put on a boiled shirt. What about the masks?"

THE MAN FROM PEACE RIVER 17

"I can provide those. Will you wait for me here, while I go and get a wrap?"

"Sure!"

She left the room, and Wallace scratched his jaw and laughed. It was all so incredible that even now he believed he was dreaming. Blessed be the little shoe that had brought this miracle about! A short while ago he was vowing London a dull place, and now it seemed the greatest place in the world. A girl's soft eyes and dimpled cheeks had made all that difference.

Then she came—looking like something unreal in her ermine evening coat. Wallace gulped as he followed her to the door. Outside he hailed a taxi from the neighbouring rank, opened the door for her and then sat down beside her. The greatest adventure of his life had begun.

CHAPTER THREE

THE Ball was well attended, and the majority were in fancy costume. It was a veritable feast of colour, and the band was excellent. Diana found that her knight errant danced exceedingly well, which surprised her.

"Where did you learn?" she asked.

"In the township a hundred miles down the river from my place. I have to go there at intervals. But we don't have a band—only a gramophone."

Diana had been searching the room for Summers, and she had a shrewd suspicion he was the Harlequin. Later in the evening an opportunity came to test this. There was a Paul Jones, and towards the end of it she got the Harlequin for a partner. As soon as he touched her she knew it was Summers.

"Jolly affair?" he remarked.

"Yes," she replied.

"You know—you remind me of someone."

"Do I?"

"Yes. But of course it is impossible."

"What is impossible?"

"That you can be the person you remind me of."

Diana made no reply. The dance ended and then she inveigled Summers into the conservatory, which adjoined the big room. Seeking a quiet but well-lighted

corner, she suddenly raised her mask. Summers gave a gasp.

"Di!"

"The impossible has happened," she said coldly. "Why did you lie to me this evening?"

"I didn't," he protested. "The meeting was called off later, and I met a friend who was coming——"

"Don't add further lies. I know the friend. You have been dancing with her all evening. It was Ethel Waring."

"Di—let me explain——"

"I don't need any explanations from you."

His face grew hard.

"Then I'll ask one from you," he retorted. "What are you doing here? And who is the man you came with?"

"That is my business."

"It's mine too." He caught her by the wrist. "I've got a right to know who——"

She wrested herself free and then hurried into the ballroom and rejoined Wallace, who was wondering where she had vanished to.

"Here I am," she said with a smile. "And how are you liking it, Mr. Wallace?"

"Great! It was worth coming all the way to England, if only for this."

While Wallace danced with Diana, Summers moved about like a bear with a sore head. Furious at having been found out, he was all the more furious to discover who this new Romeo was. He danced very little after that, but went to the bar with a party of men and drank very unwisely.

Late in the evening Wallace made his way to the bar—which was reserved for gentlemen only. Summers recognised the big form, and the eyes behind his mask flashed resentfully.

"Do you know who that fellow is?" he inquired of a friend.

"No."

"I'd like to know."

"Why?"

"For a certain reason—and I'm going to know."

"How?"

"It's midnight. Let's pretend it is the custom to unmask. I want to have a squint at him."

His friends were quite willing to try the ruse. They were all out for a spree—ready for any mischief. Summers started the business as the clock struck twelve.

"Masks off, everyone!" he hiccupped.

His companions followed his example, but Wallace still continued to wear his mask. Summers went up to him.

"Time to unmask," he said.

Wallace looked through the slightly open door of the bar into the ballroom, and saw that no one there had taken off their masks. Moreover he resented the tone of Summers' voice.

"Guess I'll stay as I am," he said.

"It isn't allowed," said Summers.

"All the same, I'd rather keep it on."

Summers turned to his friends.

"Gentlemen, here's a mutineer—refuses to unmask. What shall we do with him?"

"He must be made to obey the laws," said another in

mock tones of majesty. "We will allow him ten seconds."

Wallace stood quite still, sipping his drink. He was quite amenable to a bit of fun, but he detected not fun but ill-feeling particularly on Summers' part.

"—seven—eight—nine—ten!" counted a voice. "Well, we must do our duty."

Five of them advanced on Wallace. He held up his hand.

"One minute," he said. "You guys are sure welcome to your jokes, but don't try them out on me."

"Get him!" cried Summers.

There was a rush at Wallace. The first man to reach him was neatly turned aside. But the second one displayed distinct aggression, and got hurt. There was no good humour about the affair now. Summers hurled himself at Wallace with his fists clenched. He went staggering back against the wall, and then another and another of them. Within five minutes Wallace had cleared the bar. He finished up his drink—and still wore his mask!

"Was there trouble in the bar?" asked Diana later.

"Nope. Just a bit of fun."

"But there is blood on your hand! Oh, tell me what happened."

"Wal, the Harlequin wanted to look at my face for some reason or other. But he wasn't exactly polite about it, and that started things. There were five of them—but they didn't cut any ice. Guess they had been drinking some."

Diana was quick to see the significance of this. A little later she pleaded tiredness and asked Wallace to take

22 THE MAN FROM PEACE RIVER

her home. Outside her house they lingered for a few minutes.

"It was mighty good of you to take pity on me," said Wallace.

"Take pity! Why, I have enjoyed myself immensely."

"You mean that?"

"Honestly."

"Is this to be—good-bye?"

"What do you mean—by that?"

"Can't I see you again—some time?"

"Would it give you any pleasure?"

"Would it put me up in heaven!"

"Well—perhaps?"

"When?"

"Saturday. You can ring me up, and we will fix a rendezvous then."

CHAPTER FOUR

A FORTNIGHT had passed and much had happened in that short time. Jim Wallace had seen Diana on no less than six occasions, and much talk had taken place between them. Jim was in love—and knew it. He failed utterly to see any social bar, and he was waiting for the psychological moment to arrive when he could tell Diana that he loved her.

Diana on her part did not really know where she stood. She had expected Summers to come and beg her forgiveness, but this had not happened. She had seen him, and he had tried to explain away his conduct, but there was a noticeable lack of real regret. Again he was holding her cheap—sneering at her friendship with Jim Wallace.

“How is the wild man from Canada?” he asked.

“You mean Mr. Wallace?”

“Yes—the cow-puncher, or whatever he is by trade.”

That meeting had finished up in a quarrel, and she swore she would not see him again. Then came Jim Wallace, with all his freshness and interest. He was a violent relief after Summers, and she was genuinely pleased to see him. They went to a theatre, and afterwards Wallace brought her home. To her surprise the taxi seemed to be taking a very circuitous route.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

24 THE MAN FROM PEACE RIVER

"I'm guilty," he said. "I told him to come this way."

"But why?"

"I wanted to speak to you. I've got to sail for Canada within the next ten days."

"So soon!"

"Yep. And there's something I've got to tell you—now."

She divined what was coming, and held her breath. She did not want him to say what he was going to say—and yet she did. Her mind and desires were all so confused she could not think clearly.

"I love you," he said suddenly. "Oh, it's no use beating about the bush. I know I'm rough and can't express half the things I feel. But all I know is that I love you—and shall go on loving you for ever."

"Jim!"

"Wait! I'm poor—poor compared with the people you mix with. But I've a good business up there at Eagle Fork. There's never been any incentive to make more money than was necessary for my needs until now. But I guess I could if only——"

"If only—what?"

"If you were there—with me. You'd get to love the place—the sunshine and flowers in summer, the cataracts and the colour. In winter it is cold, but even more wonderful——"

"Oh, wait—wait!" she begged. "I had no idea."

"Maybe you thought it was just friendship. Maybe you meant it to be only that?"

"I don't know. Things seem to have gone all wrong."

"That means you—you don't love me?"

"I don't know. Please, Jim—don't force me into

things. I must have time to—to know where I stand. I like you—because you are different to any man I have ever met, but I haven't had time to think what I want—exactly. And my father is away, and won't be back for two months."

"But you are twenty-two years old, and——"

"Yes—yes, but my father naturally expects to be consulted in a serious matter—like that."

"I must go back within ten days," he said, and then took her arms and gazed into her eyes. "You love me. Maybe you don't quite realise it yet. But I've watched you—and I know, I know. I can make you happy, too—up at Eagle Fork. We could make that old place all neat and good. And there's the river and the woods. Isn't it better than all this bricks and mortar? Every day will hold something new for you. I've never felt blue up there. Nature won't let you be anything but happy and fit. Say you'll come. We can get a special licence and——"

The depth of his appeal was enormous. She was under his spell again, yet fighting against convention.

"I must think," she panted. "I must think—alone. Come and see me to-morrow, Jim. Say no more now—please."

And so it was left at that. But in her bedroom she was able to think things over coolly, and in thinking them over she came to the conclusion that real passionate love had not touched her yet. Neither Jim nor Summers had done that, though at times she was conscious of queer sensations in her breast when Jim looked at her with those penetrating eyes of his. Was he right—did she love him without knowing it?

The following day brought matters to a climax. Summers begged to see her again, and she consented to his calling. She quite expected that he would now be humble, but instead he rated her for being seen out with Jim. Everyone was talking about it. Her name would be mud.

"In addition, you might have some little regard for me," he added.

"For you!" she retorted, stung to fury by his impudence and egotism. "Where do you come in? How dare you speak to me like this? I have discovered you to be nothing but a liar and a cheat."

"So I don't come up to your standard, eh—the cave-man standard that seems to appeal to you?"

"You certainly do not, and please leave Mr. Wallace's name out of it."

"I can't—because he is very much in it."

"Jim is——"

"Oh, so it is 'Jim' now?" he sneered. "It looks as if things have gone much further than I suspected."

"Yes, it is 'Jim' now," she snapped. "And he has asked me to marry him."

"Ha-ha! That's good—damn good! I suppose you are to go to Canada, and scrub out his shack for him. What a tit-bit that will be for the social journals."

"You beast!"

His expression changed and he grew serious.

"Enough of this nonsense. You wouldn't have the courage to marry a man like that—and you know it. You are just carrying on with him to get your own back on me. Well, we'll cry quits and start all over again. What do you say to that?"

She had reached the limit of her patience, and was about to rate him soundly, when the maid announced Jim Wallace. Summers gave a short laugh.

"Ask Mr. Wallace in," said Diana.

Jim was shown in, and expressed some surprise at seeing Summers there. He looked at Diana and saw a dangerous look in her eyes.

"I don't think you two have met before—actually," she said. "Jim, this is Mr. Summers. Frank, allow me to introduce you to my future husband."

Summers started, and then glared at Jim. He then reached out for his hat and stick, and strode from the room. Jim went to Diana and took her in his arms.

"Did you mean that?" he asked hoarsely.

"Yes—yes. As soon as you like. Take me away from here. I am tired of it all."

Jim uttered a low cry of immense joy, and then lowered his head and kissed her on the lips.

"I'll fix it," he said. "Oh, gee, I must be dreaming!"

CHAPTER FIVE

DIANA's sense of triumph was short-lived. She had been stung into retaliation by Summers' heartless cynicism—his cheap sneers at her expense. Soon she realised that her impulsive, independent spirit had carried her further than she had really intended going, but in the meantime Jim had got into his stride. Almost before she could get her breath he telephoned her to tell her that he had secured a special licence. She had to pretend that she was excited, but at heart her feelings were very different.

The news got round, as was inevitable. She found herself bombarded with embarrassing questions. Who was this man whom she had suddenly lost her heart to? All her friends insisted upon being introduced, and at once. Sly little Diana!

Summers, in order to be quits with her, made it a kind of joke with her acquaintances. Introductions, he swore, were absolutely impossible. The fellow ate with his knife, wore his hat in drawing-rooms and chewed tobacco. Hence this unconventional marriage—by special licence. Any girl who wasn't secretly ashamed of her husband would have indulged this one great occasion of her life by having a decent wedding at a respectable church.

So Diana found herself growing more and more ner-

vous as the days passed. Every other hour she resolved to tell Jim that she could not go on with it—that while there was admiration for him love was not present—at least not the kind of love that would justify marriage. But to prevent this was the patent fact that this big fellow from the wilds was up to his ears in love—that he believed in himself—in his ability to make her happy. She rightly felt that he was the victim of her impulsive act, and that to tell him the truth now would be like plunging a dagger into his heart.

"This is sure the greatest thing that ever happened to me," he would say. "Who'd think that the finding of a dinky little shoe, just when I was feeling homesick, would lead to this? What about the old man—I mean your father?"

"I—I must write to him."

"Guess he'll be surprised."

"Yes. Jim, are you sure you——?"

"You bet I'm sure," he interrupted. "I was never more sure of anything in my life. You'll love the place I'm going to take you to."

Within two days of the marriage a firm resolution took hold of her. Jim must be told. It was impossible to go on like this—causing him to believe that she loved him in the way that he loved her. Whatever the outcome, she would dilly-dally no longer.

And all the while Jim was walking on air, counting himself the luckiest son-of-a-gun that ever took a trip across the herring-pond. He was not oblivious to the fact that he came of a different class—that she had been used to luxuries such as had never entered into his simple life, but nothing would convince him that she

would not get to love the primitive wildness and beauty of Peace River.

Unfortunately, he ran into Summers in a restaurant where he had gone to lunch. It was not the kind of place he usually patronised, but Diana had had to go to her dressmaker and had promised to take lunch with him at this rendezvous. He naturally imagined that Summers would ignore him after what had taken place, but Summers acted quite differently.

"So you are to be married in two days, Mr. Wallace?" he said.

"Sure!" replied Jim. "Any objections?"

"No—I congratulate you."

"Thanks!"

"I trust this is not premature."

"What do you mean?"

"Well—as between one admirer and another, Diana is capable of changing her mind. The novelty may wear off, so to speak, before she definitely commits herself."

Jim gave him a long penetrating stare.

"Guess you're hoping for impossibilities," he said.

Summers laughed shortly, and then made his way to a table. Jim was not worried by the remark. He wrote Summers down as being filled with a jealous hate, and paid no more attention to him. Later he met Diana, and they had lunch together, far removed from Summers. Jim considered it diplomatic not to mention her old "flame."

He thought she looked pale—almost worried, but she denied being unwell. Before they parted they fixed up a meeting for that evening. He called at the house

shortly before eight o'clock. To his surprise, she was not dressed.

"Am I a bit early?" he asked.

"No. I have been waiting for you. Jim, there is something very important that I must tell you."

"Well?"

"I feel—I feel that this marriage is a mistake."

"What!" he gasped. "You mean——?"

"Oh, wait—wait! I am not trying to excuse myself. I meant what I said—that I would marry you, but there is something you must know before that takes place."

"I don't understand you."

"You remember how this came about?"

"Of course. But——"

"Summers came here, and enraged me. Then you came in. I was partly actuated by a mad desire to revenge myself on him for having lied to me and——"

Jim now saw the thing in an instant. His big jaw was thrust out and he caught her by the shoulders and stared into her eyes.

"You mean you used me to get level with him?"

"No—not quite that. I then believed that I wanted to marry you, but since then——"

"Since then you have discovered that you don't love me. Is that what you are trying to say?"

"I don't think I love you—in that way," she said haltingly.

"You mean—you want to quit?"

The word was singularly effective, accompanied as it was by his unflinching glance. It was partly question—partly accusation, and it stung her deeply.

"No," she said. "But I want you to know. I gave

a promise and I'll keep it—if you still want me to, but it's no use my pretending that I love you in the way that a woman should love the man she is going to marry. The decision rests with you.”

Jim moved restlessly. This thing had come upon him like a bolt out of the blue. He had never dreamed of such a possibility, and yet here she was telling him in a way which left no room for misunderstanding.

“You mean you'll go through with it—in spite of what you have just said, if I want you to?”

“Yes.”

His mind was now working with incredible speed. He realised he had been living in a fool's paradise—dreaming an impossible dream. Now to be awakened like this. Then he recalled Summers—the remark he had let fall—about Diana changing her mind. He could see now the fellow's sneering smile, and the contemptuous shrug of his shoulders. How Summers would laugh! Yes, everybody would laugh, including two friends he had cabled to in Canada. Jim Wallace to be made the plaything of a girl! He looked at her more fiercely than she had ever seen him look before.

“See here—do you still love that guy—Summers?”

“No,” she replied.

“Then the thing stands. You and I are going to be hitched up the day after to-morrow. How does that strike you?”

She looked at him squarely.

“It strikes me as being the worst decision you ever arrived at,” she said.

CHAPTER SIX

UP to the very last minute Diana hoped Jim would relent—recognise the folly of what he proposed to do. But Jim had no such intention in his mind, and his unwavering resolution to see the thing through was not due entirely to pique. He sincerely believed she was in the toils of convention—that her pride had intervened and blinded her to a rich chance.

“You wired your father?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“How did he take it?”

She handed him her father’s prompt reply. Jim read it and his mouth twitched at the forcibly worded cablegram:

“Cancel arrangement. Am coming home. Beg of you to avoid wrecking your life with a man of whom you know nothing. I absolutely forbid it.”

“What are you going to do?” he asked.

“Nothing. You have decided—haven’t you?”

“Sure!” he said, with an attempt at cheerfulness.

“I’ll wire him—after the ceremony.”

And the marriage took place. Before she was legally Mrs. Wallace, Jim had a last word with her.

“Get this straight,” he said. “I love you—and you’ve

nothing to worry about. I'm going to make you glad you ever lost that shoe in Piccadilly. Trust me."

As soon as it was all over Jim sent a cablegram to his father-in-law. It announced that they were married, and that he proposed taking Diana to Canada. At the end he added a tag, "Don't worry—everything is O.K."

"Wal, that's settled," he said. "To-morrow we'll be on the boat."

"Jim!"

He turned his head and saw her moist eyes focused on him.

"Wal?"

"I must wait until my father returns."

"But I've wired him. He understands."

"He doesn't. He is coming home, and I want to explain—how it all happened."

"Sorry," he replied. "But I got to catch that boat. I got a letter this morning from the man I left in charge. I got to beat it back."

"Then—leave me here."

This bold suggestion amazed him, but he realised she was deadly serious.

"It wouldn't do," he argued. "If you came to join me later it would mean a bad journey for you. It isn't easy to get to my place at Peace River. Nope—we go together."

There was an air of finality in his voice, and she knew instinctively it would be a waste of time to labour the point. She began to regret her conscientious behaviour in the matter, for it was fast dawning on her that marriage gave him big rights over her. The door of escape had been open, and like a fool she had refused

to go through it, because of a promise made in a moment of impulse.

On the following day they boarded the ship, and she was relieved and a little surprised to find that Jim had booked first-class berths. It was her first experience of a big Atlantic liner, and despite the problems that vexed her she could not but feel a little excited. But how different it would have been had she loved him in the way that he loved her!

With ample time on his hands for reflection, Jim sized up the situation in his own simple fashion. He detected in Diana resentment—and a chilly reserve that hurt more than words. Doubtless she thought he should have gone out of her life after she had made matters clear, and was labelling him a brute because he had not done so. How could he make her see that he loved her more than his life—that he had been actuated by the belief that he could make her love him?

Away there up the Peace River this might be possible, but not on board a big ship when social customs and conventions still held good. Already he was feeling that their new acquaintances were beginning to suspect a rift in the lute, and he wanted to prevent this, because he knew it would re-act on Diana, and make her more embittered than ever. He tackled her one evening.

“Di?”

“Well?”

“You haven’t spoken a word to me all day.”

“What is there to say?” she asked. “You brought about this state of affairs. You mustn’t blame me.”

“I’m not blaming anyone, but I guess it isn’t for our good to have people think——”

"Think what?"

"That you and I haven't a grain of respect for each other other."

"Why should they think that?"

"Guess it's a natural conclusion when you spend all the evening dancing with—anyone but me."

"So—that's it!" she retorted.

"Oh, I ain't complaining for myself—if you prefer the other men, but I'm not keen on your advertising our trouble. Can't you pretend a bit?"

"Pretend what?"

"That you're not the most discontented woman on this ship."

This suggestion seemed to annoy her, but later he discovered it had taken root in her mind. For the sake of appearances, presumably, she danced with him on occasion, smiled when he joined any circle in which she was included, and even called him 'Jim dear' in public.

"Fine," he said. "Keep it up."

"It's a bit of a strain," she replied mischievously.

"It must be."

"For you, too," she added.

He dropped his banter and gazed at her with those disturbing eyes of his.

"I don't have to pretend," he said. "If that had been in the programme I should be on my way back—alone."

"I wonder how long it will be before you wish you had done that, Jim."

"About a million years."

So the voyage for Diana proved to be one of ever-growing perplexity—and partly masquerade. Jim's suggestion had proved a good one. Their travelling com-

panions were completely deluded, and Diana heard many a favourable comment on her unconventional husband. But when at last they left the ship and took train for Edmonton she found herself face to face with hard facts. Where they were going there would be no room for masquerade—no entertaining society people to amuse her. It was a grim enough prospect in the circumstances.

Jim, with his acute natural sense of perception, realised that her mind was now centred on their future, and he took steps to relieve any anxiety which might be troubling her.

"I'm glad the sea-trip is over," he said. "Aren't you?"

"I—don't know," she faltered. "But why are you glad?"

"It leaves us to get on with our job."

"And what is that job?"

"To understand one another better, to share joys and sorrows, to wring from life all the happiness there is going."

"Do you think we shall wring much, Jim?"

"Sure! I want to be honest with you, Di. I guess some fellows would have quitted after being told what you told me. I would have done if I had believed it."

"Why do you think I should mislead you?"

"I don't. You mustn't think I took this step without thinking it all out. I figgered it like this. I suddenly butted into your life, and you kinder took an interest in me because I was a bit different to the sort of men you had been brought up amongst. I amused you—not because I've any real humour about me—but quite uncon-

sciously. Maybe I was all to blame for mistaking your interest for love. Anyway, you gave me the chance of loving you and going away, with no chance of being able to love any other woman—and of loving you and standing a reasonable chance of making you love me. It's like offering a starving man a loaf of bread in one hand and a stone in the other. Would you blame him if he took the loaf?"

"Was it quite as bad as that?"

"Worse."

"But am I the only woman in the world?"

"For me—yes."

"I'm sorry—Jim."

"You needn't be—for I'm going to win through. Maybe you think that sounds like a cheap boast, but it isn't exactly that. Life is different in the wilderness. Nothing comes by accident—neither failure or success. If you want a thing you have to go out after it—and the men who go out after things, with no other idea in their hearts but to get them—usually do get them. That's been my experience of life so far as it goes. The few little things I've wanted I've managed to get. If so, why can't I get the really big thing? Why, if I had quitted when you put up the big obstacle it would have been like running away—deserting when things looked pretty bad."

Simple as this was, it represented to her an entirely new point of view. True, she felt like smiling at his magnificent optimism, in which he included the human emotions with material objects, but it was impossible not to admire the spirit which moved him. Moreover, she was bound to admit that he had acted like a gentleman

since the day of their marriage. Always he was attentive without descending to eating out of her hand. Never did he flatter her as so many men had done, but spoke the truth as naturally as a child, even when it was likely to hurt.

Thus in a fortnight she had got to know more about him than during the period when, for a time, she had believed she loved him, and singularly enough, it was this new insight which seemed to widen the gulf between them. It was as if a new Jim Wallace was being born out of the old one—and this man was far more dominating, in his restrained way, than the old one could ever have been.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A FEW days changed Diana's whole environment and mode of life. It was as if she had jumped from a towering cliff into the unknown—and an unknown that proved to be magnificent beyond description.

They had left Edmonton by car, and finally joined an upper tributary of the Peace River, where there was a small hotel and such impedimenta as was necessary to river travel. Here Jim was known, and he introduced his wife, to the amazement and admiration of his acquaintances. Later the link between the township and Eagle Fork was revealed—a strong canoe packed down with tent, cooking utensils and what-not.

Food was laid in, and on the following morning Diana found herself speeding down to the parent stream in the bright sunlight, with the river singing a gay song. Two days passed, the intervening nights of which had been spent camping, and now, according to Jim, they were within a few hours of Eagle Fork.

To Diana it was the most marvellous experience of her life, marred only when she remembered the circumstances. The scenery was on the grand scale, the air like a tonic, the conditions as perfect as they could be. There was a natural reaction in her heart to the call of the wild. In the company of one who knew every

trick of the born rover, inconveniences were few. Jim could cook a meal that would have whetted the appetite of a gourmand—let alone travellers rendered ravenous by the dry clean air of the prairie lands.

"I think you are rather wonderful," she had admitted.

"Eh!"

"Knowing all these things—doing them so easily."

"I should be wonderful if I didn't," he replied.

"Why, a half-bred Indian can do as well, or better."

"Where does the river end?"

"In a lake—Lake Athabaska."

"Does it freeze in winter?"

"You bet it does. Everything freezes up here. You wouldn't think so to look at it now, would you? Some will tell you it's bad in winter, but not if you look at it the right way. Life is all being born and dying, then re-birth on and on for ever. It's good to watch it. It's fine to know when everything is stark and still that it's only an illusion—that under the snow the magic is working. And there is something clean about it all—clean and decent like a man redeeming a solemn promise."

Such expressions and opinions came from him spontaneously. More and more he was getting back into his right setting. Sitting in the canoe, with his neck and bare arms the colour of mahogany, driving the craft swiftly down the river, he seemed to merge into the scene, and when his eyes caught hers there was a gleam in them which told of his pride in his close association with these things.

And so they came home, on the gleaming breast of the singing river, through green avenues of giant trees,

through the many rapids that raised the lazy drone of the waters to a quick and lively arabesque. Jim raised the paddle and pointed in the distance to what appeared to be smoke.

"Eagle Fork. We're nearly home!"

She had imagined a little colony of shacks clustered on the river bank, but as they drew nearer she saw but one building—a long timber shanty from the chimney of which coiled black smoke. There was a kind of landing stage below it, thrust out into the water, and from that some steps blasted out of the rock, which led to the higher ground on which the shanty was built. A painted board advertised Jim's business—Eagle Fork Trading Post.

"It ain't really a fork at all," he explained. "That's an island yonder."

Diana made no reply. She was taking in the beauty of the place in its setting of pines and running water. But at the same time she was appalled by the isolation.

"Isn't there a town at all?" she asked.

"Sure! Twenty miles lower down the river—Fairborn. They've found minerals there, and the place is growing. There's a hotel and dance-hall, and they're talking of running a movie show, but getting films enough is the difficulty."

He talked as if twenty miles was a mere bagatelle, which it was in a country which extended for thousands of miles in every direction. And then the canoe came alongside the landing stage. Jim gave vent to a shrill whistle, and by the time Diana had been helped out, a man in corduroy breeches and vivid red shirt appeared at the top of the steps. He had a patch over one eye,

and had obviously had no associations with a razor for weeks.

"Hey, boss!" he shouted, and came running down the steps with an agility amazing for his years.

"This is Sparrow," said Jim to Diana. "He's been looking after things while I've been away. George—meet my wife."

Sparrow rubbed a horny hand on the seam of his breeches before he offered it. It was clear he was embarrassed and amazed at the fair apparition that Jim had brought along with him, and he held her hand for a long time, until he suddenly remembered himself and dropped it like a hot brick.

"I'll take the grips," he said. "Birdseye can deal with the other stuff later. Welcome to Eagle Fork, ma'am."

Followed Diana's introduction to her new home—and to Birdseye. Birdseye was a Cree Indian, with shaggy locks, a face like wood and orbs that had earned him his soubriquet. He was lean and dark of skin, and when she beheld him he wore nothing but a pair of ragged canvas trousers and beaded mocassins. Above the nether garment his fine physique gleamed like a piece of highly polished mahogany. He bowed to her, hands to forehead, Indian fashion, and then got on with his work—sorting out pelts.

"White as they make 'em," said Jim. "I took him in five years ago, when he came along starving. This is the sitting-room."

Diana blinked as she stared around the room. It was certainly picturesque, with its Indian relics, guns, skins and what-not, but the bareness of the walls, the lack of anything approaching comfort, appalled her. The

windows were double to keep out the intense cold of winter, and heat was supplied by a snaky black pipe which came in at one end and went out at the other.

Within a quarter of an hour she had seen all there was to be seen, and all she wanted to see. To add to the circus-like effect, there were dog-kennels attached to the store, and sundry additions on all corners. To her it was the sort of place that could only exist in a nightmare. Finally she turned round on Jim, with her eyes flashing.

"This—this is your home?"

"Sure! It's a bit rough, but——"

"Rough! I had no idea—— I thought there would be a town of some sort—other women, but here there's nothing. You have tricked me——"

"Tricked you!"

"Why didn't you tell me it was like—this? If I had known nothing in the world would have induced me to come. At least I expected something approaching civilisation."

"I never led you to believe it was a hotel de luxe," he replied quietly.

"Hotel! It is a barracks."

"See here——!"

She faced him, her eyes flashing with injured pride and determination.

"I won't stay. You must take me back. You can't expect me to stay here."

"I do."

"Have you no sense of decency?" she stormed.

"You'll get used to it, and there is much a woman can do to improve it."

"Improve! Do you imagine——?"

"That's Sparrow calling me. He doesn't belong here. He lives down river and wants to get back."

He left her abruptly and she gazed at the luggage which had been brought into the bedroom. To her amazement, Jim's things were there too, and it brought her attention to the double-bed. She went hot, and then cold, and sat down on the bed to recover from the shock. A few minutes later Jim came in.

"Sparrow's gone," he said.

She jumped up and faced him.

"Are you going to take me back?"

He shook his head.

"This is where we make a new start," he added.

"Not this way," she retorted, glancing at his belongings. "This is my room—you understand? My room—so long as I am compelled to remain in this dreadful place."

Jim gave her a long glance, and then inclined his head.

"I get you," he said. "I'll have that attended to."

He went out and a few minutes later Birdseye came in and removed his master's baggage. She heard him dumping it in the next room, and was relieved to have survived that situation. Later she was called to the evening meal which Birdseye had prepared. She ate in silence, and immediately it was finished she sought her room. When Jim went along the passage later he noticed that the key had been removed from the outside of her door, and he had not the slightest doubt that it was locked on the inside.

CHAPTER EIGHT

WITHIN a week Diana was on the verge of a breakdown. Blind to all the natural beauty of the place, she could only dwell upon the loneliness of her surroundings. Once or twice Jim had endeavoured to get her interested in his work, but all she thought about was the country she had left, the many admiring friends she possessed there. Then a tremendous thunderstorm gathered in the mountains and brought about conditions that were terrible and intolerable. Jim saw to what extent she had let her self-control lapse.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Wrong? Can't you see it is driving me mad?"

"It's the storm. But it will pass and the air will get fresh again."

"No."

"Eh?"

"It isn't the storm—and you know it. No woman could endure this dreadful life. If you had the slightest regard for me you would put an end to it. What joy can it give you to keep me here—a prisoner? Does it please you to have a woman hate you?"

"Hate me?"

"I didn't want that to happen. I thought that after a few days you would come to see that you had made a mistake—that our lives lie far apart."

"I'm not sure that they do."

"Are you blind?"

"Sometimes I wish I was so that I couldn't see your face—your form——"

"Enough of that—I can't stand it. This past week has seemed like ten years. I never dreamed it could be as bad as this."

He looked through the window at the great river, and the pines and mountains that backed it.

"Do you call that bad? The scenery, the clean air, the feeling of independence——"

"Independence!" she rasped. "Where is the independence?"

"Here," he replied quietly. "As long as you pull your weight you can feel that."

She took this as a direct reference to her inactivity. It was true that her enmity and bitterness of heart had prevented her from taking up any sort of work, but the food was cooked and the house cleaned by Birdseye. But in truth she did not know where to start, and all the time she had been expecting to break his resolution. It had scarcely seemed worth while making a start.

"I understand," she replied. "You expect me to be a kind of unpaid slave. That's exactly what Summers told me."

It was an unfortunate reminder, and it caused his mouth to twitch and his hands to close tightly.

"Mr. Summers was sure a good prophet," he rejoined.

"Better than I knew——"

The altercation was interrupted by a vivid flash of lightning and a deafening peal of thunder. The long-expected storm was breaking. Following hot on the thunder came rain—not ordinary rain, but a kind of

cloudburst which thrashed the river into fountains, and blotted out everything. Diana was silenced by fear. Another vivid flash of lightning lit up the place.

"The dogs—they're loose," said Jim.

He donned a sou'-wester coat and hat, opened the door and went out into the storm. The dogs were wailing outside the kennel, already drenched and miserable. He let them in and gave vent to some of his pent up feelings by rubbing them all vigorously with a dry cloth.

