

**OTTWELL
BINNS**

THE LADY OF
NORTH STAR

Ottwell Binns

The Lady of North Star

«Public Domain»

Binns O.

The Lady of North Star / O. Binns — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	10
CHAPTER III	15
CHAPTER IV	20
CHAPTER V	24
CHAPTER VI	29
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	34

Ottwell J. Binns

The Lady of North Star

CHAPTER I

THE END OF A TRAIL

THERE was a smell of burning spruce in the sharp air, and Corporal Bracknell, of the Northwest Mounted Police, threw back his head and sniffed it gratefully. His team of dogs had been conscious of it for some time, and now, quickening the pace, they broke into joyous yelps as they turned inward towards the Saskatoon bushes on the left bank of the frozen river. The corporal smiled to himself.

“They’re wise dogs,” he muttered, “but not wise enough to know the trail’s end. I wonder if I shall find the man here.”

He followed the well-marked track towards the bank. The aromatic smell of the spruce grew stronger, but there was nothing to be seen save the shadowy woods, and the packed sled-road between. The road had been cut through the trees, and here and there a stump bearing the mark of the ax protruded above the snow. For perhaps three hundred yards it ran in a bee-line between the tall trunks, and then turned abruptly to the right. He reached the turning, and looked about him curiously. The road still continued, but the end of it was not in sight, for again it turned, as it seemed to him into the very heart of the forest.

“There’s a house or encampment somewhere about,” he said to himself, “but – ”

He broke off abruptly as something caught his eye. It was a new-marked sled-trail debouching from the main track, and he stooped to examine it carefully. When he straightened himself there was an eager light in his eye, and curbing his impatient dogs he stood considering for a full two minutes.

“He may have a shack here,” so his thoughts ran, “but if there’s more than that, why this broad road?”

He considered the avenue made by the sombre pinewoods on each side of the road, and then shook his head. “Too much style for Koon Dick. There must be a homestead somewhere about, but if those are not the marks of his sled-runners I’m a dutchman.”

He spoke a word or two to his well-trained dogs, and slipping off his snowshoes turned towards the trail which led into the wood, and began to follow it carefully. As he walked, he unbuttoned the pistol-holster at his waist, and gripped the handle of the weapon in preparation for action. The man whose trail he believed that he was following was not given to being over-scrupulous. He had pursued him for nearly four hundred miles, and now that the end of the chase was in sight, it behoved him to be cautious, for if Koon Dick suspected his presence his resentment of it might even go to the extreme length of a rifle bullet. He left the trail, and began to move cautiously from tree to tree.

The short Northland day was almost over. Dusk was coming on apace, and the gloom under the trees deepened, little misgivings awake in his mind.

Was it wise to follow the track into the heart of the wood? His dogs were good dogs, but —

The sudden sharp crash of a rifle echoed through the stillness, followed immediately by a second, and that by the sharp cry of a woman assailed by mortal terror, and then there came the quick yelp of dogs. He turned in his tracks and began to run back under the trees.

How long it was before he reached the main trail he never knew, but never in his life had he run so fast before. Fear was pounding at his heart. His dogs? If they were gone —

He reached the edge of the wood to find them still where he had left them, and his relief found expression in a quick “Thank God!” He looked round him, up and down the road and into the dark

woods on either hand. There was nothing to be seen, and the coming of night had already shortened the range of vision. He stood listening intently. No sound broke the awful silence that had followed the shots and the curdling cry of fear. His hand, resting on the gee-pole of the sled, shook a little.

“It was a woman,” he whispered, “a white woman, at that. There’s some infernal mystery about. I wonder if Koon Dick – ”

He did not finish the thought. Setting his face to the turn in the road, he gave the dogs the word and they moved forward. Somewhere at the end of the road there was a human habitation. Of that he was convinced. He would find it, and perhaps at the same time find Koon Dick and the solution of that mysterious cry which had so suddenly startled the silent woods.

But he was not destined to reach the end of the road without further adventure. As he reached the turn he became aware of a narrow road on the left hand cut at right angles from the main track, and as he looked down it, saw a shadowy figure moving swiftly between the trees straight towards him. Against the fading light and the white background of snow he made out the form of a woman, and instantly halted his dogs with the intention of speaking to her. She was perhaps five and twenty yards away when he first saw her, and the distance between them she covered at a run, approaching him apparently without seeing him. Her line of progression brought her within four yards of the place where he stood waiting in the shadow of a giant spruce. Still she did not see him, and he was about to make his presence known, when the sight of her face checked him.

It was a young face, and beautiful, but as he saw it, it was a picture of incarnate terror. The eyes were staring as in horror. There was a stony look about the cameo-like features, and he caught the gasping intake of breath as she passed him. He had seen terror in feminine faces before, once when a drunken half-breed had lifted a knife to slay, and once on the face of an Indian girl, swept towards the White Horse Rapids on the Yukon in a frail canoe, and he had no doubt whatever as to the emotion which found expression in that stonily beautiful face. The girl was badly frightened. He was quite certain of that, and the fact of her passing both himself and his team without observing them was further evidence that she was in great stress of mind. As she hurried by something in her hand caught his eye. It was a rifle carried at the trail.

For a moment he stood there undecided what to do. Once he made as if to follow the girl, and then checking himself again, stood considering. Those two shots which he had heard – what did they mean? They had sounded quite close, and now there came this girl, clearly badly frightened, carrying a rifle and hurrying from the wood. He looked up the narrow path between the gloomy pines, his trained mind and his instincts working together. Something had occurred in the wood, something tragical, or it had not brought that look on the girl’s face. What was it?

Tired as he was with the day’s travel, and certain though he was of the nearness of some house of rest, he could not leave the problem unsolved. For the moment he even forgot Koon Dick, and again leaving his dogs he turned into the path from which the girl had emerged. He moved cautiously, with the service pistol in his hand. He did not know what to expect, and he was not inclined to be caught unprepared. Once, as he walked in the darkness of the trees, he paused, and throwing back the ear-flaps of his fur-cap, stood listening. No sound reached him, though a moment before he had caught a noise which had seemed like the snapping of a dry twig. Thinking he must have been mistaken, he resumed his way. As he did so, a shadowy form behind him slid from one tree trunk to another; and as he progressed the form in the wood followed, evidently stalking him.

Corporal Bracknell, however, remained unconscious of the shadow, and moving quickly but silently on his way, came suddenly upon something which brought him to an abrupt halt. In the snow not three yards from where he stood lay the huddled form of a man. For a moment he stared at it as if fascinated, and as the man did not move, when the moment had passed he stepped swiftly forward, and bent over the inanimate form. The man was lying on his side, and a dark stain in the snow the corporal divined was blood. Apparently the man was dead, and as it was now too dark to see his face, the corporal felt in his pouch and produced a tin box of sulphur matches. Striking one, he waited until

the sulphur had finished spluttering, and when the wood was fairly alight, he bent over the prostrate form, shading the match with his hands so as to throw the light upon the man's face. Then suddenly he dropped the match and stood upright.

"Koono Dick!" he muttered, and then whistled softly to himself.

