

The Lady of Big Shanty

Frank Berkeley Smith

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The Lady of Big Shanty

By

F. BERKELEY SMITH

1909

TO THE READER

This story, written by a man who has passed many years of his life in the Adirondack woods, strikes a note not often sounded--the power of the primeval over the human mind.

Once abandoned in the wilderness, wholly dependent upon what can

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be wrested from its clutch to prolong existence, all the ordinary standards and ambitions of life become as naught: for neither love, hatred, revenge, honour, money, jewels, or social success will bring a cup of water, a handful of corn or a coal of fire. Under this torture Nature once more becomes king and man again an atom; his judgment clarified, his heart stripped naked, his soul turned inside out. The untamed, mighty, irresistible primitive is now to be reckoned with, and a lie will no longer serve.

Such is the power of the primeval, and for the unique way in which it has been treated between these covers, the father takes off his hat to the son.

F. HOPKINSON SMITH.

September, 1909.

THE LADY OF BIG SHANTY

CHAPTER ONE

It was the luncheon hour, and The Players was crowded with its members; not only actors, but men of every profession, from the tall, robust architect to the quiet surgeon tucked away among the cushions of the corner divan. In the hall--giving sound advice, perhaps, to a newly fledged tragedian--sat some dear, gray-haired old gentleman in white socks who puffed silently at a long cigar, while from out the low-ceiled, black-oak dining room, resplendent in pewter and hazy with tobacco smoke, came intermittent outbursts of laughter. It was the hour when idlers and workers alike throw off the labours of the day for a quiet chat with their fellows.

Only one man in the group was restless. This was a young fellow who kept watch at the window overlooking the Park. That he was greatly worried was evident from the two tense furrows in his brow, and from the way his eyes scanned the street below.

"The devil!" he grumbled. "I wonder if Billy's missed his train--another Adirondack express late, I suppose." He flicked the ashes from his cigarette and, wheeling sharply, touched a bell.

"John," he said, as the noiseless old steward entered.

"Yes, Mr. Randall."

"Find out at the desk if a Mr. William Holcomb from Moose River has called or telephoned."

"Very good, sir."

"He's a tall, sun-burned young man, John--and he may be waiting below. You understand."

"I'll go and see, sir," and the steward turned.

"And, John--tell August we shall be five at luncheon."

The next moment two hands gripped him from behind by both shoulders.

"Well! I'm glad __you're__ here, Keene, at any rate!" cried Randall as he smashed the bell hard. "Two dry Martinis"--this to the yellow-waistcoated steward now at his elbow. "It's Billy Holcomb you've come to meet. He wrote me he was coming to New York on business and I made him promise to come here first. He and I hunted together last fall and I wanted you and Brompton to know him. What I'm afraid of is that he has missed the night express. Moose River's a long ways from the railway, and you know what an Adirondack road is this time of year. I hope The Players won't scare him."

"Oh! we'll take care of him," laughed Keene good-humouredly. "Thank God he's not a celebrity; I'm sick of celebrities. It'll be a treat to meet a plain human being. Hello! here comes Brompton!"

Randall rose to his feet.

"Glad you could come, old man. There's only five of us--you, and Keene, Sam Thayer, and a friend of mine from the woods. Touch the bell and give your order."

Again the noiseless John appeared.

"Any news, John?"

"Yes, sir; Mr. Holcomb is waiting for you below, and Mr. Thayer has telephoned he will be here in a moment."

Jack started for the stairs.

"Good!" he cried. "I'll be back in a second."

If the actor and Keene had expected to see a raw-boned country boy, reticent and ill at ease, they got over it at the first glance. What they saw approaching with his arm in their host's was a young man of twenty-three, straight as an arrow, with the eyes of an eagle; whose clean-cut features were so full of human understanding that both the actor and Keene fell to wondering if Randall was not joking when he labeled him as hailing from so primitive a settlement as Moose River. To these qualities there was added the easy grace of a man of the world in the pink of condition. Only his dark gray pepper-and-salt clothes--they had been purchased in Utica the day before--confirmed Randall's diagnosis, and even these fitted him in a way that showed both his good taste and his common sense. The introductions over and the party seated, Randall turned again to his friend.

"I worried about you, Billy; what happened?"

"Oh, we had a washout just this side of Utica, and the train was nearly three hours late. But I had no trouble," he said with a quiet smile. "I came down a-foot--let's see--Fourth Avenue, isn't it? As soon as I saw the Park I knew I was on the right trail," he laughed, his white teeth gleaming in contrast with his nut-brown skin.

"Oh, I'd trust you anywhere in the world, trail or no trail. That's the way you got me out of Bog Eddy that night, and that's the way you saved Sam Thayer. He's coming, you know. Wants to meet you the worst kind. I'm keeping you for a surprise, but he'll hug himself all over when he finds out it's you."

The young man raised his eyes in doubt.

"Thayer? I don't know as I--"

"Why, of course you remember the Thayers, Billy! They were at Long Lake three or four summers ago."

"Oh! a short, thick-set man, with grayish hair?" replied Holcomb in his low, well-modulated voice--the voice of a man used to the silence of the big woods. "Let's see," he mused--"wasn't it he that cut himself so badly with an axe over at Otter Pond? Yes, I remember."

"So does Thayer, Billy, and it'll be a good many years before he forgets it," declared Jack. "You saved his life, he says. That's one thing he wants to see you for, and another is that he's played out and needs a rest."

"Bless me!" cried Brompton in the tragic tones of his profession. "You saved his life, me boy?"

Holcomb, for the first time, appeared embarrassed.

"Well, that's mighty good of him to think so, but I didn't do much," he replied modestly. "Now I come to think of it, he was badly cut and I helped him down to Doc' Rand's at Bog River. That was, as I figure it, about three years ago--wasn't it, Randall?"

"You mean," returned Randall, "that you took him down on your back, and if you hadn't Sam Thayer would have bled to death."

"Bless my soul!" cried the actor.

"Well, you see," continued Holcomb ignoring the interruption, "there are some that can handle an axe just as easily as some fellows can fiddle, and again there are some that can't. It's just a little knack, that's all, gentlemen, and, of course, Mr. Thayer wasn't used to chopping."

"The only thing Sam Thayer can handle is money," interposed Keene. "He's got millions, Billy--millions!"

"Millions," chuckled Randall; "I should think so. He owns about five of 'em." As he spoke he half rose from his chair and waved his hand to a well-dressed, gray-haired man whose eyes were searching the crowded hall. "Thayer!" he shouted.

As the new-comer moved closer the whole group rose to greet him.

"I'm afraid, my dear Jack, I've kept you all waiting," the banker began. "A special meeting of the Board detained me longer than I had anticipated. I hope you will forgive me. I am not usually late, I assure you, gentlemen. This for me?" and he picked up his waiting

cocktail.

Holcomb, although his eyes had not wavered from Thayer, had not yet greeted him. That a man so quiet and unostentatious belonged to the favoured rich was a new experience to him. He was also waiting for some sign of recognition from the financial potentate, the democracy of the woods being in his blood.

Randall waited an instant and seeing Thayer's lack of recognition blurted out in his hearty way:

"Why, it's Holcomb, Sam; Billy Holcomb of Moose River."

Thayer turned and formally extended his hand.

"Oh, I beg your pardon! I--" then his whole manner changed. "Why, Holcomb!" he exclaimed with delightful surprise. "Oh, I'm so glad to see you! And--er--your dear father--how is he?"

"First rate, thank you, Mr. Thayer. It seems kind of natural to see you again. Father was speaking about you the very day he left. He went on Monday to Fort Ti' with my mother for a visit."

"Ah, indeed!" returned Thayer, drawing up a chair beside the boy, and before even the glasses were entirely emptied the two had begun talking of the woods and all it held in store for them, the banker declaring, as he followed Randall into the dining room, that if he could arrange his business he would make a quick trip to the Lake with Holcomb as guide.

If the luncheon that followed was a surprise to the stranger from Moose River, Holcomb's modest naturalness and innate good breeding were a revelation to Randall's friends. This increased to positive enthusiasm when one of the actor's massive turquoise rings struck the rim of the stranger's wine glass, nearly spilling the contents into Holcomb's lap, and which Holcomb's deft touch righted with the quickness of a squirrel, before a drop left its edge, a feat of dexterity which brought from the actor in his best stage voice:

"Zounds, sir! A little more and I should have deluged you"--Holcomb answering with a smile:

"Don't mention it. I saw it coming my way."

Even those at the adjoining tables caught the dominating influence of the man as they watched him sitting easily in his chair listening to the stories of the Emperor of the First Empire--as Brompton was called, he having played the part--the young woodsman joining in with experiences of his own as refreshing in tone and as clear in statement as a mountain spring.

Suddenly, and apparently without anything leading up to it, and as if some haunting memory of his own had prompted it, Thayer leaned forward and touched Billy's arm, and with a certain meaning in his voice asked:

"There is something I have wanted to ask you ever since I came, Holcomb. Tell me about that poor hide-out--the man your father fed in the woods that night. Did he get away?"

Holcomb straightened up and his face became suddenly grave. The subject was evidently a distasteful one.

"Whom do you mean, Mr. Thayer?"

"I don't know his name; I only remember the incident, but it has haunted me ever since."

"You mean Dinsmore."

"What has become of him?"

"I haven't heard lately." He evidently did not want to discuss it further--certainly not in a crowded room full of strangers.

"But you must have learned something of him. Tell me--I want to know. I never felt so sorry for anyone in my life."

Holcomb looked Thayer squarely in the face, read its sincerity and said slowly, lowering his voice:

"He is still in hiding--was the last time I saw him."

"When was that?" asked Thayer, his eyes boring into the young woodsman's.

"About a month ago--Ed Munsey and I were cutting a trail at the time."

"Would you mind telling me?" persisted Thayer. "I have always thought that poor fellow was ill treated. Your father thought so too."

Holcomb dropped his eyes to the cloth, rolled a crumb of bread between his fingers and said, as if he was thinking aloud:

"Ill treated! I should say so!" Then he lifted his head, drew his chair closer to the group, ran his eyes around the room to be sure of his audience, and said in still lower tones:

"What I'm going to tell you, gentlemen, is between us, remember. None of you, I am sure, would want to get him into any more trouble, if you knew the circumstances as I do. One night about nine o'clock, during a pouring rain, Ed and I lay in a swamp under a lean-to. Ed was asleep, and I was dozing off, when I heard something step in the brush on the other side of the fire. I couldn't see anything, it was so dark, but it sounded just like an animal slouching and stepping about as light as it could. It would stop suddenly and then I'd hear the brush crack again on the left."

Thayer was leaning now with his elbows on the table, as absorbed as a child listening to a fairy tale. The others sat with their eyes fixed on the speaker.

"Any unusual noise at night must be looked into, and I threw a handful of birch bark on the fire and reached for Ed's Winchester. I had to crawl over him to get it, and when I got my hand on it and turned around a sandy-haired fellow was standing over me with a gun cocked and pointed at my head.

"I knew him the minute I laid eyes on him. It was Bob Dinsmore, who killed Jim Bailey over at Long Pond. He'd been hiding out for months. He was not more than thirty years old, but he looked fifty; there was a warrant out for him and a reward to take him dead or alive. He kept the gun pointed, drawing a fine sight on a spot between my left eye and my ear.

"Hold on, Bob!" said I; 'sit down.' He didn't speak, but he lifted the muzzle of his gun a little, and there was a look came into his eyes, half crying, half like a dog cornered to fight.

"S-s-h!" said I; 'you'll wake up Ed.'

"I got to kill ye, Bill," said he.

"Sit down," I said, for I saw he was so weak his thin legs were trembling. 'Neither Ed nor I are going to give you away--sit down,' and I shook Ed. He sat up blinking like an old toad in a hard shower. 'By whimey!' said Ed, staring at Bob as if he had seen a ghost.

"I'm hongry, Bill," said Bob. 'Bill, I'm hongry,' and he began to stagger and cry like a baby. I got hold of his rifle and Ed caught him just as he fainted.

"By and by he came to and Ed and I fixed up a stiff hooker of liquor and some hot tea and gave him a mouthful at a time. Just before daylight he rose on one elbow and lay there following us with his eyes, for he was too weak to talk. It seemed as if he was clean beat out and that his nerve was gone. What grit he had he had used up keeping away from the law."

Again Holcomb paused--the round table was as silent as a court room before a verdict.

"Neither Ed nor I liked the idea of being caught with Dinsmore," he resumed, "with three counties after him harder than an old dog after a five-pronged buck, so when it came daylight we shifted camp over back of a fire-slash where I knew all hell couldn't find him. We had to carry him most of the way. That was on a Wednesday. We never said anything to him about his killing Bailey--he knew we knew. We fed him the best we knew how. Saturday, 'long toward night, I killed a small deer, and the broth did him good.

"In a couple of days--Hold on, I've got ahead of my story; it was _Sunday_ night when Bob said: 'Boys' said he, as near as I can repeat it in his dialect--'you've treated me like a humin, but I dassent stay here. It ain't fair to you. What I done I done with a reason. You've heard tell, most likely, that I been seen in Lower Saranac 'bout three weeks ago, ain't ye?'

"Yes," said Ed, 'we heard something about it. That Jew horse-trader, Bergstein, told us, but there warn't nobody that seen ye, that was sure it was you.'

"They lied then," said Bob, 'for there was more'n a dozen in the village that day that knowed me and warn't mistook 'bout who I was. As to that red-nosed Jew, Bergstein, he'll quit talkin' 'bout me and everythin' else if I kin ever draw a bead on him.'

"Then Bob began to tell us how he walked into the big hotel at Saranac about noon and flung a hind-quarter of venison on the counter in front of the clerk and said: 'What I come for is a decent meal; I ain't got no money, but I guess that'll pay for it.' The clerk got white around the gills, but he didn't say anything; he just took the venison and showed Bob into the big dining hall. Bob says they gave him the meal, and he kept eating everything around him with his Winchester across his knees. There wasn't a soul that spoke to him except the hired girl that waited on him, although the dining room was crowded with summer boarders.

"'Tea or coffee?' asked the hired girl when he had eaten his pie.

"'No, thank ye,' says Bob, 'but I won't never forgit ye if ye can git me four boxes of matches.' Bob said she was gone a minute and when she came back she had the matches for him under her apron. 'Good luck to ye, Bob,' she says--her cheeks red, and her mouth trembling. It was Myra Hathaway--he'd known her since she was a little girl. 'Bob, for God's sake go,' she begged--'there's trouble coming from the village.'

"It wasn't long before Bob crossed Alder Brook about forty rods this side of the Gull Rock. They saw his tracks where he crossed the next day, but Bob had the matches, and the sheriff and about forty that went out to get him came back that night looking kind of down in the mouth. There wasn't a sign of him after he crossed Alder Brook. He knew those woods like a partridge. When he got through telling how he got the square meal at Lower Saranac, Ed said to him:

"'Bob, you're welcome to what I've got,' and I told him, 'What I've got is yours, and you know it.'

"He tried to say a little something, but he choked up, then he said: 'Boys, I'm sick of bein' hounded. There's been nights and days when I've most died; if I can only get into Canady there won't none of 'em git me.'

"Ed and I had about eleven dollars between us. 'That will get you there, Bob,' I said, 'if you look sharp and don't take risks and keep to the timber.' We gave him the eleven dollars and what cartridges and matches we could spare, and what was left of the deer. I never saw a fellow so grateful; he didn't say anything, but I saw his old grit come back to him. That was Monday night, and about nine o'clock we turned in. Before daylight I woke up to attend to the fire and saw he was gone."

The men drew a deep breath. Keene and the actor looked blankly at each other. Compared to the tale just ended, their own stories seemed but a reflex of utterly selfish lives. Even the Emperor experienced a strange thrill--possibly the first real sensation he had known since he was a boy. As to Thayer--he had hung on every word that fell from Holcomb's lips.

"And what motive had Dinsmore in killing Bailey?" asked Thayer, nervously, when the others had gone to the hall for their coffee and liqueurs. "I asked your father but he did not answer me, and yet he must have known."

"Oh, yes, he knew, Mr. Thayer. Everybody knows, our way, but it's one

of those things we don't talk about--but I'll tell you. It was about his wife."

Thayor folded his napkin in an absent way, laid it carefully beside his plate, unfolded it again and tossed it in a heap upon the table, and said with a certain tenderness in his tone:

"And did he get away to Canada, Holcomb?"

"No, sir; his little girl fell ill, and he wouldn't leave her."

"And the woman, Holcomb--was she worth it?" continued Thayor. There was a strange tremor in his voice now--so much so that the young man fastened his eyes on the banker's, wondering at the cause.

"She was worth a lot to Bob, sir," replied Holcomb slowly. "They had grown up together."

CHAPTER TWO

That same afternoon the banker passed through the polished steel grille of his new home by means of a flat key attached to a plain gold chain.

The house, like its owner, had a certain personality of its own, although it lacked his simplicity; its square mass being so richly carved that it seemed as if the faintest stroke of the architect's soft pencil had made a dollar mark. So vast, too, was its baronial hall and sweeping stairway in pale rose marble, that its owner might have entered it unnoticed, had not Blakeman, the butler, busying himself with the final touches to a dinner table of twenty covers, heard his master's alert step in the hall and hurried to relieve him of his coat and hat. Before, however, the man could reach him, Thayor had thrown both aside, and had stepped to a carved oak table on which were carefully arranged ten miniature envelopes. He bent over them for a moment and then turning to the butler asked in an impatient tone:

"How many people are coming to dinner, Blakeman?"

"Twenty, sir," answered Blakeman, his face preserving its habitual Sphinx-like immobility.

"Um!" muttered Thayor.

"Can, I get you anything, sir?"

"No, thank you, Blakeman. I have just left the Club."

"A dinner of twenty, eh?" continued Thayor, as Blakeman disappeared with his coat and hat--"our fourth dinner party this week, and Alice never said a word to me about it." Again he glanced at the names of the men upon the ten diminutive envelopes, written in an angular feminine hand; most of them those of men he rarely saw save at his own dinners. Suddenly his eye caught the name upon the third envelope from the end of the orderly row.

"Dr. Sperry again!" he exclaimed, half aloud. He opened it and his lips closed tight. The crested card bore the name of his wife. As he dropped it back in its place his ear caught the sound of a familiar figure descending the stairway--the figure of a woman of perhaps thirty-five, thoroughly conscious of her beauty, whose white arms flashed as she moved from beneath the flowing sleeves of a silk tea-gown that reached to her tiny satin slippers.

She had gained the hall now, and noticing her husband came slowly toward him.

"Where's Margaret?" Thayer asked, after a short pause during which neither had spoken.

The shoulders beneath the rose tea-gown shrugged with a gesture of impatience.

"In the library, I suppose," she returned. Then, with a woman's intuition, she noticed that the third envelope had been touched. Her lips tightened. "Get dressed, Sam, or you will be late, as usual."

Thayer raised his head and looked at her.

"You never told me, Alice, that you were giving a dinner to-night--I never knew, in fact, until I found these."

"And having found them you pawed them over." There was a subtle, almost malicious defiance in her tone. "Go on--what else? Come--be quick! I must look at my table." One of her hands, glittering with the rings he had given her, was now on the portiere, screening the dining room from out which came faintly the clink of silver. She stopped, her slippered foot tapping the marble floor impatiently. "Well!" she demanded, her impatience increasing, "what is it?"

"Nothing," he replied slowly--"nothing that you can understand," and he strode past her up the sweeping stairs.

Margaret was in the biggest chair in the long library, sitting curled up between its generous arms when he entered. At the moment she was absorbed in following a hero through the pages of a small volume bound in red morocco. Thayer watched her for a moment, all his love for her in his eyes.

"Oh, daddy!" she cried. Her arms were about his neck now, the brown eyes looking into his own. "Oh, daddy! Oh! I'm so glad you've come. I've had such a dandy ride to-day!" She paused, and taking his two hands into her own looked up at him saucily. "You know you promised me a new pony. I really must have one. Ethel says my Brandy is really out of fashion, and I've seen such a beauty with four ducky little white feet."

"Where, Puss?" He stroked her soft hair as he spoke, his fingers lingering among the tresses.

"Oh, at the new stable. Ethel and I have been looking him over; she says he's cheap at seven hundred. May I have him daddy? It looks so poverty-stricken to be dependent on one mount."

Suddenly she stopped. "Why, daddy! What's the matter? You look half ill," she said faintly.

Thayor caught his breath and straightened.

"Nothing, Puss," he answered, regaining for the moment something of his jaunty manner. "Nothing, dearie. I must go and dress, or I shall be late for our guests."

"But my pony, daddy?" pleaded Margaret.

Thayor bent and kissed her fresh cheek.

"There--I knew you would!" she cried, clapping her hands in sheer delight.

Half an hour later, when the two walked down the sweeping stairs, her soft hand about his neck, the other firmly in his own, they found the mother, now radiant in white lace and jewels, standing before the white chimney piece, one slippered foot resting upon the low brass fender. Only when the muffled slam of a coupe door awoke her to consciousness did she turn and speak to them, and only then with one of those perfunctory remarks indulged in by some hostesses when their guests are within ear-shot.

In the midst of the comedy, to which neither made reply, the heavy portieres were suddenly drawn aside and Blakeman's trained voice rang out:

"Dr. Sperry!"

A tall, wiry man with a dark complexion, alluring black eyes and black moustache curled up at the ends, entered hastily, tucking the third envelope in the pocket of his pique waistcoat.

A peculiar expression flashed subtly from Alice's dark eyes as she smiled and put forth her hand. "I'm so glad you could come," she murmured. "I was afraid you would be sent for by somebody at the last moment."

"And I am more than happy, I assure you, dear lady," he laughed back, as he bent and kissed the tips of her fingers.

"And yet I feel so guilty--so very guilty, when there is so much sickness about town this wretched weather," she continued.

Again he smiled--this time in his best professional manner, in the midst of which he shook hands with Margaret and Thayor. Then he added in a voice as if he had not slept for months--

"Yes, there is a lot of grippe about."

Thayor looked at him from under lowered lids.

"I wonder you could have left these poor people," he said sententiously.

Alice, scenting danger, stretched forth one white hand and touched the doctor's wrist.

"You came because I couldn't do without you, didn't you, dear doctor?"

Again the portiere opened.

"Mr. and Mrs. Reginald Van Rock--Mr. Kennedy Jones--Miss Trevor," announced Blakeman successively.

Mrs. Thayer's fourth dinner party that week had begun.

* * * * *

As the door closed at midnight upon the last guest, Margaret kissed her father and mother good-night and hurried to her room, leaving the two alone. The dinner had been an ordeal to her--never before had she seen her father so absorbed.

"You were very brilliant to-night, were you not?" exclaimed Alice as soon as she and Thayer were alone.

Thayer continued silent, gazing into the library fire, his hands clenched deep in his trousers pockets, his shoulders squared.

"A beautiful dinner," she continued, her voice rising--"the best I have had this season, and yet you sat there like a log."

The man turned sharply--so sharply that the woman at his side gave a start.

"Sit down!" he commanded--"over there where I can see you. I have something to say."

She looked at him in amazement. The determined ring in his voice made her half afraid. What had he to say?

"What do you mean?" she retorted.

"Just what I said. Sit down!"

The fair shoulders shrugged. She was accustomed to these outbursts, but not to this ring in his voice.

"Go on--what is it?"

Thayer crossed the room, shut the door and turned the key in the lock. She watched him in silence as he switched off the electric lights along the bookcases, until naught illumined the still library but the soft glow of the lamp and the desultory flare from the hearth.

Still he did not speak. Finally the storm broke.

"What I have to say to you is this: I'm sick of this wholesale giving of dinners."

Alice let go her breath. After all, it was not what was uppermost in her mind.

"Ah! So that's it," she returned.

"That's a part of it," he cried, "but not all."

"And the other part?" she asked, her nervousness returning.

"I'll come to that later," said her husband, with an accent on the last word. "It is necessary that I should begin at the beginning."

"Go on," she murmured nervously, gazing absently into the fire, her mind at work, her fears suddenly aroused. For the first time its wavering light seemed restful. "Go on--I'm listening."

"The first part is that I'm sick of these dinners. I've told you so before, and yet you had the impertinence to-night to give another and not say a word to me about it." The voice had a cold, incisive note in it--the touch of steel to warm flesh.

"Impertinence! Your ideas of hospitality, Sam, are peculiar." Any topic was better than the one she feared.

"Hospitality!" he retorted hotly. "Do you call it hospitality to squander my money on the cheap spongers you are continually inviting here? Do you call it hospitable to force me to sit up and entertain this riff-raff night after night, and then be dragged off to the opera or theatre when I am played out after a hard day's work down town for the money you spend? And just look at Margaret! Do you suppose that these people, this sort of life you daily surround her with, is a sane atmosphere in which to bring up our daughter? That's the first thing I've got to say to you, and I want to tell you right here that it's got to stop."

She looked up at him in a half frightened way, wondering whether there was not something back of this sudden tirade, something she could not fathom--something she feared to fathom.

"The second thing that I have to tell you is this: I am at the end of my rope, or will be if I keep on. A man can't keep up month in and month out, living my life, and not break down. I saw Leveridge yesterday and he wishes me to get some relief at once. Young Holcomb, who did me a service once at Long Lake, is here, and I am going back home with him. I intend to take a rest for a fortnight--possibly three weeks--in camp."

For an instant she could not speak--so quick came the joyful rebound. Then there rushed over her what his absence might, or might not, mean to her.

"When do you start?" she asked with assumed condescension--her old way of concealing her thoughts.

"Saturday night."

"But Saturday night we are giving a dinner," she rejoined in a positive tone. This was one at which she wanted him present.

"You can give it, but without me," he replied doggedly.

"I tell you you'll do nothing of the sort, Sam. I'm not going to abide by the advice of that quack, Leveridge, nor shall you!" The old dominating tone reasserted itself now that she had read his mind to

the bottom.

"Quack or not, you would not be alive to-day but for him, and it is disgraceful for you to talk this way behind his back. And now I am going to bed." With this he turned off the remaining light, leaving only the flicker of the firelight behind, shot back the bolt and strode from the room.

As he passed Margaret's door there came softly:

"Is that you, daddy?"

"Yes, dear."

"Come in, daddy, dear." Her clear young voice was confident and tender.

He stopped, pushed back the door and entered her dainty room. She lay propped up among the snowy whiteness of the pillows, smiling at him.

Like her mother, Margaret in her womanhood--she was eighteen--was well made; her figure being as firm and well knit as that of a boy. For an instant his eyes wandered over her simple gown of white mull, tied at the throat with the daintiest of pink ribbons, her well shaped ears and the wealth of auburn hair that sprang from the nape of her shapely neck and lay in an undulating mass of gold all over her pretty head. Whatever sorrows life had for him were nothing compared to the joy of this daughter.

All his anger was gone in an instant.

"Little girl, you know it's against orders, this reading in bed," he said in his kindly tone. Never in all her life had he spoken a cross word to her. "You'll ruin your eyes and you must be tired."

She closed her book. "Tired--yes, I am tired. Mother's dinners are such dreadfully long ones, and, then, daddy, to-night I've been worrying about you. You seemed so silent at dinner--it made my heart ache. Are you ill, daddy? or has something happened? I tried to sleep, but I couldn't. I've been waiting for you. Tell me what has happened--you will tell me, won't you, daddy?" Her smooth, young arms were about his neck now. "Tell me," she pleaded in his ear.

"There's nothing to tell, little girl," he said. "I'm tired too, I suppose; that's all. Come--you must go to sleep. Pouf!" and he blew out the flame of the reading candle at her bedside.

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For a long time that night Thayer sat staring into the fire in his room, his mind going over the events of the day--the luncheon--the talk of those around the table--the tones of Holcomb's voice as he said, "It was about his wife," and then the added refrain: "He couldn't get away; his little girl fell ill." How did his case differ?

Suddenly he roused himself and sprang to his feet. No! he was wrong; there was nothing in it. Couldn't be anything in it. Alice was foolish--vain--illogical--but there was Margaret! Nothing would--nothing could go wrong as long as she lived.

With these new thoughts filling his mind, his face brightened. Turning up the reading lamp on his desk he opened his portfolio, covered half a page and slipped it into an envelope.

This he addressed to Mr. William Holcomb, ready for Blakeman's hand in the morning.

CHAPTER THREE

Two days subsequent to these occurrences--and some hours after his coupe loaded with his guns and traps had rumbled away to meet Holcomb, in time for the Adirondack express--Thayer laid a note in his butler's hands with special instructions not to place it among his lady's mail until she awoke.

He could not have chosen a better messenger. While originally hailing from Ireland, and while retaining some of the characteristics of his race--his good humor being one of them--Blakeman yet possessed that smoothness and deference so often found in an English servant. In his earlier life he had served Lord Bromley in the Indian jungle during the famine; had been second man at the country seat of the Duke of Valmoncourt at the time of the baccarat scandal, and later on had risen to the position of chief butler in the establishment of an unpopular Roumanian general.

It is not to be wondered at, therefore, that he was at forty-five past master in domestic diplomacy, knowing to a detail the private history of more than a score of families, having studied them at his ease behind their chairs, or that he knew infinitely more of the world at large than did his master.

Blakeman had two absorbing passions--one was his love of shooting and the other his reverent adoration of Margaret, whom he had seen develop into womanhood, and who was his Madonna and good angel.

At high noon, then, when the silver bell on Alice's night table broke the stillness of her bedroom, her French maid, Annette, entered noiselessly and slid back the soft curtains screening the bay window. She, like Blakeman, had seen much. She was, too, more self-contained in many things than the woman she served, although she had been bred in Montmartre and born in the Rue Lepic.

"Did madame ring?" Annette asked, bending over her mistress.

Alice roused herself lazily.

"Yes--my coffee and letters."

The girl crossed the room, opened a mirrored door, deftly extracted from a hanging mass of frou-frous behind it a silk dressing jacket, helped thrust the firm white arms within its dainty sleeves, tucked a small lace pillow between Alice's shoulders and picking up the glossy mass of black hair, lifted it skilfully until it lay in glistening folds over the lace pillow. She then went into the boudoir and

returned with a dainty tray bearing a set of old Sevres, two buttered wafers of toast and two notes.

Alice waited until her maid closed the bedroom door, then, with the impatience of a child, she opened one of the two notes--the one Annette had discreetly placed beneath the other. This she read and re-read; it was brief, and written in a masculine hand. The woman was thoroughly awake now--her eyes shining, her lips parted in a satisfied smile. "You dear old friend," she murmured as she lay back upon the lace pillow. Dr. Sperry was coming at five.

She tucked the letter beneath the coverlid and opened her husband's note. Suddenly her lips grew tense; she raised herself erect and stared at its contents:

I shall pass the summer in the woods if I can find suitable place for you and Margaret. Make no arrangements which will conflict with this. Will write later.

SAM.

Again she read it, grasping little by little its whole import: all that it meant--all that it would mean to her.

"Is he crazy?" she asked herself. "Does he suppose I intend to be dragged up there?"

It was open defiance on his part; he had done this thing without consulting her and without her consent. It was preposterous and insulting in its brusqueness. He evidently intended to change her life--she, who loathed camp life more than anything in the world was to be forced to live in one all summer instead of reigning at Newport. She understood now his open defiance in leaving for the woods with Holcomb, and yet this last decision was far graver to her than his taking a dozen vacations. Still deeper in her heart there lurked the thought of being separated from the man who understood her. The young doctor's summer practice in Newport would no longer be a labour of love. It really meant exile to them both.

At one o'clock she lunched with Margaret, hardly opening her lips through it all. She did not mention her husband's note--that she would reserve for the doctor. Between them she felt sure there could be arranged a way out of the situation. Again she devoured his note. Yes--"at five." The intervening hours seemed interminable.

That these same hours were anything but irksome to Sperry would have been apparent to anyone who watched his use of them. The day, like other days during office hours, had seen a line of coupes waiting outside his door. Within had assembled a score of rich patients waiting their turn while they read the illustrated papers in strained silence--papers they had already seen. There was, of course, no conversation. A nervous cough now and then from some pretty widow, overheated in her sables, would break the awkward silence, or perhaps the voice of some wealthy little girl of five asking impossible explanations of her maid. During these hours the mere opening of the doctor's sanctum door was sufficient to instantly raise the hopes and the eyes of the unfortunates.