"Good boys!" he said as he dried them. "You seem to be the only pals I've got—you and a copper-knob. Gee, this is some storm!"

He went back into the house to find Diana sitting away from the window—terrified by the storm. He wanted to comfort her, but felt that she would not appreciate any advances of that nature on his part. It seemed part of her programme to misinterpret his motives. So he merely stayed there until the worst had passed, and then went into the store and helped the industrious Birdseye to grade hundreds of pelts that had recently been brought in by the hunters.

"Food nearly all gone," said Birdseye. "Indians buy big lot tea and beans. Soon you go to Fairborn, boss?"

"Aye," said Jim. "I'll lay in a new supply in a day or two."

Birdseye held up a skin for Jim to see.

"Not good," he said. "Next time I tell big chief no give good food for bad skins."

Jim did not reply. His heart was not in his work now. This wife of his was interfering with his business. It was quite impossible to carry on in normal fashion while she was straining at the leash—rebuking him with her

eloquent yet beautiful eyes, locking her door at nights as if she feared molestation.

Only seven days had passed, and there were three hundred and sixty-five in one year. In that time no progress had been made. On the contrary, things had got worse. She had selected one of the dogs as her companion and went long walks with it while Jim laboured. He began to envy that dog.

It was not that he had not tried to show her that he sympathised with her—to make it clear that he did not expect her to regard everything as part and parcel of Paradise. But all his attempts were met with a frigid silence, resistance that was sometimes worse than her castigations. In turn he was becoming silent—silent and painfully meditative. Could it last much longer? One of them had to give up or life would not be worth living at all.

Arguing with himself, he struck the idea that perhaps he had not given her much of a chance. There was Fairborn only twenty miles away, and in Fairborn was a cinema, a hotel and restaurant, and other men and women. There was also a big stores where pretty and useful things could be purchased. Soon he must take the canoe down the river and bring back the merchandise he needed for trading purposes. Diana might be glad of a change. Moreover, it would be far better than leaving her alone in the house, for it was quite impossible to make the return journey on the same day.

He decided to put this to her, but was prevented from doing so at once by the arrival of a band of Indians who brought in a fairly good collection of skins. The current price of all pelts were posted up in the storeroom, but

they had to be checked, and this took time. Then followed the tally and the trading. Some of the payment was taken in cash, but the larger portion was worked out in kind. Small gramophones, watches, ammunition, tea, tobacco, beads and other trinkets changed hands, and it was very late in the evening when the merry party left for their camping grounds, to gladden the eyes of wives and children with the results of the chase.

"That clears us right out," said Jim to Birdseye. "I'll sure make that trip to-morrow."

"Big storm not finish," said the weather-wise Indian. "Him come again soon."

Jim went into the sitting-room, and found that Diana was not there. She had apparently gone to bed—without eating. In order to ask her about the proposed trip, he went to her room and tapped on the door.

"Who is it?" she demanded.

"Me," growled Jim. "I want to speak to you."

"Not now," she replied. "To-morrow."

"But it's about to-morrow. Come—I won't keep you a few minutes."

"I'm in bed," she replied in tones of finality. "It must wait until to-morrow."

Frowning, he went into the kitchen and rapidly cooked himself a meal. While he was eating it the circular storm came round again. The rain was not repeated but there were many violent crashes of thunder and brilliant lightning. But he regarded this display as nothing compared with the storm that existed between Diana and himself. The locked door—the refusal to see him. These were humiliating enough.



Diana had found it impossible to get to sleep. The combination of jangling nerves and the increasing storm kept her tossing from side to side. When she did close her eyes for a few minutes it was only to have tantalising dreams of the past when she had been a free woman, and the envy of many of her own sex. How they would laugh at her now could they only see her!

By midnight the storm was overhead again. Every crash of thunder shook the house to its foundation, and the lightning was more terrifying still. The bombardment seemed to terminate in one awful reverberating crash, and she breathed a sigh of relief when there was no repetition. The next roll she heard was faint and far away, and there was no more lightning.

She was just falling into a doze when there came a rap on the door. She remembered Jim's earlier call and wondered what excuse he had now to entice her out of bed.

"Who is it?" she called.

"Me?"

The answer came in a curious voice—Jim's voice, but somewhat strained.

"Why—why do you worry me?" she complained.

"I—want see you—quick!"

To her dismay she heard the handle turn noisily. This had not happened on the earlier occasion and it caused her to wince. Then while she was wondering if he had gone away she heard a thump and a groan. Then silence. Alarmed, she got out of bed, slipped on a kimono, and cautiously opened the door. There was a light in the passage, coming from Jim's bedroom, and just outside her door was Jim, lying in a pool of blood and striving to

get on to his feet. She glanced at his left arm and saw that it was spurting blood, and that he was trying to stem the flow with a bandage.

"Jim!" she gasped.

"It was—tomahawk—fell from wall—over bed. Try to——"

He slipped back again into a sitting position, incapable of speech. She realised in a flash that her unworthy fears had brought about a serious state of affairs. All revulsion went now. Quickly she knelt beside him, faced the awful gash in his arm, and got to work with the bandage. The bleeding was stemmed at last, and it brought a little cry of intense relief from her lips. She tried to drag him into her room, but he was too big a weight. While she was debating how to get at Birdseye, Jim opened his eyes, gazed at his neatly bandaged arm, and then at her.

"Thanks!" he said. "I couldn't do it with one hand. Sorry to knock you up. Guess I can manage now."

To her surprise he got on to his feet, and then groped his way into his bedroom. She went back into her own room, with a strange little quiver at her heart. It was her first act of service to him—and it had the effect of calming her to a miraculous degree. Later she slept with ease—and quite forgot to lock the door.

CHAPTER NINE

DIANA rose early the next morning, and found that spell of bad weather had cleared up. The air was sweet and fresh again, and she experienced a pleasant reaction in herself. She imagined that Jim would still be in bed, in view of his accident, but she found him up, gazing at the magnificent scene across the river. His injured arm was now in a sling, and she got the impression that it was worrying him.

"Jim," she said.

He turned round, and gave her a smile.

"I came to—see to your arm. You shouldn't have got up."

"It's all right," he replied. "I managed to get it into a sling. Been bleeding a bit—but nothing much."

"Let me see."

He displayed the bandaged arm with some reluctance, and she was horrified to observe that the bandage was stained in several places. Evidently he had spent a dreadful night rebandaging it at intervals.

"Why didn't you tell me?" she demanded.

"Tell you—what?"

"That it was bleeding again. It looks—terrible. You must see a doctor."

"Yep, I'm waiting for him now," he said. "Birdseye has gone to get a needle and some gut."

"You mean that Birdseye is going to—to sew up the wound?" she gasped.

"Sure! That won't be a new experience for him. When you're born in places like this you have to learn a bit of every trade. He'll soon put me right."

It brought home to her more than ever their chronic isolation. If it was like that now what would it be like when winter came, and the river was frozen. Jim seemed to take it philosophically enough, but to her it was tragic.

Birdseye appeared with a needle and some fine gut. He, like Jim, was perfectly calm. To them this was quite an ordinary incident—a part of their primitive existence.

"Better do it here—in the sunshine," said Jim. "Yank out a table and chair."

While Birdseye went for these Diana fidgeted nervously.

"Can I—help at all?" she asked.

He hesitated, and then shook his head.

"But I want to."

"It won't be a nice looking business."

"All the same——!"

"Well, if you could fix me up with a clean bandage I'd be very glad."

She nodded and went into the house. In a drawer she found some old linen, and from this she fashioned a quite respectable bandage. When she returned to the verandah Birdseye had started on his task. Jim was sitting in the chair, gazing at an old magazine while Birdseye worked deftly with the needle and gut. She felt she wanted to avert her eyes, but was reluctant to display her horror.

She saw the needle enter the brown flesh, and then the strong fingers of the Indian drawing the edges of

the wound together. She felt sick for a few seconds, but then recovered. Jim went on reading. She could not detect even a wince in his countenance. At last the fourth and last stitch was put in.

"Good now," said Birdseye. "Him heal fine—yes."

"Thanks!" said Jim.

It was Diana's turn now. She bathed the blood from the arm, and then fastened her bandage around it. Jim raised the injured limb and stretched it.

"Fine!" he said.

"You had better use the sling for a bit," she suggested.

"I'm O.K."

"But you must—please."

"All right."

No sooner was breakfast over than he was at work again, on a job that could be done with one hand only. Birdseye commenced making the house tidy, but was called away to trade with some Indians who brought in many skins. Her conscience smote her as she gazed at the half-finished housework. A few minutes later she was busy at the wash-up place, scouring grease from dishes, and turning up her delicate nose.

Never in her life had she engaged in such work, and it took a lot of will-power to overcome her violent aversion. She did it, she argued, to kill time. It was now just a question of killing time until Jim came to his senses. But as the work proceeded and tidiness was won out of chaos, there was a sneaking sense of pleasure in her breast. It amazed her to discover how quickly the time had flown, and how satisfying it was to look upon the results of her own toil.

Round about noon Jim came in, carrying two very

fine fishes. He laid them on the kitchen table and pointed to their fine body markings.

"Got 'em with worms," he said. "Of course they're fresh, and not quite so good as salt-water fish, but the quality isn't too bad. Where's Birdseye?"

"He has been trading all morning."

"Then who——?"

He stopped as his glance took in the exceptional tidiness of the place, and she turned her head away, wanting no thanks for something she had accomplished merely to please herself. Jim compressed his lips and went out to Birdseye.

The Indian came in later and dealt with the fish and the potatoes which were to accompany it. In a few minutes he had them ready for frying. She took it all in while pretending to be immersed in a magazine.

It was the start of her domestic education. Little by little she found herself learning things—sometimes from Jim and sometimes from Birdseye. The days passed quickly enough, but the evenings were awful. Between herself and Jim hung constantly the shadow of the past—the memory of their relationship. She argued that she was doing her part now—all that he was justified in expecting of her. She had taken over the cooking, and most of the cleaning. Meals were served punctually, and in improved conditions. Always there was a clean tablecloth, and highly polished china. When meals were ready she banged the gong on the verandah, and this unfliningly brought Jim in from work—wherever he was.

But the changes were merely external. Jim believed that any advances from him would be deeply resented,

and he was far too proud to give her an opening that would permit her to humiliate him with her tongue.

Yet he was not displeased with progress so far as it had gone. He still believed that time would heal the wound in her pride. On thinking things over he came to the conclusion that he was not giving her any kind of relaxation. So far she had never left Eagle Fork. It might be a pleasant change for her to go down to Fairborn, where there were shops and people, and some acquaintances of his own.

There was an excellent opportunity to bring this about, for it was necessary for him to lay in a new supply of provisions and stores. His arm was now well enough to cause him no inconvenience, and he decided to make the trip at once.

"I've got to make a trip to Fairborn," he said. "I have to get rid of my pelts periodically, also re-stock the place."

"How far is it?" she asked.

"Twenty miles—down river. I can make it in the canoe in five hours, for the stream runs pretty swiftly. Coming back it takes nearer ten. That means staying the night there."

"When are you going?"

"To-morrow morning. Will you come along?"

The invitation came as a great surprise. She thought for a moment and then agreed to accompany him.

"Fine," he said. "If it's a sunny day you'll enjoy it. The river scenery is the best in a hundred miles."

The bigger of the two canoes was employed, for Jim had a fairly bulky cargo. She sat in the bows while he took the foremost seat, armed with the paddle. From

Eagle Fork the river ran swiftly, and in places the banks rose to almost mountainous heights. The experience was delightful. Not even the circumstances of her marriage could dull her quick appreciation of the beauty of the scenery. The water sang and bubbled under the canoe, and the bright sunshine painted the water the colour of the sky. Every mile had something new to reveal, and the sensation of smooth, effortless motion was a balm to her mind.

"Good, isn't it?" asked Jim.

"It is certainly beautiful."

"Sure! It gets you in winter just the same—when the water is turned to ice and that forest is laden down with snow. There's something about the stillness that gets right inside you, and makes you feel——"

He stopped as if he had suddenly realised it might be indiscreet to talk about the winter—to anticipate anything in the circumstances.

Diana noticed the sudden break. It caused her to look forward a little. She did not get the same thrill out of the prospect, for it meant greater isolation than now obtained. Moreover, she knew that winter lasted seven months—that even the little excursions she made would be rendered more difficult. Something must be done before that came about.

In due course they arrived in Fairborn. In her ignorance of up-country pioneer towns Diana had imagined a quite presentable centre of civilisation, but Fairborn was an eyesore. It was nothing—or less than nothing. The timber had been cut away from the river bank, and here and there were buildings in various stages of construction. A very rough kind of wooden

jetty was thrust out into the river, and to this a ramshackle steamboat was moored. It was the chief link between Fairborn and railhead, and Jim explained that it ran fortnightly until the end of October.

In the township itself were some dozen shops—a big store, a hotel and a very small cinema. But the drawback to the cinema was that films could only be changed once a fortnight, which, in view of the small population, meant that the cinema opened only twice weekly.

"Things will be different when we get roads and a railway," said Jim. "You'll see."

Diana devoutly hoped she would not "see"—since seeing might mean anything from five years to fifteen. While Jim did his business in the store she surveyed the town. There was some attempt at planning, for she could see pegs and kerbstones where streets would one day run, and many lots of building land were already taken.

Beyond the town were the mines, which promised to make Fairborn quite an important centre in the course of time. The valley on the south side was fully developed already, and dotted with farms, and the whole atmosphere of the place was one of expectancy. She made a few purchases and got into conversation with one or two of the tradespeople. They were all cheerful and marvellously optimistic. Jim's name was known to most people there, and she was the object of much interest when it was known that she was Mrs. Wallace.

But she was conscious of being terribly depressed. These people were not her people. She could not talk of crops, of live stock, nor of industry. What weighed upon her was the great distance that separated her from

civilisation as she knew it. Even Eagle Fork, with its stark loneliness, was preferable to this.

She met Jim later in the hotel by mutual arrangement. He had done his business, and was anxious to hear what she thought about Fairborn. She wanted to tell him what she really felt, but realised it would serve no useful purpose. Apparently he was incapable of understanding that a woman of refinement could not be transplanted into such soil.

"I've reserved a table," he said. "We'll eat and then go to the cinema. It's open to-night."

She was hungry and enjoyed the meal, for Jim certainly showed he had some culinary tastes. But all the time she wanted to get away from the newness of things. Their dining companions were mostly men—men who ate as if their interests were elsewhere, as indeed they were. The cinema made her laugh—not the film itself but the accidents which happened every few minutes. First the film was put in upside down, then it jammed, finally it broke.

"New to the job," explained Jim.

And then came night, and an embarrassing state of affairs. The hotel was full and the best that Jim had been able to do was to get a double bedroom. But it contained two single beds, and she was between the sheets a full hour before she heard the door open and Jim enter. He did not switch on the light but undressed by moonlight. And in the morning he was up and out long before she had opened her eyes.

Such was a specimen of her married life!

CHAPTER TEN

THE summer was passing. Diana saw the first leaves fall before the swift approach of winter. Very soon there were bare branches and many dead leaves under all but the evergreen trees, which bravely faced the change of the seasons.

One morning she looked from her window and saw the distant hilltops covered with snow. It was a vivid reminder of what was coming, and she felt her heart leap. Then came a spell of warmth again which surprised her.

"It's often like that," said Jim. "Just as if the old earth roused herself for a last effort, before she sleeps. When this is over the winter will come quick."

And come it did, almost in a night. The temperature went down and down. The wind seemed to freeze her to the marrow. Then the first snow flurry sprinkled the river banks, and Jim began to look to his sledges, which he knew would soon be needed.

As the thermometer fell, so did Diana's heart. All this time she had waited for Jim to give her her freedom, making it clear to him, she thought, that their lives were destined to run in different grooves. And he had not realised it—or refused to realise it.

She marvelled that he could be satisfied with things as they were. Was it merely patience, or an overweening regard for himself? Did he still believe he could

break her spirit completely? Was he waiting for the winter, with all its discomforts, to complete what incompatibility had started? As the days passed that old first feeling of revolt was re-born. It was even more keenly felt now, for it was clear to her that if she let another month pass there would be no chance of getting away from that snow-bound spot until spring came round.

She wrestled with the situation for many days, and it was a different woman now who faced it. Before she had opposed him with emotion—rage. Now she was more calm. Yes, calmness was a better weapon. She had learnt that from him. The time had arrived when the thing must be discussed—ere it was too late.

In the meantime Jim had been trying to size up the situation. He had noticed changes that were welcome enough. His wife now did her share of the work, and did it well. She had been amazingly quick in learning things, and the result was order where there had been chaos, comfort where there had been none. It was a real enough home now.

But these were merely external things. A paid woman who hated him might have brought about the same changes. The things that were lacking were just those things that really mattered. He saw her now, mistress of her emotions, and was more than ever baffled because she no longer permitted him to look into her heart. He himself was welcoming the winter. It would mean more time indoors—long evenings before the log fire. Perhaps that would bring about what he most desired—an understanding.

It was ironical that just when he was thinking that,

Diana chose to bring things to a head. She got him to herself one night after supper and revealed her hand.

"The winter is here, Jim."

"Wal, nearly," he corrected. "It ain't really cold——"

"I want to know—about us?"

"Us!"

"You and I. I have waited months for this—to let you see that I am not impulsive in this matter. Are you satisfied that what I told you before is true?"

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, you know. I told you months ago that I could never endure this life. You pretended to believe that I should get to like it. You suggested that if I did my share I should find it less irksome——"

"I didn't——"

"I don't blame you for saying that. It was justified—then, but not now."

"You've done marvellously," he conceded warmly.

"Thank you. I decided to give it a chance, and I am now able to publish the result."

"Wal?"

She shook her head.

"It's no use, Jim. I don't intend to go on with it. The thought of spending the winter here appals me. My very soul is craving for release from these conditions. I want you to take me to some place where I can get to the railway."

"You don't mean that?" he asked in a hoarse voice.

"I do. This is not the impulse of a moment, but the result of months of thought. I want to go back to my own people."

64 THE MAN FROM PEACE RIVER

She watched his face, and saw it change swiftly through varying emotions as his mind worked, and she was surprised that he should not have anticipated this new appeal—which presumably he had not.

"Well?" she asked, after a long silence.

"I'll think it over."

"You must be quick. I do not want to be caught here by the winter."

"Yep, I'll think it over," he repeated heavily.

He was thinking it over, arguing for and against her interminably when something happened that swung the pendulum in the wrong direction. Diana had written to her father, and had received a reply about a fortnight before. Jim had never known what she had written nor what her father had replied, but on the following morning he saw the letter in question. It had blown from Diana's room into the passage. He picked it up, and could not help seeing what was written on the back page. It ran :

"... I can read between the lines, my dear. It is clear you realise your dreadful mistake. I advise you to leave him, and let him take what action he likes. Wire me if you need financial help. Summers tells me that the fellow is a blustering adventurer and——"

He removed his glance from the bold writing, and put the letter back in her room, under a book. So that was what they thought of him! He remembered Summers—and the circumstances which had led up to the quarrel between Summers and Diana. In all probability the fellow still loved Diana, and she——

It was not pleasant to follow that line of thought. Here were the plain facts. She wanted to go home, and at home were Summers and her father, and all her amused scandal-mongering friends. Not one of them loved her as he loved her, and yet she preferred them.

"Why should I?" he murmured. "Why?"

When at last he was compelled to come to a decision, he realised that in his subconscious mind the decision had already been made.

"It's no use, Di," he said. "We have got to see the thing through."

"What does that mean?" she demanded.

"I want you to stay—here."

"You mean you intend to keep me here?" she retorted.

"I mean this is our home."

"Yours, but not mine. I had hoped you would come to your senses in time, but that does not appear to be the case. I do not intend to stay, and shall make my own plans."

It was two days later when her resolution was put to the test. She was in the store room when she heard a chugging noise from the river. She knew it was the "Dominion"—the steamer which she had seen at Fairborn. Birdseye was sorting out pelts, but the noise of the steamer caused him to gaze through the window.

"Make last trip this season," he said.

"The last trip! How long will it stay at Fairborn?" she asked as casually as possible.

"Two days, mistress—then he go back to Charlestown, and rest long while."

She remembered that Charlestown was the place from

which she and Jim had started after the motor ride from Edmonton, and she recalled having seen the steamer there.

"Does she take passengers, or only freight?" she asked.

"Sometimes captain he take passengers—from Fairborn. Plenty room coming back."

She said no more, but watched the steamer round the big bend and disappear from view. The sight of this connection with the civilised world had given her an idea, and it rankled in her mind all that evening. Jim had practically refused to let her go, and she had warned him that she would make her own plans. Here was an opportunity that would not recur for a month—and a month was a terribly long time.

That night she got little sleep. All the time she was thinking of the steamer—and the canoe which would take her down to Fairborn in a few hours. All she needed was a suitcase, and money. There was abundant money in the house, but this she could not bring herself to use. As an alternative there was the little jewellery she owned personally. It could doubtless be sold at Fairborn for sufficient money to get her to the coast. There she could cable home for more.

In the silent and desperate hours of the morning she made up her mind. Birdseye had said the steamer would stay two days. That meant it would leave on the morrow. The night was better suited for her project—after Jim had gone to bed. There would be a moon, and she was now quite capable of handling the canoe.

The next day passed uneventfully. Jim tried to get into conversation with her, but her responses were not

such as to encourage him. In her heart she began to be sorry for him. How little she had given him! Yet she had warned him she had little to give. That evening she retired early, but in her room she packed the suitcase and listened intently. Outside it was brilliant moonlight, and from her window she could see the river flowing by—down to Fairborn. It seemed to be beckoning her.

At close upon eleven o'clock she stole from her room into the sitting-room. It had only just occurred to her that some explanation of her absence was called for. She was about to pencil a note when she realised that it might cause Jim to suspect her whereabouts. Suppose he waited for the steamer and stopped it? Even then she was not bound to come back. She could appeal to the captain, who would surely protect her. Yes, the note was necessary.

She took a little time over its composition, because she wanted to lighten the blow as much as possible. She wanted to make him realise that she knew his intentions were good, but that she was unable to fall in with his plans. At last she finished it to her satisfaction and placed it on the table, taking a vase from the mantelpiece in order to prevent it from blowing away. Here calamity stepped in. The vase slipped from her fingers and smashed to pieces on the floor.

Gasping with fright, she made for the door, but as she reached it Jim appeared from his room. He was fully dressed and had evidently not been to bed at all. He took in the situation at a glance and forced her back into the room. Then he lighted the lamp and faced her.

"What does this mean, Di?"

"I'm going. I told you——"

She stopped as he picked up the note and read it. When he glanced at her again his face was drawn.

"Now you know," she said. "I'm going—now."

She made for the door, but he stood before it, opposing her.

"I can't let you do that," he said heavily.

"My mind is made up. It's no use trying to dissuade me. Stand aside—please!"

But still he stood there. Despite the note—her utterances, it seemed, he still did not quite understand—did not quite realise that she was capable of leaving him like this. Overborne by emotion, she failed to appreciate this, and saw only the jailer. By the side of her was a table, and on this was his revolver. She snatched it up and brandished it.

"You shan't stop me," she panted. "If you don't stand——"

Jim's glance went to the revolver. To his amazement it was cocked, though how it had become so he could not imagine. It needed but the slightest pressure on the trigger to fire it. Afraid that she might do herself some injury, he made a grab for her wrist. The movement brought her round, and the striker of the revolver was caught against the end of his sleeve. There was a reverberating report, a small cloud of smoke, and then a thump as the heavy weapon dropped from her fingers to the floor.

She saw Jim, no longer obstructing her, but leaning heavily against the table, while one big hand was placed against his shoulder. He seemed to be smiling—somewhat derisively. She made a dart past him, reached the

door and ran out into the passage and then into the moonlight, with the suitcase clutched tightly. It was but a hundred yards to the landing stage, and the canoe was moored close to it. She got aboard, placed the suitcase at her feet, took the long paddle, and then started down the river. The banks slipped by, and when after a few minutes she looked behind her Eagle Fork trading post had vanished from sight.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

DIANA'S mind was a confused mass of thoughts as she floated down the river, merely using the paddle to guide the swift canoe. The magic moon was weaving a spell over everything, and she came to her senses to realise that it was bitterly cold. Here and there were patches of snow that had successfully resisted the day's sunshine, and amid the timber it lay deep.

The stiller water in small inlets was frozen, and frost glistened on the overhanging branches at the bends. She was brought to realise how late she had left things. Here was the raw edge of winter giving her a warning of what would happen ere long. She visualised the steamboat, and then remembered she had no money. But her rings could be sold or pawned, and when she reached some civilised part a few hours would suffice to get some money cabled to her from home.

Then, as her arms moved automatically, she began to get visions of the place she had left—that isolated home at Eagle Fork. She saw again Jim's big figure, his expression of amazement when he realised what she was about to do, and that queer stupefied look on his face when the revolver had gone off. This mental picture became more and more vivid as she reflected upon it. She seemed to see it much plainer than when it had been a fact. He was leaning against the table

with one big hand clapped to his right shoulder, and a smile on his face.

He could have stopped her. Why had he made no attempt? Why had he smiled like that and permitted her to pass? It wasn't—it couldn't be possible that the bullet had hit him? It had seemed to her that the barrel was turned upwards when the pistol went off. Oh, no, she was permitting herself to be scared by remote possibilities. He would have told her—surely he would have told her?

Such thoughts passed through her mind at lightning speed. She tried to check them—to concentrate on the future, the journey to the coast and her voyage to England. Her father would be pleased to see her. He would understand, and advise her on the right course to follow. But while she endeavoured to keep her mind on this trend of thought, the big figure of her husband stayed like a ghost. He seemed to be with her—in the canoe. The strange lighting and the unreal surroundings all helped out this illusion. She tried to fight it—to persuade herself that she was allowing herself to become the victim of a fear suggested by her imaginative mind. The firing of a revolver had started it all in her subconsciousness. There was no basis of truth behind it.

But still the fear stayed, and it increased when she entered a dark section of the river. The rock walls towered ever higher until the light of the moon was cut off. Now there were only stars—and how far away they seemed! Then again came the spell. She knew Jim was calling her—calling her back, and the voice that she heard was pain-racked.

Never in her life had she experienced such strange

emotions. While all her reason revolted against it, the intuitive part of her—so long repressed—whispered that it was true. Her hands trembled on the paddle, then she shook her head and drove the paddle deep into the water.

"It isn't possible," she muttered. "Why am I so afraid—why?"

Then the paddle remained still, while this amazing revulsion of feeling swept away every other consideration. She knew it was impossible to go until she could kill for ever the anxiety that was gnawing at her heart. She had come but four miles. She could go back, creep to the house and settle this terrible doubt. If it was but a baseless fear born of the darkness she could go on again. There would still be time. Yes, it had to be done!

She drove the paddle deep into the water, and brought the blade to a horizontal position to turn the canoe. The nose went round on a wide bend, and it was soon facing the opposite way. She paddled closer to the left bank to avoid the current, and then began to use her arms vigorously. Yard by yard she won a passage, and the exercise was good for her. Her half-frozen limbs began to thaw. Each stroke of her arms was more powerful than its predecessor. Again she was in the moonlight, with the snow-flecked woods passed to her rear. It was madness, she thought—coming back like this at the behest of a foolish fear.

Two hours passed and then the landing-stage at Eagle Fork loomed in sight. As a tribute to the cold, thin ice had formed around it since she had left it. The canoe only just succeeded in breaking through this, and she scrambled ashore. Now her heart was beating a tattoo.

She imagined she could hear it—thumping away in her breast.

She mounted the few steps hewn out of the rock, and looked towards the house. From the sitting-room a shaft of light came through a slit in the outer shutters. She was lured that way, the thin frozen snow creaking under her feet. At last she reached the window and peered through the shutter. What she saw caused a little cry of horror to escape her. Jim was lying by the door, half on his side, and on the floor was a pool of blood. She could see his face—the closed eyes, and the tight lips, also the two big hands that were clenched and bloody.

Stunned with horror, she stayed there a few seconds, and then ran wildly round to the door. Soon she was beside him, gazing round-eyed at the hideous wound in his shoulder, around which the blood had since congealed. With pallid face she felt his heart, and then withdrew her hand with a pitiful cry, for she could discern no beat.

“Birdseye! Birdseye!”

Her call to the Indian rang out piercingly in the stillness. There was no response, so she ran wildly to the rear of the building where Birdseye was accustomed to sleep. She found him in an old shed and was not surprised that he had not heard the report of the revolver nor her cry for help, for the place was lined deep with animal pelts, which would absorb all sound from without.

“Birdseye!”

The Indian sat up and recognised her shape against the moonlit exterior.

“Mistress want Birdseye?” he lisped.

"Yes—the master—he has met with an accident. You must come to him—quickly!"

Birdseye left nothing to be desired in the way of rapid movement. She saw him reach Jim and bend over him. A curious little hiss left his lips, and he turned his dark face up to her.

"Who do this—hey?"

"It was an accident," she said. "Is he—tell me, is he alive?"

"Birdseye think so."

"Think so! Oh, what are we to do?"

"Birdseye take him to bed—then we see. You go—make ready."

She scarcely realised that the Indian was taking command of the situation. No longer was he the servant. In his expression was marked contempt for her, but fortunately she was too distressed to be aware of it. To Birdseye she counted as nothing, for he had observed many things during the last few weeks. It was the "boss" who mattered.

While Birdseye handled the heavy body with care, she made Jim's bed ready for him. Birdseye staggered in, waved her aside, and deposited his burden on the bed.

"I undress him," he said. "You go—make water warm, and bring here."

She reacted to his instructions like an automaton. In such a situation she found herself completely overshadowed. Birdseye knew about these things. She knew nothing. All that mattered at the moment was the saving of a life.

When she entered the bedroom with a basin of warm

water and a swab, Birdseye had got his beloved master undressed, and was leaning over him, lifting an eyelid.

"He live," he said bluntly.

"Thank God!"

"Now mistress go bed. Birdseye sit up."

"No," she replied forcefully. "I am going to stay—here. I want to help."

Birdseye glared at her, and produced a knife with a very thin blade.

"What are you going to do?" she gasped.

"Boss have bullet there. Birdseye take him out. You go to bed, hey?"

She paled, but shook her head.

"Not good for you to see."

"I am going to stay."

He accepted this as final, and proceeded with his grim business. She could not but admire the amazing skill and deftness of the brown fingers. When at last the bullet was reached, she had to hold her breath to prevent herself from crying out. The bullet was exposed at last, but with it came a flood of blood, and a plug was used to stop the flow. Then came the swab and long lengths of bandages.

"All done," said Birdseye. "Now I stay here with him."

But at last she had taken control of her emotions, and her duty for the moment was sun-clear. Neither Birdseye nor anyone else was going to prevent her from carrying out what she perceived to be an absolute obligation to Jim.

"I am going to stay with him," she said determinedly.

"You have done well, Birdseye, but now you must go. I will watch him. If I need you I will come for you."

He faced her with flashing eyes, but she met them bravely and finally subdued him.

"I go," he said. "But boss he save my life, and I not let him die, you understand?"

"I understand."

He slouched out and left her alone with the man she had married, and all but killed. She thanked God now for that strange intuition—that urge from the unknown which had brought her back to him. But for that he might have lain there until morning, when Birdseye would undoubtedly have found a corpse. Even now, there was no doubt an element of gravity. He had lost quarts of blood, and the future depending upon his recuperative powers. A less powerful and healthy man might not have won the battle so far.

She took a seat by the bed, and strove to interest herself in an old magazine, while every other minute her eyes went to him. His breathing was noticeable now. She could see the bedclothes rise and fall regularly, though no sound left his lips.

It was in the early hours of the morning that he stirred, and then became conscious. She saw the eyes open and stare past her. Then the focus shortened and she knew that he was aware of her presence. The lips moved, but before he could speak she was close beside him bidding him be still.

"But—I—must know," he said. "What am I doing here?"

"There—was an accident."

"Accident! I can't remember— There's something wrong with my chest, isn't there? It—hurts."

"Yes, but please don't talk yet. Won't you try to sleep again?"

"I don't feel like sleep," he complained. "And yet—"

His eyes closed as if to belie his words. She became afraid, for there was a curious pallor beneath the tanned skin of his face. Why were things like this? Why was there not a doctor at hand—someone who knew exactly what to do? She feared this lapse into semi-consciousness, and she paced the room in her stockinged feet, wringing her hands together, painfully aware of her shortcomings in such emergency.