He struck another match and looked again in order to make sure. As for the second time the flickering light fell on the face in the snow, every doubt vanished. The man who was lying there was the man whom he had followed for *four* hundred miles through the waste, the man whom he had hoped to make his prisoner, but who now, if appearances were to be trusted, had finally escaped him. Dropping the match as it burned towards the end, he thrust his hand inside the man's fur parka to feel if the heart were beating. He could detect no movement, and as he withdrew the hand, he stood upright, and as he considered question after question went through his mind at the gallop.

Who had killed Koono Dick? The girl whom he had met with that look of frozen terror on her face? Who was she? Had she shot the man lying at his feet? Why had she done so? Where did she live? As the last question shot in his mind he knew that the answer to it was in his grasp. He had seen the direction she had followed, and he guessed that whatever homestead lay at the end of that road cut through the forest would be her dwelling place. As this conviction surged into his mind the whining of his dogs came to his ears. They were evidently growing restless, and since he could do nothing by lingering there, after one glance at the still form lying in the snow, he swung on his heel, and made all speed back to where his team awaited him. They yelped with delight as he appeared, and when he gave the word, bounded impatiently forward along the well-beaten track.

Four minutes later, a turn in the road unexpectedly brought into view the homestead that he was seeking. It was set in the midst of a large clearing, and from its outline in the darkness was of considerable proportions for a Northland lodge. Lights shone in three of the windows, and just as he reached the wooden fence which ran round the house, a door opened, and a light within streaming through outlined the form of a man in the act of entering.

Corporal Bracknell shouted to him, and the man turned round and peered into the darkness, then he rested something against the wooden wall of the passage, shut the door, and moved towards the policeman.

"Who are you?" he asked, as he came nearer.

"Corporal Bracknell – on Dominion service," replied the policeman.

"Corporal Bracknell?"

As the man echoed the words the corporal caught a puzzled note in his tones, and explained further.

"Yes, of the Mounted Police."

"Oh, of course! I was not thinking of the Mounted service. I am a stranger in the Nor'-West –" Bracknell had already divined that such must be the case, but he did not say so. He laughed lightly, and made his wants known.

"I'm on service, and tired. I should be grateful for supper and a bunk if that is possible."

"It is quite possible, Officer, and Joy – I mean Miss Gargrave will be very glad to oblige you. She is always pleased to play the Good Samaritan."

As the man spoke the name, the corporal remembered that he had heard it before. It had been borne by an eccentric Englishman, who had been reported enormously wealthy and who had perished rather tragically on the Klondyke, three years before, and the mystery of whose death had never been cleared up, satisfactorily. He knew now where he was.

"This is the North Star Lodge, then?" he inquired.

"Yes!" was the reply. "Will you go in now and attend to your team afterwards, or –"

"In my service," laughed Bracknell, "the dogs come first."

"Very well," answered the other. "I will wait for you!"

He lit a cigarette and watched the corporal whilst he loosed the dogs from the traces, and fed them with frozen fish. The light from the window fell on his face and showed that he was less interested in the operation than in the man engaged upon it, for never for a moment did his eyes leave the officer, and there was a ruminative look in them, as if he were speculating what manner of man the policeman was. The corporal was quite conscious of the stare, but gave no sign of it, though once or twice as he moved about, he flashed a glance at the stranger, endeavouring in his turn to take the other's measure. When he had finished his task he turned to him.

"I am ready now."

"So am I," laughed the man; "it is cold waiting about."

He threw his cigarette away, and moved towards the door of the house. Corporal Bracknell followed him, and as the door opened his guide stumbled over something which fell with a clatter on the pinewood floor.

The man stooped and picked it up.

"My rifle," he explained. "I had forgotten it was there. I rested it against the wall when you hailed me."

The corporal nodded, but made no remark. His thoughts were engaged with Koona Bill lying out there under the shadow of the pines, and he was wondering what the meeting with Joy Gargrave would be like, guessing as he did that she must be the girl who had passed him out in the wood. His companion conducted him to a room that for the Northland was positively luxurious, and waved him a chair near the stove.

"You will like to change your socks and moccasins," he said politely. "I will go and inform Miss Gargrave, and return for you in ten minutes or so. It should be almost dinner time."

Corporal Bracknell nodded, and when the man had departed looked round the room with some curiosity. Nowhere in the wild region where his work was done was there another such room, he was sure. Even the commandant's rooms down at the Post were poor beside it. The furniture was of excellent quality. The wall was match-boarded, hiding the outer logs, and there were furs everywhere. Pictures too! Something familiar in one of them caught his eye, and moving towards it he saw that it was a photograph of Newham College, Cambridge.

He stood looking at it, whistling softly to himself. He himself had been at Caius, and having a sister at Newham, had once or twice had tea in its precincts. He wondered what the picture was doing here in this lodge in the northern wilderness, and he was still wondering when a gong sounded. Hastily he began to change his socks, and the operation was scarcely completed, when the man who had introduced him to the house appeared.

"Ready, Corporal?"

"Almost," he replied, and half a minute later stood up and nodded.

"This way," said the other laconically, and led the way out of the room and across the wide passage. The policeman was prepared for surprises, but the appearance of the room into which he entered almost took his breath away. Except for the roaring Yukon stove, and the fur rugs on the polished floor, it was a replica of the typical dining-room of an English country house. The furniture was Jacobean, the table was laid with the whitest napery, and silver and glasses gleamed on its whiteness. He had a quick apprehension of oil-paintings on the wall, of a long-cased clock in the corner, and of two girls standing together near the stove, then his companion's voice sounded.

"Corporal Bracknell! Miss Gargrave! Miss La Farge."

He bowed to the two ladies in turn. The second he knew as he glanced at her was of French Canadian extraction, with perhaps a dash of Indian blood in her veins; but the first was a golden-haired English girl, tall, blue-eyed, with face a little bronzed by the open-air, and – the girl who had passed him with her face the index of mortal terror and her rifle at the trail. It was she who spoke in a voice that had the indescribable accent of culture.

“We are pleased to see you, Corporal Bracknell. No doubt, if you have been long on the trail, you will be ready for dinner.”

CHAPTER II

A STRANGE DISAPPEARANCE

FEELING like a man in a dream, the corporal took his seat at the table, and when the soup was served by an Indian youth, he was too much amazed to attempt conversation. Miss Gargrave looked at him and casually asked, "You have never been to North Star before, Mr. Bracknell?"

"No," he answered, shaking his head. "I am new to this district. I was transferred from Edmonton four months ago."

"Then you did not know of our existence?"

The corporal smiled. "I had heard something of it; but the truth is I had forgotten all about it."

The girl nodded. "I can understand that. We are so far out of the track of things that it is easy for the world to forget us."

Bracknell would have liked to ask why such as she should continue to live in the wilderness; but he repressed his curiosity, and looking round smiled again.

"Your solitude is not without its amenities. I did not think there was such a room as this anywhere in the north. It reminds one of home!"

"You are English, of course?" she asked.

"Yes," he answered. "I come from Kendal, in Westmorland."

"Kendal?" There was an accent of surprise in her voice.

"You know Kendal?" he inquired quickly.

"Yes," she answered. "I have stayed in the neighbourhood. Are you any relation of Sir James Bracknell of Harrowfell?"