For during these office hours Dr. Sperry had a habit of opening

the door of this private sanctum sharply, and standing there for an instant, erect and faultlessly dressed, looking over the waiting ones; then, with a friendly nod, he would recognize, perhaps the widow--and the door closed again on the less fortunate.

It was, of course, more than possible that the young woman was ill over her dressmaker's bill, rather than suffering from a weak heart or an opera cold. Sperry's ear, however, generally detected the cold. It was not his policy to say unpleasant things--especially to young widows who had recently inherited the goods and chattels of their hard-working husbands.

"III!--nonsense, my dear lady; you look as fresh as a rose," he would begin in his fascinating voice--"a slight cold, but nothing serious, I assure you. You women are never blessed with prudence," etc., etc.

To another: "Nervous prostration, my dear madame! Fudge--all imagination! Silly, really silly. You caught cold, of course, coming out of the heated theatre. Get a good rest, my dear Mrs. Jack--I want you to stay at least a month at Palm Beach, and no late suppers, and no champagne. No--not a drop," he adds severely. Then softening, "Well, then, half a glass. There, I've been generous, haven't I?" etc., etc., and so the day passed.

On this particular day it was four o'clock before he had dismissed the last of his patients. Then he turned to his nurse with an impatient tone, as he searched hurriedly among the papers on his desk:

"Find out what day I set for young Mrs. Van Ripley's operation."

"Tuesday, sir," answered the nurse.

"Then make it Thursday, and tell James to pack up my big valise and see that my golf things are in it and aboard the 9.18 in the morning."

"Yes, sir," answered the girl, dipping her plump hands in a pink solution.

All this time Alice had been haunted by the crawling hands of the clock. Luxurious as was her house of marble, it was a dreary domain at best to-day, as she sat in the small square room that lay hidden beyond the conservatory of cool palms and exotic plants screening one end of the dining room--a room her very own, and one to which only the chosen few were ever admitted; a jewel box of a room indeed, whose walls, ceiling and furniture were in richly carved teak. A corner, by the way, in which one could receive an old friend and be undisturbed. There was about it, too, a certain feeling of snug secrecy which appealed to her, particularly the low lounge before the Moorish fireplace of carved alabaster, which was well provided with soft pillows richly covered with rare embroideries. To-day none of these luxuries appealed to the woman seated among the cushions, gazing nervously at the fire. What absorbed her were the hands of the clock, crawling slowly toward five.

* * * * *

He did not keep her waiting. He was ahead of time, in fact--Blakeman leading him obsequiously through the fragrant conservatory.

"Ah--it is you, doctor!" she exclaimed in feigned surprise as the butler started to withdraw.

"Yes," he laughed; "I do hope I'm not disturbing you, dear lady. I was passing and dropped in."

Alice put forth her hand to him frankly and received the warm pressure of his own. They waited until the sound of Blakeman's footsteps died away in the conservatory.

"He's gone," she whispered nervously.

"What has happened?" asked the doctor with sudden apprehension.

"Everything," she replied womanlike, raising her eyes slowly to his own. Impulsively he placed both hands on her shoulders.

"You are nervous," he said, his gaze riveted upon her parted lips. He felt her arms grow tense--she threw back her head stiffly and for a moment closed her eyes as if in pain.

"Don't!" she murmured--"we must be good friends--_good_ friends--do you understand?"

"Forgive me," was his tactful reply. He led her to the corner of the lounge and with fresh courage covered her hand firmly with his own. "See--I am sensible," he smiled--"we understand each other, I think. Tell me what has happened."

"Sam," she murmured faintly, freeing her hand--"Sam has dared to treat me like--like a child."

"You! I don't believe it--you? Nonsense, dear friend."

"You must help me," she returned in a vain effort to keep back the tears.

"Has he been brutal to you?--jealous?--impossible!" and a certain query gleamed in his eyes.

"Yes, brutal enough. I never believed him capable of it."

"I believe you, but it seems strange--psychologically impossible. Why, he's not that kind of a man."

Alice slipped her hand beneath a cushion, drew forth her husband's note and gave it to him.

"Read that," she said, gazing doggedly into the fire, her chin in her hands.

"I may pass the summer in the woods"--he read. "'Make no arrangements--' Well, what of it?" This came with a breath of relief. Alice raised her head wearily.

"It means that my life will be different--a country boarding house or a camp up in those wretched woods, I suppose--an _existence_"--she went on, her voice regaining its old dominant note--"not life!"

"And no more Newport for either of us," he muttered half audibly to himself with a tone of regret.

Alice looked up at him, her white hands clenched.

"I won't have it!" she exclaimed hotly; "I simply won't have it. I should die in a place like that. Buried," she went on bitterly, "among a lot of country bumpkins! Sam's a fool!"

"And you believe him to be in earnest?" he asked at length. She made no reply; her flushed cheeks again sunk in her jewelled hands. "Do you, seriously?" he demanded with sudden fear.

"Yes--very much in earnest--that's the worst of it," she returned, with set, trembling lips.

For some moments he watched her in silence, she breathing in nervous gasps, her slippered feet pressed hard in the soft rug. A sudden desire rushed through him to take her in his arms, yet he dared not risk it.

"Come," he said, at last, "let us reason this thing out. We're neither of us fools. Besides, it does not seem possible he will dare carry out anything in life without your consent."

"I don't know," she answered slowly. "I never believed him capable of going to the woods--but he did. And I must say, frankly, I never believed him capable of this."

"You and he have had a quarrel--am I not right?"

She shrugged her shoulders in reply.

"Perhaps," she confessed--"but he has never understood me--he is incapable of understanding any woman."

"Quite true," he replied lightly, in his best worldly voice; "quite true. Few men, my dear child, ever understand the women they marry. You might have been free to-day--free, and happier, had you--"

He sprang to his feet, bending over her--clasping her hands clenched in her lap. Slowly he sought her lips.

"Don't," she breathed--"don't--I beg of you. You must not--you _shall_ not! You know we have discussed all that before."

"Forgive me," said he, straightening and regaining his seat. The ice had been thinner than he supposed, and he was too much of an expert to risk breaking through. "But why are you so cold to me?" he asked gloomily, with a sullen glance; "you, whose whole nature is the reverse? Do you know you are gloriously beautiful--you, whom I have always regarded as a woman of the world, seem to have suddenly developed the conscience of a schoolgirl."

"You said you would help me," she replied, ignoring his outburst, her eyes averted as if fearing to meet his gaze.

"Then tell me you trust me," he returned, leaning toward her.

She raised her eyes frankly to his own.

"I do--I do trust you, but I do not trust myself. Now keep your promise--I insist on it. Believe me, it is better--wiser for us both."

"Come, then," he said, laying his hand tenderly on her shoulder--it had grown dark in the teakwood room--"let me tell you a story--a fairy tale."

She looked at him with a mute appeal in her eyes. Then with a half moan she said: "I don't want any story; I want your help and never so much as now. Think of something that will help me! Be quick! No more dreams--our minutes are too valuable; I must send you away at six."

For some minutes he paced the room in silence. Then, as if a new thought had entered his mind, he stopped and resumed his professional manner.

"What about Margaret?" he asked quietly. "Is she fond of the woods?"

"Why--she adores them." She had regained her composure now. "The child was quite mad about that wretched Long Lake. What a summer we had--I shudder when I think of it!"

"Did it ever occur to you, my dear friend, that Margaret needed the woods?" His eyes were searching hers now as if he wanted to read her inmost thought.

"Needed them--in what way?"

"I mean--er--wouldn't it be better for her if she went to them? A winter at Saranac--or better still, a longer summer at the camp--if there is to be a camp. In that case her father would not leave her alone; there would be less chance, too, of his insisting on your being there--should you refuse. At least that would be a reason for his spending as much time as possible in camp with Margaret, and you might run up occasionally. I'm merely speaking in a purely professional way, of course," he added.

A sudden pallor crept over her face.

"And you really believe Margaret to be delicate?" she asked in a trembling voice full of sudden apprehension.

Sperry regained his seat, his manner lapsing into one that he assumed at serious consultations.

"I am a pretty good diagnostician," he went on, satisfied with the impression he had made. "Don't think me brutal in what I am going to say, but I've watched that young daughter of yours lately. New York is not the place for her."

"You don't mean her lungs?" she asked in a barely audible tone.

The doctor nodded.

"Not seriously, of course, my dear friend--really not that sort of condition at present--only I deem it wisest to take precautions. I'm afraid if we wait it will--er--be somewhat difficult later.

Margaret must be taken in time; she is just the sort of temperament tuberculosis gets hold of with annoying rapidity--often sooner than we who have had plenty of experience with the enemy suspect. I have always said that the Fenwick child might have been saved had it not been for the interference of Mrs. Fenwick after the consultation."

"And you are really telling me the truth?" Alice gasped--her lips set, her breast heaving.

The doctor shrugged his shoulders.

"Unfortunately--yes," was his reply.

Alice straightened to her feet, crossed to the mantel and stood for some moments with her forehead pressed against the cool edge of the marble, Sperry watching her in silence.

"Poor Margie!" he heard her say--then she turned to him with a strange, calm look in her eyes.

"You must go," she said with an effort; "it is late. Blakeman will be here in a moment to turn on the lights." She stretched forth her hands to him. For a second he held them warm and trembling in his own, then Blakeman's rapid step in the conservatory was heard.

"Good-night," he said in a louder tone, as the butler appeared. "I shall see you at the Van Renssalaer's Thursday--we are to dine at eight, I believe."

She smiled wearily in assent.

"And remember me to your good husband," he added. "I hope he will have the best of luck."

"They say hunting is a worse habit to break than bridge," she returned with a forced little laugh.

Blakeman followed the doctor to the door. Reverently he handed him his stick, coat and hat--a moment later the heavy steel grille closed noiselessly.

Blakeman stood grimly looking out of the front window, his jaw set, his eyes following the doctor until he disappeared within his coupe and slammed the door shut.

"Damn him!" he said. "If he tells that child that I'll strangle him!"

CHAPTER FOUR

In a deserted lumber clearing up Big Shanty Brook a chipmunk skitted along a fallen hemlock in the drizzle of an October rain. Suddenly he stopped and listened, his heart, thumping against his sleek coat. He could hear the muffled roar of the torrent below him at the bottom of the ravine, talking and grumbling to itself, as it emptied its volume of water swollen by the heavy rains and sent it swirling out into the

long green pool below.

"Was it the old brook that had frightened him?" he wondered. "Perhaps it was only the hedge-hog waddling along back from the brook to his hole in the ledge above, or it might be the kingfisher, who had tired of the bend of the brook a week before and had changed his thieving ground to the rapids above, where he terrorized daily a shy family of trout, pouncing upon the little ones with a great splashing and hysterical chattering as they darted about, panic-stricken, in the shallowest places.

"Perhaps, after all, it was only the creaking of a tree," he sighed, with a feeling of relief. Before he could lower his tail he heard the sound again--this time nearer--more alarming--the sound of human voices coming straight toward him.

Then came the sharp bark of a dog. At this the chipmunk went scurrying to safety along the great hemlock and over the sagging roof of the deserted shanty lying at its farther end, where he hid himself in a pile of rock.

There was no longer any doubt. Someone was approaching.

"If Billy Holcomb had only give us a leetle more time, Hite," came a voice, "we'd had things fixed up slicker'n they be; but she won't leak a drop, that's sartain, and if this here Mr. Thayer hain't too pertickler--"

"Billy allus spoke 'bout him as bein' humin, Freme," returned his companion, "and seein' he's humin I presume likely he'll understand we done our best. 'Twon't be long now," he added, "'fore they'll git here."

Two men now emerged into the clearing. The foremost, Hite Holt, as he was known--was a veteran trapper from the valley--lean and wiry, and wearing a coonskin cap. From under this peered a pair of keen gray eyes, as alert as those of a fox. His straight, iron-gray hair reached below the collar of his coat, curling in long wisps about his ears after the fashion of the pioneer trapper. As he came on toward the shanty the chipmunk noticed that he bent under the weight of a pack basket loaded with provisions. He also noticed that his sixty years carried him easily, for he kept up a swinging gait as he picked his way over the fallen timber.

His companion, Freme Skinner, was a young lumberman of thirty, with red hair and blue eyes; a giant in build; clad in a heavy woollen lumber-man's jacket of variegated colours. One of his distinguishing features--one which gained for him the soubriquet of the "Clown" the country about, was the wearing of a girl's ring in his ear, the slit having been made with his pocket knife in a moment of gallantry. At the heels of the two men trotted silently a big, brindle hound.

They had reached the dilapidated shanty now and were taking a rapid glance at their surroundings.

"Seems 'ough it warn't never goin' to clear up," remarked Hite Holt, the trapper, slipping the well-worn straps from his great shoulders and staggering with ninety pounds of dead weight until he deposited it in the driest corner of the shanty. Then he added with a good-natured

smile: "Say, we come quite a piece, hain't we?"

During the conversation the dog stalked solemnly about, took a careful look at the shanty and its surroundings and disappeared in the thick timber in the direction of the brook. The trapper turned and looked after him, and a wistful, almost apologetic expression came into his face.

"I presume likely the old dog is sore about something," he remarked, when the hound was well out of hearing. "He's been kind er down in the mouth all day."

"'Twarn't nothin' we said 'bout huntin' over to Lily Pond, was it?" ventured Freme.

"No--guess not," replied the trapper thoughtfully. "But you know you've got to handle him jest so. He's gettin' techier and older every day."

Imaginative as a child, with a subtle humour, often inventing stories that were weird and impossible, this strange character had lived the life of a hermit and a wanderer in the wilderness--a life compelling him to seek his companions among the trees or the black sides of the towering mountains. All nature, to him, was human--the dog was a being.

The Clown swung his double-bitted axe into a dry hemlock, the keen blade sinking deeper and deeper into the tree with each successive stroke, made with the precision and rapidity of a piston, until the tree fell with a sweeping crash (it had been as smoothly severed as if by a saw) and the two soon had its full length cut up and piled near the shanty for night wood.

It was not much of a shelter. Its timbered door had sagged from its hinges, its paneless square windows afforded but poor protection from wind and rain, while a cook stove, not worth the carrying away, supported itself upon two legs in one corner of the rotting interior.

Stout hands and willing hearts, however, did their work, and by the next sundown a new roof had been put on the shanty, "The Pride of the Home" wired more securely upon its two rusty legs and the long bunk flanking one side of the shanty neatly thatched with a deep bed of springy balsam. Thus had the tumble-down log-house been transformed into a tight and comfortable camp.

* * * * *

The next morning (the rain over) dawned as bright as a diamond, its light flashing on the brook below, across which darted the kingfisher, a streak of azure through the green of the pines--while in a clump of near-by firs two red squirrels played hide-and-seek among the branches.

At the first sunbeam the Clown stretched his great arms above his head, whistled a lively jig tune, reached for a fry pan, and soon had a mess of pork hissing over the fire. Later on, from a bent sapling a smoke-begrimed coffee pail bubbled, boiled over, and was lifted off to settle.

"A grand morning ain't it, Hite?" he shouted in high glee, rubbing his eyes as he squatted before the blaze. "Yes, sir--a grand mornin'. Them deer won't hev' time to stop and make up their beds arter the old dog gits to work on 'em to-day. I'm tellin' ye, Hite, we'll hev' ven'son 'fore night if Mr. Thayer and Billy takes a mind to go huntin'."

"Mebbe," replied the trapper guardedly, "and mebbe we won't. There ain't no caountin' on luck, specially deer. But it's jest as well to be ready"--and he squeezed another cartridge into the magazine of his Winchester and laid the rifle tenderly on its side in a dry place as if fearful of disturbing its fresh coat of oil.

Suddenly the old dog, who had been watching the frizzling bacon, lifted his ears and peered down in the basin of the hemlocks.

"Halloo!" came faintly from below where the timber was thickest.

The Clown sprang to his feet.

"Thar they be, Hite!" he said briskly. "By whimey--thar they be!"

The trapper strode out into the tangled clearing and after a resonant whoop in reply stood listening and smiling.

"Jest like Billy Holcomb," he remarked. "He's took 'bout as mean goin' as a feller could find to git here." Then he added, "But you never could lose him."

"Whoop," came in answer, as the tall, agile figure of Holcomb appeared above the tangle of sumac, followed by a short, gray-haired man in blue flannel, who was stepping over a refractory sapling that Holcomb had bent down.

The trapper and the Clown strode clear of the brush and saw for the first time the man whose home they had been preparing.

Not the Samuel Thayer that Holcomb had talked to during that memorable luncheon at The Players, when he sat silent among Randall's guests; nor the Samuel Thayer who had faced his wife; nor the Samuel Thayer, the love of whose daughter put strength in his arms and courage in his heart. But a man with cheeks ruddy from the sting and lift of the morning air; all the worn, haggard look gone from his face.

"Wall, I swan!" shouted the trapper to Holcomb, as he came near enough to shake his hand, "you warn't perticler 'bout the way you come, Billy. If your friend ain't dead beat it ain't your fault."

"I hadn't any choice, Hite," laughed Holcomb. "You fellows must have been drowned out last night; the log over the South Branch is gone in the freshet; we had to get round the best way we could. Step up, Freme," he said. "I want you to know Mr. Thayer. This is Freme Skinner, Mr. Thayer, and this is Hite Holt, and there's no better anywhere round here."

Thayer stretched out both hands and caught each extended palm in a hearty grip.

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Thayer," said the trapper, his great freckled paw tight in the white hand of the stranger. "By goll,

you done well, friend. But what did ye let Billy lead you through sich a hell-patch as he did, Mr. Thayer?" There was a certain silent dignity about the trapper as he greeted the new-comer. As he spoke the old dog sniffed at Thayer's knees, and with a satisfied air regained his resting place once more.

"Well, it was about all I cared to do for one morning," answered Thayer between his breaths, "but you see we found the old trail impossible. And so you received our telegram in time," he said, glancing in delight at the freshly thatched roof of the shanty.

"Oh, we got it," answered the trapper. "Joe Dubois's boy come in with your telegram to the valley, and as soon as I got it I dug out for Freme, and we come in here day 'fore yesterday to git things comfortable."

"Breakfus, gentlemen!" announced the Clown, for the bacon was done to a turn. "How do you like yourn, Mr. Thayer--leetle mite o' fat and lean?"

"Any way it happens to be," replied the millionaire, as he squeezed into his place at the rough board table next the trapper. "But before I touch a mouthful I want you all to understand that I don't wish to be considered as a guest. I'm on a holiday and I'm going to take my share of whatever comes."

"Thar, Freme!" exclaimed the trapper, "I told ye Mr. Thayer warn't perticler."

* * * * *

That night after supper the four sat chatting within the glow of the stove, while the old dog lay asleep. Possibly it was the persuasion latent in a bottle of Thayer's private reserve, that little by little coaxed the trapper into an unusually talkative mood, for until far into the night the man from the city lay on his back on the springy boughs, listening and smoking, keenly alive to every word the old man uttered.

"Most times now," he went on, as he leaned forward and patted the dog, "I let the old dog have his way--don't I, dog?--but then it warn't a week ago that 'twas t'other way. Me and him was follerin' a buck on Bald Mountin, and he got set on goin' by way of West Branch, 'stead of travellin' a leetle mite to the south, what would have brung us aout, as I figger it, jest this side o' Munsey's. Wall, sir, arter we'd been a-travellin' steady, say, for more'n four hours the old feller give in. Says he to me, 'I'm beat,' says he, julluk that, and he stopped and throwed up this gray snout of his'n to the wind and then he says, kinder 'shamed like, 'I led ye off consid'ble, hain't I?' says he. I see he was feelin' bad 'bout it, and I says, says I, 'It warn't your fault,' says I, 'we come such a piece; a dog's jest as liable to be mistook as a humin'; and arter that it warn't more'n an hour 'fore we was out to the big road and poundin' for home. Thar, now"--here he pushed the old dog gently from him--"lie down and take another snooze; ye're gittin' so blamed lazy ain't no comfort livin' with ye."

Thayer bent the closer to listen. Every moment brought some new sensation to his jaded nerves. This making a companion of a dog and endowing him with human qualities and speech was new to him.

The Clown now cut in: "And it beats all how ye kin understand him when he talks," he laughed, too loyal to his friend to throw doubt on the old trapper's veracity, "and yet it's kind o' cur'ous how a dog as old as him and that's had as much experience as him kin git twisted julluk some pusillanimous idjit that ain't never been off the poor-house road."

Thayor laughed softly to himself, not daring to bring the dialogue to a close by an intervention of his own.

"Now, there's Sam Pitkin's woman," the Clown continued with increased interest, "she's jest the same way; hain't never had no idee of whar a p'int lays; takes sorter spells and forgits which way't is back to the house. Doc' Rand see her last September when he come by with them new colts o' his'n. 'You're beat aout,' said he, 'and there ain't no science kin cure ye. Ye won't more'n pull aout till snow flies if ye don't give aout 'fore that'--so he fixed up some physic for her and she give him a dollar and arter he tucked up the collar o' that new sealskin coat o' his'n and spoke kinder sharp to Sam's boy what was holdin' the colts, he laid them new yaller lines 'cross their slick backs and begun to talk to 'em: 'Come, Flo! Come, Maudie!' says he. 'Git, gals!' and he drewed the lines tight on 'em, and Sam's boy says it jest seemed as if they sailed off in the air."

Thayor broke out into a roar of laughter, and was about to ask the Clown whether the physic had killed the pneumonia or the woman, when the trapper slanting his shoulders against the bunk broke in with:

"Ye ain't laid it on a bit too thick, Freme." "I knowed Sam's woman, and I knowed her mother 'fore she married Bill Eldridge over to Cedar Corners."

"That's whar she was from--I seen her many a time. My old shanty warn't more 'n forty rod from where Morrison's gang built the new one."

Thayor's delighted ears drank in every word. The perfunctory discussion of a Board of Directors issuing a new mortgage was so many dull words compared with this human kind of speech.

"And now ye are here whar I kin get at ye, Billy," continued the trapper, "let me tell ye how bad I feel when I think ye never been over to see me, or stopped even for a night. Why it actually sets my blood a-bilin'--makes me mad, as the feller said--" Here he nodded toward Thayor--"Some folks is that way, Mr. Thayor."

"I'd like to have come," pleaded Holcomb, "but somehow, Hite, I never managed to get over your way. You see I live so far off now, and yet when I come to think of it, I must have passed close by it when I was gunning last fall over by Bear Pond."

"Yes--I knowed ye was gunnin', and we cal'lated ye'd come in with them fellers what was workin' for Joe Dubois. Me and the old dog never give up lookin' for ye. The dog said he seen ye once, but you was too fur off to yell to."

"I want to know!" exclaimed the Clown, as he re-crossed his long legs.

"Goll--I felt sorry for the cuss; he took it so hard," Hite went on. "Then he owned up--tellin' me that when he see I felt so lonesome and disappointed at ye not comin', he'd be daddinged if he could hold out any longer and see me so miserable; so he jest ris his ears and made believe you was a-comin' and that he see ye, and that there warn't time to let ye know."

"Say--don't that beat all!" roared the Clown as he slapped his leg at the thought of the old dog's sagacity. Here the old dog cocked an ear and looked wistfully up into his master's face. Thayer could hardly believe the dog did not understand.

Hite paused in his narrative for breath. When these men of the woods, living often for weeks and months with no fellow-being to talk to, loosen up they run on as unceasingly as a brook.

"But dang yer old hide, Billy, what I got most again' ye is that ye ain't writ afore," and he slapped his young friend Holcomb vigorously on the back. "'Twarn't a night that passed when I was to hum in the valley last winter, but what I'd kinder slink away from the store arter they'd sorted out what mail thar was, feelin' ashamed, julluk the old dog does when he's flambussled into a trout hole ahead of ye. 'Why, how you take it,' my old woman would say; 'like as not Billy's been so busy he hain't had time to write ye and it hain't come,' says she. 'No,' said I, 'if he's writ I'd had it 'fore this. United States mail don't lie,' says I."

"But I did write you," declared Holcomb earnestly.

"Yes, so ye did, for I hadn't more'n said it 'fore down comes Dave Brown and says: 'Eke says thar's a letter come for ye in to-night's mail,' 'Why, haow you talk!' says I, and I reached for my tippet and drawed on my boots and started for Munsey's. 'For the land's sakes!' my old woman yelled arter me. 'Whar are ye a-goin' a night like this, Hite Holt?' 'Don't stop me,' says I, 'the old cuss has writ--the old cuss has writ--jest as I knowed he would. Most likely,' says I, 'he's broke his leg or couldn't git out to the settlement 'count the snow, or he'd writ 'fore this. Don't stop me,' says I, and aout I went and tramped through four feet of snow to the store and there lay yer welcome wad as neat as a piney in a little box over the caounter, and the lamp throwin' a pinky glow over its side, and that scratchy old handwritin' o' yourn I'd knowed three rod off. Thar it lay kinder laughin' at me and slanted so's I could jest read it. Gosh! but I was tickled!"

The trapper drew a sliver of wood from the stove, shielded its yellow flame in the hollow of his hand and re-lit his pipe.

Back in the shadow of the bunk lay Thayer drinking in every word of the strange talk so full of human kindness and so simple and genuine. For some moments his gray eyes rested on the gentle face of the old trapper, the wavering firelight lighting up the weather-beaten wrinkles.

Soon he straightened up, threw the white ash of his cigar toward the stove and slid gingerly to the dirt floor, his muscles lame from the morning's tramp, and calling to Billy to follow him, went out into the cool air.

The banker made his way carefully through the tangle until he reached the edge of the ledge overhanging the boiling torrent below, white as milk in the moonlight. He selected a dry log and for some minutes sat smoking and gazing in silence at the torrent, whose hoarse roar was the only sound coming up from the sleeping forest. So absorbed was he with his own thoughts that he seemed unconscious that Holcomb was beside him. His gaze wandered from the brook to the forest of hemlocks bristling from the opposite bank, their shaggy tops touched with silver. Beyond lay the wilderness--a rolling sea of soft hazy timber hemmed in by the big mountains, flanked by wet granite slides that shone like quicksilver.

"Billy," he began at length.

Holcomb started; it was the first time the banker had called him "Billy."

Suddenly Thayer looked up, and Holcomb saw that the gray eyes were dim with tears.

"You're not sick, are you, Mr. Thayer?" asked Holcomb, starting toward him.

"No, my boy," replied Thayer huskily; "I've been happy for a whole day, that is all. Happy for a whole day. Think of it!"

"I'm glad--and you haven't found it too rough; and the things were comfortable, too?" ventured Holcomb.

"Too rough! Why, man, this is Paradise! Think of it, Billy--your friends have been actually interested in _me_--in _my_ comfort--_me_, remember!"

"Why, of course," returned Holcomb. "They think a heap of your being here--besides, there are not two better-hearted men in these whole woods than Freme and the old man."

Again the gray eyes gazed down into the torrent.

"What I want to say to you is this: I want you to let me know what you think would be right at the end of our stay, and I'll see that they get it."

Holcomb straightened and looked up with surprise.

"But they're not here, Mr. Thayer, for money; neither of them would accept a cent from you."

"What! Why, that isn't right, Billy. You mean to say that Holt and Skinner have come up here and fixed up this shanty to hunt with us for nothing!" stammered the financier. "I won't have it."

"Yes," answered Holcomb, his voice softening, "it's just as I'm telling you. That's the kind of men the Clown and Hite are. You'd only insult them if you tried to pay them. There are a lot of things the old man has done in his life that he has never taken a cent for; and as for the Clown, I've seen him many a time doing odd jobs for some poor fellow that couldn't help himself. I've seen him, too, after a hard month's chopping in the lumber woods working for Pat Morrison,

come into Pat's hotel and pay the whole of his month's wages out in treat to a lot of lumber jacks he'd meet maybe Saturday night, and knew maybe he'd never see again by Monday morning."

"And yet you tell me they are both poor."

"Poor isn't the word for it. Why, I've seen Freme when he's been broke so he didn't have the price of a glass of beer at Pat's, build a dog house for some of the children, or help the hired girl by stacking a pile of wood handy for her."

It was a new doctrine for the banker--one he had never been accustomed to; and yet when he thought it over, and recalled the look in the old trapper's face and the hearty humour and independence of the Clown, he felt instantly that Holcomb was right. Something else must be done for them--but not money. For some moments he sat gazing into the weird stillness, then he asked in one of his restful tones:

"Billy--who owns this place?"

"You mean the shanty?"

"I mean as far as we can see."

"Well," answered Holcomb, "as far as we can see is a good ways. Morrison owns part of it--that is from the South Branch down to the State Road, and--let's see--after that there's a couple of lots belonging to some parties in Albany; then, as soon as you get across above the big falls it is all state land clear to Bear Brook--yes, clear to the old military road, in fact."

"Are there any ponds?" asked Thayer.

"Yes--four," replied Holcomb. "Lily Pond, and little Moose and Still Water and--"

"I see," interrupted Thayer.

"Why do you ask?" inquired Holcomb, wondering at the drift of Thayer's inquiry.

"Oh, nothing. That is, nothing now. How many acres do you think it all covers?"

"I should say about fifteen thousand," replied Holcomb.

"Only fifteen thousand, eh?"

For an instant he paused and looked out over the sweep of forest, with the gaunt trees standing like sentinels. Then he raised his hands above his head and in a half-audible voice murmured:

"My God, what freedom! I'll turn in now if you don't mind, Billy."

And so ended the banker's first day in the wilderness.

CHAPTER FIVE

All through the night that followed Sam Thayer slept soundly on his spring bed of fragrant balsam, oblivious to the Clown's snoring or the snapping logs burning briskly in the stove, his head pillowed on his boots wound in his blanket. Beneath the canopy of stars the torrent roared and the great trees whined and creaked, their shaggy tops whistling in the stiff breeze. Not until Hite laid his rough hand on his shoulder and shook him gently did he wake to consciousness.

"Breakfus's most ready," announced the trapper cheerfully.

Thayer opened his eyes; then, with a start, he sat up, remembering where he was. As he grew accustomed to the light he caught a glimpse outside of Billy and the Clown busy over the frying pan, and the steaming pail of coffee. Its fragrance and the pungent smoke from the fire now brought him fully awake.

"How'd ye sleep, friend?" inquired Hite, his weather-beaten face wrinkled in a kindly grin.

"How did I sleep?" returned the millionaire smiling; "like a top--really I don't know; I don't remember anything after Holcomb covered me up."

"Breakfast!" shouted the Clown from without.

"Wait'll I git ye some fresh water," said the trapper, tossing the soapy contents of a tin basin into the sun and returning with it re-filled. "Thar, dip yer head into that, friend--makes a man feel good, I tell ye, on a frosty mornin'." Then lowering his voice to a whisper he added: "The old dog's sot on gittin' an early start; he's mighty pertickler 'bout it. The old feller's been up 'long 'fore daylight. He told me he never seen no nicer mornin' for a hunt. If we don't git a deer 'fore noon you kin have all that's on my plate." There was a confident gleam in the old man's eyes--an enthusiasm that was contagious.

The gray head of the millionaire went into the tin basin with a will. Big Shanty Brook, that morning, was as cold as ice. He rubbed his face and neck into a glow, combing his hair as best he could with his hands. He was as hungry as a wolf. Thayer was now beginning to understand their unwillingness to accept pay for their services.

Breakfast over, the four struck into the woods in single file, en route for their runways, Hite taking the lead, the old dog trotting at the Clown's heels in silence, Holcomb bringing up the rear.

"Now, friend," began Hite in a low tone to Thayer, "you'd better come with me, I presume; and, Billy, we'll go slow so's you'll have time to git down to whar that leetle brook comes into Big Shanty." And the banker and the trapper, followed by the dog, struck off to the left, up the densely wooded side of the mountain.