But sunrise brought a little relief, for again Jim became conscious, and clear-headed. She knew by the way that he looked at her that all the incidents which had led up to this situation were in process of being reconstructed. At last he spoke.

"So you came back?"

"Yes," she replied chokingly.

"I guess you didn't understand—when you went. I didn't know it was so bad or I'd have told you."

"Jim!"

"Wal?"

"You—you don't think I meant—I intended——?"

He smiled and shook his head.

"It was my fault—leaving that gun about. It was always light on the trigger. Where's Birdseye?"

"In his hut—I think. But he knows. He was here some hours ago."

"Did he take out the bullet?"

She nodded.

"Good. Handy guy, Birdseye. There ain't much he can't do. I'd like to talk to him."

"Not now," she begged. "You are terribly weak. A little while ago I thought— Please don't try to talk with Birdseye. We can manage."

"All right," he said. "You're right. Talking does seem to use up a lot of breath."

Later he slept again, and she was able to snatch a little rest herself. When she awoke the sun was fairly high, and the landscape was well illuminated. But there was an absence of heat in the sunshine, and gusts of wind that were bitterly cold. During the night the ice near the landing-stage had reached out farther into the stream. Soon she knew it would join hands with that on the opposite bank, and then—

Her glance was drawn downstream, and she started to perceive the steamboat making up-river towards her winter quarters. Twelve hours ago there had been every prospect of her being aboard and bound for freedom. Now she stood and watched it go past. The skipper waved his hand in a parting salute. She waved back—waved until the noisy little craft had vanished, and only its engine could be heard.

The last chance had gone!

CHAPTER TWELVE

OVER four thousand miles away Diana's name was being used frequently in a hot discussion between various members of her family. It was on the occasion of the annual visit of her two elderly aunts to Sloane Square, where David Cunningham was leading a life of loneliness and chagrin.

Aunt Mary was short and plump, Aunt Ethel tall and slim, but psychologically there was no difference between them. Full of family pride, they were both convinced that Diana had spilled an enormous blot on the family scutcheon.

"It is quite beyond my comprehension," said Aunt Mary. "The idea of her marrying without your consent, while you were abroad, and never even advising us of the fact. David, do you intend to sit still and do nothing?"

Cunningham gnawed the end of his military moustache.

"I intended to go out after her," he said. "But I'm not fit enough. The beastly malaria has got me again. Even now I ought to be in bed."

"But this is no marriage. It is nothing more or less than a case of abduction. The child didn't know what she was doing. Her last letter makes that clear. Something must be done—and at once. Where is this place—Eagle Fork?"

In the most God-forsaken spot—up the Peace River. There is no railroad—nothing but a trail, or a river route. It is too late now to do anything. The place will be snowed up very shortly.”

“Poor, foolish girl!” said Aunt Ethel. “She used to laugh at the old way of life, but there was at least some sense in it. This modern craze for freedom and independence is poison. David, what are you going to do?”

While Cunningham was cudgelling his brains, Summers was announced. Both the aunts knew the aspirant to Diana’s hand, and were aware that he was the only person among them who had seen the man who was responsible for this terrible state of affairs.

“Do ask him in,” suggested Aunt Mary. “He at least has seen the fellow.”

Summers was shown in. He bowed to the two ladies and made an appropriate remark. At this sort of thing he was a past master, and he made an immediate appeal to their vanity and snobbishness.

“We were discussing Di,” said Cunningham.

“Have you heard from her again?”

“No.”

“A scandalous state of affairs, Mr. Summers,” said Aunt Ethel. “I simply can’t understand how it all came about. Surely she couldn’t have fallen in love with this—this cowboy?”

Summers shook his head.

“I can explain,” he said. “She and I had a little tiff. She imagined herself aggrieved, and in order to score off me, pretended to be in love with this fellow. I think she committed herself without intending to, and the brute took her at her word. You know how stubbornly

proud she is. Rather than beg for quarter she went through with the business—to her everlasting regret.”

“What sort of a man was he?”

Summers laughed scornfully.

“A bull in a china shop,” he said. “Doing a lot of cheap cinema stuff for her benefit. I have no doubt he drew marvellous pictures of his palace at Peace River, and that she swallowed at least fifty per cent. of it. But now she knows different. Her letters make it obvious that she realises her terrible mistake.”

“Can nothing be done to rid her of this man?”

Summers shrugged his shoulders, and looked at Cunningham. Cunningham shook his head wearily. It was true he felt ill, and totally unfit for a trip into the snow-bound wilderness.

“I think she could be brought home,” said Summers after a brief pause.

Three pairs of eyes were turned on him.

“It depends whether you think she should come home,” he added.

“Come home!” echoed Cunningham. “Why, of course she should come home. I am prepared to go to any expense to rid her of this—incubus. What did you mean?”

“You are unwell?”

“I am,” admitted Cunningham. “I have a temperature of a hundred and one, and ought to be in bed.”

“Then why not tell Diana this?”

“What do you mean—exactly?”

“It would be no great exaggeration to say you were ill—in fact, desperately ill.”

The two ladies looked at each other. They would have

been appalled at the idea of being party to a lie, but a slight exaggeration was not quite the same thing. In fact, they could now see that dear David was indeed ill—and for all they knew it might be serious.

"You think she would come if she received such a telegram?" asked Cunningham.

"There is every possibility—and there is just time for her to get through before the winter sets in. While she is here she might realise more fully the folly of her action, and take steps accordingly. It is only an idea, but I think it is worth while considering."

He spoke as if he had no great personal interest in the scheme. The chief idea was to get Diana out of the sphere of influence of her husband—permit her a breathing space, so to speak. They must decide if such an action were justified by the circumstances.

Late that night the relatives did decide. The cablegram was sent in Aunt Mary's name. True, the good lady hesitated before dispatching it, but she salved her conscience by the thought that she was doing the right thing for her impulsive niece—a thing that Diana would in time be grateful for. And so the cablegram was handed in.

* * * *

Diana, with her hands full, now gave no thought to anything but her patient. She had to undo the harm she had unwittingly done, and at the same time to see that the business at the trading post did not suffer unduly.

Within two days Jim had definitely turned a corner, but there was much leeway to be made up, and it was obvious that he would have to rest for a considerable

time. The long-threatened, permanent change in the weather came at last. A semi-blizzard gathered up in the mountains and brought with it thick snow.

"He come stay now," informed Birdseye.

For twenty-four solid hours the snow continued. When it finally ceased everything was covered deep. The sun re-appeared and lit up the utterly changed landscape. Diana had to admit there was something magical about it. Each tree was a masterpiece of Nature's art, and the colour was bewildering.

On top of the storm came deathly calm and intense cold. Luckily Jim had kept the wood supply up to its maximum, and the central heating equipment was able to be put on at full blast. Birdseye now hid his former nakedness with furs, and Diana found it necessary to revolutionise her own garb.

She scarcely dared think about the weather—to reflect that these conditions would prevail for at least six months. A week or so might have been enjoyable, but half a year——! She saw Birdseye tinkering with the two sledges which had been dragged from a shed. In future these would represent the only means of transport.

Then, while she was making a worthy attempt to play the part of nurse-cum-housewife, a messenger came up the river from Fairborn. He had a telegram for her, on which there was considerable portage to pay. She opened it, while he waited to see if there was any reply, and started as she read the bad news:

"Your father dangerously ill. Advise you come at once.—Aunt Mary."

It was something she had never dreamed of, and it

represented a problem most difficult to solve. In any case, it was no use the messenger waiting. An immediate reply was quite out of the question. In addition, she had missed that last steamer. She dispatched the man and went indoors to think the matter over.

Two persons needed her—her father and Jim, and she thought that her obligation to each of them was very similar. Had Jim been well—had he even met with a simple accident, she might have moved heaven and earth to get to her father, but she took the blame for Jim's condition. To leave him as he now was was quite impossible. The only thing to do was to cable back and explain the circumstances. Birdseye would have to run down the river.

When she went in to her patient with the beef-tea which she had made for him he detected that something was wrong. Her hand shook as she fed him, and her whole being was expressing her agitation. He inquired if she were unwell, and she said she was not. He pondered over this after she had gone, but could not arrive at a solution.

Later Birdseye came in to ask some question in regard to the business. He omitted to close the door properly when he went out, and a slight breeze blew it wide open again. There was a long stick close to the bed, which Jim used when he wanted to call Diana. He took the stick and tried to close the door with it. Then he noticed that a piece of paper had blown in—and it did not take him many moments to recognise it as a telegram. He crept out of bed and retrieved it, closing the door at the same time.

The message caused him to open his eyes. So that was

the cause of Diana's agitation! He wondered how she would respond to it. There was nothing to prevent her going now. The way was yet open. If she went down to Fairborn she could find a man who would pilot her to the railroad. Most probably she had sent a reply by the messenger.

At tea-time Diana came in with some weak tea, and some toast. As she put the tray down she saw the telegram lying on the table—writing uppermost. She shot a quick glance at Jim, and met his challenging eyes.

"It blew in," he explained. "I couldn't help reading it. I'm sure sorry."

"He may recover."

"You—you didn't reply?"

"No. I shall send Birdseye down to-morrow—with an explanation."

"You mean—you ain't going?"

"How can I?"

"You think you can't get through?"

She shook her head.

"I mean—I've got you on my hands. My father will understand. He must be made to understand."

Jim held his breath, and reflected that he knew nothing about women, and never would know anything. Now that the need for her going was greater than ever she was erecting obstacles. It helped to give him a better insight to her character. Cold and unresponsive she might be—but she certainly had her own ideas about playing the game.

"It says he is dangerously ill," he said.

"I know."

"If something should happen——"

"Oh, don't!" she cried. "I can't bear it."

"You haven't got to bear it," he said. "You're going."

"What do you mean?"

"You're going to your father—who needs you just now. Listen, there is a man in Fairborn named Dawson—Ned Dawson. He has a good motor-boat that can put up ten miles an hour against the stream. He'll still have time to get you to within a motor ride of Edmon-ton and be back again before the river closes. Take the canoe early to-morrow morning——"

"But I can't leave you——"

"I'm all right. This hole is mending fine. And there's Birdseye. That copper-knob won't allow me to be wanting much. You do as I say, or I'll get out of bed right now, and put on my clothes."

"Jim!"

"There's plenty of cash in the box in the safe. You'll find the key in that drawer. Take what you want, and make the going."

She did not attempt to protest any more, for it was clear that he really meant what he said, and that the offer was made in the circumstances amazed her.

"Send Birdseye to me," he said. "I'll tell him what's in the wind."

The situation was explained to Birdseye, who listened to it calmly. In fact, he seemed rather pleased, for so far he had not a great opinion of the boss's wife.

"Birdseye know what do," he said to Diana. "Him look after post many times. You pack grip—I take him canoe."

She began to pack the things she needed, with her

brain in a whirl. Everything seemed inextricably mixed up. He was letting her go—bidding her go—with no sort of guarantee that she would ever come back.

The moment of parting came very early the next morning, while the sun was throwing its first amber glow over the snow. She gave her bag to Birdseye, and then went in to Jim, who was wide awake and sitting up in bed. He gazed at the fur-clad figure somewhat wistfully.

“Ready?”

“Yes.”

“I hope you’ll get there to find he ain’t so bad as the telegram makes out. Take care of yourself.”

“I will,” she said.

“Then good-bye!”

He held out his hand, and she took it and pressed it warmly. Her eyes began to smart. She knew that if she lingered the tears that were gathering would betray her real feelings.

“Good-bye, Jim,” she cried hoarsely. Then she went to the door and looked back at him. “Get well again—and expect me back as soon as possible.”

She heard a deep sigh as she closed the door on him.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

DIANA's voyage to England was memorable enough. storms and rough seas were encountered, and for the first two days she suffered misery. As the ship approached England she began to get worried about her father. She had already wired to say she was on her way, hoping that the news would have some beneficial effect, but that was days ago, and anything might have happened.

When the ship was within a day of Liverpool she sent a marconigram, asking for news. The reply came some hours later, informing her that her father was considerably improved. This came as a great relief, and her mind then turned in the other direction. She wondered how Jim was getting on in that lonely shack on the Peace River? It was curious how distance lent enchantment. She dwelt upon her last sight of the place—the great half-frozen river, the pines under snow, the amazing clearness of the air, and the bite of the cold on her cheeks. It did not seem half so terrible now, compared with the misty, turbulent seas and the clinging damp.

Then she recalled that brief little scene, when she had said good-bye to Jim. Why had it affected her so deeply—after all she had vowed? After all, they were nothing to each other. Their marriage had been the merest farce. She had made it clear to him that it was but a marriage in name. And yet there was within her a kind of vacuum

—a subtle yearning—that was difficult to understand.

When the ship finally berthed, she was surprised to find that Summers was on the quay. He waved to attract her attention as she was passing across the gangway, and then forced his way through the crowd.

“Diana!”

She took his outstretched hand, but her first thought was about her father.

“How is he, Frank?”

“Much better. I thought I had better come along—to help you with your baggage.”

“There isn’t much,” she replied. “But it is very good of you. Tell me about father.”

“Later. I want to get hold of your baggage as soon as possible. The boat train is waiting, and there is going to be a scramble for seats.”

At last they were fixed up with seats on the train, and a few minutes later the express steamed out—Londonwards. Diana gazed through the window and saw a sad-looking countryside. As at Peace River, the winter had come, but how different it was. She turned from her reflections to Summers.

“Now tell me everything. How long has father been ill?”

“About a month.”

“What is wrong with him?”

“Heart, I think—brought on by some bad attacks of his old complaint—malaria.”

“Is there any danger—now?”

“I think so.”

“But surely you must know. What does the doctor say?”

"He has got to be very careful."

"Is my aunt still with him?"

"Yes—your Aunt Mary."

It seemed very difficult to get any real details from him, and she wondered if he was hiding the truth from her—concealing the fact that her father was in a critical condition.

"Forget it—for the moment," he begged. "Tell me about yourself. Aren't you glad to be home—away from that appalling place where——?"

"Frank!"

"Well?"

"I don't want to discuss that—please."

"But surely——!"

"Not now."

To keep some sort of conversation going he lapsed into social gossip. She listened and made some comments, but somehow the news rang stale. She could not find much interest in the engagement of so-and-so, or Lady Bigwigs last supper party. And so at last they reached London, after a journey that had been boring in the extreme.

"Here we are!" said Summers. "I'll get a taxi."

Within half an hour Diana was outside the old house. Her heart was now beating furiously. She would not have been surprised to see the blinds lowered, but this was not the case, and she thanked God she was in time.

"I'll go now," said Summers. "I have an appointment, but I hope to see you later."

She nodded, and he drove away in the taxi, which he had kept waiting. The door opened and the butler welcomed her, and dealt with the luggage. Then Aunt

Mary sailed along the hall, and took her prodigal niece in a warm embrace.

"My dear—how good to see you!"

"Where is father?"

"In his old bedroom. But take your things off first."

"Oh, no. I must see him."

She hurried up the stairs, and tapped on the door of her father's room. He bade her enter, and she opened the door and stepped inside. Cunningham was lying in bed with his face turned towards her. She was relieved to find it was by no means as haggard as she had expected—that his cheeks were quite full and his eye bright.

"Diana!" he said. "Thank God!"

She kissed him fondly and then drew up a chair.

"You are much better?"

"Miles," he replied. "Your aunt has been an excellent nurse to me."

"But haven't you had a trained nurse?" she asked.

"No. I am old-fashioned. I prefer Mary. What sort of a trip did you have?"

"Oh, never mind about me. Tell me about your illness. What does the doctor say about you?"

His replies were very lame, and they caused her to ponder deeply. Later she left him and went to change her dress. All the time she was thinking rapidly. There was something unreal about it all. The house did not have that atmosphere that one would expect in the presence of serious illness. Where was the nurse that a doctor would have insisted on?

She went into the lounge, with a view to writing a letter to Jim. The writing-bureau was open, and she

sat down to pen an account of her voyage to the lonely man at Peace River. She pulled a sheet of note-paper from a pigeon-hole in the bureau. But she found it had been written on. It bore yesterday's date—in her father's handwriting.

This discovery came as a great shock to her. She sat still for a few minutes, and then rang the bell. The butler entered, and bowed. She asked him to bring some more note-paper, and when he brought it she put a question casually.

"Did my father use this desk yesterday?"

"I think so, miss—I beg pardon—ma'am."

She nodded and let him go. It seemed to her that the truth was out now, and it amazed her that she had never suspected that such a thing was possible. While she sat there, unable to write a word, Aunt Mary entered.

"Tea, dear. Where will you have it served?"

Diana swung round and faced her relative.

"You sent me a cablegram, Aunt Mary?"

"Yes—of course."

"You told me that father was dangerously ill?"

"Y-yes."

"Who told you to say that? Was it the doctor's opinion?"

"Well—not exactly. But it was obvious."

"You mean you brought me all the way from Western Canada without asking a medical opinion?"

"Your father wished to see you."

"But was he dangerously ill—was his life despaired of?"

Aunt Mary preferred to maintain silence, but she showed signs of distress.

"You needn't answer," said Diana. "I see it all now. It was just a mean trick. My father is in bed now, but he was here in this room yesterday, writing letters."

"My dear——!"

"It is true. If that cablegram had not been sent in your name I might have had doubts, but at least I believed you to be a truthful woman."

Aunt Mary prepared to go into battle. She experienced a burning desire to vindicate herself in her niece's eyes. She compressed her thin lips for a moment and then let forth.

"I did what I did for your sake," she said. "You nearly broke your father's heart, and disgraced the family name. Your letters made it clear that the man you married is a brute——"

"What!"

"He took you into the wilderness—away from everything that means anything to a decent woman. All this time you have been pining to be home. Your father would have come and fetched you, but he was not fit enough to make the journey. If I exaggerated, I did so to put an end to this folly."

"Put an end to it——!"

She was interrupted by Cunningham, who had heard the sound of altercation, and knew the plot was exposed. He entered the room clad in a dressing-gown, and closed the door behind him. Aunt Mary sighed and gave him the stage.

"Sit down, Diana, I want to talk to you," he said in his most serious tone of voice.

"I can hear just as well standing up," she replied. "You have played a miserable trick on me, father."

"Call it what you will, but hasn't it served its purpose?"

"In what way?"

"In releasing you from that man."

"You mean—my husband?"

"Yes. Here you are—home again, and there is no need——"

"Wait!" she cried. "Perhaps you don't know that when I left Jim he was seriously ill—genuinely ill. He needed me then, but when he heard that you were ill—desperately ill—he insisted that I should come at once, and gave me the money to get me here. Where he is lying ill there are no doctors, no nurses, no medicine. It's just a wooden shack in the middle of nowhere. He hasn't demanded much of me, and I haven't given him much. Yes, I have wanted to get away—have planned many times to escape. But if you think I am going to win my freedom by a trick you are mistaken."

"Diana! Think——"

"I don't need to think. I know that if I were to take advantage of this situation—get free of that life by the use of a contemptible lie, I should hate myself for ever."

"Is he the sort of man deserving of fine distinctions?" asked Cunningham scathingly.

"Whatever he may be he is the sort of man who would scorn to sink to a despicable lie to gain a point."

"Well, what do you intend to do?" asked Cunningham.

"Do? I am going back to him—as quickly as possible."

"You will do nothing of the sort."

"You mean——?"

"I mean I will do everything in my power to prevent it."

"Father," she begged, "do be reasonable. We are living in the twentieth century—not in the middle ages. I am a married woman, and my life is my own."

"You mean to defy me?"

"No. I mean that I cannot take a line of action which to me seems disgraceful."

"But why this sudden regard for a man who has undoubtedly regarded you as bag and baggage. He refused even to let you stay in England until I came home. Diana, why not be frank with me. You don't love him. You were carried away—induced to take a step which you are bound to regret eternally. Here is a chance to put the matter right. I will settle it for you."

"How?"

"In my own fashion. I think I could put up a proposition that would interest him."

"You mean—money?"

"Why not? Don't you think that possibility was in his mind when he took you all that way? Why do you imagine he let you come home. He is fooling you."

She was aghast at this horrible suggestion. For a moment she was on the verge of flaying him with her tongue, and then the funny side of it struck her, and she burst into laughter. Cunningham frowned.

"For God's sake stop!" he roared. "What is there to laugh about?"

"Everything," she panted. "Your amazing ignorance of men of Jim's calibre. You are incapable of understanding that type. Everything he possesses he has won by personal toil—won it out of the wilderness. I

guarantee he wouldn't trade you one item of the things he cherishes for the whole of your fortune."

"Very likely," he retorted, "but I am not asking him for something he cherishes, but something for which I am convinced he has little but contempt."

It was a merciless retort, and she felt it keenly. Fearful of letting this altercation develop into a vulgar quarrel, she begged to be excused and strode out of the room, to seek the peace and quiet of her bedroom.

That night an amazing thing happened. She was awakened by Aunt Mary, who told her that her father had had a stroke or something. The butler had been awakened by the violent ringing of the bell, and had gone to his master's bedroom to find him lying across the bed in a terrible condition. The doctor had been telephoned for, and was on his way.

Diana slipped on a kimona and hurried along the passage. She found her father being supported by the butler. His face was drawn on one side, and he appeared to be paralysed in all his limbs. A great wave of pity swept her breast. She called to him, tried to induce recognition into his staring eyes—but failed. Then came the doctor.

"A bad stroke," he said. "Serious, I am afraid."

For the rest of that night Diana sat in her room—waiting for the worst to happen. She could not overlook the irony of the situation. They had got her home on a false message, and now Fate had stepped in relentlessly to turn falsehood into truth.

On the following evening Cunningham passed away.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

At Eagle Fork the winter had settled in. The river was now frozen from shore to shore, and dog-teams had already trampled out a trail over the ice. Trading was still in progress, for the passing of summer did not put an end to hunting. The forests in the district were rich in fur-yielding animals, and blue fox, bear, wolves, and many other winter-roving animals were still to be had by the expert hunter, who laid his traps on the snow, and knew the ways of the wild.

Jim's wound was now healed, and save for an occasional ache he was able to forget all about it. A letter had come from Diana three days ago, and it informed him that her father had died from a paralytic stroke, and that she would be kept in England for some time in connection with the estate.

He had written back at once, telling her that he was fit again, and that the place seemed uncommonly lonely without her. The letter was brief, for he was afraid to dwell upon the affairs of the trading post. In his heart there remained a growing doubt. He had let her go, because it would have been inhuman to have done otherwise, but now she was among her friends again, and would probably be rich under her father's will. Was it likely she would come back to a place like this—a place she had openly said she hated?

There was a spectre in the picture, too—Summers.

That Summers still loved her was beyond doubting. To what extent was this man capable of influencing her? Would the call of society—the lure of theatres, the independence of wealth blank out for ever any memories she might have had of Eagle Fork? Was it reasonable to expect any woman to come back there, when life offered so many opportunities for pleasure?

These thoughts haunted him day and night. When business was brisk he was able to forget them for a time, but when he was sitting alone, gazing at the chair she used to occupy, they swam in again, bigger and more impressive than ever. A trip to Fairborn with sled and dogs enabled him to see to what extent gossip would spread even in that locality. Unwittingly he overheard a scrap of conversation in the big store.

“Jim Wallace is in town.”

“Yep? Been ill, I hear?”

“Sure. Shot himself with a gun.”

“Queer how a man like Jim could do that. Wal, it’s a queer world. His wife’s in England, too?”

A laugh greeted the last remark.

“Maybe that had something to do with the accident,” put in a man. “That woman never did intend to settle down.”

“You’re wrong,” said another. “Cody at the Post Office told me she had a cable from London saying her father was ill.”

“Sure! I’ve heard that sort of yarn before. I’ll wager five hundred dollars you won’t see any more of Mrs. Wallace.”

There was a guffaw at this, but it stopped abruptly as one of the disputants suddenly saw Jim’s fox-skin

toque through the half-open door. The next moment Jim was standing in the doorway with his tanned face puckered up.

"Some guy talking about me?" he asked.

The last speaker gulped and then nodded his head.

"I was jest saying it's some time since you came into town," he stammered.

"You're a mighty good liar," said Jim, without moving a muscle. "But I'm not hard of hearing. I guess you boys would be better engaged in minding your own business. I've known guys who got hurt badly by minding other people's."

Then he turned and walked out of the store. What he had overheard caused him to wince. In his heart he could not blame them, for there was little enough to talk about in that place, where there wasn't a newspaper less than a week old. Certainly there were a few wireless sets, but reception was generally bad, and no one believed any other man's version of what he had heard on the air.

Going home up the river he became a little more hopeful, for the day was magnificent, and the dogs in good fettle. Snow overnight had slowed down the trail somewhat, but he was compensated by the snow-pictures, and the marvellous colour. Over the snow lay great frost jewels, untold millions of them that reflected the sun's rays and gave quite an unearthly aspect to things.

When at last he reached the post he found Birdseye very busy with a party of white hunters. They were a noisy, quarrelsome lot of men, who questioned all the prices, and bullied the quiet but determined Indian.

"Let me handle this," whispered Jim to him.

"I know that husky who's making all the bother." The "husky" in question was a short, thick-set man, with a prodigious beard. His real name was Joshua Gubbins, but he was invariably called Gubb. At this moment he was hotly debating the honesty of the current price-list for pelts.

"What's your grouch?" asked Jim.

"Are you the guy who runs this store?"

"Sure!"

"Wal, that ain't a straight price for wolverine."

"It's my price, anyway," replied Jim calmly.

"Wal, I ain't takin' it."

"That's all right," said Jim. "I guess there'll be a panic on the world's fur markets, but it can't be helped."

He waved aside Gubbins' pile of pelts, and went to attend to the next man. Gubbins made some remarks under his breath that could not possibly be put into print, but Jim turned a deaf ear to them, preferring to avoid any quarrel with this notorious firebrand. He was doing business with the next man, when he saw Gubbins remove his pelts. But instead of transferring them straight to his sled, Gubbins laid the pile on some pelts which had already been traded to the store, but not taken away owing to the pressure of business. Gubbins stuck a wad of tobacco into his mouth, and then picked up the pelts again—and with them the pile which did not belong to him. In a second Jim was round the counter—obstructing the red-bearded ruffian.

"Not yet," he said. "Guess you've made a small error."

"Eh?" demanded Gubbins.

"You've accidentally picked up four blue foxes with them skins. There they are at the bottom."

"Not me!" snarled Gubbins. "I had them when I came in, but I'm not taking your rotten price."

"You'll jest put them aside," said Jim in a dangerous voice.

"You turn over and dream again," retorted Gubbins. "I sure knew this joint wasn't on the level. You don't put anything over on me, sonny."

Jim's reply was to tear the pelts from Gubbins' arms. He quickly sorted out the blue fox skins and flung them across the counter, where Birdseye caught them and put them in a safe place. Gubbins seemed to go mad with rage. His hand went to his belt and he drew a long hunting knife from its sheath. Jim's hand came down, and his clenched fist caught Gubbins full on the wrist. The knife clattered to the floor, and Jim kicked it aside.

"Better get out now," he said. "I don't allow horse-play in here."

Gubbins' reply to this was to remove the scarf from his neck, and throw off his short bearskin coat. He then framed up, looking as dangerous as an outraged grizzly. Jim realised that he had been drinking, and he made to move towards the counter. Gubbins took this as a sure sign of nervousness. He reached out and caught Jim by the shoulder, pulling him round violently.

"No, you don't," he snarled. "I don't allow any guy to lay hands on me and get away with it."

It was obvious there was no avoiding the skirmish. Gubbins was either too drunk, or too blind to realise what he was up against. He shouted a warning and then rushed at Jim, dealing fierce punches that would

have been most damaging had they got home. But Jim suddenly changed his quiet demeanour. He deftly warded off the powerful blows, and landed a heavy punch to Gubbins' jaw. The effect of this was other than Jim hoped. Gubbins made a noise like a mad animal and then rushed in recklessly. Jim waited for the psychological moment, and then swung his left arm. The blow was accurately timed and placed. The hard knuckles rattled on Gubbins' jaw, and he collapsed in a heap, and lay half on his back—quite still.

"Take him outside," said Jim. "The cold air will bring him to his senses. And I don't want him in here any more."

He resumed business, while Gubbins lay in the snow, blinking at the sunlight, and wondering what had happened to him. When his aching jaw made it clear to him, he shook off the restraining hands of his friend and staggered to the door of the store.

"I'll get you yet, you scab!" he shouted. "Gubb doesn't forget. By gosh—no!"

Jim was vastly relieved when the whole party had gone, for they were the sort of nomads he was not anxious to trade with. He suspected that most of them took to the wilderness because the towns were far too hot for them.

"Yellow men, boss," said Birdseye.

"You've said it," replied Jim.

Some weeks passed and he waited anxiously for another letter from Diana. But none came, and he suspected that this was due to the difficulties in portage between railhead and Fairborn. In the summer the mail came up by river, but with the laying up of the steam-

boat it meant hundreds of miles of heavy going with sled and dogs.

Birdseye never inquired about the "mistress." Like the rest of them, he appeared to take it for granted that Jim would never see her again. Jim understood this silence, and it touched him on a raw spot. He still believed she would come, and yet there were times when he told himself he was a fool for cherishing this belief.

He began to wonder whether she had wired, and the slack people at Fairborn had overlooked the telegram. To settle this he decided to go down to the township and institute inquiries. He set off in the teeth of a howling blizzard, through which it was almost impossible to see, and it took him eight solid hours to win through. To his disappointment, there was no telegram.

He spent the night in the hotel, and started back the following morning over new snow. Undoubtedly Diana had written, he argued, and the letter was somewhere on the trail. He wished now he had advised her to telegraph, for by that means her message would have come straight to Fairborn.

But all the while that little doubt was growing into a big and disturbing thing. In London there was gaiety—social distractions—flattering friends—old lovers. Here there was intense cold—and the things she hated. What madness to imagine she would come back to him—just because in a moment of emotion she had said she would!

The crisp snow, frozen overnight, rose from the runners as the dogs were urged on. He came to the last bend in the river, and looked towards Eagle Fork. Above the stark snow-encumbered trees on the high left bank was a spiral of black smoke. True, he expected

to see smoke, but his experience told him that this coil was different from that which habitually rose from the smoke-stack of his home.

"Strange!" he muttered.

The long whip cracked and the dogs increased their pace. He was slowly bringing the store into view. Another hundred yards and he was at a spot where he should have seen the place, high on the bank. A groan of anguish left his lips, and he pulled up the dogs involuntarily. The trading post was gone. All that remained was a huge pile of smoking timbers—black and horrible against the virgin snow!

Utterly overwhelmed, he mushed the dogs again towards the smoking debris. A man scrambled down the bank and came rushing at him. It was Birdseye, and his agitation was so great he could scarcely speak when he reached Jim.

"How—how did it happen?" asked Jim.

"No know. Birdseye wake up—find house all flame. He try to put it out—no good. All burn like dry grass. Then Birdseye—he remember the yellow man."

"Gubbins!" ejaculated Jim.

"Birdseye find trail in the new snow. He follow it and see the yellow man. Go to kill—but man shoot—here."

He opened his coat and Jim saw a bloodstained rag bound round the Indian's shoulder. He nodded grimly and went nearer the scene of the conflagration. Everything had gone. Somewhere there was money in a steel safe. That would be safe, but it was small compared to the value of the store, and the piles of skins that were now beyond recognition.

It was the worst blow he had ever suffered in his life, and he sat down on a tree-stump, dry-eyed but with a weeping heart. Sticking out of a pile of burnt debris he saw the leg of a chair—charred but still recognisable. It was the chair in which Diana preferred to sit. His mind turned to her. She was coming back, she had said, coming back—to this!

“What do now?” asked Birdseye plaintively.

Jim shook his head. It was yet too early to make new plans. His little world had gone up in smoke. A little while ago he was a happy and proud man. To-day he felt like an outcast—a wanderer in the wilderness.

“Guess we’ll have to start again, Birdseye,” he said finally. “This isn’t going to beat me. No—sir!”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE sudden death of her father was a great shock to Diana. Despite his domineering ways, his love of authority, he had loved her, and she recalled many happy days in his company. She tried now to forgive him for the deception which he had sunk to—to attribute it to his regard for her welfare.