"My uncle and guardian," he smilingly replied.

Joy Gargrave looked at him thoughtfully. "I have met your uncle," she said slowly. "I should scarcely have looked for his nephew in the Mounted Police."

"Why not?" he demanded, with a laugh. "The Force is a packet of surprises. My sergeant at Edmonton was the heir to an Irish peerage, and I know a trooper down at Alberta who is the second son of a marquis."

"But Sir James!" she murmured. "He did not seem to me the sort of man who would approve –"

"He does not know," interrupted the corporal.

"It is very likely that he would not approve if he did. But that does not greatly matter; as before I came out here we quarrelled, and the relations between us are likely to continue strained."

"Is it permissible to ask the cause of this quarrel?" inquired the man on the other side of the table, whose name the corporal had not yet learned.

Bracknell frowned at the directness of the question and was about to administer a snub, when he caught Miss Gargrave's eyes fixed upon him expectantly. He laughed shortly as he replied, "Well, Mr. – ar –"

"Rayner is my name," said the other. "I forgot I had not introduced myself."

The corporal nodded. "I was about to say, Mr. Rayner, that it is a private matter; but there can be no harm in saying that my uncle had a matrimonial scheme for me of which I did not approve, so here I am."

He laughed to hide his embarrassment of which he was conscious, and looked at Miss Gargrave to whom the explanation had really been offered. There was a thoughtful look upon her face.

"Sir James is rather dictatorial," she said, and then turned the conversation. "Do you like the service?"

“Yes,” was the reply, given wholeheartedly. “It is a man’s work, and the open-air life, with all the many hazards of the North, is infinitely preferable to stewing in chambers waiting for briefs; or devilling the K.C. who wants to keep all the crumbs on his own table.”

The girl nodded. “I can understand that,” she commented, and for a moment she sat there crumbling her bread.

The thoughtful look on her face was accentuated. Remembering what he had seen there when she had passed him in the road, the corporal found himself wondering if there was any connection between the two. Then Miss Gargrave spoke again.

“I suppose you are in this neighbourhood on professional business?”

“Yes,” he answered readily enough. “I have been following a man for a month and have trailed him something like four hundred miles.”

“That is a long journey in winter,” said the girl a trifle absently.

Corporal Bracknell smiled. “Nothing to boast of. There have been many longer trails in the Territory by our men. Did you ever hear how Constable Pedley took the lunatic missionary from Fort Chipewayn to Saskatchewan down the Athabasca River in the very depth of winter?”

“Yes,” answered the girl. “That was an epic. The constable lost his own reason in the end, didn’t he?”

Bracknell nodded. “Yes, but he’s better again now; though naturally that experience has set its mark on him. And if I had got my man my return journey would have been much harder than the journey up, as I should have had to look after him; and sleep with one eye open all the time.”

“You speak as if you had lost your man,” said Rayner. “Is that so?”

“Yes, I have lost him finally,” answered the corporal slowly.

“Who was he? What had he done? Was he a very desperate character?” inquired Miss Gargrave, and to the corporal as he turned to her it seemed as if there was a look of troubled expectancy in her face.

“He was an Englishman,” answered Bracknell quietly, his eyes fixed on the beautiful face. “I do not know that he was a particularly desperate character, but he certainly was not scrupulous, and he was suspected of selling whiskey to the Indians in the reservation, which is a serious offence in the Territory.”

“What name?” asked Miss La Farge.

“His proper name I do not know, but he has been known through the North as Koona Dick!”

As he gave the name he saw Joy Gargrave’s face grow white, and the trouble in her eyes was plain. Also, with the tail of his eye, he saw Mr. Rayner start violently, and guessed that both he and his hostess were not unacquainted with the man who lay out there in the snow under the shadow of the pines. For a moment after his reply there was a strained uneasy silence. The corporal removed his eyes from his hostess’s face and glanced round the table. Mr. Rayner was fingering the stem of a wine-glass nervously, whilst Miss La Farge was looking from him to Miss Gargrave with puzzled eyes. Evidently she was conscious that something unusual was taking place, but the corporal was sure that to her the name he had just spoken was without any special significance. That it was known to the other two people present he was certain, and he waited to see what would follow. The sense of strain grew more pronounced, then Mr. Rayner shuffled uneasily and broke the silence.

“I notice, Corporal Bracknell, that you speak of this – er – fellow in the past tense, and you say that he has escaped you finally. Do you mean to say that he is – a – dead?”

“He is lying in the snow in a path cut through the trees off the main road to the Lodge,” answered the corporal steadily, “and he has been shot, I think.”

“Good God!” ejaculated Mr. Rayner, in a voice that, whilst it expressed astonishment, seemed to the corporal to be a little flat. “And we have been sitting here, gassing, whilst – ” He broke off abruptly. “Joy,” he cried addressing Miss Gargrave, “you are ill. The shock of this story – ”

“It is nothing,” interrupted the girl in a shaking voice. “I – I – feel a little faint. If you will excuse me – ” She rose to her feet, staggered a little, and then, as Miss La Farge ran to her, fainted outright. For a moment Corporal Bracknell did not speak, though a look of utmost concern came upon his face. The situation seemed to him to be thronged with dreadful possibilities. Remembering the look on the girl’s face when he had encountered her in the forest road, and the rifle in her hand, he found in this faint further support for the suspicion which had occurred to him when he had stood by the supine body of Koono Dick. Living in the wilds, it was scarcely likely that the news of a dead man would affect her thus, if that news were without special significance for her. Death in the Northland – death sharp and sudden was not so uncommon as all that. Moving accidents by flood and field, by wild beasts and wild men, were part of the general circumstances of wilderness life; why, therefore, should the girl be thus affected by the news that he had uttered? Whilst Mr. Rayner assisted Miss La Farge to carry their hostess out of the room, he stood there, his mind occupied by this momentous question. The answer was one which took the form of a further question and which filled him with concern. Had she killed Koono Dick, with whom, as he was sure, she was acquainted?

Again he saw the beautiful face, the picture of terror and the eyes in their unseeing stare of horror, and wondered what was the meaning of it all. Had the girl seen the body of Koono Dick lying there in the shadow of the pines with his blood staining the snow, and was she merely frightened; or was her knowledge of a more intimate and guilty character? He could not decide, and whilst he was still wondering, the door of the room opened and Rayner entered. His face now was mask-like, and his voice was suave and even as he addressed the officer.

“I am afraid your story has been a shock to Miss Gargarve, who has not been very well all day. You will have to excuse her for this evening; but that is no reason why you should not finish your dinner, after which we might go out and look at this dead man. I suppose he will have to have sepulchre?”

“Even the worst of us should have that,” answered the corporal quietly, then added, “Miss Gargrave – she is better?”

“Yes, it was only a faint. I expect she found it rather shocking to think that whilst we were sat here, that man was lying dead in the snow outside.”

“I can understand that,” answered the other in a non-committal voice.

Mr. Rayner nodded. “Feminine nerves are unstable things.” A second later he asked, “Did I understand you to say that this man whom you were following was shot?”

“That is only a guess of mine,” was the reply. “I found him lying there in the snow, and only a few minutes before I distinctly heard a rifle fire twice.”