It was all a mystery to Thayer, this finding a blind trail in the forest, but to the trapper it was as plain as a thoroughfare.

"'T won't be long 'fore the old dog'll git down to business this

mornin'," he muttered to Thayer in his low voice, as he steadied him along a slippery log. "The dog says Freme's allys sot on keepin' up too high. He thinks them deer is feedin' on what they kin git low down in the green timber underneath them big slides. I ain't of course, sayin' nothin' agin Freme. Thar ain't a better starter in these hull maountins, only him and the old dog ain't allus of the same idee."

Presently Big Shanty Brook flashed ahead of them through the trees, and the trapper led the way out to a broad pool, a roaring cauldron of emerald green steaming in mist. Just above it lay a point of boulders out of which a dense clump of hemlocks struggled for a rough existence--the boulders about their gnarled roots splitting the course of the mountain torrent right and left.

"Thar, Mr. Thayer!" shouted the trapper in a voice that could be heard above the roar of water. "Guess you'll be better off here whar ye kin see up and down--if the deer comes through here he's liable to cross jest above whar ye see them cedars noddin' to us, or like's not he'll take a notion to strike in a leetle mite higher up, and slosh down till he kin git acrost by them big rocks. Take your time, friend, and if ye see him comin' your way, let him come on and don't shoot till he turns and ye kin see the hull bigness of him."

"I'll do my best," returned Thayer above the roar, as he settled himself behind the pile of driftwood the trapper had indicated. "But where are you going, Mr. Holt?"

"Me? Oh, further up. 'T ain't likely he'll come my way, but if ye was to miss him I'll be whar he can't git by without my gittin' the gun on him if he undertakes to back track up the brook. Let's see!" he exclaimed, after a moment's hesitation, again casting his keen eyes over Thayer's vantage point. "Guess ye'd be more comfortable, wouldn't ye, if ye was to set over thar whar ye won't git sloppin' wet. Gosh! how she's riz!" he remarked, as Thayer re-settled himself. "If you was to hear me shoot," said the old man, as he took his leave, "come back up to whar I be. 'T ain't more 'n half a mile."

Thayer watched the gaunt figure of the trapper as he went off to his runway, leaping with his long legs from one slippery boulder to the next, as sure-footed as a goat--watched until he disappeared beyond the clump of torrent-scarred trees.

The man from the city was alone. He sat there listening and watching as eager as a boy. An hour passed. Time and again since he had taken up his vigil he had started up excitedly, glancing here and there, confident he heard the baying notes of a hound above the roar of Big Shanty. Voices, too, rang in his ears from out of that deceptive torrent as it boiled and eddied past him in the sunlight. Again, it seemed as if quarrelling had broken out among the boulders--quarrels that changed to girlish laughter and distant choruses. Once his mind reverted to the note he had sent by Blakeman; he wondered what effect the news had had upon Alice. When he faced her again would he have to go through what he had gone through before? or would she come to her senses, and be once more the loyal, loving wife she had always been until--No; he would not go into that. Then Margaret's eyes looked into his. Again he felt her arms about his neck; the coo and gurgle of her voice, and laughter in his ears. Here she, at least, would be happy, and here, too, they could have those long days together which he had always promised himself, and which his life in the Street made

impossible.

He rose to stretch his legs. As he did so the strange fascination of the mountain torrent--fascination that grew into a stranger feeling of isolation, almost of fear, took possession of him. He knew the trapper was somewhere, but half a mile above him. He was glad of this unseen companionship, and yet he realized that he was helpless to find his way back to the shanty. Big Shanty Brook had lost men before, and could again.

Suddenly the hoarse bellowing of a hound brought him again to his feet.

"Oo--oo--wah!" it rang over the roar; then the baying grew fainter from far up under the black slides as the dog turned in his course.

At this instant he became conscious of a presence which he could not at first make out--but something alive--something that moved--stood still--still as the tree behind which it slunk--and moved again. He grasped his Winchester and peered ahead, straining his eyes. Before him, barely thirty yards away, stood a man, the like of whom he had never seen before. Gaunt, hollow-eyed, unshorn, his matted beard and hair covered by a ragged slouch hat. Resting in the hollow of his arm was a rifle, and around his waist a belt of cartridges. That he had not seen Thayer was evident from the way he stood listening to the baying of the hound, his hand cupped to his ear.

Suddenly the figure crouched; sank to the ground and rolled behind a fallen log. At the same instant the old dog bounded out of the bushes and sprang straight at where the man lay concealed.

Thayer waited, not daring to breathe. The old dog had evidently lost the deer tracks.

Thayer settled once more in his place, now that the mystery was explained; looked his rifle over, laid it within instant reach of his hand and gave a low cough in the direction of the concealed figure. Should the deer charge this way it was just as well to let the man know where he sat, or he might stop a stray bullet. Quick as the answering flash of a mirror a line of light glinted along the barrel of a rifle resting on the fallen log, its muzzle pointed straight at him.

Thayer shrank behind the drift and uttered a yell. Almost every year someone had been mistaken for a deer and shot.

At this instant there rang through the forest the stamping splash of hoofs in the rapids above him; a moment more and he saw the spray fly back of a boulder. Then he gazed at something that obliterated all else.

A big buck was coming straight toward him. He came on, walking briskly, his steel-blue coat wet and glistening, a superb dignity about him, carrying his head and its branching horns with a certain fearless pride, and now that he had struck water, wisely taking his time to gain his second wind.

In a flash the buck saw him, turned broadside and leaped for the clump of nodding hemlocks.

Bang! Bang! Thayer was shooting now--shooting as if his life depended upon it. His first shot went wild, the bullet striking against a rock. The second sent the buck to his knees; in a second he was up again. It was the fourth shot that reached home, just as the deer gained the mass of boulders and hemlocks. The buck sprang convulsively in the air--the old dog at his throat--turned a half somersault and fell in a heap, stone dead, in a shallow pool. With a cry of joy the trapper was beside him.

"By Goll! you done well!" Hite declared with enthusiasm. "By Goll! friend, you done well! I knowed you had him soon's I heard the gun crack. Thinks I, he ain't liable to git by ye if he comes in whar I knowed he would. Well, he's consider'ble of a deer, I swan!" he declared, running his hand over the branching prongs.

"He's a beauty!" cried Thayer.

"Yes, sir, and he'll dress clus to a hundred and seventy. Must have made him think this perticler section was inhabited when ye was lettin' drive at him. Fust shot I know ye shot too quick. I warn't mor'n a hundred yards from him, then I knowed ye was gittin' stiddier when I heard ye shoot again."

"Hurrah, boys!" shouted a voice from the bank. It was Holcomb. "There's our saddle for Randall," he cried as he leaped toward them.

"But, Billy, I came pretty near not getting him after all," exclaimed Thayer with a laugh. "I was trying to keep your friend in the runway across the brook from shooting me, but I forgot all about him when I heard the deer come crashing down stream. If he got a crack at him at all I didn't hear it, I was so excited. You ought to have told me, Mr. Holt, you had somebody else watching out across the brook, or I might have let drive at him by mistake, or he at me." And Thayer laughed heartily. He was very happy to-day.

The trapper looked at him in wonder.

"Freme warn't down this way was he, Billy?"

Holcomb shook his head--a curious expression on his face.

"Oh, it wasn't Freme," retorted Thayer. "This man was half the size of Skinner, and a regular scarecrow. Looked as if he hadn't had anything to eat for weeks--but he could handle a gun all right. That's what worried me; I was afraid he would use it on me until the old dog lay down beside him."

The trapper gazed at the hound long and earnestly as if to read his mind, and then he answered thoughtfully:

"No--he warn't none of our folks, Mr. Thayer--one o' them gunners, I guess. They all know the old dog. And now," continued the old man, "I presume, likely, arter we've washed up a mite, we'd better be makin' tracks for home. I'm gittin' hollerer 'n a gourd. How be you, friend; hongry?"

"Hungry as a wolf," returned Thayer, still beaming over his good luck.

The Clown now appeared, and drawing his heavy knife, began dressing the buck.

"Here, Freme," cried the trapper, when the deer had been quartered, "that's yourn," and he slung the forequarters over the Clown's neck. "Ride nice?" asked the old man. "Kinder hefty, ain't it, Freme?"

"Wall, it ain't no ear-ring," laughed the Clown, shifting his burden to a finer balance.

"I'll take the hind quarters," said Thayer, straddling them across his neck, as the Clown had done, and with his own and Thayer's rifle spliced to the buck's head, the Clown led the way back to camp.

* * * * *

Some mornings after the hunt, during which Thayer had become so saturated with the life about him that the very thought of his work at home was distasteful, the banker called Holcomb to one side, and the two took their seats on a fallen tree, sections of which had warmed their tired and rain-soaked bodies more than once during his stay in the wilderness.

The open-air life--the excitement of the hunt--the touch of the cool woods, had removed from Thayer's mind every lingering doubt of his future plans. With the same promptness which characterized all his business transactions, he decided to return to New York the next day.

"Billy," began the banker, when he had settled himself comfortably, and lighted his cigar, "do you suppose Skinner can get a despatch out for me in the morning?"

"Yes, he might," replied Holcomb.

"Well, will you please see that he does then? And, Billy, one thing more--how many acres did you tell me the other day there was as far as we can see?" and he waved his hand to the stretch below him.

"About fifteen thousand, sir."

"Well, that will do for a beginning. I'm going to settle here, Billy, permanently--all my life. I want you to start to-morrow and find out who owns, not only this fifteen thousand acres, but what lies next to it. I'm going to buy if I can, and you're the man to help me."

"But, Mr. Thayer," faltered the young woodsman.

"No--there are no buts. I am not buying timber land, you understand, in the ordinary way, to destroy it. I want this beautiful country to be my own. No," he added smiling, "_our_ own, Billy. That's the better way to put it."

"I'll do my best," replied Holcomb simply, when he got his breath. "It's a big purchase and I must go slowly."

"Then the sooner you begin on them, my boy, the better. I shall send my lawyer, Mr. Griscom, up to you immediately; he will see that we get fair play legally, but as to the question of what and what not to buy, I leave that entirely to your judgment; what money you need you have

but to ask Mr. Griscom for."

"I'm afraid they will hold the tract at a high price, Mr. Thayer," said Holcomb.

"Whatever they hold it at within reason I'll pay," declared the millionaire.

"Then you'll have it," replied the young woodsman in a positive tone, "at the fairest figure I can get it for."

"I haven't a doubt of it, Billy. And now let me tell Holt and Freme--they are just inside the shanty. Ah--Mr. Holt, I was just telling Holcomb that I'm off in the morning, and before I go I want to tell you and Freme that I shall miss you dreadfully--miss you more than I can tell.

"Yes--so we mistrusted," answered Freme, in a regretful tone, "when we overheard ye talkin' 'bout telegrams."

"Goll! I hate to have ye go," declared the trapper, clearing his throat. "Seems 'ough you hain't but jest come, Mr. Thayer. But you got what ye come for, didn't ye? I dunno as I ever see a nicer deer."

"Yes, thanks to you and the old dog. But I'm coming back."

"Thar! what did I tell ye, Hite?" exclaimed the Clown.

"And when I do come back it will be to stay--at least during the summer months--perhaps for all the months."

The Clown and the trapper looked up with a puzzled expression.

"And as it is a decision which concerns all of us," Thayer resumed, "I want to tell you now that I have decided to buy Big Shanty Brook as far as we can see, and build a home here for myself and my family."

"Gee whimey!" cried the Clown. "I want to know!" The keen eyes of the trapper opened wide in astonishment.

"I have left the matter of purchase," continued Thayer, "entirely in Holcomb's hands. He will be my superintendent. I now ask your help, my friends, both of you; and so if you are willing you may consider yourselves under salary which Billy will settle with you, beginning from the morning I first saw this shanty. And now, Billy, if you don't mind, I want to see Big Shanty Brook once more before it gets dark. Maybe we can pick out a place for the new camp."

For some time neither the trapper nor the Clown spoke. Both sat amazed, silently gazing into the fire. Then Hite said slowly, turning to the Clown:

"Freme, I dunno as if I ever seen a nicer man."

* * * * *

Once outside Thayer stretched his arms above his head.

"Ah--what a day, it has been, Billy," he sighed. "What a full,

glorious day, and what a rest it has all been. At what hour do we start in the morning?" and a touch of sadness came into his voice.

"At seven," Holcomb replied; "Freme will take us out to the railroad with a team from Morrison's. We can send your telegram there."

"Good!" cried Thayer, brightening. "And, Mr. Holt--isn't he coming too?"

"I'm afraid not; he said to me before lunch that he and the dog were going to stay on for a spell."

"What--not alone! Oh, Billy, I wouldn't want to leave him here alone. He's an old man, you know, even if he is tough as a pine knot. Can't we persuade him to go with us? He's been so loyal and lovable I hate to leave him."

"I don't think you need worry, sir--he won't be alone."

"But Skinner is going with us."

"Yes--but he'll have company."

"Who?"

"The man you saw yesterday. You didn't suspect, perhaps, but that was Bob Dinsmore, who killed Bailey."

"The hide-out!" exclaimed Thayer, with a start.

"Yes, he's been around here ever since we came."

"Oh! I'm so sorry! Why didn't you let me see him?"

"Well, we didn't think any good would come of it, sir. Hite won't let him go hungry if he can help it, and he can now. We haven't eaten half the grub we brought."

Thayer stood for a moment in deep thought, reached down into his pocket and took from it a roll of bills.

"Hand this to Holt, Billy, and tell him to give it to the poor fellow from me."

CHAPTER SIX

When Blakeman opened the steel grille for his master at an early hour the day following, the thought uppermost in his mind was the change in Thayer's appearance. He saw at a glance that the wilderness had put a firmness into his step and a heartiness in his voice, as well as a healthy colour in his cheeks, such as he had not seen in him for years. He would gladly have sacrificed his month's salary to have been with him, and more than once during his absence had he gone to his room, finding a certain consolation even in looking for rust spots on his favourite gun.

With the casting off of his heavy travelling coat and hat, Thayer's first words were of his daughter.

"And how is Miss Margaret?" he asked, as Blakeman followed him upstairs with his gun and great-coat.

Dr. Sperry's villainous verdict still rankled in the butler's mind, and at first he had half decided to tell Thayer all he had overheard in the teakwood room. Then the pain it would give his master restrained him.

"Miss Margaret is quite well, sir," he returned in the unctuous, calm voice he assumed in service.

"Ah, that's good. She's asleep, I suppose, at this hour."

"I presume so, sir, as she was out rather late last night. I beg pardon, sir, but might I ask if you have had good luck?"

"Well, I managed to kill a fine buck, Blakeman," returned his master, as he continued up the stairs.

"Did you, indeed, sir!" exclaimed Blakeman, his face lighting up. "Well, I'm happy to hear it, sir--I am, indeed. A full blue-coat, sir, I dare say."

"Yes, and a splendid set of horns."

They had reached the broad corridor leading to his wife's bedroom, Blakeman continuing up to Thayer's room with his traps.

Thayer stepped briskly to Alice's door and knocked, then stood there waiting for her response, keyed up for the scene he knew would ensue the moment he crossed the threshold. The next instant, in response to her voice, he opened the door and entered. To his amazement Alice raised her eyes to his and smiled.

"So you're back," she laughed, re-tying a ribbon at her throat.

"Yes," he replied, closing the door and drawing a chair mechanically to her bedside. "Yes, I'm back and I've had a good time, dear." In spite of her disarming welcome he could not dispel a lingering distrust of her sincerity. "How do I look?" he added.

She leaned toward him, her head pillowed on her hand, and regarded him intently, a smile playing about the corners of her mouth. Again he searched for the truth in her eyes, and again he was baffled.

"Splendid, Sam--like a man who had never been ill."

Instantly the doubt faded. A sense of mingled relief and of intense happiness stole through him. If she would only believe in him now, he thought, and understand him, and be a help and a comfort to him.

"I was ill when I left," he continued in a softened tone. "You would not believe it, dear, but I was. I should have been ill in bed if I had stayed a day longer."

"Yes," she answered carelessly, "you must have been, otherwise I doubt if you would have had pluck enough to leave me as you did. It was quite dramatic, that little exit of yours, Sam."

"And so you got my note?" he inquired, stiffening up, yet determined to ignore her touch of sarcasm, and so preserve the peace.

"Oh, yes; Blakeman did not forget. He never forgets anything you tell him. I must say it was very thoughtful of you after our interview a night or two before." This came with a shrug of her shoulders, the smile still flickering about her mouth. "Of course you had a good time?"

"Yes, and I feel twenty years younger," he ventured; "couldn't help it, the way those men took care of me."

"Who?" she asked, still gazing at him curiously.

"Young Holcomb and--"

"Ah, yes, I remember," she mused, while she played with the lace on the sleeve of her gown.

"And there was Freme Skinner and a grizzled, kindly old trapper, named Hite Holt," he added. "I have never met with such sincere hospitality."

"What deliciously amusing names," she sighed, changing her position beneath the lace with the swift suppleness of a kitten. "And what luck hunting?" she asked, as she loosened the ribbon at her throat.

"I killed a smashing big buck," he declared with boyish enthusiasm.

She buried her head once more among the lace pillows and ran one hand through her wealth of hair.

"So you intend to stay up there all summer?" in the same half playful, half sneering tone.

"No, dear; I intend to buy a tract of land and build a house, or camp, that will house you properly."

This last came as a distinct shock, but she did not waver.

"And your decision is final, I suppose," she returned, as she readjusted her rings. "And when will this be?" she added.

"As soon as I can get the title deeds--not later than a month at the outside. Would you like me to tell you about the country?"

She shrugged her shoulders, raising herself among the pillows.

"No, I shouldn't know anything more about it."

"But you haven't the slightest idea what Big Shanty Brook is like," he said with conviction--"a superb wilderness, an unbroken forest. Imagine a--"

She raised her hand with a bored little laugh.

"Now, Sam, dear, don't," she protested. "I hate long descriptions of places; besides, I can imagine it perfectly--a muddy old stream with a lot of sad looking trees sticking about in a wilderness miles away from any human being anyone in his or her right mind would ever care to see. As for your Holcomb and the other two tramps, they would simply bore me to death."

The assumed tenderness in her voice had vanished now. After all she had not changed. What he had supposed was a return of the old camaraderie was but another of her covert sneers.

She drew her knees up under the embroidered coverlid, resting her chin firmly upon them, and for some moments gazed in dogged silence in front of her, with half-closed eyes.

"Then you have settled the matter," she said at length, without looking up.

"Yes," he replied. "You have known for years that I have longed for just such a place; now I'm going to have it."

She raised herself on her elbow and looked straight at him.

"Then you'll have it to yourself," she burst out, "and you'll live in it without me; do you understand? You and Margaret can have whatever you want up there together, but you'll count me out. Oh, you need not go out of your head," she cried, noticing his sudden anger.

Thayer sprang from his chair, all his anger in his face.

"You'll do as I say!" he exclaimed, "and when my camp up at Big Shanty Brook is built you will come to it--come to it as any self-respecting wife should--out of your duty to me and to your daughter."

"I will not!" she retorted, her breast heaving.

"You will do as I say, madam," he returned, lowering his voice. "This luxury--this nonsensical life you crave is at an end. From this day forth I intend to be master of my own house and all that it contains. Do you understand?"

She stared at him fixedly, her hand on her throat. A certain flash of pride in the man before her welled up in her heart. She hadn't thought it was in him.

"Yes--and master of you," he went on, pacing before her. "I'll sell this house if need be!" he cried with a gesture of disgust. "I don't want it--I never did; it was your making, not mine. Tell me what life I have had in it? There has not been a day since it was built that I would not have given twice its cost to be out of it. From this day forth my time is my own," and with a blow he brought his fist down on the back of the chair. Then squaring his shoulders he looked fearlessly into her eyes. Something of the roar of the torrent of Big Shanty Brook was in his voice as he spoke--something, too, of the indomitable grit and courage of the old dog.

For some seconds she did not answer. The outburst had given her time to think, but what move should she make next? Up to now she had lived

as she pleased and had managed to be selfishly happy. She knew he could force her into a life she loathed, and she realized, too, that, shrewd and resourceful as her friend the doctor was, there were obstacles that neither he nor she could overcome. Instantly her course was determined upon.

"Sam," she began, a forced sob rising in her throat, "I want you to listen to me." Her voice had changed to one of infinite tenderness; now it was the voice of a penitent child, asking a favour.

Thayor looked at her in astonishment.

"Well," he said after a moment, strangely moved by the appeal in her eyes and the sudden pathos in her tones.

"Since you intend to force me into exile, I'm going to make the best of it. I won't promise you I'll be happy there; I'll simply tell you I'll make the best of it." He started to speak, but she stopped him. "I know what my life there will mean; I know how unhappy I shall be, but I'll go because you want me to--but Sam, dear, I want you to promise me that for one month in the year I shall be free to go where I please--alone if I choose. Won't you, Sam?"

Thayor started, but he did not interrupt.

"What I ask is only fair. Everyone needs to be alone--to be free, I mean, at times--away from everything. You, yourself needed it, and you went--and how much good it has done you!"

"Yes," he said after a moment's hesitation--"I understand. Yes--that is fair."

"Is it a bargain?" she asked.

"Yes, it is a bargain," he answered simply. "I accept your condition."

"And you will give me your word of honour not to interfere during all that month?"

He put out his hand.

"Yes, you shall have your month. And now, Alice, can't we be friends once more? I've been brutal to you, I know," he said, bending over her. "I am sorry I lost my temper; try to understand me better. I am so tired of these old quarrels of ours. Won't you kiss me, Alice? It's so long since you kissed me, dear."

"Don't!" she murmured; "not now--I can't stand it. Let me thank you for your promise--won't that do?"

He turned from her with set lips and began to pace the floor.

Again her mood changed.

"I wish you'd sit down, Sam," she said. Her helpless tone had gone now. "You make me nervous walking up and down like a caged lion. Sit down--won't you, please?"

"I was thinking," he said.

"Well, think over in that chair. I have something to say to you which is important--something about Margaret's health."

He stopped abruptly.

"What do you mean? Is she ill?"

"No, not now, but she may be."

Thayor strode rapidly to the door.

"Come back here--don't be a fool. She is asleep after the Trevis dance. The child did not get home till after three."

"And you let her get ill?" he cried.

"Sit down, will you--and listen. Dr. Sperry came here the day you left, and he told me he had not liked the child's appearance for a long time, and that she ought to have the air of the mountains at once."

"And you called that charlatan in to see my daughter!" he cried indignantly. All his anger was aroused now. When any wall was raised in his path, this man Sperry was always behind it.

"I did not," she retorted savagely, "and Dr. Sperry is not a charlatan, and you know it. It was owing to his good heart that he came of his own accord and told me."

Thayor gripped the arm of his chair.

"Why didn't you call Leveridge?" he cried.

"There was no necessity. Dr. Sperry merely told me that Margaret was not over strong, and that she needed a change of air, and where she could be kept out of doors. He said there was no immediate danger," she went on steadily, "because the child's lungs are still untouched."

"Does Margaret know?" he asked between his teeth. Sperry and Margaret were the two poles of a battery to Thayor.

"Does she know? Of course not! Do you consider Dr. Sperry a fool?"

"Do I think him a fool? Yes, and sometimes I think he's worse," and he looked at her meaningly. "I'll see Leveridge at once--now--before I change my clothes. He's seen Margaret almost every day since she was born and this silk-stockings exquisite of yours hasn't seen her ten times in his life!" And he strode from the room.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Thayor's interview with Alice only made him more determined than ever to carry out his plans at Big Shanty. If he had hesitated at the danger to Margaret, he got over it when Leveridge said, with marked

professional courtesy:

"I should not have diagnosed her case as seriously; I should not worry in the least," adding confidentially--"I should be very much surprised if Dr. Sperry were right. However, I'll keep an eye on Margaret, and if I see things going the wrong way I might advise Lakewood in the spring. To send that child to as severe a climate as the woods in winter, would, in my opinion, be the worst thing in the world for her, Sam."

Thayor had repeated Leveridge's words to Alice, and she had replied:

"Well, if you are fool enough to believe in Leveridge I wash my hands of the whole affair."

Margaret, as Thayor had expected, was radiantly happy over the idea of the camp. She and her father talked of nothing else, Margaret taking an absorbed interest in every detail concerning the new home. Every letter from Holcomb was eagerly scanned by her. She even treasured in her bureau drawer a duplicate set of the plans, as well as memoranda of the progress of the work, and so knew everything that the young woodsman was doing. Furthermore, the frank simplicity of his letters to her father appealed to her--showing, as they did, a manliness sadly lacking in the fashionable young men about her. Thus it was not strange that she began to take a personal interest in Holcomb himself, whom she dimly remembered at Long Lake. With this there developed in her mind a certain feeling of respect and admiration for the young superintendent, due more to her democratic spirit than to anything personal about the man. Then, again, those who were natural appealed to her. As to men of Dr. Sperry's stamp and the idle youths who chattered to her in the world which her mother had forced her into, these she detested.

* * * * *

During the long winter months Big Shanty lay buried under tons of snow and ice. The broad bed of the stream became unrecognizable; its roar muffled. Along its wild course the boulders showed above the heavy drifts, capped with a sea of white domes, like some straggling city of sunken mosques. Along the bed of the brook open wounds gaped here and there, while at the bottom of these crevasses the treacherous black water chuckled and grumbled through a maze of passages, breaking out at rare intervals into angry pools, their jagged edges piled with floe ice. For days at a time the big trees moaned ceaselessly; often the snow fell silently all through the day, all through the bitter cold of the night, until the knotted arms of the hemlock were cruelly laden to the cracking point, and the moose hopple and scrub pines lay smothered up to their tops. Always the crying wind and the driving snow.

As the winter wore itself out the sun began to assert its warmth. All things now steamed at midday, dripping and oozing in sheer gratefulness; the snow became so soft that even the tail of a wood mouse slushed a gash in it, the dripping hemlocks perforating the snow beneath them with myriads of holes. Soon the woods were oozing in earnest, the warm sun swelling the young buds. Day by day the roar of Big Shanty Brook grew mightier, its waters sweeping over the boulders with the speed of a mill race, tearing away its crumbling banks.

With the opening of spring Holcomb started work in earnest. The woods

reverberated with the shouts of teamsters. Soon the deserted clearing became the main centre of activity, echoing with the whacking strokes of axes and the crash of falling trees. Horses strained and slipped in their trace chains, snaking the big logs out to the now widened clearing--slewing around stumps--tearing and ripping right and left.

By early March the clearing had widened to four times its original size, reaching for rods back of the shanty; the air had become fragrant, spiced with the odour of fresh stumps and the great piles of logs stacked on the skidways.

At last the work of chopping ceased. Then began the ripping whine of saws and the wrenching clutch of cant hooks; loads of clean planks now came clattering up the rough road from the sawmill in the valley below--men cursed over wheels sunk over their hubs in mud--over broken axles and shifted loads.

The clearing had now become Holcomb's home--if a square box provided with a door and a factory-made window can be called a home. In it he placed a cot bed and a stove, the remainder of its weather-proof interior being littered with blue prints, bills, and receipts. Before long these had resulted in the development of the skeleton of a pretentious main structure; its frame work suggesting quaint eaves and a broad piazza. At the same time a dozen other skeletons were erected about it, flanking a single thoroughfare leading to the road. This, too, had undergone a radical change. Before many weeks had passed the newly cut road lay smooth as a floor in macadam.

Strange men now appeared at Big Shanty on flying trips from Albany and New York--soulless looking men, thoroughly conversant with gas engines and lighting plants; hustling agents in black derby hats with samples, many of whom made their head quarters at Morrison's, awaiting Holcomb's word of approval. Most of these the trapper and the Clown treated with polite suspicion.

Wagon loads of luxuries then began to arrive--antique furniture, matchless refrigerators, a grand piano and a billiard table--cases of pictures and bundles of rare rugs. So great was the accumulation of luxuries at Big Shanty that little else was talked of.

"How much money do ye cal'late Sam Thayer's got?" one of the prophets at Morrison's would ask. The "Mr." had been long since dropped from lack of usage.

"Goll--I hain't no idee," another would reply, "but I presume if the hull of it was dumped inter Otter Pond you'd find the water had riz consider'ble 'round the edge."

During all this time Thayer had not once put in an appearance. He had left Holcomb, as he had promised, entirely in charge. Billy worried over the ever-increasing expenditure which had grown to a proportion he never dreamed of at the beginning, and was in constant dread of being asked for explanations--yet the vouchers he sent to New York invariably came back "O.K.'d" without a murmur or a criticism from the man who had told him to buy Big Shanty "as far as he could see."

CHAPTER EIGHT

The only thing that caused the young superintendent any real anxiety, and one he had tried in vain to stop--was the sale of liquor to his men at Morrison's. When pay-day came half of his gang were invariably absent for several days, including even his trustworthy and ever-to-be-relied-upon Freme Skinner, the Clown.

Holcomb had reasoned with Freme and had threatened him with discharge a dozen times, his example being a bad one for the French Canadians under his immediate care. As a last resort he had taken Belle Pollard, Freme's sweetheart, a waitress at Morrison's, into his confidence. If Belle could keep Freme sober over Sunday--it was impossible to keep him away from her--Holcomb would speak a good word to Thayer for Freme and Belle and then they could both get a place as caretakers of the house during the coming winter, be married in the fall and so live happy ever after.

The girl promised, and the next Saturday the test came.

"If Freme will let liquor alone," he had written to Thayer the day these final arrangements were completed, "you couldn't have a better man or a better girl, but I'm afraid we'll have to move Bill Morrison's bar-room into Canada to accomplish it."

The result of this bargain Holcomb learned from the girl herself as she sat in his cabin, the glow of a swinging lamp lighting up her face.

On Saturday night, as usual, so Belle said, the Clown, his wages in his pocket, had sat in one corner of Morrison's bar-room, the heels of his red-socked feet clutched in the rung of his chair. A moment before there had been a good-natured, rough-and-tumble wrestle as he and another lumber jack grappled. The Clown had thrown his antagonist fairly, the lumberjack's shoulders striking the rough floor with a whack that made things jingle. The next moment the two had treated one another at the bar, and with a mutual, though maudlin appreciation of each other had gone back to their respective chairs among the line tilted against the wall.

At that moment she had opened the bar-room door and announced supper. Instantaneously the front legs of the line of tilted chairs came to the floor with a bang. The Clown reached the girl and the half-open door first.

"Blast you, Freme Skinner," she said, "be you a-goin' in or out?"

"Wall, I swow, Belle," remarked the Clown, steadying himself and turning his bleary eyes on the closed door, "you be techier 'n a sp'ilt colt, ain't ye?"

Soon the long table was filled by the hungry crowd. They sat heavily in their chairs, their coats off, their hair slicked down for the occasion. The Clown was seated at one end of the table, nearest the swing door leading to the kitchen. He wore a red undershirt, cut low about his bull neck. It was Belle's ring that dangled from one ear. Loosing the strap about his waist he began to sing:

"My gal has a bright blue eye,
And she steps like a fox in the snow;
And a thousand miles I'd tra-vel
To find her other beau."

Then in crescendo:

"She used to live in Stove-pipe City--"

Here the girl kicked the swing door and appeared with the first assortment of bird dishes.

"Here, boys, you'll kinder have to sort 'em out for yerselves," she laughed, her eager eyes watching the Clown.

Freme started in again, unconscious of the girl's anxiety--too drunk to notice anything in fact:

"She used to live in Stove-pipe--"

He stopped short and looked at the girl with a half-drunken leer, then wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his red shirt.

"Ham an' eggs, fried pork, tea or coffee, mince or apple pie," rattled the girl, holding the dishes under Freme's nose.

Skinner leaned back, tried to fix his gaze upon her, lurched in his chair and slid heavily to the floor. Such breaches of etiquette were not infrequent occurrences at Morrison's.

The men filed out, crowding around the red-hot stove in the bar-room. When Belle burst in again to clear the table, the Clown lay snoring flat on his back.