Aunt Mary was considerably shaken by what had taken place. It seemed to her like an act of Providence, and a punishment for what she was beginning to realise had been a very mean trick. Diana was sorry for her, and did her best to make her feel that she bore her no ill-will.

"After all, it was as well I came home," she said. "So things have turned out for the best."

It was when the will was read that a bombshell was burst. It was a new will made since her departure for Canada. It left the bulk of Cunningham's property to his daughter on certain conditions. When these conditions were read they proved to be most onerous. She was to take up permanent residence in England within a period of six months. Failing this, there were instructions as to the distribution of his assets among other members of the family.

Diana gasped at this. There was no mention of her husband, but the meaning was quite clear. She was expected to leave Jim. There was, of course, the alterna-

tive of bringing Jim to England, but doubtless her father had concluded he would never leave Canada, in which his real purpose would be achieved without putting it into actual words.

At first she was shocked, but a little later she tried to look at things from a different angle. Her father had sincerely believed she had made a dreadful mistake, and was giving her a weapon to fight with—a vast sum of money, and big properties.

"What is the value of the estate?" she asked the solicitor.

"Approximately a million and a quarter—so far as can be at present ascertained. But, of course, there will be heavy death duties. You should inherit about seven hundred thousand pounds. Quite a nice fortune."

"Quite," she said, and turned away.

That evening Summers called. Diana was changing in her bedroom when he arrived, but she sent a message to tell him that she would not be long. A minute later she had occasion to go downstairs in her kimono, and as she passed the door of the sitting-room she caught a few scraps of conversation.

"You have nothing to reproach yourself with," said Summers.

"But I can't get it out of my mind. I feel as if I—I were the cause of his death."

"Nonsense! As it turned out it is a good thing your niece did come home. His heart was bad, so what you wrote was quite true."

"Yes, but I didn't know it was. Neither did you when you suggested we should adopt that plan——"

Diana's heart thumped in her breast. Until that moment she had had no idea that the scheme to get her home originated with Summers. Aunt Mary had apparently been just a catspaw. It caused her to feel enraged against Summers, and she meant to let him know what she thought of him.

When she came down finally Aunt Mary was no longer in the sitting-room, and Summers was sitting in a chair reading a magazine. He beamed at her as she entered, and rose to offer her his hand. But she refused it and lashed him with her angry eyes.

"Why, what is the matter, Di?" he asked.

"Everything. I discovered that a mean trick had been employed to bring me home, but I did not know until a few minutes ago that it was engineered by you."

"But I don't understand."

"You do. Please don't lie to me. I want to tell you that we can never be friends again."

"What nonsense is this? If you had not come your father would have d——"

"Don't!" she begged.

He was silent for a moment, and then changed his attitude.

"Well, let us be frank. When the telegram was sent I didn't know that he was really seriously ill. I'm not a bit sorry I did what I did. You behaved badly to him, and I think he has treated you generously in the circumstances."

"By making conditions?"

"By assuring himself that you will stay here and look after the property."

"So you think I am going to stay here?"

"You must—or you will lose everything."

She laughed scornfully, then stopped and fixed him with her indignant eyes.

"Three days from now I shall be on the Atlantic."

"What!"

"So that surprises you?"

"But it would be madness—unless you intend to return again."

"I have no intention of returning. It is the spirit behind those conditions which make it impossible for me to accept them—the same spirit that put into operation a mean scheme to part me from my husband."

"Well, it isn't my business."

"You appear to have made it very much your business," she retorted.

This remark stung him into quick anger.

"What if I did? Yes, I am interested, too. I love you—and have always loved you. This affair of yours doesn't mean anything. It started with an impulsive act on your part, and you are now trying to brazen it out. Diana, why not be reasonable? You could never be happy out there in that appalling wilderness with a man like that. You need London, and London needs you. I also need you——"

"You!" she gasped. "You can say that to me—another man's wife."

"Why not? You know it is true."

"Never mention it to me again. In fact, you will not be able to," she added, "for in all probability I shall never see you again."

110 THE MAN FROM PEACE RIVER

"You mean you are serious—about staying in Canada?" he asked, still incredulous.

"Quite serious."

"Then I think you are insane."

"Thank you!" she replied coldly, and rang the bell.

Later she made known her decision to Aunt Mary, who, like Summers, appeared to think she was not in her right senses. But on the following morning when she saw her niece commencing to pack, she had to accept plain facts.

"You are really going back to that man?" she asked.

"I am. It was understood that I should go back. I am not going to let him down."

Parting came in due course, after the solicitor had had a word with her, and tried to make her see that her return within six months was a condition that must be carried out if she wished to benefit under the will.

Then came the steamship, the complete change of environment, and thoughts of Peace River. The voyage was a bad one, for gales were encountered all the way, and snow when they were approaching the American coast. It was not a good time of the year to be travelling north-westward, but she experienced a curious yearning to see the real snows again, after the mist and chilly wind of the Atlantic.

She sent a message to Jim by wireless from the ship, telling him of the day of the ship's arrival, and then turned her mind to the question of reaching him. The river would be closed by now, and it would mean a journey by sledge, but that project did not alarm her. No longer did she feel the soft creature she had once been.

THE MAN FROM PEACE RIVER III

In due course she reached Edmonton, to find the country snowbound. Upon making inquiries, she found that she could travel to the upper tributary of the Peace River by car, but from that point a sledge was the only means of transport to Eagle Fork.

She made the place where she and Jim had once stayed, and where the river steamer was berthed. There she negotiated for a sledge and found a man named Singer who owned a good outfit, and who was reputed to be an excellent guide. To ease her anxiety he had a daughter of seventeen years of age, and he suggested that the daughter should accompany them, since it would be necessary to camp for two nights en route.

Diana agreed to this, and on the following day the party set off. Fortunately the weather was good, and most of the running was done in bright sunshine. The girl was an interesting companion, and had been born in Canada, and thus the journey was enlivened by conversation.

"Guess I know your husband," said the girl. "I took a trip to Fairborn two summers back. Everyone knows Jim Wallace up there. Runs the trading post at Eagle Fork, doesn't he?"

"Yes."

"A good spot that."

Diana wondered. It was rather remarkable that after her bitter comments about Eagle Fork, and her determination to get away from it, that she should now be going back voluntarily, at the worst time of the year. She persuaded herself that it was because she had given her word, but at the same time she wondered whether this was strictly true.

112 THE MAN FROM PEACE RIVER

Bitterly cold, and snowbound as the country was, there was something magnetic about it. It was calling her back, despite her painful experience. Every few minutes she caught her breath as her eyes took in the constantly changing scenery. Yes, it was magnificent enough—though cold and aloof.

The two nights were spent under canvas amid the timber. Singer knew that kind of life to the last iota, and she found the tent far more comfortable than she imagined, and slept soundly while the thermometer registered over twenty degrees below zero.

"We'll make Eagle Fork to-morrow," said Singer.

But this programme was not fulfilled for a very good reason. On the morrow the dogs were making good progress on the river trail when a sledge was seen coming towards them. When it was within a quarter of a mile the respective drivers hailed each other. Diana was staring at the driver of the approaching team. She knew that big figure, and the motion of the right arm.

"It's my husband!" she said.

"Sure it is!" corroborated Singer. "Wal, that shortens the journey. Gosh, that's a fine team of dogs!"

Jim reached them and both teams were pulled up dead. Diana got out of the sledge and went across to Jim. He seized her hand and gripped it hard. She looked into his eyes, and was somewhat puzzled by their expression.

"So you are fit again?" she asked.

"Sure! Had a good time?"

"No," she said. "But I must tell you later. Forgive me for not writing, but I have been worried. You got my telegram?"

"Yep, after it had been kept nearly a week. I only got it this morning, and reckoned I should run into you somewhere on the trail. How are things, Singer?"

"Pretty good!" replied Singer. "Business O.K.?"

"Not so bad," said Jim, with a wince.

"Will you take the grips over from me?"

"Yep."

The baggage was transferred to Jim's sledge, the financial side of the business settled, and then they bade farewell to Singer and his daughter, who had decided to start on the return journey without further delay.

"Better get aboard," said Jim.

She got into the sledge, and he tucked the heavy rugs about her. While he did so she wondered why he looked so glum. It was a trifle disappointing after the trip she had undertaken to get to him.

"Are you sure you are quite well?" she asked.

He nodded and then cracked the whip over the backs of the dogs. The sledge moved forward, and for a long time there was dead silence, save for the panting dogs, and the noise of the runners on the snow.

"How far are we from Eagle Fork?" she asked at length.

"Two hours."

"I suppose the river is frozen right across now?"

"Yep."

"How—how is business?"

He made no reply, so she turned her head and gazed at him. To her surprise he pulled up the dogs and came and sat on the side of the sledge, with his big gloved hands gripping the rail tightly.

114 THE MAN FROM PEACE RIVER

"I oughtn't to hev let you come," he said. "I should have sent you back with Singer."

"But why?" she gasped.

"It don't exist any longer—the trading post, I mean."

"Jim—what are you saying?"

"It's true," he said in a hollow voice. "It was burnt down weeks ago."

"Burnt down! Oh, no—no!"

"Yep—every log of it. Fortunately the dogs were saved and the sledge. But all the rest is tinder."

"How dreadful! But how did it happen?"

At this question his face grew as hard as steel, and she saw the big hands open and close again.

"A skunk who tried to rob me. I had to throw him out, and he took his revenge in his own dirty fashion. But I'll find him one day, and when I do——"

She laid her hand upon his in her deep sympathy, for it was clear that this treacherous act had hit him hard.

"Where are you living, then?" she asked.

"On the site—in a tent. Birdseye and me—we're trying to rebuild it. I'm not leaving that place, and I can't wait for the spring. We got to get a roof over our heads somehow."

"But the pelts——?"

"All gone in smoke."

"Then you have lost—almost everything?"

He nodded.

"Almost everything," he echoed. "Just a few dollars at the bank. I had spent a whole lot of money laying in provisions before it happened, and I should have cashed

in the pelts earlier. Guess I was a goldarned fool to keep so many on hand. You'll have to go down to Fairborn."

"Why?"

"Until I can get a roof up."

While she sat in silence, letting the bitter truth filter into her mind, he went to the driving-board again, and set the sledge moving.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Two hours later they reached Eagle Fork. Diana caught her breath as she gazed to where the trading post had once been. Now it was the scene of desolation. Spread over the snow were timbers, and miscellaneous gear. Beyond it was a tent, and to the right the foundations of a new dwelling. When the sledge pulled up near this heartbreaking scene, she heard the sound of sawing.

"Birdseye," explained Jim. "He's using a cross-cut on the pines. We need new wood."

She nodded, and got out of the sledge. With eyes half-blinded with tears she moved among the piled-up debris. She recognised various articles—the stove, two or three damaged chairs, a table which had since been repaired. While she strove to keep from crying out loud, Jim came to her with a stiff lip.

"The new place will be a bit more sheltered," he said. "I always calculated we didn't make the most of the windbrake when the old place was put up. What do you think about it?"

"I—I think you are right."

"It's a big job with the weather against us," he said. "I tried to get two guys up from Fairborn to lend a hand, but they asked for wages which I couldn't afford to pay. Trouble is the ground—it's like steel. We had to light fires to thaw it before them posts could be put in."

"You have done wonders already," she said.

"Not too bad considering. Birdseye is sure true blue. I have to drag him away at sundown. Hey, Birdseye—come and make yourself visible."

The Indian emerged from behind a clump of pines. He dropped the gleaming saw and trotted across the snow—to welcome his boss's wife Indian fashion.

"Soon make new home," he said. "Glad see mistress."

Diana reflected that he did not seem particularly glad, and she could understand that feeling on his part. With him Jim came first and few other people mattered at all.

"Mistress come stay here?" he asked, looking at Jim.

Jim shook his head.

"I'm going down to Fairborn right now," he replied. "Guess I can make it before dark."

"No," said Diana.

"Eh?"

"I don't want to go to Fairborn."

"But it's the only place."

"What is wrong with this?"

The question seemed to take his breath away.

"We'll be busy here," he said at length. "It's not so bad while weather is good, but——"

"I shall stay here," she said determinedly. "Perhaps I can be useful."

"You mean that?"

"Of course. But where do I sleep?"

This was rather a problem. He possessed but the one tent and that was now shared by him and Birdseye. But he quickly solved it. He would knock up a rough shanty for the Indian, and then he and she could share

the tent. Birdseye was told what was required, and within an hour a kind of cubby-hole had been fashioned out of some of the new timber which had been hauled up from Fairborn. It was rather like a dog-kennel, and not tall enough for Birdseye to stand upright in, but this did not appear to worry the Indian, who had slept in less comfortable circumstances.

The tent was heated by a kerosene stove, and was warm although decidedly smelly. Diana was shown where the various utensils were, and by noon she was busy preparing a meal. Jim had gone off with Birdseye to engage in herculean toil, and the place rang with hammers and axes.

It was a simple enough meal—fried beans and bacon, washed down with coffee. But they were hungry enough to enjoy it to the full. Immediately afterwards they were back again at work, wrestling with big timbers, and thawing out more holes in the frozen earth.

She could not but marvel at their energy, and their pugnaciousness—Jim's in particular, for it was easy to see that he was the driving spirit. Here was work being carried on under the very worst conditions—a gang job attempted by two men, and she believed that they would succeed in achieving their object.

How different was the scene to that which she had recently left! With all its hurrying millions London did not seem to possess the vitality of these two rough men. Here was progress going on before her eyes, indifferent to obstacles and surroundings. It gave her a thrill to watch a big timber being placed in position, and to hear Jim's remark—"Good enough!"

Work did not cease until the stark hand of evening

fell over the camp, and then came the two workers to the meal she had prepared. Birdseye insisted upon taking his meal a little apart from them, and when he had finished he fed the dogs and sought his cubby hole, tired out from his labours.

"I sure oughtn't to let you stay," said Jim, gazing at her intently.

"Why not?"

"It's hard going, and it'll get colder every day. I'll be rooted to this spot for months to come."

"I know."

"But you don't quite understand."

"Does it matter? Here I am, anyway."

"Yes, here you are," he echoed meditatively. "But you haven't told me about your trip."

"You haven't asked me," she retorted.

"That's true. Guess I'm a bit self-centred. You see, I've got to see this job through, and it takes a good deal of planning. Anyway, I want to know what happened. Was your father very bad?"

"He is—dead," she replied with a little choke.

He put out his hand and touched hers.

"I'm sorry. Did you get there in time?"

"Yes. But he died suddenly—without being able to say a word to me."

"Gee, I'm mighty glad you went," he said. "But I can't quite understand——"

He halted and looked at her.

"Understand—what?" she asked.

"Weren't you needed there—to clear things up? The estate, I mean."

"The solicitor did all that. There was no need for me to stay. I—I promised to come back, didn't I?"

"Sure! But then I wouldn't have wanted you to neglect anything because of——"

"I neglected nothing."

"I see," he said slowly. Then after a long pause: "I guess you are a rich woman now?"

"No. I have nothing but the clothes I brought with me."

His eyes opened wide at this statement.

"You don't mean he—he left you nothing?"

"He left me—everything."

"But you said——"

"There were conditions—conditions that I could not accept. Oh, please don't talk about it any more. Tell me about the new shack—how do you intend to plan it?"

"I got a kind of drawing here," he said. "Ah, here it is! I figgered we'd have a better kind of sitting-room—bigger and with more windows, and on this side——"

He went through all the details with her, pointing them out on the rough plan which he had over his knees. He now seemed to forget the dire catastrophe that had overtaken him, and became more and more enthusiastic as he retailed the various little labour-saving devices which he had included.

"I'm getting up a fine boiler from Fairborn," he said. "It will give us hot water all day long. It's dandy, I can tell you, and I'm planning to have red pine floor-boards in the sitting-room. But a lot depends upon what business I can do within the next month or two. You see, I've got to get the trading portion done first—"

just a kind of plain room with a counter. I'll sure pass the word to my clients to hustle up every hunter in this neighbourhood. Look—there's my sign already painted."

He picked up a square board on which was inscribed: "Business as usual—during structural alterations." She could not refrain from laughing at his cool cheek.

"I don't believe anything could beat you, Jim," she said.

"Dunno about that," he replied. "But I ain't going to let a yellow tinhorn like Gubbins lay me down and out."

"Gubbins! Who is Gubbins?"

"The man who lighted the fire. One of these days him and me are going to meet, and then——"

His expression terrified her, and she quickly changed the subject with a view to keeping his mind away from the grim thoughts that were now troubling him. There was something very pleasant in sitting by the roaring log fire, and yarning. The more she thought about it the more amazing it seemed—after what had happened.

"I'll go heat up the tent," he said. "It gets mighty cold in there early in the morning."

He was absent for about ten minutes, during which time she stared into the flames and let her mind wander. When he came back he indicated that her shake-down was ready when she felt like going to it.

"I think I'll go now," she said. "This air—it makes one so tired."

"Sure it does. But I'll sit here awhile and have a smoke."

She entered the tent and found that Jim had made certain alterations there. He had fixed a tarpaulin across the centre pole, thus dividing it into two separate cubicles. Two iron-framed bedsteads had been saved from the fire, and one of these was now rigged out with a scorched mattress, some blankets and a number of heavy pelts. There was no pillow, but instead a folded-up fur coat.

The small paraffin heating stove was on her side of the canvas partition, and it gave out good heat, although the smell was rather disturbing. She turned it lower, and after removing some of her outer garments, she crept between the blankets.

What a strange home-coming! For some minutes she lay there turning over the facts in her mind. It was rather humorous to reflect that she had regarded the quite comfortable shack as a terrible place, yet now she was content to lie there with aching limbs and feel much more contented.

Before Jim came in she was fast asleep, nor did she know anything more until she awoke and found the tent flooded with faint light. The stove was still alight but it was bitterly cold outside the blankets. From without she heard sounds, the crackling of burning wood, mingled with a sizzling noise. The latter she identified as the sound of frying bacon, and it brought her out of bed quickly, for she rather resented Jim taking on what she had already accepted as her job.

A rapping came on the canvas, and automatically she cried "come in." Jim entered with a bowl of warm water, and only then did she remember that she was half-undressed. A slight blush suffused her cheeks, while

she told herself how ridiculous it was to feel like that before her husband. She grabbed a dressing-gown while he placed the water handy.

"Breakfast is nearly ready," he said.

"Why did you do that?" she demanded.

"Do what?"

"Get the breakfast. I wanted you to wake me."

"I will next time," he promised. "But you were asleep, and I guessed you were dead tired. It's snowing like mad outside. We're in for a spell of bad weather."

She was better able to appreciate this when she was dressed and went into the open. It was impossible to see more than a few yards for the dense curtain of falling snow, and in addition a knife-edged blast smote down the valley every few minutes, and raised clouds of powdery snow, chilling her to the bone.

"Have to eat in the tent," said Jim.

During breakfast the conditions worsened. The snow was less dense but the wind was appalling. Diana found more covering, and still felt the regular blasts. She had never bargained for anything quite like this.

"Is it unusual?" she asked with chattering teeth.

"Nope. You have to expect this sort of thing at this time of the year. Better stay under cover. We're going to have a shot at that roof."

She marvelled at their indomitable wills when she saw them defying the storm. Covered inches deep with snow, they worked on. By noon a certain amount of good work had been done, but both Jim and Birdseye were half frozen. She had managed to get some food fried, but was herself suffering acutely from the exposure. Jim realised her condition.

"Guess it won't do," he said.

"What won't?"

"I'll have to get you down to Fairborn, or you'll sure freeze to death."

"No," she replied stubbornly.

"Yes," he retorted. "You go this evening."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

By late afternoon Diana was better able to appreciate Jim's resolution, for she was chilled to the marrow, and utterly miserable. Yet she put up a show of resistance.

"If you are staying why can't I?"

"Because you ain't properly acclimatised yet. If this bad patch passes soon I'll come down to Fairborn and bring you back."

"What am I going to do down there?"

"Wal, it ain't a bad sort of place. There'll be books in the hotel. Come, we got a twenty mile run to do, and the going won't be easy."

Birdseye had already harnessed the dog team to the sled, and a few minutes later she was inside it, while Jim took up the driving position. The sled slithered down the steep bank to the river ice, and then the journey really commenced. It was a fantastic trip, and one that she was not likely to forget. Darkness soon closed them in, and the howling wind drowned every other sound. Jim drove furiously for the dogs needed exercise, and despite the terrible conditions wonderful progress was made.

At last they pulled out of the river trail into Fairborn itself. The streets were deserted, and covered deep in snow, and at intervals blurred lights were seen. Jim found his way to the hotel and brought the sled to a

halt outside it. He came to Diana who was cramped and numbed.

"How are you?"

"All—right," she said through her chattering teeth.

"Good thing I brought you," he said. "This is going to be a hell of a night."

"Are you making the return journey to-night?"

"Sure!"

"But the dogs——"

"They'll stand it."

He booked her a room on the first floor, and then carried her luggage up there himself.

"This ought to do," he said. "You got a view on the street, and it's warm. What about money?"

"I have some."

"Then I guess I'll be going."

"But you have had no meal for hours!"

"My appetite will keep till I make camp. Can't leave old Birdseye up there alone."

She frowned at this. Birdseye must not be left alone, but she could! It made her feel that Birdseye meant a great deal more to him than she did. And the thought hurt now, when a little time ago she would not have permitted it to trouble her.

"Wal, so long!" he said. Then, coming to the conclusion that this was a bit too brusque, he came forward and took her hand in his.

"You'll understand," he said. "I've got to get on with that job. It's no time for standing still."

"I understand," she replied slowly.

"See you again soon—when the weather clears up. Look after yourself."

With that he went away, and a curious little sigh left her lips as the door closed behind him. She went to the window, and later saw him pass up the narrow street—a big blurred figure and a long string of dogs. Very soon he was blotted out.

Here in comparative comfort she was able to think more clearly. Of course he had only done the sensible thing. What he had said was true enough—she had yet to get used to these conditions. But apparently he did not quite realise that she was a little different to the woman who had gone away. He did not know—could have no means of knowing—that a lot of the old aversion had gone. His behaviour after his great loss had called forth her deepest admiration for him. How could one do other than admire a man who refused to accept defeat, who believed in himself so deeply that no job was too big for him to tackle?

He had gone back now in the teeth of a howling blizzard when a man of lesser mettle would have stayed at least the night in the hotel. This man whom she had married so impetuously was even now little more than a stranger to her, but little by little he was unfolding his character, and she found it of sterling worth. She began to wonder what would have been the result had she begged him to stay with her?

She changed and went downstairs to get a meal. As usual the hotel was almost entirely masculine, the only women guests being wives of business men who had come to Fairborn in connection with schemes for its development. She took a meal alone, and then went into the lounge where a wireless set was installed. But

the concert was of brief duration, for a few minutes later the aerial blew down.

Very tired and slightly bored she went to bed. The following day found the storm still raging. It cleared by noon, and the sun appeared to work miracles on the newly-fallen snow. Fairborn became animated again, but the weather-wise were of opinion that the fine spell would not last.

By evening the sky was overcast again, and dusk ushered in the old conditions. She thought of Jim up at Eagle Fork slaving away to get a roof erected, and wished she were there helping him. The wireless was working again that evening, and the proprietor of the hotel organised a dance. Diana went to watch the couples, and was surprised to find a very big gathering. Presumably the bad weather had driven outsiders into the hotel, and they were now killing time in the pleasantest fashion.

She was engaged in conversation by a woman whose husband was connected with the mines, and who had been born in Canada. She was a little woman named Spencer, and was quite good company. She danced once or twice with her husband, and then the husband approached Diana. She accepted and they took the floor.

"My wife tells me you are new to the country?" he said.

"Yes."

"You'll like it in time. I guess weather like this gets on your nerves?"

"A little."

"You'll get over that. This is sure a bad patch, but

it is usually followed by brilliant spells of sunshine. Come from up river, don't you?"

"Yes. My husband runs the trading post at Eagle Fork."

"You don't say! Why, I heard that place was burnt out recently."

"It was. He is up there building."

He looked at her incredulously.

"It's his own means of livelihood," she added. "He wants to start trading again."

"Sure! But it's no light job building in this weather. I guess you're waiting for him to get a habitable place ready?"

"No—not exactly. It was the storm which drove me down here. I mean to go back as soon as the worst is over."

"Wallace," he mused. "Sure, I met him once. A big man with blue eyes, and a voice like a bull?"

"That isn't a bad description," she said with a smile.

"He's well-known round here—and mighty highly respected. But, of course, you're English?"

"Yes. I met my husband in London."

For three more days the bad weather continued, and then as Spencer had prognosticated, it cleared up and the sun shone from a cloudless sky. The temperature went down, and not a breath of wind stirred the trees. The snow-blocked streets were cleared with ploughs and work on buildings was resumed. Diana went into the town and laid in a stock of small things which she required. She imagined that Jim would soon be coming for her, and she was looking forward with real pleasure to the trip to Eagle Fork, and to the job of catering for him.

With a view to improving the daily diet she made many purchases of edibles of an uncommon nature, believing that a change of menu would be good for both of them, and she took long walks in the intense cold with a view to getting further acclimatised. In future no storm, however its severity, should drive her to seek shelter. Within her was a burning desire to do her bit—to prove that she was not quite as soft as Jim evidently believed her to be.

Whenever a dog-team was heard in the street her eyes went to it, but the musher was always a stranger. On several occasions she took walks up the river trail, hoping that she might be fortunate enough to meet Jim coming down, but always she was disappointed. And as the days passed she began to get anxious. Perhaps Jim was ill, and thus unable to come. Then while she was seriously debating whether she should hire a dog-musher and go up to him, a letter was brought to her by a lone hunter, who had just traded some pelts with Jim. She opened the letter anxiously.

“DEAR DI,—

“Things are going all right up here. I’ve got a roof on the store and have done a bit of trading already. Lucky for me I fell in with a guy I knew, who is a pretty good carpenter. He’s giving me a hand. I think you had better stay on where you are, until I can make a bit more progress with the building. Enclosed is fifty bucks in case you need it. Hope to be able to run down soon.

“Love,
“JIM.”

She crushed the notes in her hand and gazed out at the sunlit snow. It hurt her to reflect that he did not apparently feel any need for her. The Indian was necessary to him, and the hired man, but not her.

For the rest of the day she was miserable—and a little resentful. He was laying her aside like a china ornament—of no use when real work was in progress. She exaggerated the situation by brooding over it. Yes, he thought she was useless—even worse than useless—an encumbrance.

The desire to see him now was not so great. He could come and fetch her when he wanted her. But the passing days brought no contentment of mind. Always she was visualising Jim at work there in the snowy wilderness, and the yearning to be with him stayed, despite her attempts at self-deception. After about a week of this she met the man who had brought the letter.

"Jim's doing fine up there," he said. "Guess he'll have a better place than the old one by the time he is through."

"I'm glad to hear that," she said. "I hear he has engaged a carpenter?"

"Yep—good steady chap. French Canadian named Pernould. The girl is useful, too. She's sure used to that sort of life. Brought up in a lumber camp."

"Girl?" she asked. "What girl?"

"Jeanne Pernould. She and Jules always do their hunting together. Why, she's as hard as any man, and can use a rifle like a frontiersman."

"So she is there too?"

"Yep. She's cook and bottle-washer."

This news caused her mental discomfiture. It seemed

132 THE MAN FROM PEACE RIVER

like a rebuff to her. Was that the measure of her husband's appreciation of her? Why couldn't he realise that she was quite willing to cook for him while he worked? Why had he made no mention of this girl in his letter?

That night she came to a definite decision, and to put it into effect she hunted up the letter-bearer, and at length found him in a shack off the main street.

"You have a dog-team?" she asked.

"Sure, ma'am."

"I want to go up river to see my husband. Will you take me?"

"If you're ready to go to-morrow. I got to be back here on Thursday."

"The sooner the better. At what time can you start?"

"Any time after daybreak."

"Nine o'clock, then. Will you call for me at the hotel?"

"Sure! I'll be right there on time."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

IN the meantime Jim had been congratulating himself on his good luck in meeting Pernould and his wild sister. Pernould was a kind of Jack of all trades, but his chief skill lay in hunting and carpentry. He preferred hunting—even in winter, but Jim's request found him ready to lend a hand to a friend in need.

"We build dis ole shack no time," he said. "You got tools?"

"Yep—a chest full."

"Then I show you. What I do wit my sister, hey?"

"Why, Jeanne can look after the grub department. There'll be three of us to cook for now. What do you say, Jeanne?"

Jeanne Pernould showed her small gleaming teeth in a ready smile. Life was all the same to her. She lived it to the full and was as vitally alive as a forest animal. At this period she was twenty-two, pretty in a rough kind of way, and fascinating as a wild bird.

"I cook zee food," she said. "You leave heem to me. Where I sleep, hey?"

The new arrangements of the camp began to work exceedingly well. Jeanne could cook anything from frozen fish to omelettes, and Jules' prowess with tools was remarkable. He sang as he worked—quaint Voyageur songs many of which Jim knew by heart, and

despite the conditions the new trading post began to progress at amazing speed.

Jeanne was quite at home among men. Her expressions were quaint, and sometimes super-masculine. She understood the Indian mind and was soon on very good terms with Birdseye, who appreciated women of this type more than the civilised ones such as the boss's wife.

"We mak good going, hey?" said Jeanne to Jim.

"Sure thing. Your brother is a gold-mine to me." She pouted.

"And me—am I zee diamond mine?"

"You're the whole boiling," he replied enthusiastically.

"Where was you apprenticed?"

"In the woods, on the trail. From twelve years of age I earn my grub."

"Bully for you. Now I must go. You got a habit of keeping me away from work."

She smiled as he went off to the building site, and her eyes followed him, even while he worked. Any person of perception would have seen that this big man of another race made a deep appeal to her warm, passionate nature. There was something else, too, in her expression—sympathy. Fairborn was a regular gossip-shop and she had heard a few remarks about the wife of Jim Wallace. That Jim was working here now like a Trojan, while his aristocratic wife lounged down town was proof to her that those rumours were not at all exaggerated.

"Jeanne keep you gossiping?" said Pernould to Jim, as he wielded a plane deftly. "She love to talk—just lak zee parrot."

"She's sure an amusing kid," replied Jim.

"*Mais oui*," agreed Pernoult. "But a woman all zee time. I try mak her a man, but though she act lak a man she think lak a woman."

"So they think differently?"

"Sacré! It is as well we cannot hear them think."

Jim laughed at this and got to work hauling a big log out of the snow. He was assisted by Birdseye, who wore the scantiest of clothing despite the intense cold, and appeared to be none the worse for it.

"Heave!" cried Jim. "She's coming!"

But the half-buried log did not come, and so Pernoult lent his weight to it. Then Jeanne, witnessing the difficulty from the cook-house, came running to help.

"Now the thing is as good as done," said Pernoult, indicating his sister. "She weigh one hundred twenty pounds——"

Jeanne picked up an armful of snow and flung it in his face.

"Now laugh," she cried. "'Ere, I show you!"

The little additional help did the trick, and the log was hoisted just where it was needed. Jim slapped her on the shoulder playfully.

"You sure got back on him that time," he said.

She flashed him a look of gratitude, and then went back to her work, singing as she banged the cooking utensils about, in a high-pitched and rather musical voice. This constant singing of hers caused Jim to meditate on more than one occasion. Work was easier done that way. She was a stimulus in the camp—cheerful no matter what the weather did, full of fun, and quick of temper when something annoyed her, then repentant—a child and a mature woman in one.

But a lot of his thought was elsewhere. There was Diana down at Fairborn. He wanted her in camp again, but was keen to make more progress before that took place. All his efforts were being concentrated on the lower part of the dwelling-house—a room where she could sleep in comfort. This was to be a little surprise for her, and it was well worth waiting until he could bring her up and show it to her.

He wrote a letter, and waited for a messenger who could deliver it to her, since he was reluctant to leave work for a whole day. At last the messenger arrived, and the letter was given into his care. Jeanne saw it change hands, and guessed what that signified.

"Your wife come up soon?" she asked.

"Pretty soon—but not at once," he said. "You see, she ain't used to this sort of rough life. I want to get things a bit more ship-shape."

"Of course," she replied, and then was silent.

Being on very good terms with Birdseye, Jeanne, by dint of subtle leading questions, learnt a few facts that she embroidered to suit her own preconceptions. Birdseye was no tell-tale but he was no match for Jeanne's quick brain, and the shooting incident came out. It was conclusive evidence from Jeanne's point of view.