“But,” objected Mr. Rayner, “it does not follow that the shots you heard were directed against this man Koono Dick? I myself fired at a timber-wolf on the outskirts of the homestead just a little while before your arrival.”

“Did you fire twice?” asked Corporal Bracknell quickly.

“N – no! Once!”

There was a little hesitation before the reply was given. It was but the fraction of a second, but the policeman marked it, and suspected that the other had been a little uncertain as to what he ought to answer.

“But I heard two shots – one on the heels of the other,” answered Bracknell.

“One may have been the echo,” suggested Rayner. “Up here when it is still, sounds are easily duplicated.”

“No, it was not an echo,” asserted the corporal. “I am quite sure of that. I have lived in the wilds too long to be deceived in a small matter of that sort. The second shot was as real as the first. And there is another thing I ought to tell you, Mr. Rayner. Immediately after the second shot I heard a woman cry out.”

Mr. Rayner looked interested. "Are you quite sure it was a woman?" he asked. "It may have been the death-cry of this man – er – Koona Dick, which you heard."

"That is just possible," agreed the corporal. "Yet it seemed to me like the cry of a woman in terror."

"It is easy even for trained ears to be mistaken up here," said the other suavely. "Since I came here I have heard a hare scream like a child in agony. The cry you heard may have been no more than that of some small creature falling a victim to the law of the wild, which is that the strongest takes the prey."

"Maybe!" said Bracknell laconically. In his heart he did not accept the explanation, plausible though it was.

"I am sure of it," answered the other, as if determined to convince him. "In the silence of these northern forests, as I have noticed often of late, sounds seem to take strange qualities. The loneliness accentuates them, and if one has any reason for suspecting the presence of other humans besides one's self, then every sound one hears seems to have some bearing on the unseen presences."

"Perhaps," replied the policeman, wondering why the other should be so persistent in the matter; "but you forget one thing which is rather fatal to your argument."

"And what is that?" inquired Rayner quickly.

"Well, I was not expecting to find a woman up in this wilderness; indeed, it was the last thought in my mind. That fact makes your argument fail, at any rate as applied to the cry I heard."

To this Mr. Rayner made no reply. He pushed a wine decanter towards the other, and rising from the table crossed the room to a cabinet, from which he took out a box of cigars.

"We will have a smoke, before going to look at this dead man."

Corporal Bracknell accepted the cigar, which was of choice brand, and when he had lit it he looked at the other – and said thoughtfully. "I have been wondering why Miss Gargrave lives up here in the wilds?"

Rayner laughed a little. "I am not surprised at that. Everybody wonders. But the fact is that she has no real choice in the matter. As I dare say you will have heard, Rolf Gargrave was immensely rich, and he made his daughter his heiress, but on the condition that for three years after his death she should live at North Star Lodge. That is the explanation!"

"But why on earth should he make a condition of that sort – for a girl?"

"He was a crank!" replied Rayner contemptuously. "He was not an admirer of what is called modern civilization – indeed, he detested it most heartily and whilst he sent his daughter to England to be educated, he desired to protect her against society influences; and he believed that a few years in the North here, in touch with primitive life, would give her a distaste for the shams and artificialities of great cities. Also – I believe he was a little afraid of fortune-hunters and wanted Joy's mind to mature before she met the breed."

Bracknell nodded his understanding of the situation, and then remarked. "The place is not without its points – but to my thinking it has grave dangers also. When Miss Gargrave returns to civilization, the reaction from the hard life and the solitude of the North is likely to be so great that in the whirl she may be carried off her feet."

"Yes, Rolf Gargrave does not appear to have thought of that. But there are others who have it in mind." The corporal looked thoughtfully at his companion, and wondered what relation he stood to their hostess. It was a question that could not be asked openly, but remembering how once or twice the girl's Christian name had slipped into Rayner's speech he guessed that whatever the relationship was, it was a fairly intimate one. He was still wondering when his companion rose.

"If you are ready, Corporal Bracknell, we will go and look at – a – Koona Dick."

The corporal rose with alacrity, and five minutes later, clad in outdoor furs, they were moving briskly down the road cut between the pines. As they walked, the policeman looked about him with keen eyes, and when they reached the point where the narrower path that he had followed branched

off, noticed what had escaped him before, namely that the path was evidently continued on the other side of the road also. Rayner did not hesitate between the two. He made a straight line for the path which led to the place where Koon Dick had fallen. As they turned into it, the thought that he might be wrong appeared to strike him, and he halted abruptly.

“This path, wasn’t it? The left going towards the house, I think you said, didn’t you?”

“Yes, the left!” answered Corporal Bracknell quietly, but as he walked by the other’s side the question leaped in his mind. “Did I mention the left?” He could not remember. He doubted, and his doubts were strengthened by the fact that till a moment before he had not known that the path was continued across the main road. Thinking there was only one path, there was no reason why he should have mentioned the position of it. Yet the man by his side had known which path to take! As he walked on, he gave no sign, but a question leaped up in his mind. “How did Rayner know?”

Then simultaneously he and his companion came to an abrupt halt. At their feet in the snow was a dark blot. The corporal looked hastily round, then felt for his matches and struck one. As the wood caught, he stooped and examined the ground near the dark blot, where was the impress of a heavy body in the snow, and footmarks all round it. He stared at the trampled snow in amazement, then he examined the snow in the shadow of the trees. Its surface in the immediate neighbourhood was unbroken, save by the print of a single pair of moccasined feet, and those footmarks moved towards the place where Koon Dick had lain, and not away from it. He looked among the underwood in the neighbourhood of the path. The search in the darkness revealed nothing, nowhere was there any sign of the man whom they had come to look for.

“What is it?” asked Rayner in an odd voice. “What has happened?”

“A strange thing has happened,” said the corporal laconically. “The body we came to look for has disappeared.”

CHAPTER III

THE CORPORAL FINDS A LETTER

“DISAPPEARED!” As he echoed the corporal’s word in a hoarse voice, Rayner looked hastily and fearfully into the shadows, and then added, “Are you sure?”

“Quite sure,” answered Corporal Bracknell tersely. “This is the place where he lay. That is his blood in the snow there; and you can, see the print of his body if you look.”

“Then – then he was not dead after all?” asked Rayner in a strange voice.

“I would not say that. I would have taken my oath that there was no life in him. I even felt his heart!”

“But in that case, how has he got away?” inquired Rayner quickly. “Dead men do not walk away from the place where they die.”

“No,” answered the corporal quietly. “But they may be carried. It seems to me that there are more footmarks here than there were when I came on Koon Dick lying in the track; but I cannot be quite sure of that, as I did not look about very carefully.”

“Why not?” asked the other a trifle critically. “I should have thought that would have been the very first thing that you would have done.”

“In ordinary circumstances it would,” was the reply, “but I had left my team in the main track, and to do that overlong is not wise. One might get separated from it, you know. Also I had already guessed that there was a homestead not very far away, and it seemed the sensible thing to go there first, and learn anything that I could that would help in the elucidation of the mystery of the dead man.”

“Um! And did you learn anything?”

“More than I expected.”

“Indeed!” answered Rayner sharply. There was a new note in his voice, and the corporal felt rather than saw that the other was staring at him in the darkness. “May I ask what that was?”