By daylight Monday morning Morrison's hotel held but a single guest--the rest, penniless by Sunday night, had gone back to work. The Clown, with a dollar still in his pocket, remained. When the others had gone he came down softly in his sock feet from his room and drew up a chair to the stove in the stagnant and deserted bar-room. The room had not yet been either swept or aired. Then he rose, opened the door leading to the porch and let in the tingling frosty air and the sunlight. For a long time he played with the kitten under the stove, but he did not take a drink. He had promised Belle that he would not, and she had kissed him as a reward. A new light shone in the girl's eyes as she busied herself with the dishes in the kitchen beyond the bar-room--now and then she sang to herself the refrain of a popular song. Finally she opened the door of the kitchen and entered the bar-room. The next moment the Clown placed his great paw of a hand about her slim waist.

"I hain't took no drink," he said shakily, with an embarrassed laugh.

She looked up at him.

"I knowed you wouldn't, Freme," she answered searching his blood-shot blue eyes. "You promised, Freme, and--you know I'll marry ye," she said, "jest as I said I would if ye'll only keep to what ye promised. I guess we kin be as happy as most folks," she added, smiling bravely through tears.

"Thar ain't no guessin' 'bout it, Belle. Thar--you needn't cry 'bout it," he replied.

"You was awful drunk, Freme," she went on. "There warn't no one could handle ye 'cept me. They was tryin' to get ye upstairs and to bed, but ye was uglier 'n sin."

"Pshaw--I want to know," drawled the giant sheepishly. "Didn't none git hurted, did they?"

"None 'cept Ed Munsey; ye throwed him downstairs."

"Ed ain't hurted, be he?" he asked in alarm.

"His shoulder was swelled bad when he come back to work," she confessed. She nodded to the door behind the bar and the splinters sticking through its panel.

"Gosh all whimey!" he exclaimed; "who done that?"

"You done it, Freme; you was crazy drunk. There warn't none of 'em could handle you 'cept me, I tell ye. I spoke to ye and ye come 'long with me back inter the kitchen and set there lookin' at me strange-like for most an hour. Arter I got my dishes washed I took ye up to the little room at the end of the hall."

The Clown scratched his head as if trying to remember.

"Warn't it Ed that throwed that buffalo hide over me?" he asked after a moment of useless research.

"No," she said, "I wouldn't let one of 'em tech ye."

"And do you think he'll keep his promise, Belle?" asked Holcomb, when she had finished the story.

"I dunno. He will if I kin stay 'longside of him. But if he don't he's got to git along without me. He says he loves me better 'n liquor, and I guess maybe he does."

The following night Freme swung into the forest and took the short cut to Big Shanty, and that same night Holcomb welcomed him with a hearty handshake and the morning after set him to work. When the next day came around and Freme shook his head when the liquor passed, those around the stove at Morrison's marvelled at his grit and speculated how long it would last, wondering if Freme had "got religion"--to which the girl had answered, "Yes, he has--I'm his religion."

* * * * *

But liquor was not the only menace that threatened the work down Morrison's way. Drunkenness Holcomb could handle to some extent--had handled it in the cases of both the Clown and the Clown's head-chopper, a little French Canadian by the name of Le Boeuf, from whom Holcomb himself had extracted a pledge, which, to the little Kanuck's credit, he manfully kept. What was more to be feared was the drove of stragglers, outlaws, and tramps who, attracted by the unusual expenditure at Big Shanty, made Morrison's their resting place as long

as they had a dollar to pay for a lodging or a glass of whiskey.

In addition to these there came a more prosperous and, for that reason, a more dangerous class--speculators, lumber sharps, land agents, and the like, each one with a scheme for the improvement of some part of Big Shanty. Most, if not all of them, Holcomb turned down with a curt "No--don't want it." Now and then someone more shrewd than the others would write direct to Thayer, and on the strength of a formal business answer--"You might inquire of my superintendent, Mr. William Holcomb," etc., etc., would use the document to pave the way for an introduction.

One evening in June a rickety buck-board rattled up to Morrison's and inquired the way to Big Shanty. The passenger was short and broad-shouldered; wore a derby hat shading a pair of crafty eyes as black as his thick, scrubby beard. In his hand he carried a small black valise.

The stranger stepped into the bar, emptied his glass, waited until Morrison had cleared his throat and uttered the customary remark of "I goll--we cal'late to keep the best--" and then asked:

"How far did you say this place of Thayer's was?" The voice was harsh and peremptory--with a nasal twang in it and a faint trace of Jewish accent, despite the fact that he spoke the dialect of the country from habit.

"'Bout two miles, we cal'late it by the new road," returned the proprietor as he re-corked the bottle. "You'll see the new road 'bout a hundred rod 'bove here to the left; you can't miss it."

"I've got a letter from Thayer himself," explained the stranger, as he squinted over his hooked nose and searched cautiously the contents of an inside pocket. "It's for a man named Holcomb--he's Thayer's superintendent, ain't he?"

"Yes," said Morrison, "and a durn good one, too. I'll warrant Sam Thayer got the feller he was lookin' for when he got Billy."

"Ain't the job gettin' too big for him?" ventured the man with an attempt at a grin under the thick beard that grew to the corners of his crafty eyes.

"He kin handle any job he's a mind to," said Morrison with rough emphasis.

"Um!" grunted the man. "What's your name?" he asked.

"Bill Morrison--and yours?"

"Bergstein."

Morrison leaned forward over the bar and his brow tightened:

"Guess I've hearn of you before--horse-trader, bean't ye?"

"Yes; if you ever want a good horse"--and his small, black eyes glittered--"let me know."

"Got 'bout all I kin afford," replied Morrison; "twenty to work on my job now." Again Morrison looked at him; this time from his scrubby black beard to his dust-covered shoes. "Seems to me I heard your name before. There was a man by that name that was mixed up in that Jim Bailey murder. You ain't he, be ye?"

"No--I come from Montreal," replied Bergstein in a more positive tone. "The name's common enough." Here he opened the black valise stuffed with business papers and handed Morrison a card.

Morrison looked at it carefully, tucked it in a fly-specked screen behind the bar, and with a satisfied air said:

"Let's see--you hain't had no supper, hev ye? Supper's most ready--I'll go and tell the old woman you're here."

"No--I ain't stoppin' for supper," replied Bergstein, paying for his glass. "I'm going up to Thayer's place now; this feller Holcomb's expectin' me."

"Suit yourself, friend," returned Morrison, and he pulled down the heavy shutter screening the array of bottles.

Bergstein left with a brusque good-night and walked slowly up the road.

He had not told Morrison all he knew. Trading horses was not the Jew's only business; he was equally adept in buying and selling timber-lands and the hiring of men. When he was successful--and he was generally successful--his gains were never less than fifty per cent; less than that would have spelled failure in his eyes. For in Bergstein's veins ran the avaricious tenacity of the Pole and the insincerity of the Irishman. The former he inherited from his father, a peddler, the latter from his mother, the keeper for many years of a rough dive for sailors along the quay in Montreal. Both had died when he was a child and from an early age he shifted for himself, made no friends and needed little sleep and pursued his business with ferocious energy by night as well as by day. Added to this was a certain secretiveness. He appeared in localities mysteriously and left them as suddenly. It was often his habit to walk to unfrequented stations and take his chances of boarding a train. His movements were carefully planned and guarded--evidently he did not care to have many of them known.

He was not long in reaching the camp, though it was getting dark when he started, the straight road of macadam showing white among the gloom of the trees.

When he arrived hardly a detail of the new camp escaped his shifty glance. Once in the good graces of the millionaire, he said to himself, he would stick to him like a leech.

Holcomb's expression, when he greeted him, showed plainly a feeling of distrust and dislike. He received him courteously because of a letter from Thayer which reached camp the day before, telling him to take care of a man of his name from Montreal, if he came--he having heard that he had some excellent horses for sale--and as Billy had needed a pair this was his opportunity. As Holcomb looked at him he felt that if Thayer had ever seen the man he would not have sent him to Big Shanty at this or any other time. There was a glitter in those small,

black eyes that the young man did not like. Neither was the Clown's nor the trapper's opinion of him any more flattering. As for the old dog, he showed his dislike by discreetly keeping away from him.

Though Bergstein left Big Shanty at a quarter before eight in the morning with the order for the horses in his pocket, it was noon by the sawmill whistle before he reached Morrison's. There he engaged a single rig to take him out to the railroad.

What he had done, or where he had been in the meantime, no one knew.

CHAPTER NINE

Early in August Big Shanty was ready for its owner; ready, too, when it had been promised. Thayer was expected within a few days. He had written Holcomb that he would come alone; Mrs. Thayer and Margaret were to arrive a week later, accompanied by Blakeman and Annette; the rest of the servants being already in camp under charge of the housekeeper.

Now that only a few days intervened before Thayer's arrival, Holcomb, for the first time in his active life, experienced a feeling of genuine nervous anxiety. Would the man who had entrusted all to him be satisfied? he wondered. The thought made him strangely silent. The trapper was the first to mention it as he and the Clown sat smoking with Billy in the dusk outside the latter's cabin the evening before Thayer's arrival. Holcomb, squatting on the ground, had been whittling a twig to a fine point--now he leaned forward and drove it out of sight in the cool earth with his heel. Then, closing his jack-knife, he gazed across the tidy clearing at the big camp, and the line of low-roofed cabins showing dimly in the twilight against the trees. But two lights were visible--one in the servant's quarters opposite and one through the window of the men's shanty at the lower end of the clearing.

"What ails ye, son?" asked the trapper, breaking the silence.

"Ain't feelin' bad, be ye, Billy?" inquired the Clown with kindly apprehension.

Holcomb shook his head. Presently he said, still gazing straight before him:

"I've been wondering, boys, if Mr. Thayer is going to be satisfied."

"Thar--I knowed it!" exclaimed the trapper. "Ye needn't worry a mite, Billy."

"If he hain't satisfied I'll eat my shirt!" declared the Clown, clenching his brawny fist with a gesture of conviction, as he jumped up simultaneously on his long legs. "Thar ain't a man livin' that could hev done a better job 'n you done for him," he declared. "Jest look 'round ye! Look what it was when we fust come. Reg'lar ruin, warn't it?"

"You've come pretty close to it, Freme," confessed Holcomb.

"If it warn't for the old brook roarin' down thar," remarked the trapper, "a feller wouldn't know whar he was. Wall, sir, if it don't beat all I ever see in the way of a camp! The old dog was a-tellin' me only yisterday that he never see the beat nowhar, and he's travelled some, I kin tell ye."

"Jest so--jest so," affirmed the Clown, his blue eyes beaming with enthusiasm as he resumed: "Wall, sir, you'd oughter seen Ed Munsey when he fust seen it. 'Gol,' says Ed; and his eyes stuck out like marbles. 'Godfrey Mighty!' says Ed; 'wall, sir,' says he, 'if it ain't the slickest fixed up place I ever seen.' Goll! Ed was tickled. 'Must 'er cost more 'n forty cents,' says he. 'No,' says I, 'thar warn't no expense 'bout it; we just throwed some odds and ends together,'" chuckled the Clown, as he sat down hard.

Holcomb was himself again. The Clown's cheeriness was always contagious to him.

"I've done my best," he said, smiling. "But then, we've spent a lot of money, boys," he added thoughtfully.

Night settled and it was not long before the three rose, filed into the cabin and kindled a fire, a delicate attention which the old dog was grateful for. He had been prowling around by himself in the clearing and now that he scented smoke came stalking into the cabin, his nails clicking across the floor, and with a mournful yawn stretched himself comfortably before the blaze.

* * * * *

By the next twilight Sam Thayer had seen with his own eyes every detail of his forest domain. Only when this tour of inspection with Holcomb was over did he lead Billy back into the living hall of his new house. His manner, after the hearty greeting given him on his arrival, had lapsed into one of mute enthusiasm. His delight had more than convinced Billy of his approval. Now that they were alone in the living hall, he turned suddenly, faced his superintendent and held out both his hands to him.

"Thank you," was all he could manage to say, wringing Billy's hands heartily.

"Come, my boy, draw up a chair. That fire feels good--think of it--even in August. Oh, if you only knew how glad I am to get here!" He rubbed the palms of his hands together with satisfaction. "What a place it is, what a place, Billy! And to find everything far better than I ever dreamed it would be."

"I'm glad you're satisfied," was Holcomb's simple reply.

The housemaid appeared with a silver tray.

"Ah, there's our toddy!" exclaimed Thayer. "Thank you, Mary; you may put it between us. Bring us that little low table in the corner." As the girl busied herself in arranging the table Thayer paused to look about him.

The square room, with its low, heavily beamed ceiling and walls of birch, stained to a rich sienna, glistening in fresh spar varnish; the fire licking up the throat of the wide chimney-piece built of rough boulders from the bed of Big Shanty; the floor laid with rare rugs; the easy chairs and shaded lights--all gave to this living room a charm that none in the house of marble possessed. This artistic result was due to the personal supervision and good taste of the same architect who had designed the house of marble. Fortunately Alice Thayer had taken no interest in it.

"Excellent!" exclaimed Thayer, as he poured the hot water into Billy's temperate portion of Scotch. "The bedrooms are a delight. I'm glad to see the gun-room paved in brick--muddy boots cannot do any harm there; it will wash as clean as a stable."

"It has been the expense I have worried over," ventured Holcomb, as the two settled back in their chair. "The vouchers I was obliged to send you last month, I mean--wasn't the plumber's bill putting the screws on a little tight?"

"Nonsense!" returned Thayer, smiling, "you don't seem to realize, Billy, that had it not been for your honesty and good will and the faithful help of our friends. Skinner and Holt, Big Shanty would have cost me twice as much; and if it had"--he paused and gazed into the fire, while the corners of his mouth twitched from side to side as if forming his words, a habit of his when giving a decision--"yes, if it had cost three times the amount, I should be more than satisfied."

The colour crept up under Billy's bronzed cheek.

"It makes me feel good--to hear you say this to me," he said. "It's been a long job, but I drove things along the best I could. When things got stuck in the mud there was nothing to do but jump in and pull them out and get them started and moving, and I want you to know that Freme--since his sweetheart made him sober--and old man Hite did all they could. I could never have done it without them."

"I believe you, Billy," declared Thayer briskly. "You have done what I knew you would. Ah, yes--you're right about those two good fellows, Holt and Skinner. Their greeting to me this afternoon touched me deeply. Why, even the old dog remembered me."

"Remembered you? Of course he did. Hite says the old dog has never got over your killing that buck."

"And the old dog, I suppose, still talks to him?" laughed Thayer.

"I've never known Hite to lie," replied Holcomb with a grin.

"And now tell me about poor Dinsmore. I have watched the papers but I have seen nothing of his arrest and so I suppose he is safe in Canada, or is he still about here?"

"I think he is still in hiding, sir," replied Holcomb in an evasive tone. The least said about Dinsmore the better--the better for Dinsmore. His safety was in being entirely forgotten.

"And you haven't seen him?"

"No, not since we began work."

For some seconds Thayer drummed with his fingers on the arm of his chair; then he said in a strangely serious tone--as if to himself:

"Dinsmore had to kill him, perhaps. That's the only way out sometimes, and that's what would happen every time if I had my way."

Holcomb made no reply. No good could come to the hide-out by stirring up his case. All his friends said he was dead; that is, to strangers--some of whom might be sheriffs.

The talk now entered another channel--one more to Holcomb's liking. "By the way, before I forget it"--here Thayer drew from his pocket a package of letters--"how about this Mr. Steinberg, the dealer who sold us the horses?" he inquired.

"Who, Bergstein?"

"Yes, this Mr. Bergstein, as you call him. I gather from your last letter--I thought I had it with me," he said, searching hurriedly among the packet of correspondence, "but I have evidently left it--I gather," he resumed, "from your last letter that he did not make a very favourable impression. I can't understand it," he went on seriously, "for he was recommended by one of the vice-presidents of one of our Canadian companies, a man whom I have had dealings with by letter for years. I should hesitate to believe he would recommend anyone to us whom he did not thoroughly know about--who, shall we say, was sharp in his dealings."

Holcomb for a moment did not reply. Then suddenly he looked straight into the eyes of his employer.

"I know a man may sometimes be wrong in sizing up another," he began, "but Bergstein seems to me to have considerable of the peddler in him."

"And yet you say, Billy, the horses he sent were sound, and the price fair."

"The price he asked was not," replied Holcomb. "I gave him what I knew they were worth--he wasn't long in taking it. That's where the peddler part of it struck me."

Thayer made no attempt to reply; he was listening as calmly as a lawyer to a defence.

"There are a lot of the boys here who think Bergstein is all right," Holcomb continued, "but neither Freme, Hite, nor myself liked his looks from the first. He's too mysterious in his movements--whanging off at night to catch a train and turning up again--sometimes before daylight."

"Yet you say he is a good worker," interrupted Thayer, settling in his chair.

"There isn't a lazy bone in him," confessed Holcomb. "He's all hustle, and smarter than a steel trap--that's why I put him in charge of the gang in the lower shanty--besides, I saw the boys wanted him."

"I must see Mr. Bergstein in the morning," was Thayer's reply.

"He left day before yesterday," said Holcomb. "He told me an uncle of his had died in Montreal; he'll be back, he said, in three or four days."

"Ah, indeed," said Thayer with a nod. "I trust we are all mistaken in the fellow. You know, my boy," he said turning suddenly about, "we must all learn to be tolerant of others--of their ignorance. I've found in life a true philosophy in this. It's my creed, Billy--'Be tolerant of others, even of those who at times seem intolerable to you.'"

Holcomb was not the man to censure another without the strength of his conviction. He had been frank in giving his opinion of Bergstein, since Thayer had put the question point blank to him. Their talk before the fire had been a genial one, save for this somewhat unpleasant subject, yet despite Thayer's kindly optimism in regard to Bergstein, owing purely to his excellent recommendation, Holcomb felt a distrust of the mysterious stranger who had wormed his way into Big Shanty. He could not help being personally convinced that the vice-president of the Canadian company was either a rascal or a man of poor judgment. It was also possible that the said vice-president had never seen Bergstein at all.

CHAPTER TEN

Two nights later Holcomb again bade Thayer good-night in the square room with its heavy-beamed ceiling. All the accounts had now been gone over--even to the minutest detail, and Billy felt supremely happy and relieved at his employer's enthusiastic approval of all he had done, so much so that even the one discordant note--Bergstein--seemed of vague importance.

He crossed the clearing on his way to his cabin cautiously, feeling his way with his feet to avoid tripping over an unseen root. The night was intensely dark--so dark that as he neared his cabin he was forced to stop and feel for his card of matches. At that instant someone in the pitch darkness ahead of him coughed.

"Is that you, Freme?" called Holcomb, watching the sputtering sulphur blaze into flame.

"No," answered a hard nasal voice to the right, and within a rod of him; "it's me--Bergstein. Got any gin in your place? the nigh hoss on Jimmy's team is took bad with the colic."

"Come inside," said Holcomb.

"Bad luck," muttered Bergstein, as he followed Holcomb into the cabin; "there ain't a better work hoss on the place. Must have caught cold drawin' them heavy loads on the mountain."

Holcomb lighted a candle, extracted a bunch of keys, unlocked a

cupboard, and handed Bergstein a black bottle.

"I thought you were in Canada," he said, eyeing Bergstein closely.

"I jest got back--I didn't wait for the funeral."

"Well, keep that horse covered," Holcomb added; "you'll find some extra heavy blankets back of the feed bin." After his door was closed, Holcomb stood thinking for some moments, his eyes fastened on the candle flame.

"That nigh horse seemed all right this fore-noon," he said to himself. "That's the second horse with colic."

Thayor's first meeting with Bergstein occurred the next morning. It was brief and business-like, but it left a good impression on Thayor's mind. What little he had seen of the man, he told Holcomb, had convinced him of his honesty and ability; that the nigh horse had died was no fault of Bergstein's, since he and the boys at the lower shanty had evidently done everything that could be done. What pleased him most was Bergstein's humane and untiring efforts to save the poor beast, adding that he had decided to order him to leave for Montreal at once with instructions to purchase another horse, together with some other things, amounting to over three thousand dollars in all, which were badly needed. He liked, too, his quick return from Canada--this showed his interest in his work.

An hour later the two, with Bergstein, stood on the veranda before the latter's departure.

"Is there anything else you can think of that we need, Billy?" Thayor asked.

"That's about all I can think of," returned Holcomb, glancing over the long list that Bergstein held in his hand.

"He was a hard-working man," Bergstein casually remarked, referring to the uncle who had so suddenly succumbed. There was nothing to lead up to it, but that was a way with Bergstein. As he spoke he folded the list and tucked it into his black portfolio.

"Married?" asked Thayor.

"Yes, and to as nice a little woman as you ever see, Mr. Thayor. He ain't left her much, not more than will keep her out of the poor-house." Bergstein's voice had grown as soft as an Oriental's. "I buried him at my own expense. It's hard on her--she's got a little girl who was always ailing--sickly from the first." He fumbled at his scrubby black beard, his rat-like eyes focussed on the ground.

"One moment, Mr. Bergstein," said Thayor, suddenly turning on his heel and going into the house. Presently he returned and handed Bergstein an unsealed white envelope. "Will you kindly give this to the mother and the little girl," he said. "You will oblige me by not saying whom it is from."

"Well, now, that's mighty good of you, Mr. Thayor," Bergstein faltered; "she'll--"

"I trust you will have a pleasant journey," returned Thayer and with a nod to Billy the two disappeared through the door of Thayer's den, before the man with the scrubby beard could finish his sentence.

Bergstein tucked the envelope within the black portfolio and went down the steps to the buckboard waiting to take him out to the railroad. The boy Jimmy drove, Bergstein taking the back seat. He waited until they were well into the stretch of wood between the camp and the lower shanty, then he hurriedly extracted the envelope and glanced within. It contained a new one-hundred-dollar bill.

That night Bergstein put up at the best hotel in Troy.

* * * * *

Three days after Bergstein's departure Holcomb sat in his cabin going over his accounts. When it grew dark he lighted his kerosene lamp and drew a chair beside his desk. As he bent over and unlaced his shoes the sash of the square cabin window in front of him was raised cautiously and four bony fingers slipped in and gripped the sill. As he sprang to his feet the gaunt face of a man rose slowly above the window sill and a pair of brilliant, cavernous eyes, framed in a shock of unkempt beard and sandy hair, stared into his own.

It was Bob Dinsmore--the hide-out. The next instant Holcomb was out of his boots and had raised the sash with a whispered welcome. With the quickness of a cornered cat Dinsmore was inside.

"It's took me most a week to git this chance to see ye, Billy," the hide-out began in a faint, husky voice weakened by exposure. He glanced about him nervously, his thin body shivering under the patchwork of skins and threadbare rags that covered him. Holcomb, without a word, crossed to the cupboard.

"Eat, Bob," he said, putting a dish of cold meat and beans and another bottle on the table. For the space of a quarter of an hour the hide-out ate hurriedly in silence, his food and drink guarded between his soaked forearms like an animal fearful lest its prey be stolen. Holcomb watched him the while with now and then a friendly word. When he had finished eating, the cavernous eyes looked up gratefully.

"I dasn't risk it until to-night, Billy," he resumed. "When I seen that skunk Bergstein leave I thought I'd let ye know." He leaned forward, one hand fumbling under the rags. "That's what I found," he said in a whisper, as he drew out a piece of twisted paper. "I had hard work to get it," he added, carefully untwisting the fragment and disclosing a teaspoonful of whitish powder. "It may be pizon and it mayn't--I ain't tried it on nothin' yet, but he was so all-fired perticler in hidin' it I thought I'd bring it along."

"Where did you find it?"

"Under that hell-hound's mattress. He's got more of it in a blue box. Thar warn't nobody seen me. Damn him!"--he muttered--"it was him that told the sheriff last month down to Leetle Moose that he seen me cross his trail. I'd crep' down to see my leetle gal, and he stepped 'most on top of us. We weren't more 'n forty rod this side o' whar she lived, and the skunk went in and told how he'd seen somebody skulkin' off, and, of course, they knowed then. They made it hot 'nough for

me. I been layin' for him ever since; I was watchin' him through the winder when I see him hunt for this powder. Folks don't keep stuff like that whar he kep' it 'less it's sumpin perticler. Somebody'll find him in the woods some time with a hole in him."

Holcomb laid the powder on the table. What he suspected he dared not formulate into words, let alone tell the hide-out.

"I ain't never forgot ye, Billy, for what ye've done for me," continued the hide-out with a choke in his feeble voice. Then, starting to his feet, the old fear returning, he whispered hoarsely:

"'Tain't safe here for me; I dasn't stay longer."

"Bob," said Holcomb, "you're safe here until daylight; there's my bed."

"No! No! I dassent, Billy."

"But you're wet to the skin," insisted Holcomb.

"So be everything when it rains. I'm wet most of the time. Now I'm a-goin', and a-goin' quick. That's what I come to give ye," and he nodded to the crumpled bit of paper and its contents lying under the lamp's glow.

"Is there anything I can do for you, Bob, down below? I saw Katie last time I drove in."

A hungry eager look stole into the man's face; tears started in his eyes and lost themselves in his matted, unkempt beard.

"Ye see Katie, Billy?" he moaned. "God--how I'd like to! Growing, ain't she? Most 'leven now. Some weeks back since I dared go down. Last time I see her she cried and went on so holdin' on to me I come near givin' myself up I felt so bad; then I knowed that wouldn't git nowhars."

"No, Bob, better keep moving. I'm going to speak to Mr. Thayer when the time comes--but it isn't yet. Hold on--here's matches and what's left in the cupboard." Taking two of his own shirts and a pair of his woollen trousers, he wrapped up the food and a little cheer; then blowing out the lamp he again raised the sash cautiously, and with a hurried handshake bade him good-night.

"If ye want me again Hite Holt kin find me--he knows whar I be," he whispered softly. Then he slipped out into the darkness and was gone.

Holcomb regained his chair, folded the paper containing every grain of the powder into an envelope and slipped it into his desk.

One thing he was resolved upon--not to tell Mr. Thayer of his suspicions until there was no question of his proof.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

It is a long drive in from the railroad to Morrison's. Hite called it eighteen good miles; the Clown put it at nineteen; what the old dog estimated it at none knew. He had always trotted the distance cheerfully.

From Thayer's private flag station, the main road into Big Shanty snakes along over a flat, sparsely settled valley before it enters the deep woods. Once in the heavy timber it crossed chattering brooks skirting the ragged edges of wild ravines. On it goes through the forest mile after mile, up hill and down, until it emerges abruptly into the open country at the head of the "Deadwater," passes Morrison's, is met half a mile farther on by the new road leading down from Big Shanty camp, and continues straight ahead through a rough notch out to a valley twelve miles beyond.

It was over this road that Alice Thayer went to her exile.

Thayer and Holcomb, this rare August afternoon, were at the flag station to meet the "Wanderer"--the banker's private car, with a spick-and-span three-seated buckboard and a fast team of bays. Aboard the car were Alice and Margaret, Blakeman and Annette.

Alice Thayer's first meeting with Holcomb since the time when he saved her husband's life, consisted of a slight nod of recognition and an annoyed "How do you do?" She wore a smart travelling gown of Scotch homespun and a becoming toque of gray straw enveloped in a filmy dragon-green veil. Holcomb thought it strange that Thayer kissed his daughter and simply greeted his wife with the question, "I do hope you were comfortable, dear, coming up?"

"The heat was something frightful," she replied, lifting the dragon-green veil wearily and binding it straight across her forehead. "My head is splitting."

Holcomb glanced at her exquisite features. The brilliancy of her dark eyes was enhanced by the pallor of her ivory skin. Alice Thayer loathed travelling.

Margaret had greeted him far more graciously; she had extended her firm little gloved hand to him, with genuine delight in her brown eyes, and had told him how very glad indeed she was to see him--which was the truth. During the drive in her mother scarcely opened her lips. She sat in the middle seat beside her daughter, haughtily gracious and inwardly bored. Margaret's enthusiasm irritated her. The woman going to her exile was in no mood to enthuse over nature. Holcomb drove, with Thayer on the front seat beside him; on the back seat sat Blakeman and Annette, in respectful silence. As they entered the deep woods at a smart trot, Margaret half closed her eyes in sheer ecstasy and drew in a long, delicious breath of forest air.

"My--but that's good, daddy!" she exclaimed. Everything was of intense interest to her. The sudden glimpse of some great mountain towering above the trees; the velvety green, billowy moss; the merry little brooks they crossed; the whirring flight of a startled partridge and now the sinking sun flooding the silent woods with gold. When she was not in ecstasies over these, her brown eyes glanced at the clean-cut, handsome profile of the young woodsman who was so skilfully driving the bay team.

He was no longer the awkward and embarrassed young fellow she remembered that summer at Long Lake. He had, she realized much to her agreeable surprise, the ease and manner of a well-bred man about him now. His honest, cheery frankness appealed to her; moreover, she thought him exceedingly handsome.

"That's where the line crosses," said Holcomb, pointing quickly to a blazed hemlock.

"Oh, look, mother--quick!" cried Margaret.

"We're in Big Shanty tract now, dear," explained Thayer. "The line we have just passed strikes due east from here and runs--how far, Billy?"

"Oh--clear to Alder Brook--about fifteen miles, before it corners south."

Alice's lips grew tense; she was beginning to realize the vastness of her husband's purchase. She began to wonder, too, how much it had cost him--this folly of Sam's.

"And is it all as beautiful as this?" asked Margaret of the young man whose strong brown hands held the reins.

"Yes, Miss Thayer, and some of it is a good deal better looking."

"You shall see, dearie," added Thayer; "I've a surprise in store for you both--yes, a hundred surprises. We will cross the East Branch of Big Shanty Brook in a moment--that is surprise number one. How is the headache, Alice--better?"

"A little," she returned indifferently.

"Listen!" said Thayer; "hear it? That's the East Branch roaring."

"Oh--I'm just crazy to see it!" cried Margaret. "It was on the West Branch you killed the deer, wasn't it, daddy?"

Thayer nodded and smiled.

"Now look, puss!" he commanded, as they reached the rough bridge spanning the East Branch.

Margaret peered down into the heavy black water a hundred feet below them.

"Daddy, it's gorgeous--simply gorgeous," exclaimed Margaret. "Look, mother, at the water swirling through that green pool. Oh, _do_ look, mother." Alice condescended to look.

"Isn't it superb, Alice?" ventured Thayer.

"Yes--Sam--but lonely."

In the twilight the great brook boiled below them.

"It ain't so lonely," remarked Holcomb pleasantly, turning to Mrs. Thayer, "when the sun is shining." He had dropped into his native

dialect, which now and then cropped out in his speech.

"I suppose it _ain't_," said Alice in a whisper to Margaret. The girl touched her mother's arm pleadingly.

"Please don't," she said; "he might hear you. It really isn't kind in you, mother. You know they speak so differently in the country."

Holcomb had heard it, but not a muscle twitched in resentment. He tightened the reins, and for a mile drove in silence.

"And this is the man your father lunched with at The Players," continued Alice under her breath.

Margaret did not reply.

Presently they came out into the valley at the head of the Deadwater, still as ink, reflecting the barkless trees it had killed so clearly that it was difficult to see the point of immersion. Then the plain gabled roof of Morrison's came into view above a flat of young poplars, the silver leaves shivering in the breeze.

Morrison, who had been sweeping off his narrow porch, in his shirt-sleeves, came out into the road at the rapid approach of the buckboard.

"Hello thar!" he shouted, and Holcomb stopped at an insistent gesture from the proprietor.

"Hain't seen nothin' of a barril of kerosene fer me down thar, hev ye?" he asked. "Gosh darn it!--it oughter been here more'n a week ago."

"Nothing there for you. Jimmy's coming along with the trunks," replied Holcomb. "He won't start before the freight gets in."

"Evenin', Mr. Thayor," said Morrison. "Wall, ye've got 'em all here now, haven't ye?" he remarked, running his shrewd eyes over the filled seats.

"Mrs. Thayor and my daughter, Mr. Morrison," said Thayor.