"Zis woman he marry," she confided to her brother. "She no good. I know——"

"You know too much," interrupted Jules. "Why you not mind your own business, hey?"

"Because I tink he is a beeg fool. She shoot him and run away. Then she come back, because she want a home——"

"What's that?" he gasped.

"It is a secret, *mon frere*. I find heem out."

"I don't believe it."

She laughed in his face.

"Ah, you men. You never can see zee forest for trees, as they say. She come back after leaving heem, and then it snow a leetle, and she must go to zee big hotel and sleep in a feather bed. Jim he tink she will come here and be happy——"

"S-sh!" he whispered. "It is not our business—yours or mine. Jim is a fine fellow, and we just help him—and not pry into his affairs."

"I'm not prying," she protested. "But he tell me the other day what a fine woman she is. Pouf! That just mak me seek!"

The arrival of Jim interrupted this conversation. He had been to a fishing hole in the frozen river, and hacked away the newly-formed ice. The result of his inquiry was a fine four-pounder fish, already frozen stiff. He displayed this suddenly from behind his back.

"Bien!" ejaculated Jeanne. "I cook heem for supper."

When night came they gathered round the big camp fire for preference, ate their admirably served meal, and yarned over coffee. Birdseye, as usual, retired to his cubby-hole, and Jules told some rather tall stories about a trip he had once made, until Jeanne solemnly handed him a piece of flap-jack.

"You have won zee biscuit," she said. "Now I try. Once upon a time when I mak zee trip to the North Pole——"

Jules, thoroughly put out, got up and walked across to the tent. It was one of his little failings to display

138 THE MAN FROM PEACE RIVER

sulkiness when Jeanne wounded his pride, and Jim knew it.

"Why did you do that, Jeanne?" he asked.

"Oh, he will come back again," she said calmly.

"What you tink of this life, hey?"

"Not so bad, when one has good company."

"What you call good company?"

"Well, folks who can take the good with the bad, and laugh at troubles—like you, for instance."

"You tink I am always laughing?"

"Well, I hope you are."

She poked the fire reflectively with a long stick, with the unexpected result that a log crackled and a shower of sparks went up. One of them fell on the back of her hand, and she gave a sharp little cry and raised the injured hand to her lips.

"Hurt?" asked Jim.

"Leetle."

"Let me see?"

She displayed the back of her hand, and he saw a weal which was fast turning into a painful water blister.

"I'll go get some grease," he said.

He came back with a chunk of frozen butter which had to be melted before it could be applied, then taking her hand he smeared the burn and wrapped it up with his handkerchief.

"How's that?" he asked.

She bent the injured hand and clasped the ends of his fingers. There was a caressing movement in her touch—something warm and electric, but in his innocence he ascribed the action to gratitude on her part. But Jeanne remembered it long after that. The injury

was nothing—less than nothing. She was used to getting knocked about. What mattered was the sensation that that pressure of hands had brought about.

To Jeanne, brought up amid nature, where there are no lies, the truth was patent enough, and she did not attempt to hide it from herself. The old admiration for Jim, prevented from becoming anything else by the infrequency of their meetings, had now developed into passionate love on her part. She made no mistake about Jim. So far he did not know, and whether he ever did get to know was going to depend upon the future.

Jules came back later, pretending that he had gone to look for his tobacco pouch. Jeanne winked at Jim, and Jim turned his head away to hide a smile. They yarned on until the great cold drove them under cover.

In the morning Jeanne took a look at her hand. The butter had saved her, and there was really no further need for the handkerchief, but she retained it notwithstanding. Work commenced while the sun was trying to break through the trees. From the partly erected dwelling came the sound of hammer and saw, and from the cook-house, the rattle of pans and Jeanne's high voice.

"She's at it again," said Jim.

"Hey, one person sawing wood is enough," shouted Jules, at which a most unladylike reply was hurled at him.

"No change there," laughed Jim.

"She need a good slapping," said Jules.

During breakfast the sun made itself very evident. The still pines threw blue shadows on the snow, and a

million frost jewels gleamed everywhere. Their breath was like steam, and every sound was magnified.

"And they tell you winter is a curse," said Jim. "Gee, just look at them woods!"

Jules nodded his appreciation. He had seen it all before many times, but was not yet indifferent to the morning miracle. In a very short time work was resumed. The slightest vibration brought streams of snow dust from branches, and now and again a giant pine would shed its entire snowy covering—a marvellous sight, for it made a snow rainbow.

It was nearing noon when the sound of sled-bells were heard. Jim looked up the river trail and saw a man mushing dogs at a good speed.

"Business?" he said. "Wal, we need it. Hope he's got a sled full of pelts."

"Why, it's Bill Brock!" said Jules a second or two later. "He can't have much stuff as he was here only——"

Jim did not hear the last few words, for his eyes had revealed the fact that the sled carried a passenger, and he now saw it was a woman.

"Darn me if it isn't—my wife!" he said. "Hey—Diana!" he yelled vociferously.

There was no response, but a few seconds later all doubts were swept away. The sled reached the camp, and the dogs hauled it up the incline, while Diana walked. Jim ran down to her and gripped her hand.

"This is sure a big surprise," he said. "I didn't expect to see you."

"I thought it was understood I should come here when the weather improved?" she said in a rather cold voice.

"Sure! But I wrote you—— You see, I wanted to get on with the work—— Oh, this is Jules Pernould, who I mentioned in my letter."

She smiled at Jules, who returned the salute and then went on working. Then she turned her eyes to the door of the cook-house, where Jeanne was standing, regarding them searchingly.

"Isn't there someone——?" she commenced.

"Sure! I almost forgot. Jeanne, this is my wife. Come and be introduced."

"My 'ands—zay are all greasy," called Jeanne.
"Welcome to camp, Mrs. Wallace."

Diana nodded, and at the same time gave Jeanne a long look. In that second she saw that she was attractive, and almost intuitively divined that a disturbing element had entered her life.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

DIANA was now installed in the almost completed room. She rested for a while, and Jim went to hustle up some tea. But her mind got little rest, for she could not get the picture of Jeanne out of it. Wasn't it significant that Jim had not carried out his promise to come and fetch her from Fairborn. No doubt he would be full of excuses, but the fact remained that another woman was on the spot—undertaking the work which she herself had been induced to believe was her job.

While she rested the sound of toil rang in her ears. There would have been excitement in this feverish haste to beat time and the conditions but for the thoughts that troubled her. He had mentioned Jules in his letter, but not Jeannel! Perhaps he had omitted that name lest she should take it into her head to do what she had done?

"Tea!"

Jim burst into the room—a hammer in his hand, and his brow wet with perspiration despite the intense cold. She sat up on the bed and regarded him.

"Feeling refreshed now?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Good! Shall I bring some eats in here?"

"No, I'll come wherever it is served."

"But hadn't you better—?"

"No, I'll come out." There was a slight hesitation.

"You were the last person in the world I expected to see," he said.

"So you said before," she replied. "But I can't see why you should be so surprised."

"Well, I guessed you would wait until——"

"Until you remembered I was down there—alone?"

"Gee! You don't think I forgot that? You see, I wanted to get this room finished for you. I didn't want you to have to sleep in the open."

"But you have been doing that?"

"Wal, I'm different."

"And that French girl Jeanne—is she different?"

"I'll say she is," he replied. "She was born and bred up here, and has knocked about in lumber camps since she could first walk. Why, she uses a gun like a man. As a matter of fact she is more man than woman."

She could not help smiling at this ingenuous remark. To her it had seemed that Jeanne was very much woman. One glance had told her that.

"You're a little sore with me?" he asked.

"Well, I think you might have come down to Fairborn, or at least have given me more details in your letter."

"Details?"

"Yes—about the camp—the house. Don't you think I'm interested in it?"

"I hope so. There goes the tin-can. Guess they're waiting for us."

"I'll come in a minute," she said. "I'll slip on a coat."

"And I'll get some of this muck off my hands."

The meal was a rather embarrassing one. She found

Jules a pleasant fellow, full of good humour and high spirits, but Jeanne talked very little now, and Diana felt she was trying to sum her up, which was indeed not far from the truth. She had to admire the girl's efficiency and speed, and the quality of the tea. But the bread was cut in enormous hunks.

"My sister," explained Jules. "She tink she feed zee elephants. Hey, Jeanne, dis no kind of bread for a lady. You mak zee leetle slices."

"Sure!" said Jeanne, and commenced to slice off the thinnest kind of wafers.

"Not for me," said Diana. "I like—hunks."

"I was telling the missus how we're going to get this caboose finished in no time," said Jim.

"Zat ees so," agreed Jules. "Your 'usband—Jeem—he is lak zee steam engine—and str-r-rong—by gar! You see dat beeg log—he weigh t'ree 'undred pounds. Jeem he lift zat lak eet ees a stick and——"

"Oh, let up!" growled Jim. "Why, a blamed mule could do better than that. More tea—Di?"

"Thanks!"

The big enamel cup was re-filled by Jeanne. Diana caught her eyes as she handed the cup across. There was something in it which was inscrutable—challenging, she thought. And then her attention was taken by the magical sunset. The snow was growing crimson all round her—and the deep blue shadows were creeping—creeping. She could see across the river from where she sat. It was the most marvellous vista imaginable—overwhelming in its mighty and incomparable beauty.

She reflected that there was something of the marvellous in this life of the great outdoors. All the while

Nature seemed to be reassuring—whispering that its more violent moods must not be taken amiss—that behind the furious winds, the driving snow, the bitter cold, there was a kind of mind which thought and planned and aimed at harmony. Yet while she was able to interpret this she was conscious of inharmony. Why had circumstances brought Jules and his sister along—just when her need was to be alone with Jim?

"All feenish?" asked Jeanne ultimately.

"Aye."

"Zen I clear up."

"I will help," said Diana.

"That's all right," put in Jim. "There ain't no need——"

"But I want to."

Birdseye came and made up the camp fire, which served a double purpose. It gave heat and also light by which to work. Diana had imagined that sunset meant the end of the daily grind, but she soon saw this was not so. Hammers and saws began setting up a din, and it was late in the evening before the tired workers gave way to a last meal—and sleep.

In the meantime Diana had helped Jeanne on the domestic side. Another meal had to be prepared, for in such circumstances the human need for food was immense. There were also the dogs to be attended to, and this job Diana took over completely. It appealed to her, for at that moment dogs seemed more worthy of consideration than some human beings.

To Jeanne she had passed but a few words. She did not want to appear either curt or unfriendly, but she could not disguise the fact that Jeanne's presence caused

her discomfort. After the final meal Jules produced a concertina and played upon it with no small skill. Then the day closed, and one by one they went to their respective sleeping places.

"Helas!" said Jeanne to her brother. "She no lak me."

"You're wrong," said Jules. "Why shouldn't she lak you?"

"Maybe she tink I am wild girl—no good."

"Maybe. And what you tink of her, hey?"

"I do not want to tink of her at all. But I tink Jim he is a beeg fool."

"Eh!"

"She geeve him not'ing—not'ing at all—I know."

"You know too much," he protested.

"Why he marry a woman lak zat? She belong to the big city and love not zee snow and the woods. She go away from him when there is work to be done—zen she come back because she is jealous."

"Jealous!"

"She tink someone might steal her 'usband. She lak zee dog in the manger——"

Jules began to reprimand her fiercely, but she stuck to her point, and to back her up was the fact that Diana had gone into the only room that was near completion while Jim was presumably content to sleep in a cold tent. That was not marriage to Jeanne's way of thinking.

Diana was thinking much the same thing as she made herself comfortable inside the partly erected building. Jules' concertina was still droning away outside, and then she heard voices—and laughter. First came Jeanne's high-pitched squeal, and then Jim's deep guffaw. She

got up and crept to the window. The three of them were squatting by the fire—Jeanne in the middle. Jim was smoking a pipe, and addressing some remarks to Jeanne. She could see the French girl's interested face, the heaving movements of her bosom. But of course it could be nothing very serious since Jules was present! Then suddenly Jeanne laughed again and displayed her fine white teeth. Jim cuffed her playfully, and Jules stood up and stretched himself.

Diana went back and sat on the bed, and a few minutes later there came a knock at the door. She asked who it was and heard Jim's voice outside.

"Can I come in?"

"Yes," she quavered.

He entered with a blanket over his arm, and his coat half undone.

"I'm going to turn in," he said. "I jest wondered if you were all right?"

"All right?"

"I mean if you have got everything you want."

She hesitated as she thought of a number of things she wanted and hadn't got. Then she inclined her head.

"There's a draught from the window," he said.

"We'll get them two top panes in to-morrow. Maybe I can fix it for you to-night."

"Oh, never mind."

"May as well be as cosy as possible," he said. "This blanket should do the trick. Ah, there's a hammer and some nails!"

He placed the folded blanket across the unglazed part of the window and fixed it securely. He then tested it by running his hands round the edges and was satisfied.

"I'll bring you in some breakfast in the morning," he said.

"No," she replied emphatically. "Call me when the rest of the camp gets up."

"But we're all at work before sun-up."

"That will do."

"Gee, but it's that cold——! Jeanne has to break ice to get water——"

"Jeanne appears to be unique to your way of thinking."

"Wal, she's used to it——"

"I have heard that remark before. If it is true, the sooner I get used to it the better."

"What's the matter?" he begged.

"Matter?"

"You seem all worked-up—nervy."

"Nothing is the matter—except that I refuse to be regarded as a kind of ornament. What is Jeanne's position here?"

"She's jest—the cook."

"Then in future she'll have to be cook's mate."

"But she won't stand for that——!"

"So she's more than cook—the boss, in fact?"

"Di, what's getting you?"

"I'm tired," she said. "And want to go to bed."

"Sure you do," he agreed, and made her more irritable than ever.

"Don't forget to call me," she called to him.

"I won't," he replied grimly. "Good-night!"

"Good-night!"

The door closed and she was left to herself. Now she regretted the small display of temper. Perhaps it was

partly due to the fact that she was tired, and prone to take a wrong view of things. But all the same it was clear to her that he regarded Jeanne as the natural ally in this kind of venture, and herself as something to be kept wrapped in cotton wool. To the French girl he could jest and smile, but to her——

This keen regard for her welfare left her cold. She would have exchanged it willingly for the more natural relationship that existed between Jim and Jeanne. Behind it all, of course, was her pride—the product of a quite artificial life in big cities. It was easy to say “give way—get out of yourself—fling aside these superficialities,” but how difficult to do so! She was not Jeanne with no kind of scruples of temperament to stand between feeling and expression of feeling.

Jim, on his part, was worrying about his wife's queer attitude. He wanted to put it down to tiredness and the inevitable discomforts in the present circumstances. Reflection on these lines was merely calculated to widen the gulf between them. While he was thinking of means and schemes to make her more comfortable, she was inwardly revolting at what she considered to be his contempt for her. Ironically enough, at the very moment when she was pining to be of real use to him he was doing his utmost to prevent it.

“Queer creatures—women!” he muttered. “You never know jest where you stand with 'em!”

Despite the hard day's toil, sleep came to him that night with less ease than usual. A few yards away was his wife—sleeping alone after months of married life! He knew it was all wrong—that it could not go on like that for ever. The first revulsion of feeling he could

150 THE MAN FROM PEACE RIVER

understand, and he had backed himself to win from her the love he desired to make life really worth living, but now he began to entertain little doubts. He had heard of women whose hearts were cold within them, approach to whom was only made by force. He winced as he thought of it, and knew that never could he sink to that depth.

"It must be half-way," he muttered. "Half-way or nothing! Maybe that'll never happen—and yet she came back! Why the blazes did she come back if——?"

"Aye—queer creatures," he repeated. "With a dog or a horse or any kind of animal you do know where you stand, but a woman——!"

CHAPTER TWENTY

A MONTH had passed since Diana returned to Eagle Fork, and the building had made remarkable progress. Jim now had a roof over the whole place, and it was no longer necessary for any of them to sleep outdoors. Who could do other than admire the marvellous energy of the three men, who had laboured through storm and blizzard with but one end in view?

Diana knew it was all due to the driving force of Jim. She had seen him performing herculean feats with timber baulks—setting a pace which only the stoutest of men could keep up with. Jules had not the same physical strength, but he was skilful with every kind of tool, and seemed to enjoy this fight against big odds.

Some trading had been done, and skins were beginning to pile up. But a new factor crept in—one that caused Jim to worry very much. He had scarcely estimated the cost of the new timber, and the myriad things he required. Owing to very high freightage everything cost double as much as in the cities farther east. One day he returned from a trip to Fairborn, with a worried expression on his face. Diana knew that something was wrong, and that evening the truth came out.

"Guess I've bitten off more than I can chew," he said. "I've got to lay off."

"What do you mean?"

"Cash. I've been spending as if there was a kind of well full of dollars, and I only had to pull up a bucketful when I needed them. Well, the bank gave me a nasty smack to-day."

"In what way?"

"They're not willing to advance me any more cash."

"I—I didn't know it was as bad as that."

"Yep—it is. I bin buying building material as if—Wal, there it is!"

"But what are you going to do?"

"Guess I'll have to call a halt—until I can do some more trading. You see, I spent a whole lot of money in stores, but that's no good to buy stoves and furniture and other things. I ought to have watched the out-goings better."

Jules was told the bad news, and was almost as depressed as Jim himself. But Jules was unable to help. He and his sister lived up to the last penny, and even now there was wages due to them.

"I'm good for the wages," said Jim. "Don't you worry——"

"By gar, I not worry about dat," said Jules. "But I tink it is ver' bad luck—jus' when we mak dat place look so nice."

"Sacre! I would lak to shoot zee manager of zee bank," said Jeanne fiercely.

"Lot of good that would do," retorted Jim. "Maybe they'd send up someone who would treat me worse. No, I guess I was wrong to get big ideas into my head. Ought to have been satisfied with a log caboose."

On the following day Diana found an excuse to go to Fairborn. Having had practice in mushing the dogs, she

drove the team herself and enjoyed the thrill of it. On reaching Fairborn she went to the telegraph office, but found it was next to impossible to get a cablegram to London, and a reply the same day. There was the quicker alternative of the trans-Atlantic telephone. The cost was tremendous, but she had brought with her some bits of jewellery in anticipation of an emergency. These she sold to a man in the town, and with the proceeds she bought a telephone call to London.

It took two hours to get connected, and at last she was relieved to hear the old family solicitor at the other end. The voice was faint but intelligible. Her request was for an immediate loan of £500. But he reminded her that under the terms of the will he was prohibited from using any money from the estate of her father until she carried out the conditions. Some quick thinking had to be done. Jim needed the money. Without it the half-completed house could never be built. She took the bull by the horns.

"Will you advance me the money if I give you my word of honour I will fulfil the conditions of the will?" she asked.

"Yes. I will make it a personal loan."

"Then I agree. I want you to wire that credit to the Western Bank at Fairborn—at once—to the credit of my husband, Jim Wallace. Will you do that?"

"It shall be done at once. Don't forget the other part. We shall be delighted to see you here."

"I won't forget."

She sighed as she hung up the receiver. She had committed herself, but on the other hand she had saved the house. She went straight to Jim's bank and explained the

154 THE MAN FROM PEACE RIVER

situation to the manager. The rest of the day was spent waiting for the telegram from England. At last it came, and she was informed by the bank that Jim's credit was good for another £500.

"Will you write him a letter to that effect?" she begged. "I will take it back with me. Please give him to understand that you have reconsidered the matter, and are willing to accommodate him to that extent."

This was done and she took the letter back with her, together with some other correspondence which had been waiting at the post office. It was very late when she arrived at Eagle Fork, and Jim was waiting for her anxiously.

"I wondered if you were all right," he said. "Had a good time?"

"I have been busy—shopping."

"Wal, you don't seem to have bought much."

"Small articles, but they took a long time. Oh, and there is some mail."

She handed him a packet of letters. Most of them were of no account—being bills and receipts. But at last he came to the letter bearing the name of the bank. He weighed it in his big hand.

"I don't like this," he said.

"Why not?"

"Wal, the bank may be wanting me to put my account straight at once. That's the sort of thing they do when they get a hunch a fellow is in a bit of a tight corner. Well, here goes!"

He tore off the edge of the envelope and took out the folded sheet of paper. She saw his eyes open wide with

surprise, and then he uttered a wild whoop, caught her and swung her round.

"Sorry!" he said. "But it got me that way. Look at this! We're saved! The building can go on. Oh, gee, that is the best news ever. Hey, Jules, Jeanne!"

Jules was asleep, but Jeanne emerged from a room to find out what was the matter. Jim pushed the letter into her hand and she read it and uttered a high squeal of delight.

"Now we not have to go," she said. "I say I would shoot zat manager. But now I mus—kees him!"

Diana eventually retired to her room with a sense of comfort at her heart. It was a set-off against the feeling of insecurity which had occupied her mind for the past month. But there was a slight flaw in the amber. She recalled Jeanne's remark—her obvious gladness that she would be enabled to stay longer. Jim perhaps ascribed that to her enthusiasm in the task at hand, but Diana knew better. A month of Jeanne's company had convinced her that her first intuition had been true. Jeanne was in love with Jim. During the month the girl had changed noticeably. She was no longer the wild care-free creature she had been. Diana had seen her titty-vating—making herself even more attractive. And this in a place where there were but three men—an Indian, a brother, and another woman's husband!

She wondered if Jim knew—whether this amazing innocence which he simulated was a mere pose? She did not want to believe that. Jim did not appear to be that sort of man. Yet, it was strange if he could really believe that Jeanne's feelings towards him was one of friendship only.

Such thoughts were bound to lead to her own relationship. Jim had made no kind of advance towards her. It was as if he had taken it for granted she wished to live her real life apart. Each night he would bid her "good-night" with warm affection in his voice, and in a hundred different ways he showed his appreciation of her help, which was now considerable. But the opportunities to get together were rare, with Jules and his sister always near them.

Came the suspicion that Jeanne was playing a deep game—one if carried to certain extremes might kill for ever all hope of a lasting rehabilitation. Where was the blame? Was she not culpable for adopting this air of indifference? When Jim had been ready to demonstrate his love she had held him off. Now, when she experienced the burning need for him, he was apparently ignorant of it. If she lost him it was her own fault. She had to be up and doing—had to show him that she had warm blood in her veins—soft arms to hold and keep him against all comers. The move must come from her—ere Jim drifted away perhaps for ever. It was useless to wait until Jeanne and her brother went away. Every moment counted now. She had to take that first all-important step at once. She resolved to waste no more time.

* * * *

Jim had gone to bed, greatly relieved by the unexpected action of the bank. It meant that so far as the completion of the store was concerned everything was plain sailing. The additional credit was ample to clear up all bills for material and labour, and for the purchase of the necessary furniture. In the early spring business

would be on the up-grade, and in addition the completion of the building would enable him to take up a mortgage.

Full of optimism, he had no doubts about the future so far as business was concerned, but he realised it would take him years to recover fully from the loss he had sustained by the fiendish action of the incendiary—Gubbins. He had not forgotten Gubbins. Sometimes in his dreams he and Gubbins met, and then there were pleasant reprisals. But during the working hours he did not permit his mind to be occupied with thoughts of revenge. The immediate need was to get the home finished—their home.

After working on some figures, he had a last pipe and then got between the blankets. The good news had excited him and he lay for some time in the darkness striving to peep into the future. Diana's contribution towards the everyday toil was pleasant to reflect upon. He realised that she and Jeanne did not get on very well, but he thought this was not to be wondered at. The one was a rather uncouth girl of the lumber camps, and the other was a sensitive woman fresh from a vastly different environment. Both in their respective ways were excellent.

What a glad day it would be when the last touches were given to the building, and Jules and his sister went their way! Much as he appreciated their company he was conscious of the fact that they were obstacles to the realisation of his happiness—and Diana's. When things were tidied up, and greater comfort introduced, he and his wife could talk things over. All through their short married life there had been friction. He was going to

brush that away, make her happy, and cause her to feel that everything he had done, or could do, was for her.

Doubtless he had underestimated her energy and courage, and she was conscious of this. Certainly she had given him the lie, for she was fast making herself acquainted with all the details of this kind of existence, and even introducing new ideas into it.

"Sure, I'll make things right," he murmured.

It was his last thought before sleep overtook him. An hour later the howl of a timber-wolf awakened him. There was an answering howl from the distance—then silence, and further howls of less intensity. He composed himself for sleep again, and was almost off when he thought he heard a sound at the door. It came again—louder this time, and now there was no doubt at all that a person was entering the room.

"Who's there?" he asked.

No answer came, but he thought he heard a kind of low sigh. His hand went out and found the matches. He lighted one, and held it between his fingers. A little cry escaped him as he saw the trim form of Jeanne standing between the bed and the door.

"Jeanne!" he gasped.

She did not move, so he lighted the candle on the small table beside the bed, and then got out. As he approached her the staring eyes told their own story. Jeanne was sleep-walking. He touched her on the arm.

"Jeanne, you must go back."

She muttered something which was not intelligible to him, but made no attempt to move. He was about to shake her into wakefulness when he remembered having

heard, or read, that it is sometimes dangerous to wake a sleep-walker.

"Come!" he said softly, and put his arm round her.

She offered no resistance but walked slowly with him through the door and along the passage to the bedroom which she occupied. As they reached the door, another door opened behind them. Diana, like Jim, had been awakened by the wolves. She had heard the sound in the passage, and in fear of some intruder, had decided to investigate. She saw the pair disappear into Jeanne's room, and her heart went cold.

Closing the door immediately, she went back to her bed and sat on it in a state of acute mental agony. The resolution she had made only an hour or so before had come too late. The almost undreamed of thing had happened. For her there was no sleep—only the bitterness of lost opportunity, misplaced trust, and disillusion.



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

WHEN Diana was able to think clearly, her first resolution was to thrash the matter out with Jim, and to make it clear to him that she could not go on living with him in the circumstances. She swore she would be dispassionate and try to deal with the situation calmly. There was no need for this deception to continue. If he really believed his future happiness lay with Jeanne, it were better to face that fact, and for both of them to take steps that would bring to an end a hypocritical state of existence.

Jim had fallen in her estimation—even after making allowances for her own shortcomings. She would have liked him the more had he come to her and openly declared what she believed was the real state of affairs. It hurt her to the very soul to think that he could so insult her.

When morning dawned and the camp became busy again, there was nothing in the attitude of either Jim or Jeanne to give any observant person to believe that things were different to what they appeared to be on the surface. Jim was hard at work again, apparently overjoyed at the removal of the obstacle to progress. Jeanne was in the kitchen, making a great noise with plates and what-not.

“*Bon jour!*” she said to Diana.

“Good-morning, Jeannel!”

Jeanne seemed to detect the unusual coldness in Diana's voice, but she made no comment. The big and appetising morning meal was prepared and served, and the men came to do full justice to it. Jules and Jim held a long argument about the respective merits of two different kinds of stoves.

"Wal, I'm for the 'Dominion,'" said Jim finally. "And I'm going to yank one up at the end of the week. What do you say, Di?"

"I'm sure you are right," she said in a toneless voice.

"You bet I am. Why, Jules ain't never lived in anything you might call a house. He might be able to tell me something about axes and cross-cut saws, but when it comes to heating-stoves I guess he's a baby."

Jules laughed heartily, until Jim slapped him on the back and caused him to choke.

"You two men are jus beeg babies," said Jeanne. "Now you go and work."

All through the morning Diana was composing speeches in her mind, but none of them was satisfactory. How hard it was to find the right words in such a contingency! How difficult to face up to the task of telling a husband that one knew him to be deceitful and unfaithful. She had imagined it could be done without anger. But now she knew it could not. There would be a scene—the kind of scene that would bring out the worst in one. Was that course advisable? Was it the best course?

The alternative was to go out of his life, and then have recourse to those more subtle tongues of civilisation—pen and ink. It would hurt less and would make the way clear for him. If he wanted Jeanne it was preferable

that he should have her legally and morally, rather than clandestinely. She hated lies and deception, and did not want to run the risk of hearing Jim perjure his soul in some sort of denial.

By evening she had made up her mind. She would take the line of least resistance—make an excuse to go to Fairborn, and from there find a means of getting to railhead. It would mean slipping a suitcase into the sled without Jim seeing it, but she had no doubt this could be done. That night she made known her intention.

"I want to run into Fairborn to-morrow, Jim."

He looked up in surprise.

"It was only a few days——"

"I know, but I want to go again. Can I have the sled?"

"Sure!" he said. "But if you could wait until Saturday I'd make the trip myself—to get that stove."

"I would rather go to-morrow."

"All right. Better start early. The days are short and it's not a nice journey in the dark."

"I'll start immediately after breakfast."

"There may be a letter or two."

"If there is I'll send—bring them."

After that she had a violent reaction, but she fought against it—refused to let sentiment override what she thought was the only sensible thing to do. She packed a few things in a suitcase before she went to bed, and then went to the window and stared out at the frosty night. Everything was dead-still, and a full moon illuminated the valley. The loveliness of the scene caused her to hold her breath. How changed her whole

attitude now was! This vast snowbound country which only a few months ago had terrified her, now seemed like an old friend. The great horizontal branches of the pines seemed to be holding out their hands to her. She was about to leave the things that were becoming dear to her, for the sake of a principle.

Some women might have stayed—made a frantic effort to win back love, and then attempted to forget—at least forgive. She knew she was not built that way. She could forgive, but to forget that Jim had sunk to a mere and cruel deception in the very house that he swore he was building for her, was impossible. Besides, it might be true that Jeanne with her wild ways and passionate heart was more acceptable to Jim than a woman who was not quite so prone to exhibit her no less passionate love.

She was glad she had made the way easier for him with regard to the house. At least he deserved that after his bad luck, and the indomitable energy which he was now displaying. But it hurt to think that perhaps another woman would in due course be mistress there. Her eyes grew moist, and she dashed away the tears almost angrily. No, she would not weaken—give way to useless weeping. Jim had already taught her the value of a stout heart.

Early in the morning she completed her packing, and then concealed the suitcase in the sled. The dogs were in splendid condition and the leader dog—her favourite—attempted to “kiss” her as she buckled the harness on his haunches.

“Bad boy!” she said.

He uttered a reverberating woof, which brought Jim from the clearing.

"Fine lot of huskies," he said. "But don't let that leader run away with the rest. He's a bit too fresh at times."

"I won't," she promised.

He looked at the sky.

"Snow coming, I guess," he said. "If there's any kind of a storm works up, better stay at Fairborn for the night. The wind can be murderous up that valley."

"I'll remember."

"Are you warm enough?"

She nodded, for her heart was very full just then. But he doubted her, and felt the fur coat to discover how much was underneath it.

"Not half enough on," he said. "You sure want another jerkin underneath."

"Oh, no. I'm quite——"

"I'll run and get you something."

He went off, leaving her panting with anxiety and emotion. These attentions were the last things she wanted at this moment. If he would only display coldness, or indifference, how much easier it would be. She knew there were limits to her resolution—limits set by the fact that despite everything she still loved him. It wasn't lovelessness which was driving her away, but deep wounds in a very susceptible heart.

"Here we are!"

It was Jim back again. In his hands he held a thick woollen jerkin. She was forced to take off the fur coat and slip the jerkin over a thinner one which she already

wore. The finished product was a woman of quite considerable waist proportions.

"You'll do now," he said.

"Then—I'll be starting."

"Well, good journey! And don't be late!"

She looked round at the point where the trail went down to the river, and saw him standing near the house waving. She waved back—and that was the last of him. A few seconds later the sled was bumping over the hummocks that went billowing across the river at that point. A little later smoother ice was encountered, and she found herself on a three-mile stretch of very fast trail. Forgetting Jim's warning, she let the leader dog have his head, and he went scampering away at a terrific pace.

Oh, the joy of the open, in the keen cold air of winter! The feeling of physical well-being, the scampering blood through young veins! The fine powdery snow that flew up from thirty-two pounding feet, fell upon her cheeks, and seemed to burn them. But for the circumstances this might have been the greatest pleasure in the world, but all the time she was remembering Jim—that inscrutable man whom she loved, but believed she was going to lose to a woman who she felt convinced did not, and could not, love him as she did.

Then she became conscious of the havoc caused by the herculean leader dog to the rest of the team. They could not stand that terrific pace, and some of them were objecting, being drawn along on feet that scarcely moved. She pulled on the reins and brought the speed down to normal.