“It was that you were acquainted with Koon Dick.”

“I have never spoken to him in my life,” replied Rayner quickly.

“But you knew him or you had heard of him. I saw you start when I mentioned his name at table.”

His companion laughed uneasily. “You have sharper eyes than I gave you credit for, Corporal Bracknell. It is quite true that I had heard of Koon Dick. I heard of him in my journey up, and what I heard was not to his credit. Your presence here implied that he was in this district, and one had no hankering for such an unpleasant neighbour.”

“And Miss Gargrave, had she only heard of him also?”

As he asked the question the aurora flashed suddenly in the Northern sky, and in its light reflected from the snow the corporal saw that Rayner’s face was white and troubled. The light faded almost as suddenly as it flamed, and with that look in his mind the policeman waited for the answer to his question. It seemed to be an intolerable time before Rayner spoke in a hoarse and shaking voice.

“How can I tell you? If you feel that it is absolutely necessary to obtain an answer to that question, I can only suggest that you should approach Miss Gargrave herself.”

In his heart Bracknell knew that this answer was a mere evasion. Rayner knew more than he was willing to confess, and the policeman wondered what it was, and what link there was between him and Miss Gargrave and Koon Dick. He considered a moment, and then deliberately forced the pace.

“I have not told you everything, Mr. Rayner. I do not know what relation you stand to Miss Gargrave, but – ”

“I am her cousin,” interrupted Rayner, “and my father is her guardian and lawyer.”

“Is that so?” answered the corporal. “Then there is more reason why I should tell you what I intended to do. I have not told you yet how I came to find Koono Dick. I had turned in from the river because I smelt burning wood. I thought that maybe the man I was after had encamped somewhere in this immediate neighbourhood. I found the avenue leading to North Star Lodge and began to follow it. I turned from the main road into the wood on a fresh sled-trail which I imagined and still imagine was Koono Dick’s. I had gone only a little way, when, as I have already told you, I heard two rifle shots and a woman’s cry in quick succession to each other. I ran back to the road, and after waiting a moment I began to follow it. I had reached the point where this path cuts into it, when happening to glance across I saw a woman coming towards me across the snow. I halted in the shadows, meaning to speak to her, but I caught sight of her face, and she did not see either my team or myself.”

“You saw her face – plainly?” interrupted his listener quickly.

“Quite plainly.”

“And would you recognize it again?”

“I have already done so,” answered the corporal quietly.

“Indeed?”

“Yes, the woman was your cousin, Miss Gargrave.”

“My dear fellow,” cried Rayner, breaking into discordant laughter. “You surely are not going to charge Joy with shooting Koono Dick?”

The corporal was not disturbed by the laughter. To his ears it sounded forced, and the contemptuous protest in his companion’s words left him unmoved.

“There is one little thing that I have not told you, Mr. Rayner, and to me it seems to be significant. Miss Gargrave carried a rifle.”

“There is nothing strange or even significant in that,” replied the other quickly. “My cousin is an ardent sportswoman, and had probably been after game. Besides, as I told you, I think, there are timber wolves about. They are dangerous beasts in hard weather, and one does not go far unarmed in this district.”

Corporal Bracknell answered these suggestions by some of his own. “Miss Gargrave was running down the path which led to this spot. To my eyes she was plainly distraught, and I may remind you that she fainted when I told you that Koono Dick was dead.”

Rayner laughed again hardly. “You are persistent, Corporal, but there is nothing in a girl fainting when she is told rather dramatically that a man has been shot dead almost at her own door. Aren’t you a little imaginative? Indeed,” he laughed again, “having heard a rifle shot have you not imagined all the rest? I am told that a lonely trail plays the deuce with a man’s nerves. You say that you saw Koono Dick lying here, dead; but he is not here – now, and he can’t – ”

“I haven’t imagined that anyhow,” interrupted Bracknell, pointing to the dark stain on the snow, “and I haven’t imagined any of the other things I have told you, either. Believe me, Mr. Rayner, my nerves are in perfect order.”

Rayner stamped his feet in the snow. “Possibly! But there is no need that we should freeze, whilst we discuss the point, is there? I do not understand police procedure, but if you have quite finished here, I think we might return to the house. I have no desire to lose my toes through frost-bite.”

“I can do nothing here, tonight,” replied Bracknell quickly. “I shall have to wait until morning. I am quite ready to return.”

Rayner did not reply. Swinging on his heel, he began to move in the direction of the lodge. The corporal followed him in silence, and they had almost reached the main-road when something light caught his moccasined foot. He looked down and discerned what looked like a piece of paper. Stooping quickly, he picked it up, and crushed it in his mitten, as his companion turned round, as if to wait for him. At first he thought Rayner must have seen him make the find; but as the other spoke, was reassured.

“I hope you will not disturb my cousin unnecessarily tonight, Corporal Bracknell.”

“I shall not trouble her at all, Mr Rayner. There is no need that I should – yet.”

“Nor at any other time, I hope.”

“I share that hope, most fervently,” answered Bracknell, with an earnestness that the other evidently found convincing, for he did not speak again until they were seated in the front of the stove in the room where they had dined. Then he tried to make light of the situation. “Corporal,” he laughed, “the laws of hospitality are sacred in the North. Even though you feel you must drag us all down as your prisoners, they must be honoured. We have some very old brandy here, indeed it is incredibly old, and its quality is equal to its age. You will take a glass with me, and another cigar?”

“I shall be delighted, thank you, Mr. Rayner.”

Rayner produced a decanter and glasses, and poured out the brandy, and whilst the officer was lighting his cigar, Miss La Farge entered the room.

“How is Joy?” asked Rayner quickly.

“Better, thank you. She sent me to make her excuses for tonight; and to ask how you had sped.”

“Only fairly,” answered Rayner, with a smiling glance at the corporal. “We did not find the dead man whom Mr. Bracknell averred he saw.”

“That is very strange,” said the girl wonderingly.

“Yes,” was the reply, “very strange, so strange indeed that I have tried to persuade the corporal that all that he has told us is just a snow-dream.”

“But you have not persuaded him?” asked Miss La Farge, with a quick glance at the corporal’s face.

It was Bracknell himself who answered. “No, I have not, as yet, been persuaded, Miss La Farge.”

“My eloquence was wasted, Babette,” laughed Rayner easily. “Corporal Bracknell has that British stubbornness which is a nuisance to our friends and a terror to our enemies.”

Miss La Farge laughed as she replied, “That is a characteristic of the male persuasion.”

With a smiling nod she withdrew, closing the door behind her, and Rayner rose from his chair and drew a curtain of moose-hide over the door.

“Miss La Farge is a good companion for my cousin.”

“From French Canada, I suppose?” queried the corporal.

“Father was of that stock, but her mother was partly of Scotch descent, partly native. Joy’s mother died young, and Babette’s brought them up together. They are foster-sisters and inseparables.”

Bracknell nodded, and sipped the brandy thoughtfully, and the other continued, “I do not know what will happen when Joy gets married.”

“Is that an early possibility?” asked the corporal, with a sudden quickening of interest.

“I hope so,” replied Rayner, with a bland smile.