"Pleased to meet you, marm." Morrison raised his hat and stretched out a coarse red hand. Alice extended three fingers of her own despite her repulsion. There was really no other way out of it. "And here's the little gal, I 'spose," continued the proprietor. Margaret laughed as she shook hands. "Won't ye stop and take something, friend?" he asked Blakeman. Blakeman raised his eyebrows in protest.

"_Mon Dieu!_" whispered Annette.

"Relations of yourn, Mrs. Thayor?" asked Morrison, noticing Annette's embarrassment.

Alice straightened. "My maid!" she said stiffly.

"Wall, I'm sorry none of ye ain't dry," said Morrison.

"No, thank you," replied Thayor; "we must be getting up to camp."

Again the bays fell into a brisk trot.

Alice was furious.

"Who is that dreadful person, Sam?" she asked.

"You must not mind him, Alice. He meant well enough," explained her husband. "Morrison's rough, I'll grant you, but he's a good fellow at heart."

"It was only his way," added Holcomb. "He didn't mean to be impolite, Mrs. Thayer."

"Of course he didn't, mother," added Margaret with a glance at Holcomb.

The bays turned suddenly to the left into the new road. Alice emitted a sigh of relief. There was a sense of luxury--of exclusiveness--in passing over its smooth surface. Morrison and his common hotel, with its bleary-eyed windows, were now well out of sight. Presently the camp lay ahead of them--an orderly settlement of trim buildings. Margaret was too excited to do more than gaze ahead of her with eager interest.

"Here we are!" exclaimed Thayer. "There, Alice, you can thank Mr. Holcomb for all you see; I really had nothing to do with it."

His wife did not reply. Only Margaret's eyes met his own--a pair of brown eyes that seemed to be half sunshine and half tears.

As they drew up to the wide veranda of the camp, the trapper and the Clown came slowly across the compound to meet them; at the heels of the trapper stalked the old dog, watching the new arrivals with a certain dignified interest.

There was nothing strange in the fact that when Alice Thayer saw Big Shanty Camp she made no comment. It was a bitter disappointment to Thayer, yet he knew in his heart that he could not have expected her to do otherwise. Having reached her exile she had been careful to conceal any outward expression of her approval or dislike. Had the camp at that moment been filled with a jolly house-party, including Dr. Sperry, she could have been content to romp in a fashionable way within it for a week--even a fortnight. It was the thought that it was her home--a home which she had tried to evade and had been brought to bodily in the end--that rankled in her heart. She retired early, but could not sleep. She lay in bed for an hour or more, turning over in her mind the situation. The realization of her defeat stirred within her the old dominant spirit. She realized that her imprisonment had begun. After half an hour more of restless thinking she crept out of bed, tucked her feet into a pair of slippers, drew a silk wrapper about her and crossed to the open window. Leaning with her elbows upon its sill she stood for a long time gazing out over the wilderness.

The night was mild and hushed. It was almost certain that with dawn would come a downpour of rain; the tree-toads already heralded the good news. The dry hemlocks whispered it. Bathed in a gauze of moonlight the forest rolled away--silent--mighty in its expanse--promising nothing. Big Shanty Brook gleamed defiantly past in a riot of rapids and whirlpools. Flashing in the crisp sunlight,

these rapids and whirlpools shone in inviting splendour; at night they became terrible.

It was this torrent that swept below the woman leaning on the window sill; it mocked her, roaring with joy, chuckling to itself at the prisoner, every leaping crest in the chaos of foam rearing again for a last glimpse of the exile, and, having seen, dashed on to give place to those who followed. Little waves fawned by, partisans in the same mockery.

Suddenly she buried her face in her ringless hands:

"My God--I can't stand this!" she moaned. "I can't and I won't!" she muttered helplessly. Then she broke into hysterical sobbing, pressing her nails into the sensitive flesh of her temples; her lips trembling in a nervous chill. Her body grew cold, chilling even her bare feet thrust deep in her slippers. The torrent of Big Shanty became to her a jeering crowd, unlimitless--that poured from nowhere and dashed on into the unknown. She shut her eyes tight. In the darkness now she saw only Sperry; she saw him plainly--close to her, as one sees a face in a dream. She felt the idle, comforting tone of his voice--the warm pressure of his hand--and with her mental vision, looked into his eyes.

"Be patient, dear friend," he said to her quite clearly. Could she have looked on Sperry at that moment she would have found him playing billiards at his club, his whole mind occupied in making a difficult carom shot. When he made it he ordered a fresh brandy and soda.

The roar of Big Shanty continued. An owl screamed hoarsely from somewhere in the timber below. Alice shuddered, her cheeks burning against the palms of her cold hands, and crept back to bed.

Margaret, too, had been gazing out of her window. Big Shanty to her meant a new life--she, too, had been crying, but from sheer happiness.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Some mornings after Alice's arrival--she had spent most of the hours in her room in the interim--she came gaily into the room where her husband and Margaret were at breakfast, her face all smiles, her figure clothed in a jaunty walking dress which fitted her to perfection. Thayer looked up from his coffee and bacon; he thought he had never seen her look so pretty.

"Why, Alice!" he exclaimed, all his love for her in his eyes.

"Yes--I don't wonder you are astonished," she said, regarding them both mischievously. "The day is too glorious to breakfast in bed; besides, I've slept like a top. Sam, the camp is exceedingly pretty," she went on, as Blakeman ceremoniously pushed a chair beneath her and hurriedly laid the unexpected cover.

"And now may I ask where you two gad-about are going?" she inquired, noticing Margaret's short skirt and Sam in a pair of stout tramping

boots.

"To a pond, mother--the nearest, I believe. Think of it--we have four of them," announced Margaret proudly.

"Then I'm going too," declared her mother.

"Good!" cried Thayer. "Holcomb says he can easily take us there and back in time for luncheon."

Alice turned to her husband, and patting the back of his hand, said:

"Sam, you'll forgive me for my lack of enthusiasm since I came, won't you? I was really ill; the heat was something frightful coming up." The tone of her voice was captivating.

Thayer covered her hand with his own.

"Of course I will--you were tired out, dear--that was all. Hurry up and drink your coffee," he continued, looking at the clock over the chimney-piece in the breakfast room; "Holcomb is waiting for us. But put on your heaviest boots, Alice, before you start; the trail is apt to be damp in places after the misty night. We are lucky not to have waked up in a drizzling rain."

Margaret looked across the table at her mother:

"Oh, what a night it was!" she burst out. "Could there be anything more beautiful than the wilderness in the moonlight? It really seemed a sin to go to bed. I hope you saw it too--I was coming to wake you, it was so lovely."

"And so I gather," returned Alice with a smile, "that you went to bed very late."

"Yes, I did," confessed Margaret; "and so I have every night since we came--never have I seen anything so grand as the tumbling water. Oh, I just love it!" and she laid her little hand in her father's as a silent tribute to his generosity in giving it to her.

The breakfast hurriedly finished, Thayer went out to the veranda and lighted a long, slim cigar. He felt like a man who had just received good news. For some moments he paced jauntily up and down, waiting for Holcomb to appear. Alice's sudden change of manner had made him as happy as a boy. It was so extraordinary and so unexpected that he could hardly believe it was true. Her whole attitude during the drive in, and since, had been a bitter disappointment to him; now it seemed as if he had awakened from a bad dream. The caressing touch of her hand had put new life in him. Was she at last really repentant? he wondered; was there after all, a throb of love in her heart for him?

Suddenly he caught sight of Holcomb coming across the compound. He wore his gray slouch hat, a short jacket and his high boots. Very few of the young fellows about him had his build and breadth, and none his easy grace.

"Good morning, Billy!" he called.

"Good morning, Mr. Thayer," returned Holcomb cheerily.

"And what a day, Billy!" answered Thayer, rubbing his hands in boyish glee.

"Just about as nice as they make them. You look happy, Mr. Thayer, and you look hearty--that's best of all."

"I am, Billy--who wouldn't be well and happy a morning like this? And I've got a piece of news for you, too--good news; Mrs. Thayer is coming along with us. How will the new trail be--a little rough for her, do you think?"

"Not a bit of it! Clear going all the way--besides it isn't more than two miles there and back. Freme has made a clean job of it. There's a short swamp just before we get to the pond, but I guess we can manage to get the ladies across without their getting wet."

"Oh, that air--just smell it, Billy!" reiterated the owner of Big Shanty enthusiastically. Think of the poor people in the city who have none of it. I must send for Randall as soon as we get settled, and some of those fellows we met at The Players that day, and let them have a whiff of it--do them a lot of good. Randall loves it. Poor boy--he needs a change now worse than I did. And have you seen Mrs. Thayer this morning?"

"No."

"Well--you never saw her look better; she tells me she slept splendidly. Why, think of it, my boy, she actually came down to breakfast--a thing I have not known her to do in years."

"I'm mighty glad to hear Mrs. Thayer is better," returned Billy thoughtfully--he wished it might include her manners. "She did not seem well yesterday or the day before."

"No--one of her old headaches. It must have been pretty hot, even in the 'Wanderer.' Here they are now!"

Alice and Margaret appeared on the veranda.

"Good morning, Mr. Holcomb," said Alice, nodding pleasantly. "You see," she added with her most captivating smile, "you must show me this wonderful little pond my daughter has told me about, too. May I come?"

Holcomb lifted his slouch hat from his head.

"Why, certainly, Mrs. Thayer. We can make it there and back by noon," and his eyes wandered over the trim and graceful figure accentuated so charmingly by her short skirt.

Margaret had also followed the lines of the costume. "You must always wear a short skirt, mother--it is most becoming."

"And so comfortable, my dear," added Alice nonchalantly as she placed both hands about her flexible waist and half turned. It was her stronghold, this figure--she would have been adorable in sackcloth and ashes, she knew, but she preferred a tailor-made.

Soon the little party, lead by Holcomb, were seen picking their way along the trail; Margaret keeping close to the young woodsman and plying him with innumerable questions. She thought she had never seen him look so handsome, debonair and manly. Then, too, his wide knowledge of the woods was a delight to her. Little by little he explained, as he followed the trail, those secrets of woodcraft not found in books.

At length the trail ended in an opening at the edge of a small pond--nameless, and round as a dollar, its circumference framed in an unbroken line of timber. A few rods from this opening, where the little party was now seated, a big trout plunged half out of the water.

"He's after that miller," explained Holcomb. The others strained their eyes, but they could see nothing but the widening rings where the trout had disappeared. Again he rose out of a basin of moulten turquoise like a flash of quicksilver. "The old fellow will get him yet," remarked Billy; "the miller's wing is broken--he's lying flat on the water."

"Your eyes are better than mine, Holcomb," declared Thayer.

"Take an old trout like that," explained Holcomb, "and he'll always strike with his tail first; he broke that miller's wing the second time he rose."

Alice and Margaret were straining their eyes to catch, if possible, a glimpse of the unfortunate moth.

"I can't see him," confessed Margaret; "can you, mother?"

"My dear child, my eyes are not fitted with a microscope," Alice laughed.

"There!" cried Holcomb, as the trout splashed still farther out on the quiet pond. "He's got him!"

"And we'll get him some day," exclaimed Thayer, the fever of fishing tingling within him.

"There are some big trout in here, Mr. Thayer," continued Holcomb. "I've known this pond for several years and it has been rarely, if ever, fished."

"Then, Billy, we'll have to go at them at twilight," declared Thayer. "You had better tell Freme to bring in one of the canvas canoes."

The four retraced their way over the trail. As they reached a muddy place half way home Holcomb noticed the imprint of Margaret's trim little feet. It was evident to Alice, who had been watching him, that the tracks puzzled the young woodsman. There were four of these dainty tracks instead of two; soon the mystery was cleared as Alice Thayer passed ahead of him and Holcomb saw that Margaret's and her mother's footprint were identical in size.

"You seem puzzled," Alice remarked, as Holcomb steadied her along a sunken log.

"I was looking where you had stepped, Mrs. Thayer," he confessed.

Alice laughed, a low, delicious laugh.

"You see," she explained frankly, putting forth her trim boot, "my daughter and I wear the same size."

Again Margaret and Holcomb took the lead. Thayer and Alice followed them leisurely, Thayer talking of his purchase of which he had yet only seen a small portion, Alice listening eagerly. During a pause she said carelessly:

"It must be frightfully hot in town, Sam. New York is dirty and deserted; I pity those who cannot get away." He stopped and grew enthusiastic again over the rare purity of the air.

"We ought to be thankful for _that_," he said, as he filled his lungs with a deep breath. "Think of how many poor devils and delicate women struggling for a living, and little children it would save."

"And the other people, too," she ventured boldly. "Poor Dr. Sperry told me he would be lucky if he got out of New York at all this summer. There are some important cases of his, I believe, which may need him at any moment."

The mention of the doctor's name would have jarred on Sam at any other time, but this morning he was too happy to care, and Alice, quick to notice it, pressed on:

"I do wish he could come up here for a rest. I saw him at the Trevises Thursday; he seemed utterly used up. Do you think he would come if we asked him, Sam? Besides," she added cleverly, "I should like him to see Margaret."

Thayer stopped abruptly and looked at his wife with a curious expression.

"So should I," he replied with some severity. "I should like him to see that child now, if for nothing more than to have the satisfaction of seeing how much even these few hours in the woods have accomplished, and what a mistake he made when he said the child's lungs needed looking after. Sperry is a surgeon, not a physician--and he only makes himself ridiculous when he tries to be."

"I am quite of your opinion, Sam," Alice declared, not daring to contradict her husband--a feeling of infinite rest creeping through her veins as she spoke.

"He will then see for himself, I believe, that he was mistaken," continued Thayer in the same positive tone. "Margaret delicate! Nonsense, my dear! By George--his diagnosis was not only brutal, it was ridiculous. Why, Leveridge--"

"Be tolerant, Sam," returned Alice. "You know you always tell others to be tolerant. Dr. Sperry evidently said what he believed to be the truth. If he has been wrong I am sure he will be the first one to acknowledge it, as any gentleman who has been mistaken would."

"Then he shall have the chance," replied Thayer. "You may invite him

at once, Alice, if you wish, but for one week only. Too much of Sperry gets on my nerves."

* * * * *

When Alice reached her bedroom she locked the door and threw herself on the bed in an ecstasy of tears. After some moments she arose with an exultant look in her eyes, went over to her desk, unlocked a jewel case and extracted from between the lining of a hidden compartment a small photograph of Sperry at thirty, taken at Heidelberg.

Below the torrent of Big Shanty laughed in the sunlight.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

For Thayer to welcome Sperry with a warm grasp of the hand and an outburst of--"Oh! I'm glad you are here; it seems like a special Providence," was so strange and unusual a performance that it is no wonder Alice, moving toward the buckboard to add her own greeting to her husband's, was lost in astonishment even when the cause of the outburst became clear to her.

Her husband's mental attitude toward the doctor, if the truth be told, was one of the things that had never ceased to trouble her. Polite as he was to everybody, he had been so particularly polite to Sperry that it always aroused her suspicions. She knew he had sent for him purely to oblige her and to help her over the chasm which divided Big Shanty from Newport, but what other reasons her husband had for inviting him to share his hospitality at the camp, she was not so familiar with. It therefore came as a distinct surprise when she heard him repeat with increased warmth in his manner:

"Yes, a special Providence, my dear Dr. Sperry"--nor did the real cause of the doctor's welcome set her mind at rest.

"This way, doctor," continued Thayer, dragging Sperry with him. "Blakeman will bring your bag. One of our men is badly hurt; I was on my way to him when I heard you driving up. He's only a few rods away--hurry!"

The little man lay on his back on the floor of the lower shanty where the men had carried him. The chain cinching down a heavy sapling binding a load of shingles had snapped, and the wiry little Frenchman--Gaston Le Boeuf--who was standing on top of the load, had been shot into the air and landed in a ditch with his right forearm splintered in two. The pain was intense, both bones of the forearm--the ulnar and radius--being shattered transversely, the ulnar poking through the flesh in an ugly blue wound.

When Thayer and the doctor reached him, the Clown was holding the broken arm taut--he had to keep up a steady pull, for with the slightest release the knotty sinews and muscles would cause the broken forearm to fly back at right angles. Although this had happened a dozen times while they were bringing him in, the wiry little man did not utter a groan. He lay there white, in a cold sweat, the corners of

his black eyes crinkling over his bad luck. He had known what pain was before. Once on Bog River his skinning knife had slipped while he was dressing out a deer, and the keen blade had gone through his knotty calf, severing the nerve; yet he had walked nearly a dozen miles back to Morrison's.

As Sperry entered, the circle of lumber jacks about the wounded man widened, then closed again about him, watching the doctor who soon had the broken arm in an improvised splint.

The man from the city rarely gets very close to a backwoods people unless he possesses sincerity, democracy, and an inborn love of the woods--three virtues without which a man may remain always a stranger in the wilderness.

The New York doctor possessed none of these qualities; moreover, he was pitifully unadaptable outside of the artificial world in which he posed. So much so that at first sight of the trapper and the Clown--two men whom Thayer had pointed out to him as being his most reliable assistants next to Holcomb--his only thought had been how Sam Thayer could have such eccentric boors on the place. He noticed, too, with irritation and astonishment, that none of the men raised their hats until Alice and Margaret arrived on the scene; then not a man among them remained covered.

What he did not notice, however, was the way the men around him were, to use the Clown's expression, "sizin' him up," as they did all city men and this before he had been ten minutes among them, with the result that the trapper had concluded that he looked like a man who was afraid of spoiling his clothes; that Holcomb and the Clown thought him sadly lacking in Sam Thayer's frank simplicity; while the others stood about waiting for some word or gesture on which to hang their opinions.

But all this was changed now. With his ready skill Sperry had become, by the turn of his hand, so to speak, the Medicine Man of the tribe. They were even ready to let down their social barriers and extend to him all their friendship--a friendship he could have relied on for the rest of his days.

"Dunno as I ever see a neater job," remarked a big fellow--a former doubter--peering over the shoulders of the crowd, intent on the doctor's handling of the wounded arm.

"Yes--yes--" drawled the Clown. "Goll! seems 'ough he knowed jest whar to take hold."

"There," said Sperry, as he gave a final adjustment to the improvised bandage. "You had better get him to bed."

"By gar, Doc'," grunted the little man between his teeth, "what you goin' to do now, hein! I feel lot bettaire I tink eff I tak a drink." He had not even asked for a drop of water before, nor had he spoken a word.

"He may have it," said Sperry, in the voice he used at consultations.

The Clown poured a tin cup full of whiskey and the little man drained it to the last drop.

"He'll suffer," said Sperry, turning to the trapper, "when the arm begins to swell under the bandage."

"Broke bad, Doc'?" asked the trapper.

"Yes, a compound fracture; but he'll be all right, my man, in a few weeks." Sperry opened a thin leather case, which he took from his bag, extracted a phial, and shook two whitish gray pills into the trapper's palm. "Give him one in an hour, and another to-night if he can't sleep," he said. He went over to the patient, felt his pulse, then with a nod to the rest, he started toward the door.

"Hold on, Doc'!" came from half a dozen in the group of lumber jacks; "won't ye take a leetle somethin' 'fore ye go?"

Sperry shook his head and smiled. "No, thank you," he said, half amused. "I seldom take anything before luncheon."

"But, say--we'd like to fix it with ye--what's the damage, Doc'?" and half a dozen rough hands went into their trousers pockets. But Sperry only waved his hand in an embarrassed way in protest, and added:

"Of course not--what I have done for one of you men, I would do for anybody. I shall see him in the morning"--and he strode out of the shanty.

By this time the little Frenchman's eyes were closed, and he was breathing heavily--he was dead drunk.

"Goll! warn't that an awful hooker ye give him, Freme?" asked the trapper. He turned to the sufferer, now that the doctor had disappeared, and drew an extra blanket tenderly over him.

"Wall, he ain't no home'path," replied the Clown with a grin; "'sides, I presume likely he needed all he could git down him."

* * * * *

The days that followed were full of joy to Alice. Never had Thayer seen her in so merry a mood. Le Boeuf's broken arm had somehow changed Thayer's attitude toward his guest--so much so that the man's personality no longer jarred on him. He concluded that whatever suspicions he had had--and they were never definite--were groundless. Alice was simply bored in New York and Sperry amused her. That was the secret of his success with his women patients; she was bored here, and again Sperry amused her! Why not, then, give her all the pleasure she wanted? With this result fixed in his mind, his attitude to the "Exquisite" changed. He even sought out ways in which his guest's stay could be made happy.

"You must see the trout pond, doctor," he would say. "Ah! you don't believe we've got one--but we have; you must show it to the doctor, my dear"--at which her eyes would seek her friend's, only to be met with an answering look and the words:

"Delighted, my dear Mrs. Thayer," as he dropped a second lump of sugar in his cup. Whereupon the two would disappear for the day, it being nearly dusk before they returned again to camp; Alice bounding into

the living room radiant from her walk, her arms full of wild flowers.

There came a day, however, when Sperry, with one of his sudden resolves, preferred the daughter's company to the wife's. What had influenced his decision he must have confided to Alice--that is, his version of it--for when he asked Margaret to come for a walk, and had received the girl's answer, "I'm afraid we haven't time for a walk before luncheon," Alice had replied: "Of course you have. The walk will do you good."

What really determined him to seek Margaret's companionship was a desire to fathom her heart. She was her father's confidante, and as such might be dangerous, or useful. To have refused him Margaret knew would only have made matters worse. Much as she disliked him, she was grateful to him for having set the little Frenchman's arm; so she ran into the house and returned in a moment, her fresh young face shaded by a brim of straw covered with moss roses.

"What a pretty hat!" exclaimed Sperry, as they crossed the compound to the trail leading down to the brook. "Oh, you young New York girls know just what is and what is not becoming."

"Do you think so?" returned Margaret vaguely, not knowing just what answer to make. "It was my own idea."

Sperry looked at the young girl, fresh and trim in her youth, and a memory rushed over him of his Paris days. Margaret reminded him of Lucille, he thought to himself, all except the eyes--Lucille's eyes were black.

"Yes, it's adorable," he replied, drinking in the fresh beauty of the young girl. "You are very pretty, my dear--just like your mother." This line of attack had always succeeded in sounding the hearts of the young girls he had known.

The girl blushed--the freedom of his tone troubled, and then half frightened her. So much so that she walked on in silence, wishing she had not come. Then again it was the first time she had been entirely alone with him, and the feeling was not altogether a pleasant one. There was, too, a certain familiarity in his voice and manner which she would have resented in a younger man but which, somehow, she had to submit to.

She stopped abruptly as they came to a steep rock.

"Please go on ahead," she said with an appealing look in her brown eyes, as he put out his hand to help her down. "I can get down very well myself."

"Come, be sensible, little girl," he returned; "we must not have another accident to-day. Pretty ankles are as hard to mend as broken arms."

Again the colour mounted to her cheeks; no one had ever spoken to her in this way before.

"Please don't," she returned, her voice trembling.

"Don't _what_, may I ask?" he laughed.

"Please don't call me 'little girl'; I--I don't like it," she returned, not knowing what else to say and still uneasy--outraged, really, if she had understood her feelings. She sat down quickly, and as he turned to look at the torrent below, slid down the rock in safety. Sperry's brow knit. What surprised him was to find her different from the girls he had known. Then he said in an absent way:

"What splendid rapids!"

"It's the most beautiful old stream in the world," replied Margaret, glad he had found another topic besides herself.

"But be careful," he cautioned her a few rods farther on; "it's slippery here. Come, give me your arm."

Again she evaded him.

"I'm not an invalid," she laughed--she was farther from him now and her courage had accordingly increased.

"Of course you're not--whoever said you were. Invalids do not have cheeks like roses, my little girl, and yours are wonderful to-day."

The girl turned away her head in silence, and the two picked their steps the remainder of the way down to the brook without speaking. There she made a spring and landed on a flat rock about the edge of which swirled the green water of a broad pool. Sperry, undaunted, seated himself beside her.

"Margaret," he began, "why don't you like me? I seem to have offended you. Tell me, what have I said? I wouldn't offend you for the world, and you know it. Why don't you like me?" he repeated.

"Why, doctor!" she exclaimed with a forced little laugh that trembled in her fresh, young throat, "what a funny question!"

"I am quite serious," he added, with a sudden vibrant tone in his voice. Impulsively his hand closed over hers; she felt for a second the warm pressure of his fingers, the next instant she started to her feet.

"Don't!" she cried indignantly, flushing to the roots of her fair hair, her wide-open eyes staring at him. "You mustn't do that; I don't like it!" Her lips were trembling now, her eyes full of tears. Then she added helplessly "We had better be going--we shall be late for luncheon."

He was standing beside her now. "Then tell me you like me," he insisted. "Besides, we have loads of time. Why, it's only twenty minutes to one," he said, looking hurriedly at his watch, careful to conceal the tell-tale hands of its dial from her frightened glance.

Without answering the girl turned and began to retrace her steps.

"But you haven't said you like me," he called out, hurrying to her side.

Margaret did not speak; she only knew that her head was throbbing,

that she heard but indistinctly the words of the man who kept close to her as they went on up the steep trail. At the rock where she had been too quick for him, Sperry abruptly stepped in front of her, barring her way.

"Come now," he said; "be sensible. You must not go in to luncheon looking as you do." He put forth both hands to assist her up the rock; she offered her own mechanically, in a helpless sort of way, knowing it would be impossible to ascend otherwise while he was there. A quick, steady pull, and she was abreast of him, the brim of her gay little hat touching for a second his waistcoat. The moment was irresistible--in that second he was conscious of the fragrance and warmth of her girlhood. He felt her soft brown hands in his own, straining to release themselves.

"Don't!" she faltered; "please--I beg of you--"

A voice behind him brought him to his senses:

"Beg pardon, miss, but luncheon is served."

It was Blakeman. The butler stood respectfully aside to let them pass. Slowly he followed the retreating form of the doctor and Margaret, his hands clenched. For some seconds he stood immovable, then he broke hastily into the woods, cross-cutting back to his pantry.

"Damn him!" he muttered, as he squeezed the cork from a bottle of Pomard. "I hadn't a second to lose!"

At luncheon Blakeman served the Burgundy without a trace upon his round, smug face of the indignation surging within him. His skilled hand replenished Sperry's glass generously.

The doctor grew talkative; he told his complete set of luncheon stories with enthusiasm, while Margaret sat in grateful silence; she was in no mood to talk herself; the incident of the morning had left her depressed and nervous.

"She's pulling out of it," he said to Alice when the girl had left the room. "Colour good and walks without losing her breath. I think now you can dismiss all anxiety from your mind. The woods have saved her life." What he said to himself was: "I made a mess of this morning's work; she's not such a fool as I thought."

The end of the week, and Sperry's last (for Thayer, despite all of Alice's numerous hints, had not asked that his visit be prolonged), brought Alice's paradise to a close. So far their days together had seemed like a dream--his departure the next morning would mean the renewal of an ennui which would continue until she reached the month of freedom which her husband had promised her.

If Thayer had noticed his wife's anxiety he made no sign. He had gratified her wishes and she had been happy; further than that he did not care to go.

As to Alice, that which occupied her waking thoughts was how to prolong the situation without letting the doctor feel her need of him. Then again there was her husband. Would he agree to a continuance of Sperry's visit if she proposed it outright? She had lately noticed

a certain reserved manner in Thayer whenever he found them together--nothing positive--but something unusual in one so universally courteous to everybody about him, especially a guest. Would this develop into antagonism if he read her thoughts?

That same day Sperry went twice to the lower shanty to see Le Boeuf. His increasing his usual morning visit to glance at the slowly mending fracture was sufficient to make Thayer inquire anxiously about the little Frenchman's condition.

"Is poor Le Boeuf worse?" he asked the doctor as they sat over their cigars in the den after dinner.

Sperry rose, bent over the lamp chimney and kindled the end of a fresh Havana.

"I am afraid," he said, resuming his seat, "that the poor fellow's arm is in a rather discouraging condition. I shall see him again to-night."

Thayer frowned--the old worried look came again into his eyes. Suffering of any kind always affected him--suffering for which in a measure he was responsible was one of the things he could not bear.

"You don't say so!" he exclaimed; "that is bad news. I'm very, very sorry. You know my men are my children; there is not one of them who would not stand by me if I was ill or in danger. And you really consider Le Boeuf's condition alarming?"

Sperry shrugged his shoulders. "A fracture like that sometimes gives us serious trouble," he replied in his best professional manner. "Frankly, I do not like the looks of things at all."

"And he needs a doctor," Thayer said, suddenly looking up. "You will, of course, stay until he is out of danger?"

"No, I must return to New York," Sperry protested. "I feel I have already imposed on you and your good wife's hospitality; besides, there are my patients waiting. It is neither right nor fair to my assistant, Bainbridge. His last letter was rather savage," laughed Sperry.

"But can Le Boeuf be moved?"

"Well--er--no. Frankly, I would not take the risk."

"Then you consider his condition alarming?"

"Alarming enough to know that unless things take a sudden turn for the better, blood-poisoning will set in. We shall then have to amputate. These cases sometimes prove fatal."

"Then I will not hear of your going," Thayer said in a decisive tone--"at least not until Le Boeuf is out of danger. You have set his arm and are thoroughly in touch with the case. You must stay here and pull him through."

Sperry raised his arms in hopeless protest.

"Really, my dear Mr. Thayer, it is impossible," he said.

"No--nothing is impossible where a man's life is at stake," Thayer continued, lapsing into his old business-like manner. "As to your practice, you know me well enough to know I would not for a moment put you to any personal loss."

"But my dear Thayer--"

"I won't listen to you, Dr. Sperry. It is a matter of the life or death of one of my men--a man who, Holcomb tells me, has been most faithful in his work. I will not hear of your going, and that ends it!"

Sperry rose, and for some moments regarded intently the blue spiral of smoke from his cigar curl lazily past his nose; then with a smile of ill-concealed triumph and a slight shrug of acquiescence, he replied:

"Of course, if you insist; yes, I'll stay. I shall do my best to save him."

"Thank you," cried Thayer. "Now we will join Alice and Margaret. He held back the heavy portiere screening the door of the living room.

"Not a word to Margaret, remember," Thayer whispered, "about Le Boeuf, nor to Mrs. Thayer--she doesn't like these things and I try to keep them from her all I can."

"Certainly not," returned the doctor. "It would only worry her. Besides, I think I have a fighting chance to save him."

As they entered the living room Alice raised her eyes. Margaret put down a treatise on forestry that Holcomb had lent her, rose, and said good-night. She did not relish the thought of general conversation when the doctor was present--especially after the experiences she had had.

"Ah, Alice," said Thayer, as he crossed the room to where his wife was sitting, "I have a bit of news for you, my dear. Our friend here has positively refused to leave. Oh--it's the air," he added as the doctor laughed, "and the charm of old nature. You know, doctor, it's contagious, this enchantment of the woods." Alice gave an involuntary start and the little ball of blue worsted in her lap dropped to the floor, and unravelled itself to the edge of the Persian rug.

"Not really!" she exclaimed, smothering her secret joy. "You see what a useless person I am at persuasion, doctor. Come, be truthful--didn't I try to persuade you to stay?"

"Yes, my dear lady, to be truthful you did; but I had no intention of wearing my welcome into shreds."

The sense of an exquisite relief thrilled every nerve in Alice's body. Sperry saw her breast heave a little, then their eyes met.

Thayer touched the bell for whiskey and soda. As the doctor drained his second glass he snapped out his watch.

"I must look in on Le Boeuf," he said briskly.

Again Thayer touched the bell. "Blakeman will accompany you with a lantern, doctor."

Sperry turned and bid Alice a formal good-night. "Don't wait up for me; I may not be in until late--my overcoat, Blakeman"--and the two passed out into the night.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The days added to the doctor's visit were not wholly given to the care of the sick. One morning Holcomb, who had been cross-cutting back to camp after looking over some timber in the thick woods through which chattered a small brook, heard the murmur of voices almost within reach of his hand. His skill as a still hunter had served him well--so quick was he to stop short in his tracks and so noiseless had been his approaching step, that neither Alice nor the doctor, seated beside the brook, had been aware of his presence.

For the space of a quarter of an hour he stood motionless as a rock.