Once she stopped to give the team a rest, and to admire

the scenery. At this point she had a marvellous view of the mountains to the west. The serrated peaks were forty miles away, yet she felt she had but to stretch out her hand to grasp the milk-white snow that lay upon them perpetually. There seemed to be an analogy in this. How like love—that love which constantly evaded her—which seemed so close and yet was worlds apart!

She went on again, and by noon she was mounting the river bank just outside Fairborn. The township seemed to be busier than usual, but she ascribed that to the fine weather rather than to the influx of any additional people, for means of transport was limited to sleds.

At the hotel she took a meal and thought out her plan. Jim's team had to be returned to him quickly, for he would need it in a few days. In addition, she must write and tell him that she had been guilty of a subterfuge. Then there was her own problem—finding a reliable dog-musher who would take her to railhead.

The first item was satisfactorily settled two hours later. The manager of the hotel recommended an Indian who was normally employed by him. He gave the fellow a good character and practically vouched for the safe return of the team. Diana saw the man in question and engaged him.

"I want you to leave in the morning," she said. "And I will give you a letter to take with you."

Her own immediate problem was not so easily solved. There were few men who were willing to make the long trip to railhead at that period of the year, and in addition her available funds were very limited.

"There's Tom Webbing," said the hotel manager.

"He knows the country as well as his two hands, but he's an independent sort of guy. Anyway, you might try him."

She found Webbing in his shack that afternoon, but he had just come back from a long trip, and was comfortably ensconced with his wife and family, who expressed themselves very forcibly against his undertaking the job.

"Sorry, ma'am," he said. "But there's Scotchey—three doors up. He's a good musher, but I'm doubtful whether he has a team at this moment. Still, you might try."

Scotchey proved to be a less attractive personage than honest Tom Webbing. Rumour had it that he had a weakness for drink, and was never without a supply. Otherwise he was voted a white man.

"I sure know that trail well enough," he said. "But I ain't got no dawgs, ma'am. Maybe I could interest an acquaintance of mine who's got a swell team. What'll you pay?"

"What do you want?"

"Wal, it's worth two hundred dollars. You got to remember we got to do the return journey as well."

"I can't pay more than a hundred and fifty."

"Hm! Can I tell you in an hour?"

"Yes, I am staying at the hotel. Ask for Mrs. Wallace."

"Sure. I'll see my friend."

Two hours later Scotchey called at the hotel. He had managed to get his friend to agree. They were ready to start first thing in the morning.

"I don't want to go by the river route," said Diana. "Is there another trail?"

"Sure! Several. I'll fix that for you."

"Thank you. I'll be ready at nine o'clock."

That evening was devoted to writing to Jim. Three or four attempts were made before she was satisfied that the letter was not too hurtful. Then she sealed it and gave it to the Indian with instructions to hand it only to Jim Wallace.

The thing was done. There was no way of retreat open now. Jim would probably understand—might even be glad that she had taken that course. At home there was a big fortune awaiting her—with all the comforts and luxuries that wealth could purchase. Perhaps a reasonable woman would have been glad, but she was most unreasonable, for strangely enough she would have preferred a log shack in the wilderness with a good man's love to all the artificialities of city life.

The sled came round for her in the morning. It found her quite ready. Scotchey introduced his mate and fellow-musher as "Gub." He was very unprepossessing—a thick-set, rather short man, with a prodigious beard, and a nasty habit of expectorating.

"Morning, ma'am," he said. "There's snow coming—but nothing to worry about. You'll find this a mighty good team, and we'll sure make the going."

"Gubb!" In some queer way the name stuck in her mind. She could not think why, for she was perfectly certain she had never seen the man before. It would have given her a shock had she realised that he was none other than Joshua Gubbins—the scoundrel who had burned Jim's home to the ground!

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

SCOTCHEY took the first spell of driving. It was clear at once to Diana that he was an experienced dog-musher. For some miles the trail was polished like a piece of plate-glass where the sled-runners fitted into the well-worn grooves, and this permitted both men to ride on the contraption. But when uphill gradients were met both men were compelled to walk, and in one place the gradient was such that the passenger had to walk also.

Diana now had time to contrast the two men. Scotchey (she did not know whether this was his surname or a nickname) was lean and wiry, with a certain sense of humour. Gubbins was as thick-set as a gorilla, with a voice that was like a badly tuned violoncello. In many ways he was repulsive, and Diana had as little to say to him as possible.

Two hours after leaving Fairborn the sun became obscured and thick cloud reduced the visibility. The exquisite mountain-tops were no longer visible, and small flakes of snow came on the wind. Jim had prophesied this twenty-four hours ago, and she marvelled at his weather-wisdom, for there had been no signs of it to her inexperienced eyes.

They were now at the summit of a long incline, up which all of them had toiled. Away to the east was the river valley—now dim and hazy. Scotchey pointed to

a point about ten degrees west of a thickly wooded area.

"We're cutting across the bend," he said. "We sure lose a bit in climbing, but we make up for it in mileage. That's where we strike the river again."

"Is it above Eagle Fork?" she asked.

"Sure—three miles."

"I'll do a bit of mushing now," growled Gubbins.

Scotchey nodded and the owner of the team took the reins. A minute later Diana wished he hadn't, for he began to use the whip most cruelly. The dogs were different now. Under Scotchey's control they had appeared to be docile animals, for Scotchey had never done more than crack the whips over their backs. But Gubbins' method was very different. He let them feel the long painful thong on their haunches. It certainly made for speed, but it aroused fury in the animals.

"Must you use the whip?" complained Diana.

"Guess they're used to it, ma'am," he replied. "Why, all them animals have been hauling sleds these five years. I've broke 'em in all right."

"That's not the best way to get value out of dogs," she retorted with the air of an expert.

"That's where you're wrong, lady," he said. "They're half wolf and mighty cunning. Once they think they've got on your soft side they jest malingers. Ain't that so, Scotchey?"

"Wal, there are dogs like that," admitted Scotchey. "But I guess the lady's right up to a point. Ease off a bit, Gubb."

Gubbins uttered a scoffing laugh, but for the next hour he was not so busy with the whip. Now they were in the timber belt—passing through fairy-like glades

where everything was sunk in deep silence. On the sides of the trail were animal footprints where beasts of prey and their victims had passed recently. Scotchey broke a long silence.

"Going to the coast, I guess, ma'am?"

"Yes."

"Wal, it's a hard life up here in winter. I wish I was going to the coast too. There's a Wallace at Eagle Fork—some relation, maybe?"

"Yes," replied Diana, without committing herself further.

"Someone told me that the Pernoulds were up there, doing a job of work."

"Oh, yes—they were."

"Wild sort of kid—Jeanne Pernould. Nobody ever got her to stay in town for three months on end. I knew the old man Henri Pernould. Made a pile of dollars and then lost it all—gambling. That family always were gamblers. Nice kid, too, in a way," he added, evidently referring to Jeanne.

"Yes," she said, feeling that she was expected to concur.

"Funny she never got married. There was half a dozen young fellows after her in Fairborn, but she turned 'em all down. I reckon your brother is the only guy who ever made any impression there."

"My brother!" she gasped.

"Didn't you say he was your brother? No, of course not, or you couldn't be Mrs. Wallace. Brother-in-law, I guess?"

She decided to let him think that. That he did not dream of the real relationship was obviously due to the

fact that he would not expect any man to let his wife do a long cross-country trip alone.

"You remember Jim Wallace, Gubb?" he asked.

"Eh?"

"Jim Wallace up at Eagle Fork."

"What about him?" snarled Gubbins.

"Nothing. I was asking if you remembered him?"

"Wal, just about."

Gubbins! Again the name caused Diana to ponder. Why did it seem so familiar? She came to the conclusion that Jim must have mentioned it casually at some time or other as he had done many names. Anyway, what did it matter?

A mid-day meal was taken near the junction with the river. The snow was now fairly thick, and Scotchey was complaining about its effect upon their progress. After the meal she saw him go to the sled and take a long pull from a bottle, after which he drove the team and became very garrulous. She recalled what she had heard about his drinking propensities, and hoped he would at least on this occasion refrain from making a beast of himself.

When progress was resumed she realised with a pang that Eagle Fork was now behind her. Every minute was taking her farther and farther away from it. She had practically given her husband to another woman. Was it madness—or could she claim complete justification? If Jim were love-starved, whose fault was that—if not her own? Life was giving and taking. Without the blessed virtue of forgiveness what small measure of happiness would remain? The little doubt grew into a

big one as the snowy miles were covered, and as the light began to fail so her spirits fell.

"We'll camp soon," said Scotchey.

The remark awakened her from painful reverie. It was a reminder that this was no mad dream but stark reality. She knew she was leaving behind every hope of future happiness. Why did God make women like this—victims of every sting of adverse circumstances? Why was this thing called Love so relentless a tyrant—demanding nothing less than All?

Long shadows beside a frozen river—then the brief twilight and the darkness. They had halted and the two men were sorting out the camping gear. The two tents were erected, and very quickly a fire was produced. The familiar smell of bacon and beans was wafted to her nostrils. It brought her memories of other nights in the wilderness—with Jim.

"There's a seat for you, ma'am," said Scotchey. "Hope it ain't too hard?"

"Thank you," she said, and sat down on a sack of mixed things.

The meal that followed was as good as old-timers could make it. It was astonishing what such men could do with a camp fire, a couple of cooking utensils and some edibles from tins.

"Not so bad," said Scotchey. "Forty miles."

"Forty-five," said Gubbins argumentatively.

"Wal, maybe."

They tried to make conversation for her benefit, but had it been the most entrancing philosophy it would have found her cold. Her heart was heavy—she wanted to be alone.

"I'm tired," she said. "I think I will go to my tent."

"Sure, ma'am," said Scotchey. "If there is anything you want jest give me the word. Me and Gubb will sit and have a smoke."

So she retired to the tent. There was no heating apparatus inside, but it was placed sufficiently near the fire to gather a little warmth from it. With the exception of removing her high boots and the fur coat and hat, she composed herself for sleep exactly as she was, after lacing up the tent flap on the inside.

The long day in the open had tired her, and she was soon in the middle of a wild and confused dream. Then she awoke suddenly, and realised that the cause of it was voices raised in altercation outside.

"That's twenny-five bucks," said a voice which she had no difficulty in recognising as Gubbins'.

"No—twen—twenny-seven," hiccoughed Scotchey. "I ain't so boozed as all that."

"Twenny-five, and not a cent more. See here, I'll cut you double or quits?"

"No. I'll have my twenny-seven."

"Yah—ye're white livered!"

She got up and crept to the flap of the tent. There were several peepholes, and she peered through one of them. The snow was falling, and her two guides were crouching over an improvised table on which were spread some cards—half-covered with snow. Scotchey was obviously very drunk, and by the side of him was a demi-john and an enamelled mug. Even as she looked he poured out some of the contents with a shaky hand, and gulped it down.

"White livered, am I?" he hiccoughed. "White livered! I'll show ye. Gimme them cyards!"

Gubbins passed him the pack, and he shuffled them, spilling them badly as he did so. At last he was satisfied and slammed them down.

"I'll cut ye," he said. "But you first—double or quits."

Gubbins made a grimace and cut. He was fortunate in cutting the Queen of Diamonds, at which Scotchey growled a protest. Then Scotchey cut.

"A seven!" chortled Gubbins. "That makes us quits. Jest as it oughter be."

Scotchey grumbled at his bad luck, and took yet another drink from the demi-john. Then he stood up and staggered across to the sled with his spirit container under his arm.

Diana closed the flap and went back to her bed, disappointed at what she had seen and overheard. What company for a sophisticated woman! An insufferable brute and a man apparently incurably addicted to drink. It would be a great relief when she was safely at rail-head, with this unpleasant experience behind her.

* * * *

When Diana failed to return on the night of her departure Jim was mildly surprised, but he remembered telling her not to risk returning in foul weather. He concluded that perhaps she misgauged the time, and had decided to stay at Fairborn for the night rather than make the return journey in the dark.

By noon the next day he began to show signs of anxiety, and his glance was constantly on the river. But

there was no sign of her and by four o'clock he was visibly agitated.

"May have had an accident," he said to Jules. "Guess I'll have to run down there."

"But dere is no sled?"

"Wal, I can walk."

"Twenty miles!"

"Anyway, I can't stay here doing nothing. I may meet her on the trail."

A few minutes later his problem was solved by the arrival of two men with a fair quantity of pelts. The business of trading was completed, and on being asked they were quite agreeable to taking Jim down to Fairborn, whither they were bound.

An hour after Jim had left an Indian arrived at the post. He asked for Jim, but was told by Jules that Jim had just left. Jeanne came out and recognised the dogs.

"Sacre! Zay are Jeem's dogs!" she said.

The Indian explained. A lady had stayed at the hotel and had commissioned him to bring back the dogs and a letter. No, he had not been stopped on the river by anyone, because he had taken the land trail for the last five miles.

"You'd better leave them," said Jules.

"But lady say I give letter to Mr. Wallace," he persisted.

"I geeve him letter later," said Jules.

The messenger gave way at last, and then departed. Jeanne looked at her brother.

"It come at las'," she said.

"What has come?"

"Diane—she hav^g gone. Zat is why she not come back las' night. She hav run away—yes."

"It look lak that," admitted Jules. "But why she run from a man lak Jeem?"

Jeanne laughed scornfully.

"Because she ees mad. *Mon frere*, she run once before, but she come back again. Then she find he is ver' poor—hav no home—not'ing. Now she go for good—I know."

"You know too much," he retorted.

"Maybe. Zut—you hav no eyes. She sleep alone—nevaire he is with her. I t'ink she ees big dam fool—and Jeem too. But now he lose her and I am ver' glad."

Jules shot her an angry glance.

"We are not all beeg fools," he said slowly. "I know why you are glad. It is because you love him—is it not?"

Her face went crimson and for a moment she turned her head away. Then she faced him again, with flashing eyes and clenched fists.

"Why not—eh?" she demanded. "Why I not love heem?"

"Because you geev yourself much hurt for not'ing. Because Jeem love no one but his wife. Though she geev him not'ing he still love her. You jus' waste your time."

Tears rose to her eyes, and she strode away from him. It was evident that she feared that what he said was true, but she was not the type of woman to give up hoping.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

JIM arrived in Fairborn without seeing a sign of Diana. Knowing there was only one place where she could possibly put up for the night, he went straight to the hotel, and raised inquiries there.

"Why, sure!" said the manager. "She stayed here last night."

"Where is she now?"

"Gone."

"But where?"

"To railhead. She was inquiring after some dog-mushers. They left here early this morning."

Jim was knocked breathless by this statement.

"That can't be right," he insisted.

"It is."

"But she had a dog-team."

"That's so. I lent her one of my men to take it back to Eagle Fork—with a letter."

"A letter!"

"Sure! The fellow hasn't returned yet. He couldn't get away as early as he planned, and I ain't expecting him back for an hour or two. Say, is anything wrong?"

"Nope," replied Jim. "You see, I didn't expect her to leave until to-morrow," he explained lamely. "I—I hope she got a reliable man to drive her?"

"I recommended her to Tom Webbing, but it wasn't Tom who called."

"Maybe he would take a mate with him?"

"Wal, that's likely."

Dazed and staggered, Jim made his way to Webbing's shack, but Webbing was not in the bosom of his family, and Jim had to visit several of the saloons in town before he found him playing a game of billiards.

"Why, Jim!" he said. "It's a long time since I seen you. What you bin doing——?"

"Did a lady come to you yesterday to ask——?"

"Sure. A woman who wanted to get to railhead. I couldn't take her there. The missus wouldn't hear of it—says I gotter stay with the kids for once."

"Then who took her?"

"Scotchey."

"I don't know Scotchey."

"Oh, he ain't so bad if you make allowances. I reckon he'll land her there safely. But do you know her?"

"Know her! Oh, yep—I know her. I'm a bit interested in her safe arrival."

"Then you needn't worry none. Scotchey may drink more'n is good for him, but he knows how to treat a lady."

"But I heard there were two mushers?"

"Well, likely enough Scotchey would have to let another fellow in. I got a hunch he sold his dawgs some time back."

"You don't know which route they took?"

"Nope. 'Ere, I got to get on with the game."

Jim left him to continue the billiard contest. His heart was heavy, and he felt the need of some kind of stimulant. He went to the bar and called for a drink. The place was full of men of every conceivable kind,

talking local scandal and politics. He caught scraps of conversation as he sat and tried to control the frantic beating of his heart.

"Scotchey! Yep, he's gone on a trip—mushing."

"Mushing what? Why, he sold his dog-team two months back to Josh Gubbins—almost gave it away."

Jim started as he heard that familiar name, and his eyes blazed as he recalled what it signified to him. But he had no idea that Gubbins had been in the township recently.

"Trust Gubb to make a good bargain!" laughed a man. "And now he's gone with Scotchey—with Scotchey's own team——"

Jim's hand shook at this amazing piece of news. He waited for more, but someone intervened and the conversation changed. A few minutes later he got an opportunity to talk to the man who had let loose the all-important fact.

"I had a bit of business to do with Gubbins," he said, trying to appear casual. "I've mushed twenty miles to see him. I suppose there's no doubt he went off with Scotchey?"

"None at all. I was on the sidewalk when they left the hotel with a lady passenger."

"Were they heading for the river?"

"No—the high trail."

Jim left the place and wandered down the street. His mind was bewildered by this amazing flight, and his fears aroused by the fact that Diana was accompanied by a brute of Gubbins' calibre. A day had passed and they were probably fifty miles away. His dogs were evidently at Eagle Fork. He had to get to them. He

remembered a man in the township who owned a fast horse sleigh, and without further delay he hunted him up.

The man wasn't at all keen to make the journey, even to win a very considerable sum of money, but Jim practically browbeat him into it, and a quarter of an hour later the horse's spiked hoofs were ringing on the hard, fast trail.

"Put him to it," urged Jim. "I'm sure in a hurry."

The animal was a willing beast, for it had been stabled for over a week, and badly needed exercise. The contraption was light and the trail good. In the intermittent moonlight they sped up the river, with snow falling at intervals—and at last Eagle Fork was reached. Jim paid off the driver and climbed up the river bank.

"Jeem!"

It was Jules hailing him from the vicinity of the house, and a few moments later Jim was beside him.

"Zee dogs zay come back," said Jules.

"What time?"

"Jus' after you leeve."

"Good! That means they have had a good sleep. Guess I shall need 'em."

"Here ees a letter."

"Thanks!"

Jim went inside and opened the letter. Anxiously he scanned the contents.

"DEAR JIM,—

"I am sorry to have to play this trick on you. But I thought it better to avoid an unpleasant scene. When I came back from England it was my hope that

we could overcome all the wretched friction that had developed between us. I have recently discovered that this was a vain dream. You will understand why, if you will search your conscience. I don't blame you. At least I am willing to take half the blame. This will leave you free to take the necessary legal proceedings. I hope you will be happy.

"Yours,

"DIANA."

He winced as he folded up the letter. He did not understand the reference to his conscience, but guessed she meant his apparent neglect of her when she was down at Fairborn. Only one aspect of the letter was really sun-clear. She was offering him his freedom!

A hard little laugh escaped him as he looked round the room which she had recently occupied, and recalled his sensations when he had first planned it, and hoped it would soon be their joint bedroom. All that labour and thought for nothing!

In the face of her letter he would have let her go in the ordinary way, but there were two reasons why that was impossible now, and they were so intermingled that they became one. That reason was Gubbins!

Apart from his natural dislike of Gubbins, he believed that all his trouble could be credited to him. Hadn't Diana herself admitted that she came back from England hoping to bring about a better feeling? Gubbins' infamous act had robbed him of his home, had rendered necessary all this work—these conditions which militated against love and confidences.

Well controlled as he was normally, reflection on these

points caused his fiercest resentment to rise. Here was a chance of getting Gubbins, and it should not be missed. He went to the door and called for Birdseye. The Indian appeared as if by magic.

"I'm going on a trip. Harness the dogs—and put this gun aboard."

"Boss go far?"

"Maybe three or four days." Then, in a burst of confidence, "I'm going to get the guy who burnt down the old trading post. He is less than twenty hours ahead."

The Indian's eyes gleamed hatefully, and he rubbed the seat of the wound which Gubbins had inflicted on him.

"Birdseye come too?" he asked.

"Nope. You'll be needed here. I can't afford to miss any trade, and Jules doesn't know anything about the business. Hurry now!"

He heard the dogs barking as Birdseye released them from the kennel. Now his blood was fired. He wanted to be on the trail—going after Gubbins—not to mention Diana. He had no intention of sleeping that night. He must mush the dogs until they gave out. At the end of the quest was Gubbins.

In a very short time Birdseye brought the dogs round, harnessed to the lighter of the two sleds. Jim packed some food, a large quantity of rugs, a tent and some cooking utensils, ran his eye over them and was satisfied that he was replete. Jeanne stole up to him.

"You go 'way, eh?"

"Sure! Just a little joy-ride."

"You—you bring her back?"

"Her!"

"Diane."

"Nope. I'm going after a dirty skunk named Josh Gubbins—the fellow who burnt my place to the ground."

"Gubbins! *Mon Dieu*, you mus' be careful. I know heem. He is ver' dangerous man. If he t'ink you are after heem he will try to keel——"

"Don't you worry none," he said, patting her arm.

"I guess I can hold my end up with Josh Gubbins."

"Maybe you be on trail long time, hey?"

"I guess not. He's making for railhead. All trails meet about a hundred miles east from here. I'll find him all right."

"Jules and I—we go on with work, eh?"

"You bet your life. I want this place finished. Now I've got to make a start. So long, Jeanne!"

He gripped her hand, and seemed rather surprised when she displayed a tendency to retain his fingers.

"Not getting sentimental, Jeanne?" he said jestingly.

"I not lak you go away," she said.

"You great big baby! What are you afraid of?"

She smiled whimsically, wondering at his obtuseness. Then came Jules to bid the traveller "bon voyage." A few minutes later Jim was off. His eyes, long accustomed to dark woods, served him well. Into the silence he drove, with his nerves braced and a deep resolution at his soul.

He guessed that Diana had instructed her pilots to take the high land trail in order not to have to pass Eagle Fork. But he knew that sooner or later they must make contact with the river again. Four miles farther

on there was a place on the river bank where several trails converged. That might tell him something.

In a very short time he reached the spot. There were several inches of new snow on the ground, but he was able to see the marks of recent traffic. Stopping the dogs, he hunted about on foot, looking for the kind of place that experienced mushers would select for a halt. Luck served him well. He found two empty cans which had evidently been opened quite recently, and one or two other signs of a meal. It did not prove that Gubbins had been there, but the odds favoured that supposition.

Away he went again, along the river bank. Five miles farther on the trail wound down to the river itself, and the smoother running was a relief. There was a big rift in the scudding clouds, and the moon now shone in a perfectly clear sky. The cold seemed to strike downwards, and there was frost on his eyebrows and lashes. The dogs, too, had frost-decked whiskers.

Having a regard—even love—for his dogs, he did not attempt to force the pace. There was a natural speed which was best for them, and he let them find it. Once the willing animals showed signs of terror, and he soon divined the cause of it. There were wolves about. He saw the green eyes amid the timber on the bank above him. But like most Canadian wolves, they were shy of risking an encounter.

For hour after hour the steady pace was kept. The sled runnings made soft music in his ears, and set his mind working. A million thoughts came to him. Time ceased to exist. Like an automaton he reacted to a stimulus already given—the urge to get even with a cowardly scoundrel.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

As the true characters of her guides were slowly revealed to her Diana became more and more nervous. There was Scotchey having recourse to his rum-jar at every hour, and Gubbins, beating and cursing the dogs for not doing the impossible.

"We're sure hours behind!" he snarled. "These goldarned animals have got a grouch—jest look at 'em."

"It's because you are beating them," retorted Diana. "Why don't you leave them alone?"

"They my dawgs, and I'll do what I darn well like with 'em."

"Easy, Gubb," remonstrated Scotchey with a hiccup. "The lady's right. You lay off the leather for a bit."

"You lie down and sleep!" snapped Gubbins. "Take that, you swine!"

The heavy thong of the whip came down on backs and haunches that were fast becoming lacerated. Diana could stand it no longer.

"Stop!" she cried.

Gubbins glared at her.

"Stop the sled!"

"Can't ye hear when a lady speaks," drawled Scotchey. "She wants you to stop."

Gubbins pulled hard on the reins and the sled came

to a halt. Diana got out and approached him, with her cheeks burning, and her hands clenched.

"I won't go another yard unless you put that whip in the sled," she said. "You don't need a whip to drive dogs."

"Oh, you don't, eh?" he retorted insolently. "And what do you know about mushing?"

"I know that I was mistaken in engaging a brute. Are you going to give me that whip?"

"No."

"Then I refuse to go on."

Gubbins leered at her, and then stuck a wad of tobacco between his teeth.

"So you'd rather stay here and freeze?"

"I think I would."

"Get back," he said. "And leave a fellow to know his own business."

"I will not get back until you hand me that whip."

Scotchey, despite his half-intoxicated condition, realised that trouble was brewing. He fell out of the sled, and scrambled to his feet.

"Now listen, Gubb," he admonished. "I didn't bargain on you behaving like this. Why don't yer do as the lady asks?"

"I won't be dictated to by no females," muttered Gubbins. "If you think you can drive better 'n me, you'd better do it. Here—take 'em!"

He handed the reins and the whip to Scotchey, and then walked sulkily ahead, for they were on a long uphill gradient, and the pace was necessarily slow.

"All right, ma'am," said Scotchey apologetically.

"You mustn't take him too seriously. He gits like that sometimes. But he don't mean no harm."

She got back into the sled, and progress was resumed. The dogs worked better under Scotchey's driving. Despite his intemperate habits Scotchey had a lot of good traits, and it seemed pitiful that he could allow himself to become degenerated by drink. Gubbins did not appear to be similarly addicted. It was true he drank a little in the evening, but he had a much better control of himself.

When the sled again came out on the river, and a greater speed was possible, Gubbins came and stood on the sled step, and occasionally passed a sneering remark at Scotchey. Then again, after a long day, camp was made. Diana was glad to feel she was one day nearer her objective. Sensitive to outside influences she could feel the growing animosity between the two men—and the fault undoubtedly lay with Gubbins.

"He hates you," she said to Scotchey that evening. "Why is it?"

"He don't hate me more'n he hates everybody. That's only his way."

He turned to go to the fire, but she brought him back with a call.

"Is it necessary for you to drink so much?" she asked.

He looked a little ashamed.

"It's a habit," he replied. "You see, lady, I'm not built like Gubb, with mountains of flesh on his bones. I gotta keep the cold outside me."

"Does that call for drink every hour?"

"Wal, maybe I do take the odd one more'n I should. But I'll look to it, in future."

"Thank you! I wish you would."

When she retired to the tent her brain was unusually active. Contact with these two very imperfect specimens of mankind caused her to remember Jim—his clean sort of life, his marvellous control of himself—a little too marvellous at times! For the second time she was running away from him, and, she believed, for good.

It was curious that with all her wounded feelings she could think of him kindly. She even tried to persuade herself that this was a wrong attitude. He had undoubtedly deceived her. That surely warranted contempt for him! But this contempt could not be built up. Instead all her enmity went to Jeanne, who had treacherously worked upon Jim's emotions at a time when he was admittedly love-starved.

"Poor Jim!"

She bit her lip as her tongue half-uttered the words. Why poor, when he had someone who loved him? It was she who was poor—who had lost to a rough girl of the wilderness. No, she must not pity Jim—only herself.

She could hear the voices of the two men outside, and guessed they were playing cards. For a long time this went on, while she turned uneasily, and then she suddenly heard an uproar.

"You dirty tinhorn!"

It was Scotchey's voice, hoarse with hate and passion.

"Easy!" snarled Gubbins.

"I'm wise to you—you trickster. I never dealt you that card. I saw it come from your——"

"Shut your mouth, or I'll shut it for you!"

"I'll see you to——!"

Very apprehensive of the outcome of this altercation, she slipped on her coat and went to the tent opening.

The cords were unlaced, and she gasped as she saw the two men now standing up in the snow facing each other in threatening attitudes.

"Scotchey!" she cried.

He paid not the slightest attention to her, but danced from side to side waiting for an opening. Gubbin's short but powerfully-built frame moved less slowly. With a savage curse Gubbins suddenly bored in and caught Scotchey round the neck.

"Stop! Stop!"

She ran out, waving her hands to them. But she might as well have tried to stop a forest fire. Scotchey's blood was inflamed with drink and the consciousness of having been cheated, and Gubbins had been expecting, and wanting, this for days. She found she could do nothing but stand and watch this dreadful affray. Now they were on the ground—now on their feet. Muscles literally cracked, and their heavy breathing was awful to hear.

Scotchey, rising to his feet after a heavy fall, made a wild rush at Gubbins. The short, thick-set man leaped aside with astonishing agility, and struck out with his clenched fist. The blow caught Scotchey full on the ear and drew blood. He almost howled with the pain, and then seemed to go mad. Gubbins saw him rushing towards the sled, and knew what that meant. In the sled was a loaded rifle, and Scotchey's hand was on it when Gubbins drew a revolver from his belt.

"Let up!" he yelled.

But Scotchey was deaf to warnings. He seized the rifle and swung round.

"Don't!" screamed Diana.

The next moment Gubbins's revolver spat fire.

Scotchey turned like a tectotum and crumpled up. He fell across the sled, which was immediately behind him, groaned, and lay still. Gubbins uttered a grunt and put his weapon away.

"You've killed him!" said Diana in a choked voice.

"Serve him right—the whelp!"

Fearfully she approached the still body. It was bleeding from a wound in the chest, and the blood was freezing as it welled forth. Whether he was actually dead she did not know, but she knew he would undoubtedly die if left where he was.

"He must be got into the tent," she said. "Lift him."

"Eh?"

"Get him into the tent—your tent."

"All right," he growled. "But he ain't worth it."

He thereupon lifted Scotchey in his long arms and carried him into the tent.

"The rum," said Diana. "It may help to bring him round."

"He has had a darn sight too much rum."

"Get it—get it!"

But the fierce spirit had no visible effect upon Scotchey. He never stirred, and it was impossible to say whether his heart was still beating.

"He's dead!" said Gubbins. "Guess I'd better plant him."

"No—no."

"I tell ye he's a corpse. You saw what happened, didn't you? It was self-defence. If I hadn't got him he would have got me."

"I only know you shot him."

"Self-defence."

"The police must decide that."

"Police! What are ye saying?"

"If he dies it must be reported."

"Must it? Wal, I ain't in agreement."

"But you know——"

She stopped and retreated before his hateful eyes. He pounced on her and grabbed her by the arm.

"Let me go!" she cried indignantly.

"Sure I will—when we understand each other. That man ain't going to be found. Him and me—we had a row, and he jest walked out on me. D'ye git that?"

"Walked out——?"

"Sure! Packed up and left us."

"Do you think I am going to lie about——?"

"You're sure going to swear that."

"I can't. I shall tell the truth. I admit he went for the rifle, and might have tried to use it——"

"That ain't good enough. It's easier to say he walked out of camp and never came back. I'll plant him where no one will find him but the wolves."

"I won't."

"All right. Then I got to think what I'll do—with you."

His expression was so murderous she backed out of the tent. Then she remembered the rifle which was still lying by the sled. She ran towards it, but he anticipated her object, and caught her before she could handle the weapon.

"So it's like that, eh?" he snarled. "Get off—to your tent! Beat it! I'll arrange this matter, by God!"

Horrified, she did as she was bid. Here was a situation undreamed of. To run away was out of the question,

for they were in a desolate part of the country. Without food and equipment she would most certainly succumb to the intense cold. The only thing to do was to pretend to fall in with his plan—until she could reach safety. It was a question of self-preservation, and she believed that he was quite capable of killing her and planting her as he proposed to plant Scotchey. Indeed that would be the best thing to do from his particular point of view.

She did not attempt to sleep, but walked to and fro—to and fro endlessly in the very confined space, regretting bitterly the day when she had decided to entrust herself to such men. Years seemed to pass before she heard him outside the tent.

"Come out!" he said. "Time to beat it."

Taking her courage in both hands she stepped outside into the snow. It was yet dark—hours before the dawn, but he had harnessed the dogs, and packed the sled.

"Where is he?" she asked.

"Buried. Maybe you've changed your mind?"

"Yes."

"That's good. We had a quarrel and he walked out, didn't he?"

"Y-yes."

"That goes then. We'll have breakfast further along. I want to get away from here."