The corporal made the inference that he was meant to make. “Then you – ”

“It is not quite settled yet, but I hope it will be very shortly. The wilderness years necessitated by her father’s will are nearly over, and I am to take her ‘out’ from here. I hope then that we shall be married, and live in England.”

For a moment the corporal did not reply. He looked at the bland, mask-like face before him, saw, as he had already noted, that the steel-like blue eyes were too close together, that the lips were sensual; and as he did so, the beautiful face of Joy Gargrave, as he had seen it at table, rose before him, and somehow he found Rayner’s suggestion of coming wedlock utterly distasteful. The man, as he felt instinctively, was not a man to be trusted with a girl’s happiness. Why he should have that feeling he could not tell; but it was there, and it was only by an effort that he was able to reply affably.

“For Miss Gargrave, England, no doubt, is much to be preferred.”

“Much!” agreed Rayner, then added, “Having told you so much, you can understand that I feel rather inclined to resent your suggestion that Joy has anything to do with the mysterious affair out in the wood there. She may have heard the name of Koon Dick as I myself have, but that she knew

him, that she shot him, is the very wildest thing for any one to imagine. I really cannot think how you can entertain it for a moment in face of the utter absence of motive.”

“That is a strong point certainly,” conceded Bracknell.

“That she happened to be in the neighbourhood is nothing. I was in the neighbourhood, you were in the neighbourhood – ”

“Yes,” interrupted the corporal with a smile, “that is true. But there is no reason why I should shoot Koon Dick, and there was every reason why I should take him prisoner.”

“You are not suggesting that there was any reason why Joy or I should have done such a thing, I hope?”

“Far from it. I know of none, but of course in an area where crime is committed every one is suspect until the criminal is found.”

Rayner laughed easily, and to the corporal’s quick ear there was a note of relief in his tones as he replied, “In that case there is no need why we should worry, however one may resent the personal implication of such a general suspicion.”

He pushed the decanter towards the corporal, who shook his head, and rose from his chair.

“Thank you, no more tonight, Mr. Rayner. If you will excuse me, I will go to my sleeping quarters. I have had a very hard day, and must be up betimes in the morning.”

“As you will,” answered Rayner, and a moment later led the way to the bedroom which the policeman was to occupy. For the North it was a luxurious one, but the corporal scarcely noticed it. The moment the door had closed behind Rayner, he thrust a hand into his tunic pocket and drew forth a crumpled piece of paper. It was the paper he had picked up in the snow. He opened it out, and as he caught a word or two of the writing it contained, a swift light of interest came into his eyes.

Setting a chair in front of the stove, he seated himself, and very carefully smoothed the paper on his knee. Then he took it up and began to read.

“My dear Joy, —

“This note will no doubt be something of a shock to you; as I imagine you must think I am no longer in the land of the living; at any rate I have not heard from you for a very long time, and so can only presume that such must have been your idea. But here I am and in a sweat to see you.

“An accident gave me the knowledge of your whereabouts, and now I learn that you are not alone. Therefore I shall not visit the house, in the first instance, without your invitation, but I must see you, and in an hour’s time after your receipt of this I shall look for you in the little path that goes towards the hill. It is a long time since that day at Alcombe, which I am sure you will not have forgotten, and you and I, my dear, should have much to say to each other. Do not fail to come.

“Dick...”

When he reached the end, the corporal sat staring at the letter like a man hypnotized. It was in pencil, written on a page torn out of a memorandum book, and the writer had evidently been about to sign his full name, and then had changed his mind, for the beginning of the surname had been crossed out, and the more intimate “Dick” left to stand alone.

“Then she did know him!” he whispered to himself. “She went out to meet him. She — ”

He did not finish his utterance, but lifted the paper the more carefully to examine the signature. He was interested in the unfinished surname, and spelled out the letters carefully, “B-r-a.” He repeated them to himself several times, trying to guess the sequence that should follow, then suddenly he started to his feet, and a startled look came into his eyes.

“Good God!” he whispered. “If it should be so?” He stood for quite a long time, his face the index of profound thought and concern, then he bestowed the incriminating letter in a place of safety, and prepared for bed. But it was long before he slept. From somewhere in the forest came the long-

drawn howl of a wolf, and in response the dogs outside bayed in chorus, but it was his own silent thoughts, and not these noises of the wilderness, that kept sleep from his tired eyes.

CHAPTER IV

A PUZZLING SCENT

THE following morning Corporal Bracknell was early astir, but early as he was there were others earlier, for the smell of frying moose-meat reached him before he was dressed. When he left his room he found Rayner awaiting him.

“You are early, Corporal,” was the greeting.

“Yes, I thought of going out as far as the place where we went together last night.”

“What! before breakfast? Surely there is no need for such haste, and remember there will be no daylight for at least a couple of hours yet.”

“That is so, but – ”

An Indian servant appeared from somewhere in the rear of the house, bearing a silver coffee-pot on a tray. Rayner pointed to it with a smile.

“That settles the matter, I fancy. Breakfast is being served. You will not allow it to spoil, I am sure.”

“It is a convincing argument,” laughed the corporal. “I will breakfast first and attend to duty afterwards.”

Rayner nodded, and led the way into the room where they had dined on the previous night. Places were laid for four at the table, but neither Miss Gargrave nor her foster-sister had yet appeared.

“We are a little early for the ladies,” said Rayner, seating himself, “but we will not wait for them. They may breakfast in their room.”

The corporal took his place, and whilst they ate, conversed with his companion in a desultory kind of way. Both of them steadily avoided any reference to the events and conversation of the night before, and in the course of the meal the policeman learned a little more about his hostess’ father.

“He was an odd kind of man,” explained Rayner, when reference had been made to him. “Came of a good stock in the Old Country, and was one of the pioneers up here. A man of culture as a glance round the bookshelves will show you, and a man of business also. Some of the best mining properties in the North were secured by him, and unlike many of the Klondyke millionaires he made his home here, and he bought, regardless of cost, the old family estate in England. I think he meant to return there, with his daughter, some day. But the hard life of these wild lands had entered into his blood, and he – ”

The sound of a feminine voice outside caught the officer’s attention, and made him neglect what his companion was saying. He heard the outer door open, and close, then hurried steps sounded in the passage, and two people passed by the room in which he was seated. The door happened to be ajar, and the corporal saw that one was his hostess, and that the other was her companion and foster-sister, Miss La Farge. They were not late for breakfast because they had dallied in their rooms; they had been outside.

As he realized this a little frown of thoughtfulness puckered the corporal’s forehead. Why had they been out at this early hour, and whilst it was still dark? Rayner noticed his pre-occupation, and guessing the cause of it, suavely offered an explanation.

“Apparently I was mistaken about my cousin and Miss La Farge. They are not the sluggards I thought they were. They have been outside whilst I thought they were still a-bed.”

“They are very early,” was the reply.

“Yes! There is a silver fox about, and Joy has a line of traps. She hopes to get it. I understand that its pelt is rare.”

“Much rarer than it used to be,” agreed the policeman absently.