"It is a serious case," he heard the doctor laugh.

"Very," Alice sighed. "And he will get well?"

"Yes--of course he'll get well, in a week at best."

"And you're not bored in this dreadful place? And are still willing to stay?"

"Bored? Ah--you have been so sweet to me, dear friend," he ventured.

"I?" she returned. "I have not been even charitable. Your gratefulness is almost pathetic."

For some moments neither spoke. The still hunter stood his ground; he became part of the great hemlock beside him, his eyes riveted upon the man and woman. Now she dipped her hands in the cool, pure water, the doctor sitting close to her upon the edge of her skirt which she had spread for him, her trim feet placed firmly against a rock, the frou-frou of her petticoat framing her silken ankles.

"You see," she resumed at length, as if speaking to a spoiled child, "because you have been very, very good we are still friends--good friends--am I not right?"

"Yes," he confessed gloomily, irritated by her words. "And how long am I to be your model friend?"

"Until you cease to be," she replied, smiling mischievously through her half-closed eyes.

"And then?" he asked eagerly.

"Then you may go home," she returned in a cool, delicious voice.

With an impatient gesture the doctor tossed his half-smoked cigarette into the stream. He shrugged his shoulders, gazing absently at the cigarette bobbing along in the current.

"You cast me off like that," he muttered gloomily, nodding to the cigarette. "Did you notice," he added, "how it still fought to burn?"

"And how quickly it sizzled and went out when it had to?" she laughed.

Impulsively he took her hand--a hand which she did not withdraw, for she was trembling. Slowly his face bent nearer her own, his words were sunk to a whisper, but in his eyes there gleamed the craving of her lips.

"Don't!" she protested, raising her free hand--"for God's sake don't! _You shall not_!"

"I must," he answered, hotly.

"You shall not," she replied. "I should only suffer--I am unhappy enough as it is," and she buried her face in her clenched hands, her shoulders quivering.

Even the quiver did not evade the eyes of the man stock still beside the hemlock; no detail of the drama that was being enacted beside the brook escaped him. He who could observe with ease the smashing of a moth's wing thirty rods from shore, possessed a clearness of vision akin to that of a hawk. A bird fluttered in the underbrush near them.

"What was that?" she asked, with a guilty little start, withdrawing her hand.

"A bird--nothing more dangerous," he laughed outright, amused at her fright.

Holcomb's features, as he gazed at them, were like bronze. His first thought, as he gazed out from his ambush, had been Margaret's mother! His second thought was his dislike for Sperry. He watched half unwillingly, with a feeling of mingled curiosity and disgust. He had not pried upon them; it was pure chance that had brought him where he was. At length he withdrew.

He was still thinking of the incident when he heard the brush crack ahead of him. Then the smug face of Blakeman emerged from a thicket. It was the butler's afternoon off, and he was out after birds. He let down the hammers of his gun as Holcomb drew near.

"Any luck?" asked Holcomb.

The butler drew from the wide pocket of a well-worn leather hunting coat a pair of ruffled partridges.

"Good enough!" exclaimed Holcomb.

"'Twas a bit of devil's luck," returned Blakeman, dropping into his native brogue, which he always suppressed in service. "Both birds jumped back of me, but I got 'em."

"You're a good shot," declared Billy.

"No, my friend," replied Blakeman modestly, "I _used_ to be a good shot; I'm only a lucky shot now. It's not often I make a double. Where have you been?"

"Over to look at some timber on the West Branch."

"I heard voices," Blakeman said, "full half an hour ago"--and he pointed in the direction from which Holcomb had come--"and did you see anybody?"

"Yes," said Holcomb, after a moment's thoughtful hesitation, "I did."

"Whom?"

"Mrs. Thayer and the doctor, out for a walk."

"Of course," said Blakeman, looking queerly into Holcomb's eyes. "You saw them quite by chance, I'll wager. You're not the kind of a lad to prowl on the edge of other people's affairs."

Holcomb did not reply. He was weighing in his mind the advisability of making a confidant of Blakeman against the wisdom of telling him nothing.

"When you know these people of the world as well as I do, my friend," continued Blakeman, as the two seated themselves to rest, "what you've just seen won't rob you of much sleep," and he laid his favourite gun tenderly upon a log. "The very last people in the world--women--whom you wouldn't suspect--are usually the ones. Most of them do as they please if they've enough money."

"Blakeman," exclaimed Holcomb, unable to contain himself longer, "the man whom you and I serve is my friend. Sam Thayer never did a mean thing in his life--he's not that kind. It's his daughter, too, whom I am thinking about. You've known them both as well as I do--longer in fact--"

"And far better," added Blakeman. "It is a pleasure to serve a master like Mr. Thayer, and Miss Margaret is as good as gold." He scraped the mud from his boots as he continued: "Didn't I serve an archduke once, who was a pig in his household and a damned idiot out of it?--but neither you nor me are getting to the point. What you really want to talk about is madam, and since I believe in you I intend to post you further. It may be the means of keeping two people happy who deserve to be, if nothing else."

"That's about what I was going to say," confessed Holcomb simply, drawn by the butler's frankness.

Blakeman smiled--a bitter smile that terminated with a sudden gleam in his eyes as he leaned forward.

"Last winter," he went on hurriedly, as he glanced at the setting sun, "I stumbled on them both just as you've done, only my trail led through the conservatory of the New York house. They were both hard pressed, do you see, for a way out; that's how I first knew about Mr. Thayer's intention to purchase this property."

"The telegram Mr. Thayer sent, you mean?"

"No--a letter. It meant separation to them. I saw her hand it to the doctor to read. Do you know what he did? He condemned Miss Margaret's lungs--told her mother the child had consumption. By God--I could have strangled him!"

Holcomb gripped the log on which he sat, staring grimly at the butler.

"Yes, ordered her here!" continued Blakeman. "That was _their way out. Damn him_! Ordered her here--winter and summer, knowing that her father would go along with her, and let the wife do as she pleased. It was damnable!"

There are two kinds of anger that seize a man--explosive and suppressed. Holcomb was now suffering under the latter--a subtle anger that would undoubtedly have meant serious injury to the immaculate Sperry had he been unlucky enough to have crossed his path at the moment.

As Blakeman, little by little, unfolded more of the doctor's villainy, Holcomb's muscles relaxed and his indignation, which had risen by degrees until it boiled within him, now settled to reason. He had not only Thayer's happiness to think of, but Margaret's as well. Both, he determined, must be kept in ignorance of what, so far, only he and Blakeman knew.

"The morning the little fellow, Le Boeuf, got hurt," Blakeman went on, "the doctor took Miss Margaret for a walk. I was in the pantry and saw them start off together in the woods down by the brook. I followed them--I couldn't help it; I had a little girl myself once in the old country, and I've seen too much of Sperry's kind. Europe is full of them."

The tenseness in Holcomb returned. "What did you see?" he asked grimly.

"No more than I expected," returned the butler. "The doctor is a snake--and Miss Margaret is young and pretty; well--he would have kissed her--but I announced luncheon."

Holcomb caught his breath. "And she was willing?" he asked, looking sternly at Blakeman.

"Willing! She was frightened to death."

Holcomb threw up his head with a jerk--his clenched fists rigid on the log.

"I'm telling you this," Blakeman went on, not waiting for him to reply, "because I believe you can help. I have always made it a rule in service to keep silent, no matter what passes in a family. I meddled once at Ostend in an affair of the like of this, and it taught me a lesson. There'll be trouble here if things go on like this--maybe later a divorce--and a divorce is the devil in a family like Mr. Thayer's. Neither you nor me want that; we must stand by the little girl and the master and avoid it."

"What do you intend to do?" inquired Holcomb, staring grimly at the ground.

"I'm going to give madame a chance--she's a fool, but she's not crooked; that is, I don't think she is," Blakeman replied. "Then I'll speak out."

"Do you think Mr. Thayer suspects anything?" asked Holcomb, after a moment's hesitation.

"He's not that kind. I dare not tell him--never in the world would tell him. You might--he would listen to you. Butlers are seldom believed--I've tried it."

He gathered up the pair of fat partridges and stuffed them in his pocket.

"And you advise me to tell him?" asked Holcomb slowly.

"No," returned Blakeman, "I don't. It would go hard with him and Miss Margaret; he's had hell enough in his life already; he's happy now--so is Miss Margaret. It's not always you find two people happy in the same family." He buttoned the collar of his shooting coat about his neck, for the sun was burning below the edge of the forest and with its last rays the woods grew still and cold. "I propose to watch madame and find out whether she is bad or whether she's only losing her head," said Blakeman, as he rose to go. "Mind you do the same--mind you promise me you will."

Blakeman had lifted his mask. Holcomb saw in him no longer the suave, trained domestic, but a man of intelligence--a man with a heart and a wide experience in a world which he as yet knew but little of.

"You can count on me," said Holcomb, as he straightened to his feet.

Blakeman rested his gun in the hollow of his arm.

"We must be going," he said, "or I shall be late for my table. Have you a short cut home in your memory?"

"Come on," said Holcomb, and the two disappeared in the thick timber.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The next morning Thayer handed Alice a telegram. It was from Jack Randall, accepting Sam's invitation to visit him.

"I am so glad he's coming!" he exclaimed, rubbing his hands in delight. "Jack is a host in himself. Ah, that was a good idea of mine, dear--splendid idea! I want Holcomb to dine with us, of course, while Randall is here over Sunday; it's a pity he can't stay longer." Thayer had not said a word to her about his "idea" until he had shown her Randall's acceptance.

Alice said nothing, except to remark that she would be glad to see Mr.

Randall again--he was always so amusing; she did not relish the idea of Holcomb sharing their table during his visit. She wondered whether Thayer was paying her back for the many she had given without consulting him.

"Who do you think is coming?" exclaimed Margaret, who had run over to Holcomb's cabin to tell him the news that afternoon; "nice Jack Randall!" she cried before he could even begin to think.

Holcomb opened his eyes in surprise.

"Father said you had met him at The Players," added Margaret.

"Met him--why I've known Mr. Randall for years! It seems mighty good to think I'm going to see the dear fellow again. Well, that is good news--dear old Jack!"

They were standing in the open doorway of the cabin. Holcomb thought he had never seen her look prettier than she did this sunny morning without her hat--dressed as she was in a simple frock of some soft white fabric cut low about her plump brown throat.

"May I come inside," she asked timidly, as she peeped into the new interior.

"Why, certainly. Come in and sit down; you are really the only visitor I've had except your father--sit down--won't you?" He drew a chair up to his freshly scrubbed deal table.

Margaret looked up into his eyes--half seriously for a moment, as she stood by the proffered chair.

"You are coming to dine with us while he's here," she said in her frank way. "Father says you must."

Billy's embarrassment was evident. "That's really kind of him," he replied, "but don't you think I'd better wait until--"

"There--you're going to refuse; I was half afraid you would. But you will come--won't you? Please, Mr. Holcomb!" She seated herself opposite him, resting her adorable little chin in her hands, her eyes again looking into his own.

"I mean I'd rather your mother had asked me," he said, after a moment's hesitation. "I'm afraid Mrs. Thayer would be better pleased if I did not come, much as I'd like to."

The brown eyes were lowered and the corners of the young mouth quivered; she lifted her head and he saw the eyes were dim with two big tears.

"You'll come, won't you?" she faltered, trying hard to smile. He started to rise, looking helplessly about him as a man who casts about him for a remedy in an emergency.

"There, I shouldn't have said what I did," he explained as she brushed away the tears. "I'm sorry--I didn't mean to hurt you."

"You haven't hurt me," she said; "you couldn't."

There was an awkward pause during which she buried her face in her dimpled brown hands. Holcomb breathed heavily.

"You don't understand," she resumed bravely, trying to clear the quaver in her voice, "and it's so hard for me to explain--and I _want_ you to understand--about--mother, I mean. Mother is dreadfully rude to people at times--she is that way to nearly everyone whom she does not consider smart people." Her young voice grew steadier. "I mean whom she likes and are in her own set. It makes me feel so ashamed sometimes I could cry."

"Come," coaxed Holcomb, "you mustn't feel badly about it. People are all different, anyway. It's just Mrs. Thayer's way, I suppose, just as it's your way, and your father's way, to be kind to everyone," he said tenderly. He saw the colour flush to her cheeks.

"Mother has hurt you!" she cried indignantly. "I have seen it over and over again. Oh, why can't people be a little more considerate. It's not considered smart, I suppose. In society nearly everyone is rude to one another--some of them are perfectly nasty and they think nothing of saying horrid things about you behind your back! I hate New York," she exclaimed hotly; "I never knew what it was to be really happy until I came to Big Shanty and these dear old woods. You have had them all your life, so perhaps you can't understand what they mean to me--how much I love them, Mr. Holcomb."

"They mean considerable to me," he replied. "They seem like home. I liked what I saw in New York, and I had a good time down there with Jack, but I know I'd get pretty tired of it if I had to live there in that noise."

"I hate New York," she repeated impetuously, her brown hands trembling after the tears. "If you had to go out--out--out--all the time to stupid teas and dances, you would hate it too. It was hard waiting for the camp. I--I--used to count the days--longing for the days you promised it would be ready. It was so hard to wait--but I knew you were doing your best, and daddy knew it too."

Holcomb reddened. "I'm glad you trusted me," he said, and added, "I hope you will trust me always."

"Why, yes, of course I will!" she exclaimed, brightening. "Oh, you know I will, don't you?"

Holcomb was conscious of a sudden sensation of infinite joy; it seemed to spring up like an electric current from somewhere deep within him, and tingled all over him.

"I'm glad you'll always trust me," he said, as he rose suddenly from his chair and, going over to her, held out his hand. The words he had just spoken he was as unconscious of as his impulsive gesture. "I hope you'll always trust me," he repeated. "You see I wouldn't like to disappoint you _ever_" he went on gently.

She gave the strong fingers that held her own a firm little squeeze, not knowing why she did it.

"Of course I will. Oh, you know I'll trust you--always--always." She

said it simply--like a child telling the truth. "I must be going," she ventured faintly. "You will come to the dinner--I mean--to dine with us as long as they are here--promise me!" Again she looked appealingly into his eyes as if she were speaking in a dream.

"Yes, if you want me," he said softly, almost in a whisper, still thrilled by the pressure of her warm little hand. He stood watching her as she slowly re-crossed the compound. Then he went in and shut the door of his cabin and stood for some moments gazing at the chair in which she had been seated--his heart beating fast.

* * * * *

The dinner was all that Thayer could have wished it. In this he had consulted Blakeman, and not Alice. The soup was perfect; so were a dozen young trout taken from an ice-cold brook an hour before, accompanied by a dish of tender cucumbers fresh from the garden and smothered in crushed ice; so was the dry champagne--a rare vintage of hissing gold poured generously into Venetian glasses frail as a bubble, iridescent and fashioned like an open flower; so was the saddle of mutton that followed--and so, too, were the salad and cheese--and the minor drinkables and eatables to the very end.

Moreover, Alice was in her best humour and in her best clothes; the doctor genial; Thayer beaming; Margaret merry as a lark; Holcomb's ease and personality a delight (Mrs. Thayer had at the last moment sent a special invitation by Margaret, and he had come)--and Jack a never-ending joy. That rare something which made every man who knew him love him, bubbled out of him as ceaselessly as the ascending commotion in the golden vintage. Moreover, this good fellow was overjoyed at the change in his host; he felt that Thayer's splendid health was largely due to his advice.

Jack's repertoire was famous; he had been a prime favourite at the University smokers for years, and so when dinner was over, and the guests were grouped about the roaring fire in the living room, Sperry next to Alice, Blakeman passing the coffee, liqueurs and cigars, he was ready to answer any call. And thus it was that Thayer, amid general applause, led--or rather dragged--Jack triumphantly to the new grand piano, finally picking him up bodily and depositing him before the keyboard, where he held him on the stool with the grip of a sheriff, until this best of fellows raised his hands hopelessly and smiled to his eager audience.

Few skilled pianists possessed Jack's touch; his playing was snappy and sympathetic--it was gay, and invested with a swing and rhythm that were irresistible. He had at his command a vast host of memories--everything from a Hungarian "Czardas" to Grieg. He rippled on fantastically, joining together the seemingly impossible by a series of harmonic transitions entirely his own. His crisp execution was as facile as that of a virtuoso; he did things contrary to even the first principles found in the instruction books of the pianoforte. He rushed from the Dance of the Sun Feast of the Sioux Indians, through a passage of rag time into the tenderest of cradle songs that emerged in turn, by an intricate series of harmonic byways, into the trio from Faust and leaped, as a climax at a single bound, to the Rakoczy March--the shrill war march of Hungary, the rhythm of which stirs the blood and made men fight up hill with forty clarionets in line in the days when the Magyar took all before him--a march that

brought the blood to Alice Thayer's cheeks and diffused a lazy brilliancy in her eyes--eyes that looked at Sperry under their curved lashes. Under its spell there welled within her an irresistible desire to scream--to dance savagely until she swooned. The last chord was as vibrant as the crack of a whip.

As for Holcomb, a strange happiness had come to him. He had heard Alice voice her surprise at his ease of manner and good breeding. "He is a gentleman, Sam; I never could have believed it," and his eyes had lighted up when his employer had replied, "As well-bred as Jack, my dear. I am glad to hear you acknowledge it at last." But even a greater joy possessed him,--a happiness which he dared not speak about or risk the danger of destroying. Margaret trusted him!--that in itself was enough for the moment. She had a way of looking earnestly into his eyes now--moments when he made awkward attempts at concealing his joy. There was, too, a certain note of tenderness in her voice when she spoke to him. That firm pressure of her soft little hand--her tears! What had she meant by it? he wondered. She seemed a different being to him now--divine--not of this world. When they were alone together her very presence made him forget all else save his loyalty toward Thayer--in brief moments such as these he would gaze at her, when she was not looking; conversation he found difficult. There were moments, too, when he experienced a feeling of silent depression, and other times when there sprang up within him a positive fear--the first fear he had ever experienced. The dread that he might lose his self-control and tell her frankly all that lay in his heart--how much he thought of her--how much he would always think of her. Yet he would rather have left Big Shanty forever than have offended her. How strange it all seemed to him! Could she really care for him?--this girl, the very essence of refinement--this child of luxury. The realization of the wide social breach that lay between them was plain enough to him; he was not of her world--not of her blood.

The hopelessness of this thought brought with it a feeling of bitterness. Once he dreamed she had kissed him. It was all so real to him in his dream--they were a long way off in the woods somewhere together, back of Big Shanty, near a pond which he had never seen; he was leading her down to its edge through some rough timber, when she sighed, "I am so tired, Billy," and sank down in a little heap half fainting from exhaustion. He took her into his arms and carried her--she cuddled her head against his throat. Then she kissed him twice, and he awoke.

For a long time he sat wondering on the edge of his cot--the light from a waning moon streaking across the cabin floor. He tried to go to sleep, in the hope that his dream might continue, but he dreamed of horses breaking through the ice. He wakened again at the first glimmer of dawn--dressed and went out in the crisp air for a tramp, still thinking of his dream and the memory of her dear lips against his cheek.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The day at last arrived when Sperry must return to New York. His mail during the last few days compelled his immediate presence. Although

he gauged the contents of several letters as false alarms there were three that left no room for refusal: one meant an operation that he dared not leave to his assistant's hands; the other two meant money. He had begun to notice, too, a little coldness on the part of his host; Holcomb's manner toward him had also set him to thinking. Upon one occasion Thayer's strained silence, when he was alone with him smoking in his den and Alice had retired, had thrown Sperry into a state of positive alarm and kept his heart thumping the while, until a yawn of his host and a cheerful good-night relieved him of his fear. The doctor, like others of his ilk, was innately a coward.

On the last night of his visit, Alice and Sperry sat together in a corner of the veranda. Thayer had gone over to Holcomb's cabin for a talk; Margaret had retired early.

Alice had been strangely silent since dinner. The doctor's figure in the wicker armchair drawn close to her own, showed dimly in the dusk. Tree toads croaked in the blackness beyond the veranda rail; the air smelled of rain. All growing things seemed to have ceased living; the air was heavy and laden with a resinous, dreamy vapour--magnetic, intoxicating. Such a night plays havoc with some women. Under these stifled conditions she is no longer normal; she becomes weak, pliable--she no longer reasons; she craves excitement, deceit, misadventure, confession--quarrels--jealousy--love--stringing their nerves to a tension and breeding a certain melancholy; it tortures by its suppression; a flash of lightning or a drenching rain would have been a relief.

For some moments neither had spoken. The man close to her in the dusk was biding his time.

"Dear--" he whispered at length.

She did not answer.

He leaned toward her until the glow from his cigar illumined her eyes; he saw they were full of tears. His hand closed upon her own lying idle in her lap. She began to tremble as if seized with a nervous chill. It was the condition he had been waiting for. He watched her now with a thrill of satisfaction--with that suppressed exultance of a gambler holding a winning card.

"There--there," he said affectionately, smoothing with comforting little pats her trembling fingers. Being a born gambler he sat in this game easily; just as he had sat in many a game before when the stakes were high--yet he knew that never in his whole discreditable life had he played for as high stakes as this woman's heart.

Her silence irritated him. He threw his half-smoked cigar into the blackness beyond the veranda rail and leaned close to her white throat, framed in the soft filmy lace of her gown.

"Why are you so silent?" he asked. "Is it because--of to-morrow?"

"Sh-sh-sh! Do be careful," she cautioned him; "someone might hear you."

"We are quite alone, you and I," he returned curtly. "You know he is with Holcomb and Margaret is in bed." His voice sunk to infinite

tenderness. "You are very nervous, dear," he said, raising both her hands firmly to his lips.

"Don't," she moaned faintly. "Can't you see I'm trying to be brave; can't you see how hard it is? _You must not_"

He bent closer with slow determination until she felt the warmth of his breath upon her lips.

"Kiss me," he pleaded tensely; "I love you."

Her breath came quick, her whole body trembling violently. There was a hushed moment in which he saw her dark eyes dilate and half close with a savage gleam.

He sprang toward her.

"For God's sake, don't!" she gasped, as he tried to take her in his arms.

"I love you--_I love you_" he repeated fiercely. "Don't you trust me? You will--you _shall_ listen to me. I can't leave you like this; it may be months before we shall see each other again. It is your right to be happy--to be loved--every woman has--Why don't you take it?"

"What do you mean?" she stammered, her blood running cold.

"I mean that neither he nor your daughter loves you--that you are mine--not theirs."

She lay back in the wicker chair, scarcely breathing.

"Yes, it's my fault," he continued pitilessly; "but it is because I love you--because you are dearest to me. I want you near me--close to me always. I've thought it all out. Come to New York; there we shall find an enchanted island, the paradise I have longed for--that we've both longed for."

Her eyes looked straight into his own. They were wide open--filled for the instant with a strange look of amazement.

Her breath came in quick little gasps; a subtle anger seemed to close her throat.

She sprang to her feet, steadied herself by the chair back, and without another word, her white hands clenched to her side, turned slowly into the opening leading to the hall.

Her astonishment and disgust were genuine.

At this instant the door of Holcomb's cabin swung back and a flow of light streamed out. Sperry halted and stood immovable in a protecting shadow. Thayer moved slowly across the compound. As his foot touched the lower step of the veranda a thin, dry laugh escaped the doctor's white lips.

"I've been waiting patiently for a nightcap with you," he said.

"Mental telepathy," returned his host. "I was just thinking of it

myself. It's so late everybody has gone to bed, but I expect we can----No--here's Blakeman. Brandy and soda, Blakeman, and some cracked ice."

"Very good, sir--anything else, sir," replied Blakeman, pulling his face into shape--he had heard every word that had passed.

"No, that will do."

"Thank you, sir."

Sperry studied the butler's impassible face for a moment, measured with his eye the distance from the pantry window to the corner of the veranda, then he drew a long breath--the first he had drawn in some minutes.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Sperry left early the next morning; only his host and Blakeman saw him off. When he had reached his train and had slipped off his overcoat, he found all the tips he had given Blakeman in its outside pocket.

The doctor was not the only man that morning that awoke with an anxious mind. His host was equally preoccupied; all through breakfast he had caught his thoughts straying from those usually given to a departing guest. In his talk with Holcomb, the night before, his manager had gone straight to the point.

"You remember, do you not," he had said, "that a horse Bergstein bought died a week after its arrival--the first horse we lost, I mean?"

"Yes, Billy, I remember," Thayer had answered. "Poor beast. I remember also that you said in the letter that Bergstein was indefatigable in his efforts to save him."

"Perhaps so--but I don't think so now, and I'll tell you why in a minute. You remember, too, that Jimmy said he was all right that night when he got through work and put him in the barn for the night?" Thayer raised his eyes in surprise. "That barn was locked," Holcomb went on, "and Bergstein had the key."

"What was the veterinary's opinion?" Thayer had asked seriously, after a moment's thought.

"Quite different from mine," declared Holcomb; "he pronounced it congestion."

"Was he a capable man?" demanded Thayer.

"So Bergstein said," replied Holcomb slowly. "He got him from Montreal."

Thayer bent his head in deep thought.

"And what do you think, Holcomb?"

"That the horse was poisoned, sir."

Thayor started. "That's a serious charge. What proof have you got?"

"This"--and he opened the wisp of paper the hide-out had given him and laid it on the table. "There's strychnine enough in that to kill a dozen horses. This was found under Bergstein's mattress--the rest of it is in the gray horse's stomach." Then had followed the sum of his discoveries in which, however, no mention was made of the hide-out's help. That was too dangerous a secret to be entrusted to anyone not of the woods.

These discoveries had revealed a condition of things Thayor little dreamed of, and yet the facts were undeniable. Within the last month two horses had died; another had gone so lame that he had been given up as incurable. Leaks had also been frequent in expensive piping. Moreover, the men had begun to complain of bad food at the lower shanty; especially some barrels of corned beef and beans which were of so poor a quality and in such bad condition that the shanty cook had refused to serve them.

That not a word concerning these things had reached Thayor's ears was owing, so Holcomb told him, to the influence of the trapper and the Clown, who prevented the men from coming to him in open protest. In the meantime he--Holcomb--had been secretly engaged in ferreting out the proofs of a wholesale villainy at the bottom of which was Bergstein. What he destroyed he replaced at such a good profit to himself that he had, during his connection with Big Shanty, already become exceedingly well off. Not content with laming and poisoning dumb beasts to buy others at a fat commission, he had provided condemned meat for the men under him at the lower shanty, had secretly damaged thousands of dollars' worth of expensive plumbing, and had sown hatred among the men against the man whose generosity had befriended him. He had accomplished this systematically, little by little, carrying his deeds clear from suspicion by a shrewdness and daring that marked him a most able criminal. He had had freedom to do as he pleased for months, and no profitable opportunity had escaped him. These gains he had deposited in inconspicuous sums in rural savings banks. What he did not deposit he had invested in timber land. The evidence against him had been collected with care. Upon two occasions Holcomb said he took the trapper with him as a witness. The two had moved skilfully on, the trail of the culprit and had watched him at work; once he was busy ruining a costly system of water-filters. They had let him pass--he having stepped within a rod of them unconscious of their presence.

* * * * *

With these facts before him Thayor came to an instant conclusion. The result was that a little before noon on this same day--the day of Sperry's departure--the owner of Big Shanty sent for Bergstein. Both the trapper and Holcomb were present. Thayor stood beside the broad writing table of his den as Bergstein entered; his manner was again that of the polite, punctilious man of affairs; he was exceedingly calm and exasperatingly pleasant. To all outward appearances the black-bearded man, grasping his dusty derby in his hand, might have been a paying teller summoned to the president's office for an

increase of salary.

"Mr. Bergstein" Thayer said, "dating from to-morrow, the 8th of September, I shall no longer need your services. You may therefore consider what business relations have existed between us at an end."

A sullen flash from the black eyes accompanied Bergstein's first words, his clammy hand gripping the rim of the derby lined with soiled magenta satin.

"See here, Mr. Thayer," the voice began, half snarl, half whine.

"That will do, Mr. Bergstein," returned Thayer briskly. "I believe the situation is sufficiently clear to need no further explanation on either your part or mine. I bid you good morning."

Bergstein turned, with the look of a trapped bear, to Holcomb and the old man; what he saw in their steady gaze made him hesitate. He put on his hat and walked out of the door without again opening his thick lips.

"You ain't goin' to let him go free, be ye?" exclaimed the trapper in astonishment. Holcomb started to speak, glancing hurriedly at the retreating criminal.

"What he has taken from me," interrupted Thayer, "I can replace; what he has taken from himself he can never replace." He turned to a small mahogany drawer and extracted a thin, fresh box of Havanas. "Let us forget," he said, as he pried open the fragrant lid. "Be tolerant, Billy--be tolerant even of scoundrels," and he struck a match for the trapper.

The news of Bergstein's discharge demoralized the gang at the lower shanty. They no sooner heard of it than Thayer became a target for their unwarranted abuse. I say "the news" since Bergstein did not put in an appearance to officially announce it. His mismanagement of the commissary department was laid at Thayer's door. The men's grumbling had been of some weeks' duration; their opinions wavering, swaying and settling under Bergstein's hypnotic popularity as easily as a weather-vane in April. Nowhere had they earned as good wages as at Big Shanty. They, too, looked at Thayer's purchase as a gold mine. Morrison had done a thriving business with the stout little tumblers with bottoms half an inch thick. Bergstein frequently treated--when they growled over the bad food he treated liberally, and they forgot. He blamed it on Thayer and they agreed. They made no secret of the fact among themselves as well as outsiders, that if it were not for the high wages they would have deserted in a body long ago; no lumber boss they had ever known or worked for had dared feed them like this. These lumber jacks were used to good, plain food and plenty of it.

It is needless to say neither the trapper nor the Clown complained. They, like Holcomb, were fully aware of the fact that Bergstein was playing a dangerous game. They were waiting for the denouement. At times when the men gave vent to their grievances Hite Holt and Freme Skinner did their level best to smooth things over; they did not want to trouble Thayer.

The same afternoon of Bergstein's discharge the gang at the lower shanty struck. The bar-room at Morrison's became packed. Little else

was talked of but the injustice of the owner of Big Shanty. Later in the day a delegation of awkward, sinewy men came upon his veranda. They were for the most part sober. It might be said they were the soberest. Le Boeuf was among them. Men of the sea and men of the woods air their grievances in the same way--a spokesman is indispensable.

This man's name was Shank Dollard--a man with a slow mind and a quick temper. Their interview with Thayer was brief. His polite firmness and his quiet manner made Shank Dollard lower his voice.

"I know precisely what you are going to say," Thayer began as the deputation shuffled into his den. "In the first place I hear there has been general dissatisfaction over the food at the lower shanty."

"You ain't fur from the p'int," blurted out Dollard; "it hain't been fit to feed to a dog."

"One moment, Mr. Dollard--you will wait until I get through speaking," Thayer said as he lifted a pile of bills. "These," he went on, "are the complete list of supplies since Bergstein took charge of your commissary department. A glance at the items and their cost will, I feel sure, force you men to acknowledge that they are the best money can buy." He passed half the file to Dollard, the remainder he handed to a big fellow next him for distribution. The totals alone were startling.

"We hain't had a dollar's worth of them things, and you know it," Dollard exclaimed surlily, looking up suddenly, as he read.

"Of course you haven't," Thayer smiled in return, "and yet you censure me for terminating my business relations with Bergstein--a man you men unanimously chose."

There was an awkward pause and a sheepish look on the faces of the men as they craned their corded, bronzed necks over the shoulders of those who held the accounts.

"Wall, I swan!" drawled one.

"Reg'lar damned skin!" muttered another.

"I need not explain to you further," Thayer resumed, "that the statements are pure forgeries. You will readily see that it was Bergstein's method to open a small account at these reputable houses and add the rest."

"I tink he been one beeg rascal--_hein_!" grinned Le Boeuf.

There were others present who were still unconvinced.

"Anything further, Mr. Dollard?" asked Thayer sharply.

"About this 'ere grub," returned the spokesman; "it ain't fit, I tell ye, for a dog."