The tent was dismantled while she waited, and then folded and placed in the sled. He took the reins, slashed the dogs with the whip and set the sled moving, while the fire still flickered and illuminated the snowy wilderness. Her heart thumped in her breast as they drew out into the dense woods.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

THROUGHOUT that day a great fear struck at Diana's heart. Gubbin's hateful eyes were on her the whole time, and not a single word passed between them. Hitherto he had not appeared to be addicted to drink, but now he was drinking at frequent intervals from the demi-john of rum which Scotchey had only half-finished. The dogs came in for his smouldering fury. He lashed into them with the whip, and gave vent to horrible curses.

During the afternoon a terrible wind got up, bringing heavy snow with it. In the exposed places progress was rendered most difficult, and the cold became so intense that no amount of covering would induce warmth. According to her calculations they were now but one day from their objective, and she would have given a year of her life to have got that day over.

Evening brought even worse conditions, and it was soon apparent that they must take shelter somewhere. But the timber was sparse and they appeared to be in the most exposed part of the whole valley. The knife-edged wind smote down it with furious howlings, raising vast clouds of snow—blinding both dogs and driver, and making life unbearable.

"We must camp!" she yelled at Gubbins finally, when her limbs felt like slabs of ice.

"Can't," he snarled. "Not yet. I know a place——"

He cut off from the main trail, and went through a patch of timber by the side of a frozen creek. She had no idea what his intentions were, and was now too miserable to argue the point. A mile or so was covered, and then she caught sight of a ramshackle timber building. Closer investigation proved it to be an abandoned shack or store. Half the roof was off, but yet it offered some sort of shelter. Gubbins pulled up the exhausted team.

"Better than the open," he said. "Help me with this gear."

"I—can't," she complained.

"What's the matter?"

"I'm half-frozen."

"Get inside then!"

She staggered towards the door. The lock had long since fallen off, and it was flapping in the fierce wind. She went through it and found herself in an empty room, with a door leading to another room. There was an old stove in the centre, still carrying the grey ashes of a wood fire, a broken table and a home-made chair. It was draughty, but compared with the conditions outside it was heavenly.

Gubbins came in a little later with his arms full of gear. He grunted as he saw the stove, and looked at the pile of rubbish in a corner, which included a fair supply of dry logs. Some of these were chopped into kindling wood, and a fire was soon got going.

"That's better," he grunted. "Now perhaps you help get some grub cooked."

This she did, and half an hour later they sat down to a rough meal. Gubbins ate like a hungry wolf—and in

a manner that disgusted her. And every few minutes she would find his eyes focused on her—burning into her until her spirit quailed.

"A drink?" he said, offering her a mug of rum.

"No, thanks!"

"Well, there ain't no cawfee."

"Then I'll go without."

He gulped down the rum himself, and then refilled the mug. She took the opportunity to examine the inner room. It was smaller than the main one, and tidier. Moreover, the door still possessed an inside bolt.

"I'll take my blankets in there," she said.

"All right—but there's no hurry."

"I'm—tired," she complained.

She was relieved to get into the inner room, and to push the bolt of the door. She realised that she was near the end of her resources. The brutal killing of Scotchey was still fresh in her mind and she had an ever growing fear of Gubbins. The only bit of silver lining to the great cloud that hung over her was the fact that they were within a day's travel of their objective.

Having made her bed on the floor, she sat down and indulged in reflections while the wind howled round the building. At times there came noises from the next room—the rattle of a mug or plate, and a heavy bump, which she thought was caused by the demijohn of rum being handled.

There was no doubt that Gubbins was drinking heavily, and she concluded it was due to the recent tragedy. Case-hardened as he was, he was haunted by the fear of the possible falling of the hand of justice—for there was a witness to the crime—herself. It was

this fact which caused her such uneasiness. Suppose he decided not to trust her to hold her tongue—or to lie about what had taken place? Nothing would be easier in that patch of wild country than for him to commit yet another crime, and so render his future comparatively safe.

Time passed and then she heard him move. Listening intently, she was able to guess what was taking place. He was getting feed for the dogs. She heard his heavy retreating footsteps, then the banging of the outer door, and then yelping from outside. An idea came to her—and it was one that had to be put into effect at once. She jumped up, unbolted the door, and slipped into the next room. In the corner she saw the rifle. Without a moment's hesitation she snatched it up and carried it to her room. After bolting the door she examined the magazine of the weapon. It was fully loaded!

She concealed it under the blankets, and then tried to get to sleep. At last she dozed off. What period of time passed she did not know, but she was awakened by a noise on the other side of the door—someone was pushing it, and turning the handle. The small night-light was still burning on top of a tin, casting moving shadows as the many draughts affected it.

Great pressure was exerted on the door, and she saw it bulge. Then the handle was rattled furiously, and she heard a savage drunken curse.

"What do you want?" she cried.

"Open the door!"

"What for?"

"I wanna talk."

"To-morrow."

"Nope—now."

"Please go away?" she begged.

"Are yer going to open it, or shall I break it down?"

To this she made no reply, but felt for the rifle and slowly drew it from under the blankets. Her heart was now beating like a tom-tom. Her worst suspicions were aroused. Drink and fear and natural brutality had driven him mad. Never in her life had she been in such a predicament, and she thanked God for the thought which had prompted her to take the rifle.

"Open it!" yelled Gubbins.

"No."

She scarcely recognised her own voice—it was so husky with pent-up emotion.

"Wal, we'll see!"

There was a slight pause, and then a crash, and she saw a gleaming axe-blade strike through a panel. A quick succession of heavy blows removed the panel altogether. An arm came through and the bolt was withdrawn. Then Gubbins staggered into the room.

"So!" he snarled. "You thought——"

She was standing up now, with the rifle held short to her side and her finger on the trigger.

"Why did you break in here?" she asked.

"So you got the gun, hey? Throw it over here, and be sharp about it!"

"Get out!" she said, meeting his inflamed eyes.

"You jest hand over my gun."

"It isn't your gun. It belonged to Scotchey."

"I'm coming to get it."

She stood her ground and he took a step forward. He

was now but two yards from her, but there was something in her expression which held him up.

"You wouldn't shoot," he hiccoughed. "Not that kind o' woman, I guess."

"I will shoot you dead if you move another inch forward," she panted.

"Yah!"

He made a slight movement, but saw her finger contracting on the trigger. It pulled him up dead.

"All right," he said slowly. "All right!"

"Now get out—quick!"

She made a jabbing movement with the barrel of the rifle and he retreated, until he passed through the open door. She closed it behind him, and bolted it again. She saw him stagger to the demijohn and drink direct from it.

Still clutching the rifle she sought the bed, and sat there with her mind working swiftly. The climax had arrived. To stay with him longer would be madness. But what was to be done? For hours she sat there—no longer sleepy, and ready for any cunning move on his part. But nothing happened. The wind outside died away, and all she could hear was snoring from the next room. The night-light had now burned out, but there was a glow shed through the broken panel by the fire on the other side. She went to the orifice and gazed through it. Gubbins was lying on a blanket—apparently sound asleep.

Now was the moment! The dogs had been fed, and had had some hours of sleep. The sled was outside and civilisation was within a day's journey. She knew how to harness the dogs to the sled, and she had her own

blankets—and the rifle. There was no need for food—but even so she doubted whether Gubbins had removed all the stuff from the sled. The best means of exit was the window in her room. She decided to tackle it.

Her blankets and personal belongings were dropped through it on to the snow. She then donned her several outer garments and passed through the window. The dogs had been tied up in a small outer shed. She went to them and roused them. Only one of them showed a tendency to yelp, and she silenced him with a hearty cuff. Working swiftly in the moonlight, she got the team harnessed to the sled. The tents had not been unpacked, and she saw a quantity of food still aboard, and some spare cooking utensils.

At last she was ready. Choosing what she believed was the right direction, she set the dogs moving, and passed into the woods. The going was heavy, but she dared not use the whip for fear of causing the dogs to yelp. The woods enclosed her, and for half an hour she wondered whether she was on the right trail. Then the timber thinned and she saw the frozen river on her left.

A little later she found an easy descent and finally got the team on the river ice. Here there was a good trail, and speed was considerably increased. The cold was intense, and after the excitement of getting away, a reaction came. She felt sleepy—so sleepy that at times she nearly collapsed. It required wonderful self-control to go on, and yet she knew she must put many miles between herself and Gubbins before she dared halt.

Each mile seemed a hundred, and the steady 'swish' of the sled runners was like a lulling music. Away in the north were strange flickering lights—everything was

unreal, like a nightmare, but now without its worst horrors.

Three hours later she drove the team up the bank and finally stopped amid pines. To erect the tent properly was impossible in her exhausted condition, so she was satisfied with unfolding it and laying it over the sled, which she used as a bed, with every article of covering wrapped around her. Then she slept, while the cold stars twinkled.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

It was very late at night when Jim was brought to a halt, partly from sheer physical necessity, and partly by the fact that he saw a fire glowing amid the timber. The dogs were as near complete exhaustion as he was, and he had some trouble in forcing them up a steep incline which terminated at the fire.

He realised the possibility of finding Scotchey and Gubbins there, but as he drew nearer it was obvious that the place was deserted. All around the fire were foot-prints, and among them he had no difficulty in recognising those of a woman. Evidently the party had camped here—and within a few hours. But why had they gone at this time of night? The fire had a story to tell. He deduced from the state of the top logs that they had been placed there not more than an hour ago. Something had happened—but what?

His desire was to go on, but he knew it was impossible. Sleep was an absolute necessity, both to him and to his team. Nothing short of four hours' complete oblivion could restore the energy needed for this kind of labour.

He pitched a tent, staggering as he did so, and then prepared a much-needed meal. Immediately after being fed the dogs settled down, and he himself took in the large amount of food he needed. The urge to find Gub-

bins was still there, but clouded by fatigue. He built up the fire, and was going to his tent when he saw something that caused him to halt. It was blood upon the snow! The warmth of it had caused it to penetrate deep, and the later falling snow had partly obscured the stain, but when he carefully removed the upper precipitation he found the stains deeper in colour.

He swept away more snow with a branch, and then saw a round black object. It was a wad from a cartridge! His imagination filled in the rest. Someone had been shot here. That accounted for the hasty departure. But which of the three was it?

Sleep seemed out of the question while this problem was unsolved. He searched round for further clues, but failed to find any more. The natural conclusion was that the injured person had been put into the sled, and taken away—perhaps with the idea of getting him to a doctor post-haste.

No longer could he burn the candle at both ends. Every nerve in his body was aching for sleep. Like a drunken man he staggered to his tent, and almost fell upon the blankets. When he awoke it was daylight. He reproved himself for wasting time that was of the utmost value, and he ate a meal at a speed that was dangerous. Within a quarter of an hour of waking he was on the trail again. Snow overnight had obscured the marks of Gubbins' sled in places, but he managed to follow them. All through that day he drove as he had never driven before—urged on by the fear that the blood he had seen was the blood of his wife.

Then he lost the sled tracks, and for hours went round in wide circles endeavouring to find them. At last they

were picked up again amid timber, where they had escaped the 'drift' that was raised by the increasing wind. Time had been lost, and night was falling. He had to go on for fear that the tracks would be completely obscured during sleep.

His eyes ached from staring at the trail in the darkness, but he had long developed the night-eyes of an animal, and saw things which most men would have missed. In the cruelly cold hours of the morning he rested to take food, and to attend to his team. Both man and dogs were nearly frozen, and while they ate they clustered round the small heat given by a spirit stove, for he had no time to make a wood fire.

Then on top of the half-blizzard came a wonderful lull, a clear sky and a magnificent moon. Compared with the preceding darkness it was like the noon-day sun. He looked at the animals and decided they were good for another two hours.

Soon, to his surprise, the faint tracks cut away from the main trail—inland. He found himself running by the side of a frozen creek, the deep snow of which had been recently broken. He was puzzled to know why this bad, slow trail had been used—unless it was to avoid the terrible wind through which he had recently come?

Struggling along, with the snow up to their haunches, the dogs were a pitiful sight. His sympathy went out to them. Poor brutes—that had done all that mortal man could expect of them. Then suddenly he saw a wooden shanty before him, and through the frosted window he caught glimpses of a flickering fire.

"Gubbins!" he muttered.

Outside the shack the snow was disturbed, but he

failed to see any sled, and began to wonder whether once more he had arrived too late. He pulled up the sled and went to the door. It opened at a push and he gazed inside. The sight that met his eyes brought a low exclamation from him. A man was lying on the floor face downwards, and on him and near him was blood. Two yards away was a big six-chambered revolver. He picked up the revolver at once and saw that two rounds had been fired. Then he turned the body over. It was that of Gubbins, and the hole in his chest told its own story.

He strove to account for this amazing discovery. It seemed incredible that this was the sequel to the bloodstains at the last camp. From the position of Gubbins's wound it was obvious he could not have lived an hour. In that case he could not have bled where he now was. By the time he got there his body would have been frozen.

Two cartridges had been fired, but there was only one wound. Of course one bullet might have missed, but alternatively it might have been used in the last camp—on someone else. If two persons had been shot who was the survivor?

He went to the inner room and discovered signs of someone having been there. Then there was the broken door. What did that signify? At last the only possible solution came to him. Gubbins must have shot his trail-mate—Scotchey, and then made for this retreat in the woods with Diana. There was only one interpretation of the smashed door, and that caused his cheeks to burn. In self-defence Diana had——!

His next line of action was not at all clear. His obvious duty was to report the matter to the police, but to

do that he would have to explain certain facts. Alternatively he could go away, and let matters take their course—or bury the corpse, and so dispose of all evidence.

But the immediate need was for sleep and food. He attended to the dogs while his brain whirled, and then made up a bed in the room which Diana had recently occupied. While he was engaged in this he picked up a long hair. It caused his mouth to twitch. What a climax to their marriage! She had left him, who had been ready to die for her, to finish like this. He had no sympathy for Gubbins, who surely deserved all he got. He was thinking of his wife, with this dreadful experience on her mind.

A few hours later morning dawned—a wonderful morning for the world at large, but a bitter one for him. Still he had not come to a decision. The circumstances were so extraordinary they called for much thought. He was stoking up the fire in order to cook a meal when Nemesis stepped in. He heard the tinkle of bells, and peered through the frosted window. A dog team was approaching the hut, and he recognised the winter garb of the two men who were with it. They were members of the North-West Mounted Police!

Before he could get his mind working clearly they were at the door. A knock and it swung open. The foremost man was a Sergeant, and he was about to greet the wanderer when he saw the corpse.

"Phew!" he whistled. "What's all this?"

"He's dead," said Jim.

The Sergeant leaned over the body, while his comrade gazed round the room. Jim stood dead still, praying for

an inspiration—which failed to come. The Sergeant stood up.

"This will need explaining," he said. "What's your name?"

"Jim Wallace—of Eagle Fork."

"Who is this guy?"

Jim hesitated, which in the circumstances was not a wise thing to do.

"Speak up!" rasped the Sergeant. "Who is this man?"

"I don't know," replied Jim slowly.

"And maybe you don't know who shot him?"

"I don't."

"When did you arrive here?"

"About four hours ago."

"And you found him—like that?"

"Yes."

The Sergeant went to the table where Jim had laid the big revolver. He examined the magazine.

"Two empty cartridges! Whose gun is this?"

"Not mine."

"Have you got a gun?"

"Sure—here it is."

He handed the Sergeant his own revolver. The Sergeant examined it.

"That proves nothing," he said. "Does this caboose belong to you?"

"No."

"Then what are you doing here?"

"I reckoned it was derelict and wanted somewhere to camp. I jest looked in."

"I get you—and found a dead man?"

"I've already said so."

"Wal, it's a story that wants investigating. What are you doing up here anyway?"

"I was hitting it for Edmonton."

"Wal, you can go on hitting it. We'll all go there together."

"You don't reckon I did——?"

"I ain't anticipating verdicts. Anyway, you'll have to come right along."

"All right. Will you give me time to have a bite of food?"

"Sure! You carry on. We'll have a careful look round the place."

Jim foresaw great trouble. He wished now he had said he knew the identity of the corpse, for inquiries would reveal that that was the case. That alone would give rise to suspicion, and then would emerge the fact that he had actually gone after Gubbins! He was in a difficult position—and knew it.

* * * * *

Two days later Diana reached Edmonton. She had intended to stay there the night, but she found that a train for Quebec was due in two hours, and she decided to catch it. Then she remembered the shooting affair, and reflected whether she should go to the police at once. But ultimately she decided not to. She wanted time to think over the position calmly—to know exactly what her duty was. By the time she reached Quebec her mind would be clearer.

On board the train her spirits fell. It seemed that the last link with Jim had been severed. Her marriage had been nothing but a dismal failure just as her father had

said it would be. The cause lay a great deal with herself. Certainly Jim had brought about the crisis himself, but it was she who had started the friction. She should have thrown in her lot with more readiness—have been willing to take the rough with the smooth in the first place. It was ironical that when she had come to recognise his sterling qualities, and to love the wild spot to which he had brought her, that it was too late.

She wondered what he could see in Jeanne. Admittedly the girl was capable, pretty, and attractive. But she had imagined a man like Jim would have wanted something deeper than the superficial passion that Jeanne exhibited. Perhaps she had much to learn about men even yet. Perhaps Jeanne knew more about men than she did, and was less reluctant to let the approach come from the other side. Jim, with all his great personality and rugged strength, was a simple man at heart. That sort of man perhaps needed being made love to—

She was conscious all the while that she was making every conceivable kind of excuse for Jim—despite that little scene which was never absent from her mind. She felt she ought to hate him—but she could not. All she wanted to do was to put an end to a relationship that offered nothing now but regret and bitter disappointment.

Throughout the long rail journey her mind was never free from the immediate past. Even when she slept it was only to revive those terrible experiences with Gubbins. But at last she reached Quebec and booked a room in a small hotel not far from the station. Again she had to consider what was to be done about the death of Scotchey. If she went to the police, would they detain

her pending inquiries? This she wanted to avoid, but it seemed to her that it was inevitable in the circumstances. The alternative was to do nothing until she reached England, and then make a full statement by letter.

But this seemed cowardly in the circumstances. No, the only thing to do was to go to the police and tell them everything, and then request that she be permitted to resume her journey. She took a meal and then donned a hat and coat, and inquired the way to the police headquarters.

While she waited for the clerk to be disengaged she picked up a newspaper idly. On the front page was a bold announcement which caused her heart to thump.

"MAN FOUND SHOT IN LONELY SHACK."

Appended was a brief account. The man had been identified as Joshua Gubbins, a dog-musher from Fairborn. A man had been apprehended in connection with the crime—a fur-trader and store-keeper named Jim Wallace.

The newspaper shook in her hands, and the room seemed to go round. A man sitting near her was apparently reading the same item of news.

"The police found him in the shack," he said. "Couldn't explain anything. Said he took shelter and found the guy there. Wal, that don't ring very true."

"Where's that fellow come from, Wallace?" asked his companion.

"Eagle Fork, according to the report. Let me see—that's about twenty miles above Fairborn."

Diana staggered from the lounge and walked upstairs to her room with the newspaper clutched in her hand. She read the report again. Gubbins—Gubbins! Somehow the name had a new significance when seen in print. She suddenly gave a violent start, as she recalled the time and place where she had first heard it. Jim had mentioned it—when she had come back from England and found the old trading post burnt to the ground. Jim had said that Gubbins was the man who had burnt it!

All thought of England was banished from her mind. Jim was in great trouble. He would need her now if he had never needed her before. Jealousy, bad feeling, everything else was pushed into the background. She had to get back again—to help Jim in this fight which might be for his very life. A train was going west that night. She cancelled her room, and got aboard it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

ARRIVED at Edmonton, Diana went straight to the Chief of Police. It was necessary for her to explain that she was Mrs. Wallace, and that she had only just heard of her husband's arrest, but she considered it inadvisable at the moment to state that she was apparently the last person to see Gubbins alive—with the exception of his murderer.

"It is a serious business," said the Inspector. "The case is being investigated."

"But my husband?"

"He has been released on bail. At first I opposed, but he had one or two good friends in this city, who were willing to go bail for any amount. He was released this morning."

"Then you will want him again?"

"Everything depends upon the result of our investigations. I cannot say more than that."

"Do you know where he is now?"

"He may be in town, but Mr. Wingate will be able to tell you. It was Wingate who was chiefly responsible for his getting bail."

"Where can I find him?" she asked.

He gave her Wingate's address and she went at once to see the man who had befriended Jim. She remembered Jim having mentioned Wingate on one occasion,

but did not know how they had become acquainted.

Wingate's house was a very imposing one, on the outskirts of the city, and she drew the natural conclusion that he was a man of great wealth. She went boldly up the drive to the front door and gave her name. A few minutes later she saw Wingate in his comfortable lounge. He was a man of about fifty, with kindly grey eyes and a short beard.

"So you are Mrs. Wallace?"

"Yes. I was on my way to England when I read the bad news. They told me you—you had helped Jim."

"Well, I and one or two friends managed to get bail for him. I knew Jim years ago—before he started that post at Eagle Fork. I made money and Jim didn't, but that doesn't cancel a friendship nor a debt. I owed Jim my life."

"I didn't know," she replied. "Did he—did he tell you about me?"

"Sure! He said you had to go back to England—in connection with your father's death."

"Only that?"

"That's all."

She was grateful to Jim for keeping their trouble to himself, but she was anxious to know how matters stood—where Jim was and what the chances were.

"Is he in the city?" she asked.

"No. He left this morning. He wanted to get back to Eagle Fork to give instructions in case he should be wanted here—later."

"You think he will be wanted?"

He was silent for a moment, and then decided to be frank with her.

"I am afraid so. I had to pull a lot of strings to get bail, because the police took a serious view of the case. It came to their knowledge that Jim had raised inquiries about Gubbins in Fairborn. They can prove that Jim knew Gubbins quite well, yet when he was asked who the dead man was he pleaded ignorance. I can't make out why he did that. He wouldn't explain."

"But that doesn't prove he murdered Gubbins."

"Not at all. The police will have to find a good motive, and that may not be easy. One thing in Jim's favour is a good name. I shouldn't worry too much. It doesn't do any good."

"I'll try not to," she promised. "But I must go to him."

"Sure! He's taking it well enough, but he'll need all the friends he has got to pull through."

It was curious how this crisis in their lives had changed her. On reaching Quebec she had been conscious of lassitude—a feeling of inert hopelessness. Now this bombshell had shattered the imaginary palisade which had enclosed her. The need to be up and doing was paramount. She remembered Wingate's remark—the police must find a good motive! That caused her tremendous agitation. What better motive than the financial blow which Gubbins had inflicted by his ruthless incendiarism? If that were discovered where would Jim stand?

The immediate need was to get to him. It meant yet another trip across the frozen wilderness, but she was convinced it could not contain the horrors of the last journey. Singer and his daughter were hunted up, and they agreed to take her—as before.

In due course they landed her at Eagle Fork. Much good work had been done since she left. Jules was working on the exterior when she arrived, and his surprise was enormous. Avoiding explanations, she asked where Jim was and was told that he was indoors. She went in and found him sticking up wallpaper.

"Jim!"

He nearly fell off the steps when he heard her voice.

"Why, Di—I don't——"

"I had to come back," she said.

"So you have heard?"

"Yes—in Quebec."

"They let me out on bail," he said. "A friend of mine fixed that. I didn't think it could be done."

"I want to talk to you, Jim."

"Sure! I'll take your grip into your room. I guess you'll be staying—a bit."

"Yes."

"I'm glad," he said simply, and took the bag which had been brought in.

Since she had left her bedroom was finished. She took a hasty glance at the new wall-paper, and the fresh paint—then out across the river where the still black pines stood up against the dazzling blue sky. The place she had once despised seemed more than ever beautiful. Like everything else, that realisation had come a trifle late. She flung off her coat and hat, and stood facing Jim.

"What happened?" she asked.

"When you didn't come back from Fairborn I went down there."

"But I sent you a note!"

"Yep, but it was late getting here. I went to Fairborn

and heard that you had beaten it with Scotchey and Gubbins. Didn't you understand that Gubbins——?"

"No—not until I was in Quebec. His name seemed familiar but I didn't associate him with the man you once mentioned to me. Oh, he was a brute."

"Sure he was! Wal, I didn't feel like letting him get away with it. I went after him."

"Yes—yes."

"I found him at last in that hut."

"And you—you fought?"

He looked at her curiously.

"No, we didn't fight," he added.

"But—I don't understand."

Jim didn't either. He was waiting for her to give her own version—staring at her so fixedly that it almost frightened her.

"Why do you look at me like that?" she asked.

"Why don't you tell me what happened?"

"Nothing happened," he replied. "Nothing could happen, between me and a dead man."

"What!"

"Didn't you know he was dead?"

She was about to give him a flat denial when she realised the exact position. Jim evidently believed she had shot Gubbins. Of course the broken door would have led him to imagine an attack on her. That was why he had denied all knowledge of Gubbins—because he was hoping to keep her name out of the affair. But she saw the danger that hung over him. Given sufficient motive the crime would undoubtedly be fastened on him. Here was a man who had gone after another man whom he had every reason to hate. In addition this man

could be proved to have gone off with his (Jim's) wife. What more natural than that the husband would wreak swift vengeance on such a scoundrel? It might not be murder, but at least it was manslaughter. The way out lay with her, she thought.

"I didn't know," she said, feeling that she must say something.

"What happened to Scotchey?" he asked.

"He was shot by Gubbins the day before. They quarrelled and Scotchey went for a rifle. Gubbins shot him before he could use the rifle. It was horrible!"

"Ah, so that was it! I found bloodstains at that camp, but I didn't guess exactly what had happened. What did he do with Scotchey's body?"

"I don't know. I was in my tent—terrified."

"And then he took you to that shack?"

"Yes. I locked myself in the end room. He got drunk and broke in, but I had managed to get hold of the rifle. I held him off—for a time."

"And then—— I'm not blaming you, Diana. But this must never be known."

"Why not?"

"I don't want your name mixed up in this."

"But you—what will happen to you?"

"That business with Scotchey may help. If Gubbins killed him he was a murderer, and maybe I'll get off."

"You are overlooking facts," she said. "The police are bound to discover that I was with them when Scotchey was shot. I am bound to be called in any case. They may say that Gubbins did that in self-defence, and that is true up to a point. No, it would be too risky. I am going to tell—the truth."

"No."

"Yes, I must. That is the only chance—don't you see? I can plead self-defence. There is evidence to prove that Gubbins tried to molest me. Would any jury convict a woman for that, in such circumstances? It is the only way, Jim."

"It isn't. I won't have your name bandied about in that connection. If they prove you went to that shack, they can't prove anything else, if you swear you escaped. I came along later, and guessed what had happened."

"But it isn't true. I won't have such a sacrifice. Why should I?"

"Because you are my wife."

She turned her head away at this remark, and at the same time her heart went out to him for this magnificent gesture on his part in view of the little she had given up.

"It's no use, Jim," she said. "I am going to tell the truth—when the time comes."

"Diana!"

She turned away, and a few minutes later she was alone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

JIM had whispered his troubles to Jules, and Jules had passed on the bad news to Jeanne, whose fierce anger was roused against the police, Diana, and everyone.

"Zay are all beeg fools!" she snapped. "If Jim keel zat man it serve heem right, and now Diane she come back to spoil everyt'ing."

"Spoil?"

"Zee police zay will find out she go with zat wolf. It mak it ver bad for Jeem."

"But Jim—he is innocent," said Jules. "He tell me so—and Jim he nevaire lie—I know."

"But zay will mak him guilty. Sacre, zat man is the one who set light to Jeem's old shack. He tell me zat."

This was news to Jules, and it caused him to start, and then to utter a low whistle of alarm.

"You must nevaire tell anyone that," he said. "You understand. No one must ever know."

"I am not zee beeg fool you t'ink," she retorted. "But why she come back? It ees madness."

When Diana and Jeanne met there was a silent clash. Diana's eyes were cold and scornful, and Jeanne's were eloquent enough to return the stab.

That afternoon, with a view to strengthening the rear of the trading shed, a big pine was selected for felling. The three men got to work with saw and axe, and in a

very short time the tree was hanging by a bare few inches of wood. Ropes were applied and a place located where the tree could fall with safety. Diana, despite her pressing problems, came out of the house to see the actual fall, and Jeanne came from the kitchen with a swab in her hand.

"Now!" yelled Jim. "Let her have it!"

There was a haul on the ropes. The tree toppled, and then came down with a crash and a dull thud. Immediately following came a low cry from near the kitchen. Jeanne was standing there clutching the door post with one hand, while the other was held to her left breast. Diana suddenly started as she saw blood dripping on to the snow.

"Jim!" she screamed.

"What's the mat—?"

Jim came round the end of the fallen tree and saw Jeanne collapsing. He shouted for Jules, and then ran to Jeanne. In her breast was an ugly wound, and at her feet the blood-stained sharp-ended splinter of wood which had caused it.

"She's hurt!" said Jim. "This splinter—I thought I saw it fly. Better get her indoors—quick!"

He carried the fainting girl to the room which she occupied, and laid her on the bed. Diana was then called, and a few seconds later she was occupied in stemming the flow of blood, and in fashioning bandages.

Diana forgot her antipathy in this work of necessity. All she knew was that Jeanne had received a very deep and painful wound, and that there was considerable danger of death from bleeding. To get her to Fairborn,

or to bring up a doctor was out of the question. She went to Jim in her anxiety.

"The wound is gaping—it needs stitching," she said.

Jim looked at Jules, who was deeply distressed.

"Not me," said Jules. "I am not good surgeon. Jeem, you must do ziss—please."

Jim nodded, and the necessary things were quickly got. Unfortunately Jeanne revived before the stitching was started, and thus had to bear the pain. Diana stood by and could not but admire the girl's amazing courage. Not one sound did she utter while Jim put in six stitches. But when it was over her eyes closed and she lost consciousness.

Diana then turned the men out, and undressed Jeanne. A little later the girl was lying in bed, looking quite comfortable, with her wound neatly bandaged. Diana then shifted her few things into Jeanne's room, and when Jim came in she asked him to move in another bed.

"I shall have to stay here for a night or two," she explained.

"You're sure a brick," he replied. "It would have been mighty awkward if you hadn't been here."

That night was a bad one for Jeanne. She started to run a temperature, and by ten o'clock she was tossing about and muttering half in French and half in English. Once or twice Diana caught Jim's name, and winced at the significance of it.

At shortly before midnight Jim and Jules came in to know how things were progressing. They found Jeanne in delirium—trying to get out of bed. She did not appear to recognise any of them, and her flushed face

and staring eyes were sufficient to arouse anyone's sympathy.

"Maybe I had better stay," said Jules.

"No," replied Diana. "I can manage her. The temperature ought to go down as the morning approaches."

"But she is bad sleeper," said Jules. "When she is well sometimes she walks—what you call it—somnambulism."

"She seems quieter now. I will call you if it is necessary."

It was only after they had gone that she realised the full significance of his remark, and recalled that other incident which had caused her to arrive at definite conclusions. Curiously enough this possible explanation of what she had seen had never before occurred to her, but now it came with full force. It meant that if on that night Jeanne had been sleep-walking she had done Jim the greatest injustice. Her heart bounded while her conscience smote her.

There was no more trouble with Jeanne that night, and on the morrow she was fully conscious and grateful for what had been done for her. Jules was immensely relieved to find his sister out of the wood.

Diana now found her hands very full. In addition to looking after the men there was Jeanne to be attended to. It meant unremitting toil, and Jim was the first to realise it.

"Bad luck this happening," he said. "I guess you are wearing yourself to a shadow. I'll come and give you a hand with the washing up."

"No," she said. "You've got your own work to do."

I can manage. I like being busy. It stops me from thinking too hard."

"You mean—about Gubbins?"

"Yes. What is going to happen, Jim?"

"I don't know. Maybe they won't take any further action."

She shook her head at this, as she knew that he was saying it merely to comfort her. She wondered, too, why he had made no further reference to her flight, and the letter which she had left. Of course it was open to misinterpretation, but she did not think he could possibly misunderstand her veiled accusations, unless he was completely innocent, and ascribed her act to the old cause—discontent.

But that night her doubts in this respect were banished. She had gone to bed, dog-tired from a day of incessant toil, and had been asleep about an hour when she heard a sound in the passage. She lifted a lamp and crept to the door. Someone was undoubtedly outside, walking up and down. Summoning all her courage she opened the door, and saw Jeanne walking towards the exit door, as if to go out into the night.