The explanation was a plausible one, but he did not find it satisfactory. He suspected that something other than a silver fox had taken Joy Gargrave and her foster-sister into the woods in the darkness of the morning. He wondered what it was. Had his hostess missed the note which he had picked up the night before, and had she been out to look for it? He did not know, he could only guess, and wait impatiently for the coming of dawn.

As soon as the first leaden light showed through the trees outside he left the house. Rayner offered to accompany him; but the corporal declined the offer.

“Thank you, there is no need, Mr. Rayner. I shall be able to manage what I have to do alone.”

“You think I shall be in the way, Corporal?” laughed the other.

“I did not say so,” answered Bracknell, “though of course it is the simple truth that when one has a knotty thing to solve, solitude and quiet are sometimes helpful.”

He went out and walked quickly from the house until he reached the by-path where he had made his startling discovery of the night before. As soon as he turned into it, his pace slowed, and he walked with his eyes fixed upon the ground. There were many footmarks in the snow, the most of them stale, as was shown by the powdery snow which had drifted into them. He recognized his own tracks of the night before, going and coming from the point at which he had found Koon Dick, and there were others apparently made about the same time, but those which arrested his eyes as he turned from the main road were a pair of freshly-made well-marked tracks, too small to have been made by the feet of men. He nodded to himself as he saw them, and began to follow them eagerly.

After a couple of minutes walking, he was a little surprised to find that the double trail that he was following, turned from the path into the shadow of the trees. It was still almost dark here, but as he stooped over the tracks, he became aware of the fact which seemed to him to be full of significance. There was a third pair of footprints, not so recently made as the others, as the powdering of snow in them showed, and the tracks that he was trailing apparently followed them. He stooped and with his hand made a rough measure of the stale tracks, and of one set of the fresh ones, with which they seemed almost identical. They were the same size, and about the two sets of impressions were little individual characteristics which were immediately discernible to the trained eyes.

“Following her own tracks,” he muttered softly to himself. “Now, I wonder why?”

He could do no more than guess, and as that was not a very profitable occupation he continued his search. The trail that he was following went but a little way into the forest, and then turned outward towards the path again, and presently reached a point at which he came abruptly to a standstill.

Under a giant spruce, the lower boughs of which had been cut away at some time or another, was a medley of tracks, which called for detailed examination. He stood regarding them for a moment, and then he looked around him. As he did so he saw that the trail, which he was following, moved forward from the huddle of tracks by which he had paused, and that they led into an open lane in the trees. He looked again, took a step or two forward, and then whistled slowly to himself. He was looking at the place where the body of Koon Dick had lain. The stained snow was hidden by freshly drifted snow, the impress of the body however was still visible, and standing near it, Corporal Bracknell looked back. There was a clear line of vision from the place where the fallen man had lain to the great spruce in the shadow of which was that huddle of tracks. He went back to the spruce, bent over the trampled snow for a little time, and then standing upright looked towards the path. Then he nodded his head.

“She stood just here,” he murmured thoughtfully. “There’s the mark of her rifle-stock in the snow, and those deeper tracks show that she stood waiting a little time. Then when Koon Dick came, she – But did she?”

As he broke off and asked himself the question he remembered Joy Gargrave’s face as he had first seen it when he entered the dining room at the lodge. It had not looked like the face of a girl who had quite recently shot a man, and though he recalled it with that look of terror which it had worn when he had first seen it, and again with that troubled look in the eyes when he had explained

that Koon Dick was the criminal that he sought, he felt that his reasoning and his reading of the trail must somehow be at fault.

He stood considering the matter for a minute or two, glancing now and again to the place where Koon Dick had lain, and the frown which had come upon his face deepened. Then he recalled the note which he had picked up on the previous night and the frown lightened a little.

“Of course!” he whispered to himself, “she discovered its loss and came out here to look for it.”

But had she shot the man whom he had hoped to make his prisoner, the man who unquestionably had written that note to her? He could not decide, and as it was too cold to stand still for long together, he began to walk in a rather wide circle round the scene of the tragedy. Then he made a fresh discovery. On the other side of the path he found other footprints in the snow, and, following the track, reached a point where the person who had made them had quite evidently come to a standstill behind a clump of bushes. Corporal Bracknell looked through the screen of small branches, and once more found himself in full view of the place where Koon Dick had fallen.

The frown on his face deepened once more. He carefully examined the footmarks behind the bushes, and decided that they were at least some hours old. Probably they had been made the night before, and it was at least possible that the individual who had made them had witnessed the tragedy which had taken place.

He began to follow the footmarks from the point at which they left the bushes, and had gone but a little way when he found that the trail was crossed by another almost at right angles, a trail much more deeply marked and the first sight of which told him that either the person who had made it was of very heavy build, or had been bearing a considerable burden.

Perplexed beyond measure he stared at this new trail, then he looked round. The tall spruce alone met his eye. The profound silence of the primeval North was over all. There was no sound of life anywhere.

“And yet,” he murmured to himself, “there were quite a lot of people here last night. What were they all doing?”

Scarcely had the words slipped from him when he heard some one cough in the shadow of the wood, a little to the left of him. At once his bearing became alert. Moving silently from tree to tree in the direction from which the sound had come, he reached a point which gave him a view of an open glade. In the middle of the glade a girl was standing looking down at the snow. He recognized her instantly. It was his hostess, Joy Gargrave.

A minute or two passed and then the girl began to move down the glade quickly. He waited until she was out of sight, and himself walked to the middle of the glade where Joy had stood looking down at the snow. Instantly he saw what had held her eyes. A dog team had been halted there. The marks of the runners were visible in the snow, even the places where the dogs had waited, half-filled with new snow, were quite clear. His practised eyes read the signs without trouble. The team had entered the glade, had apparently waited there a little time, and then had turned and departed in the direction followed by his hostess. Impulsively, he turned to follow also, but as he did so, caught sight of footmarks debouching from the trees in a direct line to the place where the sled had been halted. They were deeply marked, and as he recognized instantly were the same as those which he had been following, when the sound of the cough had attracted his attention. The person who had made them had followed a devious path, making for the glade.

He frowned to himself. The mystery was growing deeper. But as no solution of the affair offered itself to his mind, after a little delay he began to follow the sled tracks down the glade, noting that side by side with them, were the fresh tracks made by Joy Gargrave’s moccasined feet.

The glade led out into the main road from the river to the house, and the sled-tracks turned towards the river, and then were lost in the hard-packed snow of the road. But as the sled had manifestly turned in the direction of the river, Corporal Bracknell also turned that way, walking quickly and keeping a sharp look-out on either hand for any indication of the sled having turned aside.

To or three minutes' quick walking brought him in sight of the frozen river, and at the top of the bank, seated on a fallen tree, he perceived Joy Gargrave.

Her back was towards him, and her bent head and hunched-up shoulders were eloquent of dejection. He moved towards her quietly, and as he drew nearer a flutter of white caught his eye. It was the corner of a handkerchief which the girl was holding to her face, and apparently she was crying. A quick sympathy moved him as he stepped up to her, the snow deadening his steps.

"Miss Gargrave, you are in trouble. I wonder if I can be of any assistance?"