"It will be fit enough by to-morrow night," answered Thayer. "I have attended to that by telegraph." There was a slight murmur of approval.

"See here, Mr. Thayer," resumed Dollard, gaining courage over the

promise of good food. "Maybe the food'll git so's we kin git along, but you hain't been treatin' us no whiter 'n you're a mind to. We ain't gittin' paid no more'n keep us out the poor-house."

"I goll, you're right, Shank Dollard," came from somewhere in the back row.

"Ah!" exclaimed Thayer, "I was waiting for that. Where, may I ask, have you received as high wages as I have paid you? Not even on a river drive," he went on coolly--"dangerous work like that, I know, commands a just reward."

"When we was to work for Morrison," interrupted a round-shouldered lumber jack, "we--"

"You need not enlighten me with figures," resumed Thayer; "I have them here," and he turned to a yellow pad. "When, I say, have you been paid as much and as steadily?"

"That may be, but we ain't as satisfied over what we git as you be," retorted Shank Dollard.

"Then let me tell you plainly--and I wish you to understand me clearly once for all," returned Thayer, glancing quickly into the faces of the men before him, "you'll stay at Big Shanty for the wages you are getting or you'll go. Moreover, the man that leaves my employ leaves for good."

Again there was an awkward silence. Thayer turned, seated himself promptly at his desk and began methodically filing away the forged accounts in a pigeon hole. The men moved toward the open door leading on to the veranda, muttering among themselves. Shank Dollard shot a vicious glance at the man seated at his desk. To exit thus, beaten by the truth, was not easy--a gentleman is always a difficult opponent.

"Good mornin'," he sneered as he started to follow the last man through the door; "a hell of a lot you done for us."

"Good morning," returned Thayer, looking up--"and good-bye. You may go to Holcomb, Dollard, for whatever is due you at once."

Dollard straightened aggressively and with an oath passed out, slamming the door behind him. The closed door muffled somewhat the grumbling from the group on the veranda. Now it increased, plentifully interlarded with profanity.

Sam Thayer, sitting at his desk, did not move. He drew from a drawer a packet of vouchers and began studying them, jotting the totals upon the yellow pad. After a few moments the sound of heavy boots stamping down the veranda steps reached his ears--grew fainter and died away. Thayer started to rise. As he did so, his foot struck something heavy and muscular beneath his desk; then a cold, wet muzzle touched his hand.

It was the old dog.

He had been plainly visible from where the men stood during the entire interview; he had arrived early, unperceived. The look in his brave, gray eyes might have had something to do with Shank Dollard's exit.

On the other side of the closed door leading out to the living room, Alice stood breathless for a quarter of an hour--listening.

She had passed a sleepless night; in the gray dawn she had left her bed and taken a seat by the window. She had tried the balcony--but the night air chilled her to the bone and she had gone back to bed, her teeth chattering.

As she listened, her cheek close to the panel, straining her ears, her heart beating fast with a dull throb, her hands like ice, there were moments when she grew faint--the faintness of fear. Now and then she managed to catch disconnected grumbling sentences; occasionally she was enabled, through the glimmering light of the half-closed keyhole, to distinguish with her strained, frightened eyes, the figure of her husband speaking fearlessly as he flung his ultimatum in the faces of the rough men in front of him. What manner of man was this whom she had defied?

Suddenly an uncontrollable fear fell upon her; with a quick movement she gathered her skirts about her and fled upstairs to her own room.

That night the photograph taken in Heidelberg, and all the letters Sperry had written her, lay in ashes in her bedroom grate.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Before dawn Alice awoke in a fit of coughing. Her bedroom was a blank. The open window overlooking the torrent had disappeared. She sat up choking--staring with wide open, stinging eyes, into an acrid haze. She felt for the matches beside her bed and struck one. Its flame burned saffron for an instant and went out as if it had been plunged into a bottle. At this instant she would have shrieked with fright had not the sound of a man leaping up the stairs leading to her room reached her ears. Then her door crashed in clear of its hinges. She remained sitting bolt upright in bed, too terrified to move. A pair of sinewy arms reached out for her, groping in the strangling haze.

"Who's there?" she gasped.

"Keep your mouth shut!" commanded a voice close to her ear; then the arms lifted her bodily out of bed and swung her clear of the floor; a glimmering tongue of flame licking up the stairway revealed the features of the man in whose arms she struggled.

"Holcomb!" she started to cry out, but the acrid fog closed her throat.

"Keep your mouth shut--do you hear!" he muttered in her ear; "we'll be out of this in a minute." He lunged with her headlong over the smashed door and reached the top of the flight, feeling for the first step cautiously with his foot. She screamed this time, beating his face with her clenched hands.

"Keep your mouth shut," he mumbled; "you'll strangle."

Her arm became limp. "Where's Sam?--where's--" she pleaded feebly. Then a dull roar rang in her ears; she lay unconscious, a dead weight in his arms.

Holcomb began to stagger on the bottom step, reeling like a drunkard; again he proceeded, stumbling on through the passageway leading to Blakeman's pantry. The ceiling of varnished yellow pine above him rained down sputtering drippings of flame; they burned his neck, his hands, his hair. He dashed on through a pantry of sizzling blisters, past a glowing wall in a hot fog of yellow smoke, one burned hand covering her mouth. Then he turned sharply to the left, striking his shoulder heavily against a corner beam!

The blow made him conscious of a man crawling on his hands and knees toward them. The man rose--groped blindly like an animal driven to bay and rushed straight at him.

"Give her to me, Billy," he hissed in his ear, "Quick--save yourself!" Then a burned fist struck straight out and missed--struck again and Holcomb fell senseless.

With the quickness of a cat the man caught the woman in his arms, groped his way to the open, laid her prostrate body on the charred grass--sprang back into the swirl and choke of the deadly gas and smoke, and the next instant reappeared with the stunned and half-conscious Holcomb on his back, his hair singed, his clothes on fire; then he tripped and fell headlong.

The shock brought Holcomb to his senses. The man was stooping over him, his ear close to his cheek.

"It's me, Billy--Bob Dinsmore. I didn't want to hurt ye, but I see ye couldn't manage her and yerself and thar warn't no other way; ye'd both been smothered. She's all right--they're tendin' to her."

Holcomb clutched at the hide-out's sleeve.

"No--I dassent stay--nobody seen me but you"--and he was swallowed up in the shadows.

Two men and a girl now swept past the half-dazed man, halted for a moment, and with a cry of joy from the girl, aided by the trapper and the Clown, dragged him clear of the rain of burning embers.

When Holcomb regained consciousness Margaret was bending over him.

"No, Billy--don't move, dear. Please, oh, please--" and she kissed his cheek--two soft little kisses--the kisses he had remembered in his dream. Then she left him.

He forgot the pain racking his arm; his brain grew clearer. He reached his feet, lurching unsteadily toward Thayer, who sat by Alice who was sobbing hysterically. The banker put out his left hand and covered Holcomb's burned fist tenderly, his gaze still fixed on the leaping flames, but neither spoke. The situation was too intense for words.

* * * * *

During this utter destruction not a man among the gang employed had put in an appearance. This fact, in itself, was alarming; nor had one outside of these come to the rescue. There was no doubt now that the general desertion had been as premeditated as the fire. Who were the prime movers of this dastardly revenge remained still a mystery.

The housekeeper, the cook, the two maids and the valet--all but Blakeman and Annette, who had awakened at the first alarm--had made their escape in terror down the macadam road; they were just in time; this road--the only open exit leading out from Big Shanty being now barred by flame. Worse than all, this barrier of fire had widened so that now two roaring wings of burning timber extended from the very edge of the torrent in a vast semi-circle of flame--sinister and impenetrable--across the compound and far into the woods on the other side. It was as if the last life boat had been launched from a sinking ship, leaving those who were too late to die!

Their only way out now lay through that trackless wilderness behind them.

Here was a situation far graver than the burning of Big Shanty. The gray-haired man with his back against the hemlock realized this. He still stood grimly watching the fire--his ashen lips shut tight.

Big Shanty burned briskly; it crackled, blazed, puffed and roared, driven by a northeast wind. The northeast wind was in league with the flames. It was on hand; it had begun with the stables--it had now nearly finished with the main camp. The surrounding buildings--the innumerable shelters for innumerable things--made a poor display; they went too quickly. It was the varnish in the main camp that went mad in flame--rioting flames that swept joyously now in oily waves. The northeast wind spared nothing. It seemed to howl to the flames: "Keep on--I'll back you--I'm game until daylight."

Walls, partitions, gables, roofs, ridge-poles, stuff in closets, furniture, luxuries, rugs, pictures, floors, clapboards, jewels, shingles, a grand piano, guns, gowns, books, money--in twenty minutes became a glowing hole in the ground. The destruction was complete; the heel of the northeast wind had stamped it flat. Big Shanty camp had vanished.

The man braced against the trunk of the hemlock saw all this with the old, weary, haggard look in his eyes, yet not a syllable escaped his lips. He saw the northeast wind drive its friend the fire straight into the thick timber of the wilderness; trees crackled, flared and gave up; others ahead of them bent, burst and went under--the northeast wind had doomed them rods ahead; it swept--it annihilated--without quarter. It scattered the half-clad group of refugees to shelter across Big Shanty Brook upon whose opposite shore, as yet untouched, they re-gathered to watch--out of the way.

It began to drizzle--a drizzle of no importance, but it cooled the faces of those who were ill.

In an hour Big Shanty Brook had sacrificed three miles of its shore in self-defence. Its bend above the nodding cedars--where Thayer had killed his deer--had succeeded in turning the course of the fire. The shore upon which the refugees stood was untouched. The brook in the chaos of running fire had saved their lives.

Still the fire roared on and although the torrent kept it at bay it went wild in the bordering wilderness. The burned camp was now a forgotten incident in this devilish course of flame. The northeast wind had not failed. The woods became a fire opal--opaque in smoke, with the red glint of innumerable trees glowing in gleaming strata, marking the course of the wind. Many a bird fluttered and dropped in a vain effort to escape from the heat--the heat of a blast furnace. The hedgehog being lazy and loath to move--lay dead--simmering in his fat. The kingfisher jeered in safety--never before had he seen so many little dead fish. It was a gala day for him. They stuck against charred branches conveniently in shallow, out-of-the-way pools. He sat perched on the top of a giant hemlock chattering over his good luck. The chipmunk, at the first sinister glare, had skittered away to safety. He had not had a wink of sleep and his little nose was as black as his hide from running over charred timber. Often it was a close squeak with him to keep from burning his feet.

Nothing can tear through a forest like a fire. Its speed is unbelievable; it strikes with the quickness of a cat--slipping out myriads of snake-like tongues right and left into the driest places. It reasons--it decides--rarely it pardons. It is more dangerous than an incoming sea; the sea gives warning--the fire gives none. Your death is only one of many--a burned detail. The forest fire has a leap which is subtle--ferocious. Things it misses it goes back for until they crumble and are devoured at its edge. It cuts with the sweep of a red-hot scythe. All this occurs above the surface. What happens beneath is worse. It gnaws with the tenacity of a cancer deep into the ground, lingering hidden until suspicion has passed; then it asserts itself in a new outbreak in places least suspected. When it is all over the region lies desolate for years. It becomes a waste, a tangle of briars--pitiful upstarts of trees and burned stumps.

Had it not been for the trapper's and the Clown's forethought the fugitives would have fared worse. They had managed to rescue a nondescript collection of clothing, blankets, mackintoshes, socks, brogans and two teamsters' overcoats from the partly destroyed lower shanty. In the storehouse adjoining they, with Blakeman's assistance, found three hams, matches, a sack of flour, some tea, half a sack of beans and a few cooking utensils. Everything else had been stolen, including possibly the new stock of provisions Thayer had telegraphed for, the debris of two new boxes and the gray ashes of excelsior giving little doubt that the new provisions had arrived. Holt and Skinner had only time to bundle these valuables together when the fire reached them. Heavily loaded they managed to regain the others keeping along the edge of the torrent.

Alice Thayer presented a strange appearance; a pair of lumberjack's trousers, a mackinaw shirt, rough woollen socks, a pair of brogans and one of the teamster's overcoats, its collar turned up against her dishevelled hair, had transformed her into a vagabond. She was still weak from shock, but she went to work with Margaret and Annette, brewing a pail of tea, while Thayer, Holcomb and the rest straightened out their weird bivouac in the acrid opal haze. The Clown was again busy with his fry-pan, the old dog watching him with bloodshot eyes.

There was little or no conversation during the preparation of that hurried meal. When at last it was ready Blakeman started to serve it. Thayer caught his butler's eye and motioned him to a seat beside him.

"You are as hungry as the rest of us," he said with an effort; "there's no need of formality here, Blakeman." He glanced with a peculiar, weary smile from one to another of the little group squatting around the improvised meal, and his voice faltered.

"Big Shanty is gone," he resumed; "but I thank God it was no worse. Whatever is in store for us we must share. What that will be nobody can tell, but it's going to be a hard experience and we must meet it. It would be sheer folly to attempt to get clear of all this by way of Morrison's; that road is completely cut off--am I right, Holt?"--and he turned to the trapper.

The old man, who had eaten sparingly and in silence, raised his head.

"Yes, ye'r right, Mr. Thayer, but it won't do for us to stay whar we be no longer 'n we're obleeged to, that's sartain. Them hell-hounds ain't done yit. Yer life ain't safe," he added slowly.

Alice Thayer gave a little gasp, riveting her frightened gaze on the speaker. Margaret turned and looked at her mother with trembling lips; then she patted Alice's hand affectionately. Annette began to cry.

"It's hard to tell ye the truth, friend," continued the old man, "but I might as well tell ye _now_. There ain't nothin' left for us to do but to git out o' this hell-hole as quick as God'll let us. We got plenty of things in our favour----No, sir, it ain't as bad as it might be with them woods full of smoke. Thar's a railroad over thar"--he continued, nodding to the wilderness beyond them. "I cal'late we could make the railroad in, say, four days. Let's see--Bear Pond--as fur as the leetle Still water; then over them Green Mount'ins and through Alder Swamp."

"And it's clear goin', Hite," interposed the Clown, "as fur as Buck Pond. I was in thar once with the survey." Holcomb did not speak; it was a country which he had never entered.

"I had a trappin' shanty at Buck Pond once," continued Holt, "most thirty years ago. I knowed that country in them days as well as I know my hat and I presume likely it ain't changed. A day from Buck Pond, steady travellin', ought, in my idee, to git us out to the cars. I'll do my best to git ye thar."

Thus it was hurriedly decided that the trapper should lead the way. Holcomb suggested that he and the trapper should return to the burned camp in the hope, if possible, of finding something left which might be of use on the journey. They were sadly in need of an axe; the dull hatchet they had found in the cook's shanty they knew would prove next to useless. So Holcomb and Holt set off at once for the scene of the disaster while the rest got together into more practical carrying shape all that they possessed, ready for a start immediately on their return.

Soon Holcomb and the trapper were trudging about in the stifling heat of the ruins; they had drenched themselves to the waist in the brook and were thus enabled to make a hurried search within the fire zone. The first ruins they came upon were the stables--not a horse had escaped.

Although they found it impossible to approach the still blazing ruins of the main camp, they discovered among the smouldering, charred timbers of Holcomb's cabin the blade of a double-bitted axe, its helve burned off. A few rods further on, in the blinding smoke, they found a keg of nails. The only things the flames had left around them were of iron. An iron reservoir lay on its side where it had fallen; twisted girders loomed above the cauldron of desultory flame, marking the rectangle of the main camp. They shovelled the hot nails and the blades of the two axes into a blackened tin bucket and started back to the brook.

The trapper led. He had gone about a dozen rods farther on when he halted abruptly, peering under the palm of his hand at a smouldering log ahead of him.

"God Almighty!" he cried, staring back at Holcomb, as he pointed to the smoking log.

Holcomb, with stinging eyes, saw a claw of a hand thrust above the log. The bones of the wrist were visible; the rest resembled a misfit glove, the fingers hanging in shreds. The hand connected with the body of a man lying close against the opposite side of the log. The legs from the knees down were gone; the remainder of the man was a mass of burned flesh and rags. Near the stump of the right arm lay a charred kerosene can.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Under the trapper's guidance the party left the burned camp behind them. They pushed on in silence, following mechanically the tall, lank figure of the old man ahead of their single file. He led them up timbered ridges and along their spines; he swerved down into swampy hollows choked with wind-slash, around which they were obliged to make tedious detours. The fine drizzle had turned into a steady soft rain that pattered on the broad moose-hopple leaves. Often they plunged into swamp mud nearly to their knees. The fallen logs over which they climbed were as slippery as wet glass--the branch spikes on these logs as dangerous under slipping feet as upturned pitchforks. The men were top-heavy under their packs; the women uncomplaining and soaked to their skins. The moist air was still impregnated with the scent of smoke--a sinister odour which kept in their minds the events of the morning.

During such a forced march in the wilderness conversation is difficult; one is content with one's own thoughts. Under the mental and physical strain they were enduring their bodies moved automatically. During this unconscious process of locomotion one can dream over one's thoughts and still go on. Legs and arms move themselves; sore muscles become reconciled to their burden--they become numb; the mind is thus left alone in peace.

Alice Thayer's thought was occupied with the incidents leading to her last evening with Sperry. Every feature stood out in bold relief. Even the tones of the doctor's voice rang clear. As these thoughts crowded in, one after another, her brain reeled, her eyes became dim. Missing

her footing she sank back in the mud, steadied herself against a tree, brushing the damp hair out of her eyes and staggered on, her gaze fixed upon the swaying pack ahead of her fastened to the Clown's shoulders.

The old dog now fell out of file; she felt his steaming muzzle bump under the palm of her hand. Since they started from their refuge across Big Shanty Brook the old dog had gone thus from one to the other. Twice she had patted him; she wanted him near her now in her weariness, but he left her the next moment to join Margaret. Her husband trudged on under his heavy pack in front of the Clown; he spoke encouragingly to those in front and behind him--and to her. Once in a while, when they came to a halt in a difficult place, he supported her with his arm and a cheery word. She would have marvelled at his grit had she not overheard his talk to Dollard. Now and then she could see Margaret, her ankles incased in rough woollen socks showing above the tops of the Clown's brogans. Margaret followed Holcomb when it was possible, and the two often walked abreast talking low and earnestly. Twice Alice was about to call her maid. The fatigue was telling terribly on this woman accustomed to luxury. Then she remembered her husband's words: "Whatever is in store for us we must share in common." Farther on Blakeman noticed his mistress turn her white face over her shoulder and look at him appealingly. He came toward her lurching under his load.

"What is it, madam?" he asked.

"Oh, Blakeman, I'm so tired! Stand here with me a minute--and you--do the straps cut your shoulders?"

A curious expression--one of intense surprise, followed instantly by one of tenderness and pity--crossed his countenance. Never before, in all their intercourse, had she spoken to him one word of kindness--one personal to himself.

"No, madam," he answered quietly, "I'm all right, thank you."

When he overtook Holcomb later on he related the incident, at which Holcomb's eyes filled. "It is the Margaret in her," Billy had said to himself. Perhaps, after all, he had misjudged her. The butler said nothing of what he had seen and heard behind the pantry door. She had confirmed his diagnosis made to Holcomb that day in the woods--"She's a fool but I don't think she's crooked." Better let well enough alone.

Night began to settle. The monotonous forest of trees became indistinct; for half an hour the rain fell in sheets--ghostly white in the dusk. It became difficult now to evade the roots and holes. It grew colder, yet there was no breeze. Still the gaunt figure of the trapper ahead of them led on without pity. They followed him blindly--now stumbling in the shadows--some of these proved to be mud--others water--still others the soaked underbrush. Whatever they stumbled into now the sensation was the same.

"Sam!" called Alice feebly.

"Yes, dear," came his voice ahead. He fell out of line and waited for her, bent and dripping under his pack. She looked at him, her mouth trembling and he patted her cheek with a numb hand. "A little more--only a little more courage, dear," he said kindly; "Holt tells

me we are near Bear Pond. You have been so plucky."

"And so have you--Sam," she faltered. He smiled wearily, turned away from her and regained his place in the line.

The rain ceased--the trees grew shorter; hemlock and spruce resolved themselves into a stunted horizon of tamarack; then came a glimmering light through an open space and a sheet of water, glistening like steel, appeared ahead of them and they emerged suddenly upon a hard, smooth point of sand.

"Bear Pond!" the trapper announced cheerily as he halted. "Here we be, by whimey! I was afeared some of ye'd give out, but I dassent stop a minute. You folks'll begin to feel better soon's we git a fire started."

Already Holcomb's and the Clown's axes were being swung with a will. They soon emerged from the forest dragging out on the smooth sand spit, where the line of tamaracks ended, enough dry timber for a fire which the trapper soon roused into a welcome blaze. He used but one match--often he travelled a week on seven. When they were wet he rubbed them in his hair.

Again the sharp whack of the axes cut out a ridgepole and two forked supports. Before it grew dark they had a snug lean-to built and covered with boughs at the edge of the tamaracks--out of the wind. Here, after a warm meal, they passed the first night of their flight. The women shared one side of the lean-to, grateful for the dry blankets; the men, tired from their heavy loads, crept in noiselessly in their sock feet beside them and were soon asleep. The old dog waited patiently until they were settled, then entered and lay down in the only space left. Back of them, far away over the horizon of the wilderness, the sky was pink.

Alice Thayer slept soundly until midnight, then she lay awake until the first glimmer of dawn. She half rose upon her elbow and looked calmly at the face of her husband asleep next to her. It seemed strange to her to be sleeping next to him. His face was drawn and haggard; he breathed heavily. Margaret was curled next to her on the other side, the curve of her lovely mouth showing above the coarse edge of the horse blanket.

Then an irresistible desire came over her to get away--away from this misery--out of these rough clothes--away from these men. The fire in front of her blazed up, illumining the thatched roof of the lean-to. She looked at her hands--they were dirty, the nails black from scrambling over logs. At that moment she would eagerly have exchanged her jewels for a boudoir and a bath. Her jewels--they were gone in the fire. Gone, too, before it began were a packet of letters and a tell-tale photograph! This fact was the only one in her desolation that comforted her.

Then came moments when her surroundings became exasperating; what fresh misery would she be forced to endure--days worse, perhaps, than the one she had just passed through might follow. If she could only fly! But where? Out in that wilderness? She had sense enough left to know that had she stolen out beyond sight of the lean-to she would have been hopelessly lost. She did not know, however, all that it meant; the terror that would await her--the suffering, stumbling

blindly in a circle--hungry, yet afraid to eat had she had food--thirsty, yet not daring to stop even at a clear spring. Her body beaten and bruised--her mind weak from fear--half naked--her hair dishevelled, her scalp bleeding; reeling toward any quarter which seemed like the way out. All this, had she but known it, had happened to the three men sleeping in the lean-to: the trapper, when he was eighteen, found barely breathing after twelve days of torture, the dog chain which he had wrapped round his waist after starting a deer, having deflected the needle of his compass; Holcomb, picking his way out along the shores of a chain of lakes, with no matches and but a handful of cartridges; and the Clown, blind drunk on Jamaica ginger and peppermint essence, in a country whose unfamiliarity nearly caused his death. A man without his stomach and physique would have died; by some miracle he lived to reach Morrison's unaided--he wanted a drink.

And yet there was not a portion of this wilderness that could lose these three men now, past masters as they were in the art of wood-craft. Yes--it was just as well that The Lady of Big Shanty knew none of these things. Miserable as she was, here, she was protected. Her hand went out unconsciously and rested for a moment on her husband. Again she fell asleep--a troubled sleep--in which she dreamed she confronted a face with sinister eyes and hot cheeks from which she fled in terror. When she awoke she looked out into a blanket of mist. In the breaking dawn the surface of Bear Pond lay like a mirror. The others were still asleep. The fire in front of the lean-to was a bed of white ashes. A kingfisher screamed past, following the limpid turquoise edge of the shore. Beyond the mist rose a great mountain, the filmy, ragged edges of the fog blanket sweeping in curling rifts beneath a precipice of black sides.

The sun presently turned the mist into rose vapour; the mirror became a greenish black, shining like polished metal. She looked out upon this scene with a sense of restful fascination. It was the first sunrise of its kind this woman--to whom morning meant the perfunctory drawing of her bedroom curtains--had seen for years. It was as if she had been transported to a new world, shutting out the other world she had known so well--the world in which she had fluttered so successfully, spending lavishly the money of the man who at that moment lay next to her, worn out by calamity and fatigue. He had been patient through years of her unreasonable extravagance--through her selfish domination--through her tyranny. He was patient now.

Alice Thayer thought of these things as she gazed out upon the strange, silent pond. It was the first time in her later life she had taken time to think. Mental anguish has its sudden changes. When we have suffered enough we seek the pleasant; to suffer requires effort. When at last we shirk the work of being unhappy we forget our sorrow. Alice, little by little, was forgetting hers--even in the midst of these trying circumstances.

Soon she noticed that Margaret's blanket had slipped from her shoulders. She leaned forward and drew it tenderly back to its place; then she bent over and kissed the cheek of the sleeping girl.

The grip of the primaeval had laid hold of her heart!

When she again gazed across the thin rose vapour, disappearing rapidly under the first rays of the sun, hot, scalding tears were streaming down her face.

CHAPTER TWENTY

With the breaking of the full dawn the Clown called the old dog, rose and stretched himself, and, noticing Alice awake, whispered:

"Good mornin',--how d'ye stand it? Kinder coolish, warn't it, 'long 'bout three o'clock?"

Alice placed her finger on her lips.

"Yes--let 'em sleep," whispered the Clown.

He rose, drew on his brogans and tiptoed noiselessly out to the ashes of the dead fire. With the crackling of a blaze freshly built, the rest awoke. The second day of their flight had begun.

It was rough and slow going along the shore of Bear Pond, with the exception of the spit of sand on which they had camped. The shore was lined with dead trees and jagged masses of rock; there was no alternative but to follow the shore, the swamp lands, which were even worse, extending far back of the dead timber. By noon they had only reached the foot of the range of mountains. By another twilight they found themselves on the other side of the range and within half a day's tramp of Alder Swamp.

All that day Alice kept patiently on with the rest. Her husband's grit was a revelation to her; not once since they left the burned camp had he mentioned the catastrophe.

Thayor's mind was also occupied. His loss had been a heavy one; the camp he loved had been criminally laid in ashes--such had been his reward for generosity. The very men he had befriended had burned him out with murderous intent. They would at that moment take his life could they find him. His money had been the cause of jealousy and discontent; it had resulted in a catastrophe--one that had been premeditated, carefully planned and carried swiftly into execution, presumably by the help of Morrison's liquor. It was clear, too, that the fire had started simultaneously in half a dozen places. The identity of the burned man was still a mystery. "Pray God it wasn't poor Bob Dinsmore hunting for food!" he said to himself. If Holcomb and the trapper had any suspicion they made no comment. They had left the body lying where it was. Neither had they referred to the hero who had risked his life to save both Holcomb and Alice.

As for Holcomb's thoughts, they had been all fastened on Margaret. In fact, there was no moment when she was out of his mind. He was continually near her during every step of their forced march as they followed the trapper--often her hand in his for better support.

It was while helping her over the hard places, she leaning on his arm, clasping his fingers for a better spring over a wind-slash or slippery rock that the currents of their lives flowed together.

Margaret, who, though tired out, had kept up her spirits all day, had

wandered off by herself a little way into the silent woods during a half hour's rest and had sunk down on a bed of moss behind the lean-to. There, half hidden by a thicket of balsam, Holcomb had discovered her pitiful little figure huddled in the rough ulster. She did not hear him until he stood over her and, bending, laid his hand on the upturned collar of the overcoat that lay damp against the fair hair.

"Don't cry," he had said tenderly; "we'll soon be out of this."

"I know," she returned faintly, meeting his eyes in an effort to be brave, "but--but--Billy, I'm so unhappy."

"But that's because you're tired out. That's what's the matter. It's been too rough a trip for you. I told Holt yesterday we must go slower."

"No," she moaned, "no--it's not that."

"But it will come out all right," he pleaded, "I feel sure of it. Think of it--to-morrow you will be out of the woods and--and--safely on your way home." Yet he was not sure of either.

She looked up at him with her brown eyes wide open, her lips trembling.

"But then you will be gone, Billy!"

His own lips trembled now. That which he had tried all these days to tell her, she had told him out of her frank young heart. He took one of her plump, little hands in both his own, holding it as gently as he would have held a wounded bird. A strange sensation of weakness stole through him. He bent lower, until his bronzed cheek felt the flush of her own through the maze of spun gold. Then he sank on his knees in the damp moss, pressing his lips to the warm fingers.

"God knows!" he burst out, "I have no right to talk to you. I've tried not to, but I must tell you."

"Don't, Billy--don't!" she sobbed, and she looked into his eyes through her tears, her limp form in the coarse ulster swaying as if she was about to faint.

He felt the hot tears strike his hand; saw the dim wonder in her eyes. Then slowly, still trembling, she sank in his arms.

"And I love you too, Billy," she breathed as she yielded her lips. "I love you with all my heart--with all my soul!"

None of these happenings did they ever breathe to Alice--time enough for that when the fear that haunted them all had passed. The mother had looked at them both in wonder when the two fell into line again, noting the new spring in their steps and the glad light in the girl's eyes, but she made no comment.

They had now reached a desolate region of oozy moss and dead trees; here they camped for the second night. It was a place even a hungry lynx would have avoided. The stillness was oppressive--a silence that one could hear. Before it grew quite dark this audible hush was

twice broken by the plaintive note of a hermit thrush--a bird so shy that he leaves his mate, seeking his hermitage among forgotten places. The place was inanimate--dead like the trees--their skeletons rising weirdly from the spongy moss.

The moon rose at length, seemingly shedding its light over the desolate spot out of pity. Again Alice Thayer lay awake until long past midnight. The very desolation fascinated her. Again she thought of Sperry, and again her face flamed with indignation--in fact, he had seldom been clear of her mind, try as she might to banish him. She wondered if he would have roughed it with the grit her husband had shown. Not once had Sam complained. This, in itself, was a revelation--she who had dared to complain of everything that thwarted her comfort or her plans. Nor had he once failed in all the hours of their long tramp to look after her comfort as best he could. With all this his heavy pack had been badly balanced, so much so that he had been obliged to stop now and then to re-pad the ropes cutting under his armpits with moss--Holcomb helping him--the straps rescued from three charred pack-baskets being reserved for the heavier loads of the Clown, the trapper, and Holcomb.

As these things developed in her mind another feeling arose in her heart: a feeling of pride in the man trudging on ahead of her--pride in his pluck, in his patience, in his cheeriness, and last, in his bodily strength, for to her great surprise her husband proved to be stronger than Blakeman and the match of Holcomb. She had not believed this possible.

At dawn she fell asleep, awaking with a violent headache. She felt as if she had been beaten; every bone in her body ached; her cheeks were burning; her hands were like ice. She shuddered now in a chill, yet she crawled deeper into her blanket and called no one. All through the cold of the early dawn she suffered intensely--shivering with cold and burning with fever, by turns. She dare not move lest she might wake Margaret or Sam. Toward morning her legs grew warm; the old dog had lain across them. Then she fell into a troubled sleep.

When she regained consciousness two days had elapsed. She saw dimly that the rest were at breakfast. It was raining. The old dog again lay across her feet; he was hungry, but he had not moved through the night. She tried to sit up, but the trees danced in front of her. Margaret and Thayer started toward her.

"You've slept so well, mother," she could hear Margaret saying; "you feel better, don't you?" Thayer was on his knees beside her--he put his arm under her shoulders and placed a tin cup to her lips.

"Come, dear--drink this"--she heard his voice faintly. Her lips moved spasmodically. "It's broth," he said softly. "Billy killed a deer this morning at daylight."

She stared up at him with a pair of vacant, feverish eyes. "Mrs. Van Renssalaer cannot come--send these people away, Sam--I want them sent away--at once--at once--Blakeman." The spasmodic movement of her jaw continued, but her words ceased to be audible.