"Jeanne!" she cried.

The girl did not appear to hear, but started to fumble with the latch of the door. She ran forward and caught her by the shoulder. One look into her eyes told her that Jeanne was asleep.

"Come!" she said softly.

"Di, is anything——?"

She turned to see Jim behind her, and put her finger to her lips. He came forward.

"She's asleep," she whispered. "Perhaps I oughtn't to have left her so soon. She isn't really well yet."

"It isn't that," replied Jim. "It's an old habit."

"I'll take her back," she said, "and get her into bed."

This was successfully done, and Jeanne seemed to be quite composed the moment her head touched the pillow. Diana waited a few minutes and then crept out of the room. Jim was waiting outside.

"All right now?" he asked.

"Yes. But what did you mean about it being a habit?"

"Wal, it happened once before," he said. "She drifted into my room. I was kinder scared until I realised she was sound asleep. I brought her back here, but I didn't say anything to her, because I thought maybe she might be sensitive about it. I had a chum once who used to do the same thing, and he was mighty raw with me when I told him about it. Called me a liar—and lots of other names."

"You didn't tell me," she protested.

"Wal, no—you see, it was just a bit embarrassing. I hoped it wouldn't happen again—and that she wouldn't be here much longer."

"You—you hoped that?" she said, almost choking.

"Sure! Can't say I like strangers about the house. But, you see, without Jules's help, I'd have never got through this job on time. She was mighty useful too, at the time, but I guess there's nothing much now she can teach you."

Diana felt her face flushing. She realised what an idiot she had been about that particular incident, even though she might be right about her analysis of Jeanne's emotions.

"I wish you had told me, Jim," she said.

"Why? It wouldn't have done any good, would it?"

"No, but——"

"But what?"

She was afraid to continue—to let him suspect that she had been mean enough to draw what she now knew to be absolutely unwarranted conclusions.

"It's a little cold here," she said. "I must get back to bed."

"Sure! You know, I think it would be a good idea to lock her door on the outside," he suggested. "She couldn't come to much harm then."

"Oh, no," she protested. "She might discover it and be annoyed. It may not happen again."

"Perhaps you are right. Gee, I'm glad you came back again, Diana."

"So am I," she replied. "You are going to need me, Jim."

"I've always needed you."

"I mean about——"

"You ain't still thinking about that crazy idea?"

"It isn't a crazy idea to tell the truth."

"Di?"

"Let us forget it for the moment," she begged. "It is a nightmare to me."

"He deserved all he got," he put in fiercely.

"Perhaps—but the law will not look at it in that light."

"They may. You mustn't worry. It may all come out right."

She nodded and stopped outside her door. Then he bade her good-night softly and went to his room. She

sat on her bed for a while, thanking God for the incident which had just happened. Though it did not entirely banish her troubles, it certainly had the effect of washing away the mud that she had herself allowed to gather. She saw Jim again in a better and brighter light—the real Jim, whom she knew now was incapable of insulting her and humiliating her.

“God forgive me!” she murmured. “I must have been mad.”

It was inevitable that the incident should ease the clash between Jeanne and herself, and on the following day she went out of her way to do Jeanne little services. It was while she was bandaging Jeanne’s wound that the girl’s better nature was touched.

“Why you so good to me?” she asked.

“I am only performing a necessary task.”

“But you sit by me when I am ill. Why you do that when you not lak me?”

Diana conjured up a smile.

“Who says I do not like you?”

“Tiens! I have eyes in zee ’ed.”

“And what have they told you?”

“Many t’ings. Maybe I am ver’ silly girl. My fader, he die and leave me and Jules wit’ no money. I hav to go out and work. Not often I meet women lak you, and I know I am ver’ rough and sometimes I am meestaken.”

“What then?”

“I hav known Jeem long time.”

“So I understand.”

“When I ver’ small child Jeem he tease me. He pull my hair and make fun of me.”

“That was too bad.”

"No, I lak heem pull my hair. Zen, when I grow up I lak Jeem different way—you understand?"

"Must you talk about that?"

"Oui—it is ver' necessary. I lak Jeem much—and I t'ink he lak me—but not lak I lak him."

"That is a bit involved."

"Oh, no—you unnerstan'. Why you pretend not unnerstan'?"

"I won't pretend any more, Jeanne. I do understand. You love—my husband?"

"Not now," replied Jeanne with emphasis.

"Why—what has he done?"

Tears came to Jeanne's eyes, and she clenched her fists.

"It is you," she said. "I have been ver' silly. I t'ink you no love Jeem. You run away, and then you come back. 'Gain you run away, and I think you no dam good. But now I know."

"What do you know?" demanded Diana.

"Why you come back."

Diana trembled a little as she fixed the last bandage. She raised her head and looked at Jeanne intently.

"You do love Jeem," said Jeanne tensely. "You t'ink maybe he love me—jus' because he play with me some-time, hey? But you come back because he is in great trouble. When I have fever it come to me. I see it all plain. Jeem, he never love me lak he love you. He never say a word lak zat. I try to mak him say it, but he does not understand. He t'ink of you—only you."

Diana found this outspoken confession more than she could bear. She turned to make for the door, but Jeanne had not yet done.

"You forgeev me if I cause much trouble," she said.

"I am jus' silly hot-blood. Ver' soon I go away, and then you will know. Maybe I will love him always—jus' in the quiet of my heart. But that do no harm—hey?"

"Jeanne," begged Diana. "Do you—do you want to make me cry?"

Jeanne smiled as the door closed on her. When she saw Diana again there was no further reference to the subject. That afternoon she was well enough to join the tea-party, and to join in the good-natured banter between Jim and Jules. But towards the end of it there came an interruption. A sergeant and a trooper of the police pulled in on a big sled. Diana saw them and her heart beat a wild tattoo.

"All right," said Jim, touching her hand. "They want to see me."

He went into the sitting-room, and faced the two men, who looked very grim.

"The bail has been withdrawn, Wallace," said the sergeant.

"Withdrawn!"

"Yep. I've received orders to take you back to town."

"You mean—at once?"

"Sure. But half an hour will do."

"I won't keep you all that time," said Jim. "Guess I'll have a word with my wife."

Jim found Diana and took her aside. She was trembling and exceedingly pale.

"I've got to go back with those fellows, Di," he said.

"You mean you are under arrest—again?"

"Yep. Of course it had to come."

"When are you leaving?"

"At once."

"Then I will come too."

"But there is no need."

"There is every need. You did not kill that man, and you will need help."

"I shall have a lawyer to defend me."

"I am coming."

He took both her arms and looked deep into her anxious eyes.

"Di, I don't want you in this. I don't want your good name dragged into the mud. Won't you stand aside, and let things take their course? You won't be called upon to give evidence, because you are my wife. Don't you see——?"

"I only see that you are in great danger. You are willing to sacrifice everything for me—me who have given you so little. No, Jim. I am not going to stand by and see any injustice done. I am coming with you."

To prevent further argument she went to her room and swiftly packed a bag. Jim's face grew hard as he stood there in the snow, gazing at the scene which he loved—and might not see again for many years. Yet his heart was beating a pæan of joy. His wife had come up to the scratch. Here she was, glorious and commanding, ready to fight for him. That knowledge was worth suffering for. All else seemed to pale into insignificance beside it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

WITH Jim in prison awaiting his trial, Diana had ample time to reflect upon the probable result. She learned through confidential channels that things looked black. Wingate, who was still Jim's champion, confided in her.

"Something fresh has emerged," he said. "Apart from the fact that Jim had been making inquiries about Gubbins at Fairborn, the police have found what they believe to be the strongest of motives."

"What!" she gasped.

"It is connected with an Indian named 'Birdseye.' He is employed by Jim, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"Well, it appears that Birdseye once told a man that Jim's old trading post was deliberately burnt down by Gubbins. The prosecution will put this man in the box, and I understand that Birdseye is now hunted for."

"Hunted for!"

"It appears he vanished from Eagle Fork, just after you and Jim left. That looks bad."

Diana went pale. The thing she had dreaded had happened. Wingate noticed her distress.

"You know I am out to help Jim," he said. "Most of us are in this town, because we know that Gubbins was a low-down skunk. Is that story true—about the fire?"

"Yes," she replied. "But even if it is, Jim wouldn't—I know he didn't kill Gubbins."

"How do you know?"

"Because he told me so. Gubbins was dead when he entered that shack."

"The prosecution will work on evidence—on motives. I don't like the look of things."

For weeks Diana lived on the edge of a volcano. It seemed needlessly cruel to her that a man should have to wait so long to know his fate. In the middle of her worry came a telegram from England informing her that she had but a fortnight to return home if she wished to fulfil the conditions of her father's will. She did not even reply to it. All thoughts of money were banished by the impending trial. She was permitted to see Jim at intervals, but any private conversation was impossible.

"I'm not worrying much," he said with a smile. "And you're not to worry either."

"I can't help it," she replied. "It is the suspense that is torturing me. Why don't they start the trial—why, why?"

"Steady, honey!" he whispered. "I guess there are lots of things to be done first. Maybe a rest is good for a fellow. I get exercise and I eat well and sleep well."

The warder had walked a little way away, and she lowered her voice to a whisper.

"If things go wrong I shall tell the truth, Jim."

He made a quick gesture to silence her.

"But I shall," she protested.

Then she was told that time was up. Jim caught her hand, and pressed it. But she stepped closer to him and

put up her lips. A curious little cry came from him, and he crushed her in his arms and kissed her.

"Guess it doesn't matter much what happens now," he said.

"It does," she replied. "I want you—home again."

Home again! The words rang in his ears when the door had closed between them. He wondered if she really knew how bad things really were. A hundred times his mind had wandered over the whole course of events. What was his defence worth? Nothing. He had been found in a shack with a murdered man—the man he hated. Undoubtedly the police had an excellent case. If things went the way he believed they must go, he might never see Diana again. Even if he did, then he and she would no longer be young. The whole world would have changed. That kiss which she had offered was like balm, and yet in a way it was dire punishment—something which reminded him what might have been.

There was her side, too. She had shot Gubbins—undoubtedly in self-defence. If he could let her plead that the court might be swayed, but his whole soul revolted against it. He knew it was illogical in the circumstances, but there it was and no kind of argument could shake him.

Then came the lawyer who was going to defend him. He seemed even more grim than usual, though he contrived to smile. When they were alone he got down to business.

"They've found out that Gubbins burnt down your place," he said. "Already they have one witness and are after another. He cannot be found, and that is why

the trial has been postponed. They mean to prove that it was always your intention to avenge yourself on Gubbins."

"Gosh! How did they discover that?"

"That man of yours—Birdseye. It appears that his brother called at the post to see him. Birdseye told his brother about Gubbins, and the brother told another man—a half-caste. This will change the whole aspect of the case."

"You mean—I am in a bad jam?"

"Yes. Now listen, you told me you were innocent. Is that the truth? Have no fear, I am to defend you. Don't keep anything back. Was the story you told me true in every detail?"

"Absolutely," said Jim. "He was dead when I arrived."

The lawyer stroked his chin reflectively.

"And your wife was there but a few hours before. There was a broken door and——"

"You can cut all that," said Jim angrily.

"I don't intend to—while your very life is at stake. Wallace, if your story is true, there can only be one other person who did that mur—who killed Gubbins."

"What are you getting at?"

"Your wife. Come, be frank. I want to know."

"I'm on trial, and I'm going to remain on trial."

"Wait a moment! Suppose things are so bad the defence breaks down completely? That may mean—at least a life sentence. But if your wife was to plead self-defence——"

"Stop!" growled Jim. "You don't know what you

are saying. If that's all you came to see me about you had better beat it."

Little more was said after that, but Jim concluded that things were as bad as they could be. Even his own lawyer was tempting him with that vision of an open door—for both himself and Diana. But he turned his heart against it resolutely.

In due course came the opening of the trial, despite the fact that a rather important witness was missing. Diana went to the court and watched the proceedings. The case presented by the prosecution was strong. The Prosecutor was a man of tremendous personality, and fluent speech. He set out to show that the prisoner and the murdered man were sworn enemies, and by the cross-examination of certain witnesses he showed that the prisoner had set off post-haste after Gubbins. He produced the revolver which had shot Gubbins, and called medical evidence to prove that the shot could not have been self-inflicted. Then the half-caste who was a friend of Birdseye's brother was called. Here the defence objected, but this objection was not upheld. The man gave his evidence, which was to the effect that Birdseye had told his brother that a man named Gubbins had set fire to Jim's store, and that he had slightly wounded Birdseye in his escape. Birdseye had stated that if his "boss" ever saw Gubbins he would shoot him.

Diana sat and heard all this, and in her imagination she saw the net slowly closing around Jim, unless the defence had something "up its sleeve." But when the defence opened on the following day it was lamentably weak. The Counsel tried to argue that Jim had gone

off after Gubbins because he had heard that he was escorting his wife, and he mistrusted him. He argued that Jim was armed, and that had he intended to kill Gubbins he would have shot him with his own weapon—that Gubbins would certainly not have given him the opportunity to do so with his (Gubbins') revolver—which was undoubtedly the case. It was shown there had been a struggle. But why should there be between two men who were both armed?

Diana turned her gaze towards the jury. It was obvious that they were not influenced by the argument. When the luncheon break came the defence was still arguing—trying to make the best out of a very weak case. She could not eat, but saw Wingate, who had been present on both days.

“Going bad,” he said. “Darned bad.”

“You think they will find him guilty?”

He did not reply, but she knew that her question was answered. Before the trial was resumed she went to see the defending counsel, who was wading through papers feverishly.

“I want to know—what is going to happen?” she asked.

“You won’t know for three or four hours,” he replied.

“But you know. You are experienced in these things. What do you think?”

“You want to know the truth?”

“Yes.”

“Your husband hasn’t an earthly chance.”

“Oh!” she moaned. “But he is innocent.”

“I know that—but look at the evidence. Despite his

excellent character the jury cannot do other than find him guilty. This is the worst case I have ever had."

"Have you finished with witnesses?"

"Yes."

"But could you call another?"

"Yes."

"Then I want you to call me."

"To what end?"

"I can prove that Jim is innocent."

"How?"

For a moment she hesitated. Would it be wise to tell him that she meant to lie to save Jim? As it was, he and the whole court might believe her story, but if she gave him to understand that she was going to invent it he might refuse to let her give evidence. She decided to keep her own counsel.

"I shot him," she said.

"Ah! So your husband was trying to cover you?"

"Yes. He doesn't want me dragged into this case. But I can't bear it any longer. I want to tell the court what really happened. I had to shoot—in self-defence. They must believe me. How could I have got away with his dog-team otherwise? It is the only way to save Jim, and I mean to do it."

"You shot him with his own revolver?"

"Yes—when I was in his arms I snatched it and got free. I—I left it afterwards, harnessed the dogs and got away."

For a few moments he paced the room, and then he turned to her and nodded his head.

"It's a good story," he said. "But I must warn you

there is a grave risk. It is impossible to say what may happen. You will certainly be tried, but the jury are men of the world, and there is every chance you may be acquitted. But it is a risk nevertheless."

"I am ready to face it," she said.

"Good! You are a brave woman, Mrs. Wallace."

"I'm not. But what about Jim—need he be told?"

"No."

"Then I am ready."

CHAPTER THIRTY

SOME miles from the city Birdseye was pushing a hand-sled through the snow. On it lay a bundle covered with blankets and a rug. The Indian staggered as he walked, for thirty-six hours had passed since he left a small Indian encampment, and started on his quest. During that time he had neither eaten nor slept. At intervals he would stop and lift the corner of the heavy rug, to reveal the thin face and protruding cheekbones of a man. Then on again, with the cold eating into his vitals.

Two miles from the city he collapsed, and lay in the snow for a few minutes, fighting against sleep. Then he dragged himself to his feet and staggered on at a snail's pace to where the pall of smoke lay. He encountered a steep decline. The sled began to move faster and faster. There was no means of mounting it, and he let it drag his weary bones along with it. Finally it came to a halt, but Birdseye lay still.

Half an hour later a police sled pulled up, and one of the two policemen stepped out and raised Birdseye's head. He lifted an eyelid and saw the pupil move slightly.

"Alive," he said. "Got that brandy flask, Henry?"

Brandy was administered, and in a few minutes Birdseye was conscious. He stared at the familiar winter garb of the policeman.

"You—policeman?"

"Sure!"

"Me Birdseye—servant Mister Wallace. You take me to city—quick. He want me."

"Birdseye," whistled the policeman. "Why, we bin looking for you for weeks."

"I go—find brudder. He there."

The constable raised the rug and saw the figure beneath it.

"Gosh!" he ejaculated. "Looks like a bad case. Henry, lend a hand here. Here's a poor guy mighty near the bone-yard."

The sick man was carried to the big sled, and then Birdseye staggered across to it. He sat at the feet of his brother, and impatiently begged the policemen to hurry. The sled went off down the trail, towards the city.

* * * *

Diana's ordeal was at hand. She heard Jim's lawyer state that he proposed to call a very important witness, who was in a privileged position, but had stated her desire to give evidence. Then her name was called. It caused a mild sensation in court, which the judge had to hush, and then she stepped into the witness-box. She took the oath, and tried not to wince as she did so.

"Now, Mrs. Wallace—you remember the night in question—the twenty-second of February?"

"Yes."

"Tell the court exactly what happened on that night, and also on the preceding day."

Diana raised her head. The moment had come and she found herself strangely calm. In a tense but clear voice she told the story of Scotchey's death, Gubbins'

threat to her, the subsequent journey to the shack, and everything up to the time when she drove Gubbins back with the rifle. Every word of this was true, and she could see that it held her audience. But now came the difficult task—to narrate something that had never happened.

"After he had left me," she continued, "I realised I must get away. I waited until I heard him snoring, and then opened the door and crept through. I had the rifle in my hand, and was half-way across the room when he woke up. He saw me and told me to stop. I raised the rifle but he crept round the table, and finally got hold of it. It was wrested from me, and then he laughed drunkenly and caught me in a tight embrace. My right hand came near his belt and I saw the butt-end of a revolver in it. My fingers closed on the butt and I drew it out. I placed it to his chest, and told him I would shoot if he didn't let me go. He was startled and released his grip slightly. I broke away and was running towards the door when he came at me. I heard him, and swung round. He was almost on me when—when the revolver went off. I saw him fall——"

She stopped and took a drink of water.

"That's all!" she said. "My husband didn't want me to tell the truth."

She was about to step down amid the very loud and excited whispering of the court, when the Prosecutor stood up.

"One moment!" he said. "I would like to ask the last witness one question."

The Counsel for the defence was about to object, but the prosecuting Counsel, taking no risk, got his question out first.

"He was coming at you when you fired—in self-defence?"

"Yes."

The Prosecutor smiled scornfully.

"Gentlemen of the jury," he said. "You have seen a medical certificate, and a statement where it is made clear that Gubbins was shot in the back. I have no more to say, except that there is a certain term which we apply to this sort of evidence—that term is Perjury."

At this there was uproar. Diana gazed at Jim's Counsel. She saw him wince, and knew that she had made a fatal blunder. Because he had believed her guilty he had not thought of this damning point—trusting her to tell merely what had happened. "Order" was called vociferously several times, and then when dead silence was restored there came an unexpected interruption. Into the court-room stepped a half-frozen Indian.

"Me Birdseye," he said. "I bring my brudder. He keel that man—Gubbins. I tell him one day I keel Gubbins when I find him. Brudder he find Gubbins and shoot him. I bring der things he take from Gubbins—here!"

He produced a number of things including a wallet, and handed them to the bench. Consternation reigned for a few minutes. A doctor was called, and Birdseye's dying brother was enabled to make a statement before he was taken to hospital. An hour later it was announced that the jury had found Jim Wallace not guilty.

Before he left, the judge came to Diana, who could not stem the tears that sprang to her eyes.

"Madam," he said, "I should be the last person to condone perjury, but I think there are occasions when

one is obliged to wink an eye. I congratulate you on your courage. I think that murder is satisfactorily cleared up."

In the meantime Jim had been waiting in his cell, with frayed nerves and aching heart. It seemed to him that the end was inevitable, and he wanted to get it over. Then came his lawyer with the most inscrutable smile on his face.

"Wal?" asked Jim "Do they want me—now?"

"No. The case has been dismissed. That is tantamount to saying you have been found 'not guilty'."

"But I don't understand!"

"Your wife gave evidence—she insisted."

"Then that's worse—worse than——"

"Oh, no. She is free too. As a matter of fact the real murderer turned up at the last moment."

"Real murderer. But she said——"

"She was willing to swear anything in order to save you. I, too, was misled."

"Great Heavens, and I thought——! But who shot Gubbins?"

"The brother of an Indian named Birdseye. The poor devil is dying from consumption, and Birdseye has been hunting him for weeks. That is why they couldn't find Birdseye."

Jim looked dazed at this news.

"So Birdseye must have told his brother, and the brother ran into Gubbins and did the job on Birdseye's account?"

"That's it. He knew he was dying, and says it was a duty placed upon him by his brother. He stole Gubbins' wallet, which was fortunate, because it served

as definite evidence. Well, they won't get him for it. The doctor gives him twenty-four hours at most. But there is someone waiting for you outside."

"You mean—I am free now?"

"Yes. See, the door is open."

Jim's meeting with Diana is better imagined than described. They walked away from the court, and from the few friends which had gathered to shake hands with Jim and congratulate him. They walked in silence until they were outside the confines of the city and amid the pines.

"Jim, can it be true?" she almost sobbed.

"I was just thinking the same. Oh, God, why did you do that for me?"

"Because I owed you so much, Jim. Because I have given you so little."

"What are you saying?"

"It is true. I let pride intervene at first, and then the stupidest sort of jealousy. I thought you were in love with Jeanne, that you did not want——"

"In love with Jeanne!"

"Don't laugh at me, Jim. I know it was all wrong. But I saw you go into her room that night, and never dreamed at the time that there was a very simple solution."

"Why, of course. The poor kid was sleep-walking. In love with Jeanne! Why, Diana, what sort of a man do you think I am to be in love with Jeanne, when you are within a million miles?"

"Was it always like that?"

"Always. There never has been a moment when you did not tower above every other woman. There never

was a moment when my mind was not full of you—or full of the things that were part of you, so to speak. The new store which I planned as our home—that room which I made for you. I didn't want you to come back to camp until I could show you what I had been doing—for you. Jeanne was just like a tool to me—something to use towards an end, and that end was your happiness. Can't you believe that?"

"Yes—now," she replied softly. "And now what are we going to do, Jim?"

"Do? Why, go back home, of course, as fast as we can—if that suits you."

"It suits me very well," she said. "There is nothing I should like better."

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

JIM was awakened by the first ray of the dawn which penetrated through a chink in the double-shuttered window, and fell upon his face. Beside him was soft breathing, a delicious feeling of warmth and softness. He put out his hand and enclosed warm listless fingers, and then suddenly realised it was his wife.

He raised the warm living fingers to his lips and kissed them—but still she slept. Then he recalled the evening before—their mutual confessions—the delightful ending to a long journey across the snow. The dispatch of Jeanne and her brother, who had put the last touches to the new construction but two days before. Here they were—alone at last—and happy.

He stole out of bed and opened the shutters. Now the light was more pronounced. He could see the river dimly, and the long pink clouds in the east. It was going to be a fine day—the sort of day that transformed Eagle Fork to a miniature Paradise. After having washed and dressed he came back to Diana. She was sleeping on the crook of her right arm, with a smile on her glorious face. He pushed his head forward and kissed her. At this her eyes opened and blinked at him.

“Jim,” she said, and her arms enclosed his head, “I dreamed—oh, what did I dream?”

"Better not tell me," said Jim. "I dreamed the same thing."

She laughed and then noticed that he was dressed. At this she sat bolt upright.

"What's this?" she demanded.

"I'm going to spoil you. You are going to have breakfast in bed. Guess you are tired after the journey."

"Tired! What about you?"

"Oh, I'm different."

She seized the candlestick from the side of the bed and raised it in her hand.

"If you say that again I'll murder you," she threatened.

"Your murders are all imaginary ones," he retorted.

She laughed and jumped out of bed.

"At any rate I'm not going to be spoiled. I feel—fine. Oh, what a marvellous sunrise!"

"Yours and mine," he said. "Glad to be home?"

"Crazy. Let me have a look!"

She came to the window and drank in the wonderful vista, while her hand caressed his cheek.

"It was worth all the storm and stress, Jim, wasn't it? Just to find ourselves."

"You bet! Now I'll go prepare breakfast."

"I'll be with you in two shakes. Oh, of course Jeanne and Jules are gone?"

"Yes, paid off. No more intruders. Poor old Birdseye must be feeling a bit blue. He was very keen on his brother."

"How he loves you!"

"You, too, now," he replied.

Half an hour later they were seated at breakfast, with

the sun streaming into the room. Jim had cooked it despite her protests, and she complimented him on it.

"Nothing like the food you cook yourself," he said. "Or that someone you love cooks. That hotel stuff always did get my goat. You know, you never really told me what happened when you went to England. Did your father cut you right off?"

"No."

"But you said——?"

"He made a condition which I could not keep."

"What sort of condition?"

"Does it matter now, Jim?"

"I guess not. Nothing matters so long as I've got you."

"Well, yes—secrets matter. No more secrets, Jim. My father left me all his estate provided I returned to England within six months and settled down there."

He stopped eating and gazed at her.

"That meant—leaving me?"

"I suppose that was his motive. You see, Jim, he didn't understand you—nor me very much."

"Gee, I wish he could see how it all ended!"

"So do I," she said.

"When you left with Scotchey you would have been in time to keep the conditions?" he asked.

"Just in time."

"And yet you stayed?"

"Of course."

"And lost everything?"

"No, Jim—won everything."

She had never seen him quite so perturbed. Underneath his roughness was a very sensitive nature. His

conscience was telling him that he had cost her a fortune.

"Forget it, Jim," she begged. "It isn't worth thinking about. All the wealth of the Indies wouldn't induce me to leave this place. It's my real home, and I love it."

"You'll always say that?"

"Always."

He got up, walked round the table and kissed her. Then he noticed a little shoe that rightly should have been in her bedroom. He picked it up.

"Do you remember this, honey?"

"Why, yes—it is the shoe I lost in London."

"The shoe which brought me to you. That was a Cinderella story if you like."

"Yes, with a Cinderella ending. It was the greatest thing that ever happened to me. I didn't calculate I was unearthing a sort of bottomless gold-mine. Come outside and taste the air."

She went with him into the sunshine. The worst rigours of winter were over, and daily the sun was gaining strength. There was the river, still frozen, but she knew that soon the ice would go, and summer would come hot on winter's heels. All the hopes and secrets of young wifehood were at her heart. She found this life—this place—this man all sufficing.

"Boss!"

Jim turned and saw Birdseye approaching him. He saluted them both with a smile of pleasure on his wooden face, and then presented Diana with a telegram.

"Man bring him this morning," he said.

She thanked him and opened the envelope. Then she

passed the contents to Jim, who read them. It was from the family solicitor and was fairly brief.

"Your Aunt Mary refuses to benefit under will, conditions of which were not fulfilled. Has re-assigned estate to you unconditionally."

"Wall" gasped Jim.

"She was partly instrumental in bringing me home," explained Diana. "But I felt she was sorry. It was all a plot, Jim, suggested by Summers to get me away from you. My father wasn't seriously ill when I arrived—at least he didn't know he was. But Fate stepped in, and he had a totally unexpected stroke. Now Aunt Mary is trying to do the decent thing."

"And what are you going to do about it?"

"What would you do, Jim, in the circumstances?"

"Nothing," he said. "Your father was wrong. I guess he would be the first man to admit it."

"You're right," she said. "You're always right. We don't really need the money, Jim, but then you never know. They say that families are very expensive to bring up these days."

He hugged her in his arms, and they stood there for a few minutes watching with interest the antics of a squirrel in the topmost branches of a tall pine.

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A GIRL coming to spend the summer on the U T Ranch! Joe Painter, foreman of the U T, was hardly overjoyed at the news. Girls! He had never liked them. But his introduction to Nina Carr was destined to be dramatic, for on his way to meet her he is just in time to rescue her from two outlaws, Bill Blackers and the Escalante Kid, members of a gang who have been planning to grab the U T Ranch. From this exciting opening the action never flags. *Cowboy Courage* is a red-hot story that is a thriller to the end.

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BACK TO THE WEST

WHEN Jack Root, a western millionaire, was wiped out in a financial crash, it was up to Dal, his spoiled, extravagant son, to do something. Having plenty of grit inherited from "old Jack," he started West, and four days later stepped off the train at Farington in a small cow-town in the Jackie May Valley. From the platform Dal caught his first glimpse of whitewashed stockyards, saddle-horses, and cowboys. The romance of it gave him a thrill. Five minutes later, however, he gets into a pistol affray in defence of a girl Teddy Blaine. The West is still the West!

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PRAIRIE'S END

HOPE CAMPBELL was standing at the hitching rail as the sunset spread its magic over the land. Two horses came round the turn of the road and as they pulled up she looked for the first time into the laughing eyes of Ricky Odell—a meeting that was to mean Adventure as well as Romance. *Prairie's End* is certainly one of Mr. Horton's finest stories of life in the Golden West.

CHARLES WESLEY SANDERS

Author of *Black Blood*, *Desert Ranch*, etc.

THE MAN FROM THE HILLS

BILLY BARTON, the Man from the Hills, has a grievance, and determines to return injustice measure for measure. He meets two women, Ruth Dempster, who is a thoroughly good and likeable girl, and Viola Warwick, who is not. Then there are the Gentry boys, Viola's father Merrick, and Edwards, who are so bad that they could hardly be worse. Bill fights and wins, and therein lies the story.

NEW 76 WILD WEST NOVELS

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Author of *A Prairie Princess*, *The Fight for River Range*, etc.

SHOOT UP !

THE dingy little town looked calm and peaceful in the twilight. . . . Suddenly a dozen horsemen gave spurs to their horses, and with a wild chorus of whoops, like so many wolves suddenly let loose, they raced up the street, whirled their horses round with the speed which only trained cow-ponies can ever achieve, and began to "shoot-up" the town. These men meant business. To Chame Maxwell, astonished spectator of the shoot-up, that business spelt trouble—the trouble that always arises when cattle and sheep are ranged in the same country. Chame takes sides with the Hunter family—Grace Hunter had nice gray eyes—in their desperate fight with the Strunk gang, and is swept into a range-war, desperate ruthless, fighting to the bitter end.

HUGH PENDEXTER

Author of *The Scarlet Years*, *Red Autumn*, etc.

RIFLE RULE

KANSAS in the old days of the covered wagon ! As sweet a land as the eye could gaze upon. Over the rolling prairies come the long wagon-trains of the first settlers while the roving red men jealously watch the sure and steady progress of the invaders. Great days—exciting days—for there was neither law nor order in the land. Many of those who rode and fought were young men, hot-headed and hungry for adventure and excitement, obedient only to the voice of the rifle. For reasons best known to himself Hale Watt is speeding north on horseback by unfrequented ways. He is trailed by "Crow" Agger and his gang until he joins company with Enoch Fair, a young Northerner. Together they meet with adventures such as only the exciting days of these Western pioneers can produce and only the pen of Mr. Pendexter can describe with adequate colour and romance.

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Author of *The Valley of Twisted Trails*, *Bluffer's Luck*, etc.

THE SILVER BAR MYSTERY

GOOBER GLENDON and his partner, Johnny Wells, had ridden into Silver Bar and put up for the night. Their destination was the range twenty miles north-west. "The West ain't nothing like what she was," Goober had remarked. But before nightfall they had no reason to complain of lack of excitement. Sheriff Nolan suddenly burst in upon them with the news that young Hal Austin had just shot a fellow cow-puncher, Jigger Slade, and in a moment the partners are caught up in a tangled mystery of the modern West.

ROBERT AMES BENNET

Author of *Fend of Cattle Kings*, *Caught in the Wild*, etc.

BAD MED'CINE

THE silence of the prairie night was split by a piercing scream. Again and again it was repeated. The listening horseman spurred his horse, for he knew that such terrible cries could be uttered only by a white man or woman under Indian torture. Glenn Kelso dashed to the rescue, and thus began an adventure which was to lead him into many breathless situations among the Comanches of the Cow Country. Mr. Bennet has never written a more thrilling novel.

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