"Drink a little, dear," Sam pleaded. "It will do you good." The lips smiled feebly, pressing wearily against the rusty edge of the tin cup; then she sank back in his arms in a dead faint.

* * * * *

By the second morning her splendid physique came to the rescue. Weakened as she was by fever, she would, she insisted, take her place with the others when they were ready to start. To this Thayer assented, as they were now nearing their last resting place, the railroad lying but half a day's tramp beyond where they were camped.

As the thought of her freedom rose in her mind a strange feeling came over her.

"Won't somebody sing?" she asked. "It's been so dreary for so many wretched long miles. Maybe I can." They were grouped about the smouldering fire at the time, Margaret's head in her lap, Holcomb, the old trapper and the others in a half circle.

Thayer looked at his wife with mingled pride and astonishment: pride in her pluck and her desire to lighten the hearts of those about her--astonishment--amazement really, in the change that had come over her.

Alice lifted her eyes to her husband and began, in her rich contralto voice, a song that recalled the days when he had first known and loved her. She sang it all through, never once taking her eyes from the man who sat apart from the others, his head buried deep in his hands.

As the last note died away a crackling in the brush behind the lean-to was heard. The two woodsmen sprang instantly to their feet; Annette screamed. The drums of Alice's ears were thumping with the beating of her heart. Holcomb reached for his rifle laying between his own and the Clown's pack, and hurriedly cocked it. The old dog had already plunged ahead into the underbrush with a low growl.

"Hold on, Billy," came a thin voice out of the blackness beyond and to the left of the lean-to. "Don't shoot!"

A short, gaunt figure now leaped noiselessly--rather than strode--out into the firelight. He moved with the furtive agility of an animal, making straight for the fire, over which he stood for some moments warming himself.

The silent apparition stood in a pair of soaked moccasins. On his legs were worn trousers of deerskin, patched here and there with the skins of muskrats and squirrels; one thin brown knee showed bare through a rent. Over a tattered woollen shirt hung an old cloth coat twice too big for him--moss-green from exposure, the sleeves of which hung in shreds over his bony fingers. Framed by a shock of sandy hair falling to his shoulders, and by an unkempt, tow-coloured beard, his eyes shone out in the firelight over his cheek-bones, with the cavernous brilliancy of an owl's. To have guessed his age would have been impossible. The truth was he was thirty-one.

No one spoke. They watched.

The trapper rose to his feet and laid his hand on the stranger's shoulder. The figure, with a wistful look in his eyes, twisted his emaciated body and held out his hand. The trapper grasped the thin, sinewy fingers in both his own.

"Friend," he said, turning to Thayer, "I'd like to make ye acquainted with my son--Bob Dinsmore."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The sudden apparition of this pitiful outcast, worn by exposure and untold suffering--coming as he did into the midst of the little band of refugees struggling with their own misfortunes, and the confidence of the trapper in those he was leading to safety, had brought a sudden joy to the old man's heart. He vowed inwardly now that his son should wander no longer--he would save him with the rest.

It had not been the first time the trapper had acknowledged the hide-out as his son. A week after Bailey was shot he had told Holcomb and Freme--with them he knew his son's secret was safe; they, too, had helped the outcast more than once.

Years ago this strange old man had come out of the forest into the valley below Big Shanty, settled there and, after some years, married. No one knew where he came from, neither did they know he had been married before. As to his son's name, "Bob Dinsmore," it could hardly be called assumed, for he had never been known by any other. When a boy of sixteen he had, like his father, appeared in the valley, hailing, like so many others in that remote region, from nowhere in particular. He gave out that he had worked for a man on Black River--that was sufficient. The two built a cabin and the old man and the boy became boon companions. There was nothing strange in this. When Bob Dinsmore became twenty-two years of age he married--later he killed Bailey. That was the whole story.

After that the old man had become a hermit from choice, helping his son when he could--often at the risk of his own life. Finally this became impossible and he was obliged for a time to let him save himself.

During this enforced exile he had developed both the shyness and the daring of an animal. With him it had become an instinct, when he moved far, or in a dangerous locality, to travel by night--like the panther, whose tracks though rarely seen by others, he often found in his wanderings. When he was forced to take to the woods by day, he either proceeded cautiously or slept. Both his hearing and his eyesight having become acute, he saw and heard with the alertness of a fox, and lived as free--a cruel freedom that became a mockery. He had no clothes save the makeshifts he stood in. When it rained he remained soaking wet, like the ground and the trees about him; he became one of them, drying when they did; drenched, frozen or warmed at the will of the weather. He no longer spoke; he became silent like the things about him--when his own voice escaped him it startled him.

Yet even in his isolation he made friends: the cave that sheltered him; the tree whose rotten core always burned for him under his flint and steel; some pure, unfailing spring,--all these had for him a certain dumb comradeship.

And now to be fed and warmed at the same time! To be eating no longer alone, crouched in the dark like a hungry lynx, often in the drenching rain, or hidden under the cold roof of some rock; but among human beings whom he did not fear, men and women who spoke to him kindly and gave him the best they had in their own misfortune. To meet again Billy and Freme; to feel the friendly pressure of the old dog's head upon his thin knees; to be within sight once more of a snug, dry lean-to ready to rest his tired body. These were mercies he had never thought to see again. Yet, thankful as he was for them, they were secondary to his silent joy at seeing his father.

Occasionally the old man spoke to him in a low tone, as he piled the freshly cut night wood beside the fire. In reply the outcast either nodded or shook his head. When he had finished eating--and he ate ravenously--he rose, went over to Thayer, and laying his hand timidly on his arm, motioned him aside.

"I've got something to say to ye, Mr. Thayer," he whispered. "That's what I come for; I'd like to talk to ye _now_."

Thayer nodded and, turning to the others, said:

"Mr. Dinsmore and I have a little matter to talk over."

At last the two had met face to face--this man who, try as he would to banish him from his mind, always rose before him: in the dead of night; before his fire in his own room at home, his wife out at some social function or asleep on the floor below him; in his walks through the woods when he would stop and listen, hoping he might again see the same, worn, shambling figure he had watched from across the brook the day he shot the buck. Why, he could not tell. Perhaps it was because of their mutual loneliness. Perhaps it was because of a woman. Whatever the cause there was something which seemed to link them together.

With a quick gesture he turned to Holcomb. "Will you keep up the fire, Billy? I want all of you to get some sleep."

"What does it mean, Sam?" asked Alice nervously.

"News, I hope," replied Thayer. "Go to sleep, dear; you need it."

The hide-out stood gazing nervously at the ground. "Do you feel better?" she asked, approaching him. "You are to sleep next to your father, I believe."

"Yes, marm," he stammered awkwardly; "I'm warm. Thank ye for the supper--I ain't hongry no more."

She nodded good night and went back to her blanket next to Margaret. Bending over the girl she lifted the mass of fair hair and kissed her on the forehead. Then she drew her own blanket about her.

Thayer and the hide-out seated themselves on a log lying on the other side of the fire, out of hearing.

"Mr. Thayer," began Dinsmore, after a moment's silence, "they've treated ye like a dog."

Thayor met the owl-like eyes grimly, a bitter smile playing about his unshaven chin, but he did not confirm the statement.

"But there's one that'll never trouble ye no more," exclaimed Dinsmore, looking queerly at the man beside him.

"Who?" asked Thayor.

"Bergstein, damn him!" returned Dinsmore slowly; "I seen him."

"But he left the camp days ago--the morning I discharged him."

"He's started on consid'ble of a trip _now_," replied the hide-out. "I see what was left of him."

"Dead!" exclaimed Thayor.

"Burned blacker 'n a singed hog. They ain't much left of him, and what they is ain't pleasant to look at. He ain't got but one arm left and that's clutchin' a holt of a empty ker'sene can."

Thayor gave a short gasp.

"And it was that cheat, Bergstein!" he cried in amazement.

"More devil than cheat," replied Dinsmore--"and three-quarters snake. The gang he trained agin ye done what he told 'em to--they burned ye out with him a-leadin' 'em. I watched him and know--see him with the can 'fore the fire began. It's as plain as day, Mr. Thayor. Father's right--yer life ain't safe till ye git to the cars."

Thayor's grizzled, unshaven jaw closed hard. He sat staring into the fire, every muscle in his haggard face tense.

"There's men me and you know in these woods now," continued Dinsmore, "who ain't no more to blame in this ornery business 'n I be."

Again Thayor looked up in surprise.

"I had hoped as much," he said slowly, shaking his head. "There was not one of them, however, that came forward to help us--I am excepting, you understand, your father, Freme, and Holcomb. I owe them a debt of gratitude which I can never repay. Why have _you_ come, Dinsmore?" he added, turning abruptly, with something of the briskness of his old business-like manner.

"Because ye've been good to me," replied the hide-out; "that's why I come; I wanted to do ye a good turn--I ain't got nothin' else to give ye."

"Good to you--I don't understand."

"I come to thank ye, Mr. Thayor. I see ye once the day ye got the buck. Father told me your name after ye'd gone. He and me eat up what ye left, and I got the money ye left fer me--Myra Hathaway's takin' care of it--she's got my leetle gal. Yes--I seen ye more 'n once. You ain't never seen me--folks don't see me as a rule; but I've seen you many a time when ye've stepped by me and I've been layin' hid out; times when I'd starved if it hadn't been for him"--and he nodded

across the fire to Blakeman.

"I caught a partridge once he'd winged," he went on, "and give it to him, seein' he was a city man and wouldn't know me. He see I was poor--thought I had run away from some gov'ment place and I let it go at that. He used to give me what was left from the kitchen; he'd come out and leave it hid for me 'long 'bout dark--your hired man asleep over thar, I'm talkin' 'bout. He said you wouldn't mind--not if you knowed how bad off I was for a snack to eat. I might hev stole it from ye more'n once, but I ain't never stole nothin'--I ain't a thief, Mr. Thayer."

"Why didn't you come to me?" asked Thayer, after a moment's pause. He was strangely moved at the man's story. "I would have helped you, Dinsmore. I have told Holcomb repeatedly I wanted to help you."

"So Billy told me, and so did my father--but I 'most give up bein' helped."

"How long have you been in this misery of yours?"

"A long time," he replied nervously; "a long time. Thar's been days and nights when I wished I was dead."

"After you killed Bailey?" asked Thayer quietly, meeting the eyes of the outcast. The figure beside him began to tremble, clenching his bony hands in an effort to steady them; then he looked up.

"You know?" he faltered huskily. "You know?" he repeated.

Thayer nodded.

"You know what I done! God knows I had a right to! They say I ain't fit to live among men."

Again Thayer stared into the fire.

"How they've hounded me," Dinsmore went on, clearing his thin voice as best he could--a voice unaccustomed to conversation. "The winter's the worst; you ain't never been hounded in winter. You ain't never knowed what it is to go hongry and alone. It'll give ye a new idee consarnin' folks. I used to think I knew the woods, but I tell ye I know 'em _now_. I've got friends in 'em now," he went on, as if confiding a secret; "sometimes a fox will leave me what he ain't ate--I've known a wolverine git a dum sight more human than them that's been huntin' me. Him and me shared the same cave--he got to know me--he was a great fisher. I got him out of a trap twice--he see I warn't goin' to hurt him."

Thayer sat looking steadily into the hollow, tired eyes like a man in a dream, forgetting even to question him further. Moreover, he knew he was telling the truth, and that Dinsmore's frankness was proof enough that he had much to say to him of importance. Somehow he felt that in his disconnected narrative he would slowly lead to it. His character in this respect was much like his father's.

"Winter's the worst," repeated Dinsmore, the effort of speaking already perceptible in his drawn features--"nights when yer heart seems froze and ye wait for mornin' and the sun to thaw in; the sun's

most as good as food when yer that way. I tried, twice, to git across the line into Canady, but I come back. I hadn't no friends thar, and somehow these here woods I knowed seemed kinder. Besides, I always had the chance of seein' father and sometimes Billy and Freme; and sometimes--my little gal." He paused, trying to proceed more directly with the drift of what he wished to say. For some moments his mind seemed vacant. At length he resumed:

"I knowed ye couldn't git clear of them fellers by way of Morrison's. I was layin' hid when I see the fire start; I see some fellers from whar I was run across the road; thar was more of 'em sneakin' off back to the camp. They was someways off from me, but I could see 'em plain. I'd hev got to ye then but I dassent run no risk; thar's a reward out on me dead or alive. Bimeby I see ye all cross the brook and I knowed ye was safe and that father'd do the best he knowed how fer ye. When it come night I begun to travel, hopin' to strike yer tracks, but the fire cut me off and I had to lay hid till the wind shifted. Soon's I see it was safe to travel I come along huntin' for ye and father. 'T warn't till I come through the swamp at Bear Pond that I struck yer tracks--seen 'em plain then and the way ye was a-goin'. Long 'bout four o'clock to-day I heared some fellers' voices ahead of me down in a holler. Then I see smoke and knowed they was camped close by. Bimeby I crawled out from whar I was hid and clum a tree. I see 'em plain then--six of 'em; they was eatin' dinner--all of 'em lumber jacks from the lower shanty; one was a Frenchy from his talk. Thar warn't none of 'em I knowed in perticlar 'cept Eph Edmunds, and he was layin' drunk 'longside the fire. I heared one of 'em say thar warn't no use follerin' ye further; that ye'd most likely got to the cars. Then another feller says, says he, "I tell ye we've got to find him; 't won't do to let him git away--there'll be hell to pay."

Thayor shook his head gloomily.

"What have I done, Dinsmore, that I should be hunted even like you?" he sighed. For some moments the hide-out did not speak. Finally he continued:

"I had a reason for what I done," and a strange glitter came into his eyes. "See here, Mr. Thayor, you're human and maybe you'll understand; I'm goin' to tell ye the truth. I give Bailey all the chance in the world; I even come to him like a friend and says to him what's mine ain't yours; I ain't never troubled ye nor your woman--we was happy--me and my wife, 'fore he begun to put notions in her head. 'T warn't long 'fore she begun to think thar warn't nobody like Bailey. He kep' store then close by whar we lived, and he give her most anythin' she wanted. She called it 'credit'.

"One day Bailey went off to Montreal, where Bergstein had a place fixed up for her. I'd been off trappin' up Big Shanty, and when I come back home next night she was gone. She didn't come back for most a week, and when she come I see she was drunk. Bailey come back the next day. I sot waitin' for him on the store porch. When he see me he come up to me uglier'n sin. 'Who in hell invited you? he says. He weighed twice as much as me, and I see he was fightin' mad. He leapt like a cat to one side of me and 'fore I knowed it he had me down. Them what was in the store come out, but thar warn't one of 'em that darst lay hands on Bailey. We wrastled some in the road--the dust blinded me. Then he begun to kick me in the mouth and back; I couldn't see for the blood. When I woke up I was to home and I seen she was gone. Bimeby

I crawled out of bed into the kitchen and I see Ed Sumner settin' 'longside the stove. 'Bob,' says he, 'he used ye awful, no use talkin'--he liked to killed ye; I hauled him clear o' ye and carried ye back home. Ye'd better git back into bed,' says he. 'Doc' Rand'll be here 'fore long; I'll be back in an hour,' says he. 'Fore I knowed it he was gone. That was 'bout three o'clock; the sun was shinin' warm in the kitchen and I sot thar thinkin' and gittin' steadier and madder. Bimeby I filled the magazine of my Winchester and started to find Bailey. Thar was more'n a dozen on the store porch when I come up. When they seen me they slunk back in the store and shut the door. I stood thar waitin' in the road; then I see Bailey come out. 'Hain't you got your satisfy?' he says, 'you--' and I see him jerk out a revolver. He was jest steppin' off the porch when my first ball hit him. He give a scream, tumbled in the road and started to git up on his hands and knees; the second ball broke his neck. Then I walked into the store. 'I'm through,' I says, 'but the first man that lays hands on me I'll kill same's I killed him.' Thar warn't none of 'em that spoke or moved. What I needed I took and paid for; a box of ca'tridges, matches and a can of beef. I had a dollar bill and I laid it on the counter and walked out the store and started into the woods. That's the hull of it, Mr. Thayer. 'Sposin it had been your wife, or your leetle gal. You'd hev done the same's I done, wouldn't ye?"

Thayer breathed heavily.

"Wouldn't ye?" insisted Dinsmore. "He ruined her, body and soul--he stole her, I tell ye; he warn't satisfied with that--he got her to drinkin'. Wouldn't ye a-killed him, Mr. Thayer?"

Thayer's eyes sought the shadows between the pines; for an instant he did not reply. Suddenly Sperry's face loomed before him and as instantly vanished, only to appear again as certain excuses hitherto explainable became for the first time obscure and suggestive. Then the words of Alice's song rang in his ears and a thrill of joy quivered through him.

Again the hide-out repeated the question.

"Wouldn't ye, Mr. Thayer?"

Thayer turned his head and faced the hide-out.

"Yes," he said slowly, between his clenched teeth; "I would have killed him too, Mr. Dinsmore."

"And yet they say I ain't fit to live 'mong men," murmured the thin voice, grown fainter from speaking. "God knows they've made me suffer for what I done."

"Where is she?" asked Thayer, a certain tenderness creeping into his voice.

There was no reply.

"Have you no news of your wife?"

"I dunno; I ain't never laid eyes on her since," he answered wearily. "I can't even ask no one; father said he heard she was in Montreal, where Bergstein had some hold on her. I'd have took her back if I'd

been free. 'T won't never be no use now--I won't never be free, Mr. Thayer."

Again silence fell upon the group; each one was occupied with his own thoughts. The old man had slouched closer and had settled himself beside his son, his hand on the outcast's knee. Thayer's voice broke the silence.

"Where are these men you ran across, Dinsmore?" he asked abruptly, a ring of determination in his voice.

"'Bout eight mile from here, I figger it--in a holler southeast of Alder Swamp," answered the hide-out, returning to a sense of his surroundings.

"And you say they were camped?"

"Yes, I see them cut some timber for a lean-to. Like as not they cal'lated to make it a kind of headquarters for a day or so, strikin' off by twos to find ye. That's what I come to tell ye; I didn't want ye to be took. I knowed I'd find ye if I kep' on--I'm more used than most of 'em to travellin' in the dark."

"Could you find them again, Dinsmore?"

"Yes, but I'd hev to be twice as keerful. It'd be all up with me if they was to see me."

"I will take care of that," replied Thayer briskly.

"What do ye mean?" stammered Dinsmore.

"I mean that you shall take me to them to-morrow."

"But I ain't goin' to let ye risk yer life if I--"

"I mean what I say, Dinsmore. I start at daylight."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Before sunrise the next morning two men were seen by a circling hawk moving steadily southeast. The man leading stopped now and then to glance carefully about him; in these pauses he studied the ground--often a weed trodden down in dew turned their course abruptly. After six miles of this careful back-tracing Dinsmore halted--this time to listen. Both could now faintly distinguish voices ahead.

"Keep straight on over that thar hemlock ridge," whispered the hide-out; "they're in the holler on t'other side." He held out his hand to Thayer, pointed again in the direction he had indicated, and disappeared as easily as a partridge.

Sam Thayer went on alone.

* * * * *

It was a day of dreary anxiety to those who awaited his return. The trapper blamed himself for having allowed him to go. "It ain't right for ye, friend, to risk yer life like this," he had declared. "Them fellers won't stop at nothin' now--I've done my best to git ye clear of 'em and I'll git ye clear and 'board the cars by to-morrow--all of ye, if ye'll let me." To which Thayer, laying his hand on the old man's shoulder, had replied:

"I refuse to expose any of you. It is a matter that concerns myself alone. I hardly think they will attempt to molest a single, defenceless man. As for your son, I'll take care that no one sees him."

As the day wore on and no tidings came from either Thayer or the hide-out, Holcomb's and the Clown's uneasiness became more and more apparent. The midday meal passed in comparative silence. By noon the sky became overcast and it drizzled intermittently. This told sadly upon Alice, who went back to her blanket. There she closed her eyes, but sleep was impossible.

Again she reviewed the events not only of this summer but of the winter preceding it. She thought of Sperry, slowly going over in her mind their days together--all that had happened; all that he had dared to ask her to do. With astonishing clearness she now weighed his worth. Bit by bit she recalled their last hours together that night on the veranda. Then the sturdy honesty of men like Holcomb, the trapper and the Clown in contrast with Sperry, and many of her guests at home, rose in her mind. Their kindness to her; their unselfishness, despite the fact that she had once treated them like a pack of uncouth boors. But for Billy Holcomb she would have burned to death. She knew his worth now. Sam had been right.

Then her mind dwelt on the close friendship that had grown up between Margaret and the young woodsman. Was it friendship, really? Again she thought of Sperry and again her cheeks burned. He had not asked her to seek a divorce and marry him--he had demanded briefly that she leave all and follow him. With this thought her face paled with anger. Instantly her husband rose clear in her mind; he who, never once in all his life, had asked her, or anyone else, to do a dishonourable thing. She wondered at his patience and his pluck, even when she remembered their many quarrels in which he had lost control of himself.

With a low moan she buried her face in her hands as little by little her mind reverted to her own cruelty; to the days of her domination over him; to her outbursts of temper: he, a man of strength, with the courage of his convictions. This he had proved during their forced march in a hundred different ways--was proving it to-day, magnificently. One ray of comfort shone through it all--that, foolish and vain as she had been, she could still look her husband in the face.

At length she rose shakily, and moving slowly crossed the small space about the fire to where the trapper was chopping firewood for the night.

"And he is not back yet?" she said to the trapper in a hopeless tone.

"No, marm, not yet," he answered gloomily. "It'll be night 'fore long; thar ain't much daylight left him to travel in."

Alice caught her breath. "But you think he'll come, don't you, Mr. Holt?" "Yes, marm, I do," he answered, laying down his axe. "'T ain't hardly possible he won't; I cal'late they'll both git in 'fore dark. It won't do to borry trouble 'fore it comes. It was my fault, marm--I shouldn't hev let him go--it warn't right--but he would hev his way."

"And you don't think they're lost?" she ventured timidly.

"Not so long as he stays by my son, marm--no, 't ain't likely they're lost; it warn't _that_ I was thinkin' of." He saw the sudden terror in her eyes.

"But you think he will be back, don't you? Oh! you do, Mr. Holt--don't you?"

"Yes, marm, I tell ye I do. He had grit 'nough to go, and I cal'late he'll hev grit 'nough to git back. He seemed to know what he was doin'."

She turned away that he might not see her tears. She could hear the dull whack of the old man's axe as she retraced her steps to her place by the crackling fire.

For another anxious hour she sat shivering before it, then the Clown announced apologetically that supper was ready. Blakeman handed her a cup of tea, but she did not taste it. Annette put to rights the few comforts within the lean-to and re-folded the blankets. Margaret and Holcomb whispered together. All moved as if in the shadow of a great calamity.

It was now pitch dark and raining. The camp sat in strained silence. Finally Margaret came over to her mother and whispered something in her ear. A weary smile crossed Alice's lips; then she beckoned to Holcomb, laid her hand on his arm, and looking up into his face said in a broken voice:

"You _will_ look after Margaret, Mr. Holcomb, won't you, if--if anything has happened?"

"All my life, Mrs. Thayer."

Before she could speak the girl leaned over and hid her face on her mother's shoulder. A light broke over the mother's face; then she found her voice.

"And it is true, Margaret?" she said, smoothing the girl's cheek. "What will your father say?"

"He knows I love Billy," she whispered, as she threw her arms around her mother's neck and burst into tears.

A grave and ominous anxiety now took possession of the camp. That something must be done, and at once, to find Thayer, had become evident as the night began to settle. But no man in the camp lagged. Billy and the trapper were busy tearing long strips of yellow bark from a birch tree for torches, while the Clown, who had been hurriedly

cutting two forked sticks, stood fitting them with the twisted bark. For some moments the three woodsmen held a low and earnest conversation together, Alice watching them with startled eyes. She caught also the figure of the trapper and the old dog standing at the limit of the firelight waiting for Holcomb, and the flare of the two bark torches that the old man held in his hands.

At that instant the old dog sprang into the darkness beyond the trapper, barking sharply. Holcomb, followed by Margaret, who had never left his side since he had determined to go in search of her father, rushed forward, following the waning light from the torches now glimmering far ahead as the trapper leaped on after the old dog.

Alice, now left alone with Blakeman and Annette, sat peering into the void, her ears open to every sound. Every now and then she would rise, walk to the edge of the firelight, stand listening for a few moments and sink back again on her seat by the embers.

Suddenly Blakeman rose to his feet, his hand cupped to his ear, his whole body tense. His knowledge of the woods had taught him their unusual sounds. Stepping quickly over the surrounding logs, he moved to the edge of the darkness and listened, then walked quickly into the blackness.

The dim flicker of approaching torches, like will-o'-the-wisps, now flashed among the giant trees. Alice sprang up, caught the end of the long overcoat in her fingers and, guided by the sound of Blakeman's footsteps, calling to him at every step, dashed on into the darkness. Then she tripped, and with a piercing shriek fell headlong.

A posse of men were approaching. The torches drew nearer and nearer--voices could be heard. She strained her ears--but it was not that of her husband. Again she staggered to her feet, reeled, and would have fallen had not Blakeman caught her. He had seen the party and turned back before he reached them.

"He's all right, madam--there he comes--they are all coming."

Thayer pushed his way ahead. He had heard the scream and recognized the voice.

"My God, Blakeman. What's the matter?" He was on his knees beside her now, her head resting in the hollow of his elbow.

"Madam's only fainted, sir. We got worried at your being gone so long."

Margaret tried to throw herself down beside her mother, but Holcomb held her back.

"No--let your father alone," he whispered--"and let us come away."

The trapper and the others, followed by Holcomb and Margaret, moved toward the camp, the torches illumining their faces. No one saw the hide-out. He was there--within touching distance, but he moved only in the shadows.

Alice opened her eyes and clasped both her arms around her husband's neck.

"Oh, Sam! tell me it is you--and you are safe, and nothing has happened? Oh! Sam--I have been so wretched!"

"There, dear--compose yourself. It's all right--everything is all right, and we have nothing to fear anywhere. Come, now--let me help you to your feet and--"

"No, Sam--not yet--not yet! Please listen--I've been so wicked--so foolish--Please forgive me--please tell me you love me. Don't let it make any difference. I can stand everything but that. Sam, we once loved each other--can't we again? I love you--I do--I _do_!"

For an instant he held her from him gazing into her eyes. The revulsion was so great--the surprise so intense, he could hardly believe his senses. Then a great uplift swept through him.

"Hush," he breathed. "Tell me again that you love me. Say it again, Alice. Say it!" The vibrant trembling of her body, close held in his arms, thrilled him; he could see dimly in the shadow the same old look in her eyes--the eyes of the girl he loved. The hour of their betrothal seemed to be his once more.

"I don't want to go home, Sam; I never want to see it again," she swept on. "I want to live here. Will you rebuild Big Shanty for you and me, dearest, and for Margaret and Billy? They love each other and--"

He folded her in his arms.

"Kiss me again!" she pleaded.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Half supporting her, one arm about his neck, her hands clinging to his as if she was afraid some unseen power would take him from her, the two regained the camp, the blaze of freshly heaped-up logs having lighted the way.

"Give Dinsmore something hot to drink at once," were Thayer's first words on reaching the group. "He's been in water up to his neck. Had it not been for him we should have had to lie out all night; he sees in the dark like an owl. We've had a hard tramp." He stood steaming before the fire as he spoke--drenched to the skin, the others crowding round him, too happy for the moment to ply him with questions. He himself was quivering with an inward joy. Alice's kisses were still on his lips.

The trapper edged nearer. "And what did them fellers say, Mr. Thayer, when ye found 'em?" he asked. He had asked the question before, but Thayer only waved his hand saying he would wait until they reached camp so all could hear the story.

"What did they say to me, Hite? They told me for one thing that they had done their best to find me, and I guess that was true," and he

smiled grimly. "And now, who do you think was leading them, Billy?"

"Shank Dollard, I guess," returned Holcomb.

"No--Le Boeuf!"

"That Frenchman--and you kept the doctor a week to look after him!" exclaimed Holcomb indignantly.

"Yes. That was the reason he hunted for me."

The men crowded about the speaker, the women drawing closer, the old dog closest of all. Dinsmore, who was seated on a stump just outside the firelight, listened eagerly. He had heard the story before, but he wanted every detail of it again. His father had pulled the dripping coat from his back when they reached the fire, and he was now wrapped in one of the blankets that Margaret had placed about his thin shoulders.

"Yes--Le Boeuf," continued Thayer. "His arm was still in a sling, but he and his crowd--there were six of them in all--had done their best to overtake us before we got to the railroad. He was more afraid of me than I was of him. When I walked in among them he jumped to his feet and came straight toward me. I was alone--with Mr. Dinsmore within reach but out of sight--and, Hite, they never saw your son--just as I promised you--"

"I hear you men are looking for me," I said. "What can I do for you?" They all stood around, their eyes on Le Boeuf, as if they wanted him to speak. A more surprised and frightened lot of men I never saw.

"Well, we didn't burn de house," Le Boeuf began. "We 'fraid you come and 'rest us. We haf no money to fight reech man like you--we want work for you again. We know who burn de house--it not us."

"That's all right, Le Boeuf," I said. "I know you didn't have anything to do with the fire or you wouldn't be here. Now go back home all of you, and if I rebuild Big Shanty I'll send for you to help. Good-bye!" and I turned on my tracks, picked up Mr. Dinsmore where he had hidden himself and started back. We really have been running away from our shadows--" and Thayer laughed one of his hearty laughs that showed how greatly his mind was relieved.

"And what kep' ye so long?" broke in the trapper.

"The fear of running across some of them who would know your son. You see we had to go around the lake, and we didn't know which side of it they would take. The rain, too, made the night settle the earlier. We were almost within sight of the camp here when we saw the torches. Holcomb and Margaret reached us first. I guess you carried her over the rough places--didn't you, Billy? Well, I don't blame you, my boy." There was a twinkle in his eye when he spoke. He was very happy to-night! "And so you see we have had our scare for nothing."

"And now one thing more before I turn in," he added in his quick, business-like way. "This has been on my mind all day, and as we have no secrets now that we can't share with each other, I want you all to hear what I am going to say. Will you come closer, Mr. Dinsmore"--it was marvellous how he never omitted the prefix; "would you mind moving

up so that you can listen the better? I am going to do what I can to end your sufferings." The hide-out shambled up and sat in a crouching position, the blanket about his shoulders, his hollow eyes fixed on Thayer.

"What I want to say to you all is this: I have had several conferences with this poor fellow and he has my deepest sympathy. I believe every word he has told me. What I intend to do now is to find a place for him among the lumber gangs in the great Northwest. There he will be safe; there, too, he can earn his living for he knows the woods thoroughly, but he must get to Canada without a day's delay. I can handle the matter better there than here. I have some friends in Montreal who can help, and some others farther north--correspondents of mine."

The head of the hide-out dropped to his breast; then he muttered, half to himself:

"I dassent--ain't nobody to look arter her but me; 'taint much, but it's all she's got."

Thayer turned quickly. "You mean your little girl? I've thought of that; she shall join you whenever you're safe." Then he added in a lower tone--so low that only Dinsmore heard: "Your wife was in Montreal, remember, when you last heard from her, and now that Bergstein's dead she may get free."

The owl-like eyes stared at the slowly dying fire; hot tears trickled over the cavernous sockets and stopped in the unkempt beard. Before he could answer there came a voice behind him:

"Didn't I tell ye so, son--didn't I tell ye ye could trust him?"

"I hope so, Hite," returned Thayer--"and you heard what I said about his getting to Canada, didn't you?"

"Yes, I heard ye, Mr. Thayer." "And are you willing?"

"Yes."

Thayer paused a moment, then he said thoughtfully: "There is only one thing that worries me and that is how to get him clear of the woods and across the line. Somebody must help. The question is now whom can we trust?"

"That needn't worry ye a mite," answered the old man in a decided tone. "He's got all the help he wants."

Thayer looked up. "Who?" he asked in some surprise.

"Me and the old dog. We'll git him thar."

THE END

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