Startled by the sound of his voice, the girl looked up, and for one fleeting moment he had a vision of the beautiful face, tear-stained, and of the blue eyes full of trouble. Then the face was hidden in the handkerchief again, and a succession of sobs was the only answer vouchsafed to him. He stood for a little while in silence, looking down at the shaking shoulders. His own eyes filled with sympathetic concern, then he spoke again.

"Please, Miss Gargrave. Let me help. I am sure your trouble is very grave."

At that she looked up again, her face expressive of deep misery.

"I am in deepest trouble," she said brokenly, "I do not think that you or any one else can be of help to me."

"Tell me," he urged. "At least let me try."

She sat for a moment in thought, her eyes veiled by the long lashes, then she lifted her head and looked at him as if she would measure his quality. Then she broke, out impulsively.

"Yes," she cried, "I will trust you, I will tell you all. Perhaps you can help me, at least you can give me advice."

"Then let us walk," he said quickly. "You will freeze if you sit there long."

He offered her his hand, and as she took it, their eyes met, and in the corporal's there flashed a new light, and as he turned and fell into step at her side his heart was beating tumultuously, and his blood was running as if heated with a generous wine.

CHAPTER V

A REVELATION

JOY GARGRAVE did not begin her story immediately. For a full two minutes they walked on, environed by the solemn pinewoods, and enveloped in the strange, white silence of the North. The corporal waited, and at last the girl spoke.

“You wonder why I was sitting on the bank, crying?”

“Yes,” he replied frankly. “I am wondering why you should do that, though I may tell you that I already have an idea.”

“You already have an idea?” the girl’s tones, as she echoed his question, betrayed surprise.

“Yes,” he answered, and thrusting a hand inside his fur parka, he produced the note which he had found, and held it towards her. He saw from her face that she recognized it, and he continued slowly: “You see, I found this last night – not far from the place where Koono Dick was lying. I did not know to whom it had been written; and if I had known, I am afraid duty would have compelled me to read it. If I am not mistaken, it was written to you; at any rate it bears your Christian name.”

“It was written to me,” answered the girl quickly. “It is mine.”

“And the writer of it? Was he Koono Dick?”

“Yes,” was the reply.

Corporal Bracknell glanced at the note, and his eyes were fixed upon the half-erased signature. “Tell me,” he said, “what is Koono Dick’s name? – I mean the second half of his name which he had begun to write apparently from force of habit, and then crossed out?”

“I am afraid it will be something of a surprise to you,” said the girl.

“Perhaps not so great a surprise as you think,” was the reply. “I think I have already guessed.”

“His name is the same as your own, Corporal. It is Bracknell!”

“Ah!” said the corporal in the tone of a man who had found his thoughts confirmed. “Richard Ascham Bracknell, of course.”

“You have the name perfect,” answered Joy quietly.

“Of Harrow Fell, Westmorland, England?” inquired the corporal.

“He was born there,” replied the girl, “and Sir James is his father, as you are his cousin.”

The corporal walked on a few paces without speaking, his eyes staring at a distant hill, and from the vacancy of their gaze it was evident that he was lost in thought. Joy Gargrave watched him curiously, and, after a little time, she spoke again.

“You did not know – you did not guess until you saw that note?”

“I had not the slightest idea. I knew that Koono Dick was an Englishman – that was all. But when I read the note last night, and recalled your acknowledged acquaintance with Harrow Fell and Sir James, I suspected.”

“If you had known you would not have undertaken to follow him – to take him prisoner, I mean?”

“I could not very well have refused, without resigning from the force. Perhaps you know how the oath of allegiance runs?”

Joy shook her head, and he quoted – “And will well and truly obey and perform all lawful orders and instructions, which I shall receive as such, without fear, favour or affection of or towards any person. So help me, God!”

The girl shivered a little. “It is a hard service, yours,” she said. “And you would have arrested your cousin?”

“My cousin, or any other man – or woman. I have no choice in the matter. Duty, after all, is the greatest word in the language.”

Joy considered him thoughtfully. His lean face was stern, and there was a hard light in the unwavering grey eyes. It was clear to her that he meant just what he said, and that he would do whatever duty dictated without fear or favour.

“It is not every one who would agree with you,” she replied. “Your cousin, for instance, he – ”

“Tell me,” he interrupted. “What was Dick Bracknell to you? This letter suggests an intimacy beyond that of mere acquaintance or friendship.”

“You are right,” the girl answered quickly. “He was my husband.”

“Good God!”

As that expression of extreme amazement broke from him, Corporal Bracknell halted abruptly, looking at the beautiful girl by his side, with incredulous eyes.

“It is quite true,” she said. “I am Koona Dick’s wife – or widow.”

Still he did not speak, and watching him the girl saw a flash of something like horror come into his eyes.

“And you went to meet him – last night?” he said, at last, in a shaking voice.

“I have not said so,” answered the girl quickly. “You have read that note, but you must not surmise – ”

“I saw you,” broke in the corporal quickly.

“You saw me?” It was Joy Gargrave’s turn to be astonished, and as he looked at her it seemed to him that fear was shining in her eyes.

“Yes, I saw you,” he answered mechanically.

“Where?” she demanded.

“You were coming out of the path between the woods. You had a rifle in your hand. There was a strange look upon your face. I was standing with my dogs in the shadow of a spruce and you passed me without seeing me. I was about to speak to you, but the sight of your face kept me silent. It was that, and the thought of two shots which I had heard, which sent me along the path you had just left to investigate. At the end of it, I found Koona Dick!”

“Dead?” asked the girl sharply.

“He seemed so to me!” was the reply. “Indeed, I was quite sure that there was no life left in him, or I should have done my best to revive him, and not have left him lying there in the snow.”

“If he were dead, where is he now?” came the swift question.

“I do not know,” replied the corporal. “The thing is a mystery to me. When I returned to the place with Mr. Rayner last night the body had already disappeared.”

“But how could it do that, if he were really dead?” objected his companion.

“Some one must have removed – ” Corporal Bracknell stopped suddenly.

It was clear to Joy that some new thought had just occurred to him. She saw that he was looking at her thoughtfully, and she wondered what was in his mind.

“What is it?” she asked quickly. “What are you thinking?”

“Tell me,” he countered, “did you see your husband last night?”

“I did,” she answered frankly.

“And when I had said that Koona Dick was lying dead in the snow, you left the table. You went out of the room, and you did not return.”

He spoke like a man pursuing a thought which seemed to him almost incredible, but which was thrust upon him by force of circumstances, and the girl divined what that thought was.

“You do not think that I went back?” she cried. “You cannot think that I am responsible for the disappearance?”

“It is a natural thought,” he answered, “though I am loathe to believe it. You must remember that I saw your face as you came out of the path; and that the man was your husband, though apparently your friends do not know it. My cousin – your husband – ”

“Oh! but you do not understand!” cried the girl quickly. “You do not realize that I would give all I have to know that the body of the man who was my husband was still where you first saw it. It is the uncertainty of the fact which troubles and worries me, and not his death.”

“Not his death!”

“No!” was the almost appalling reply. “The certainty of that would be like a deliverance.”

For a little time Corporal Bracknell stared at her, too much amazed for speech. It was clear to him that she was in deadly earnest and that she meant every word she said. He wondered what marital tragedy was behind her attitude, and was still wondering, when she spoke again in a hard voice.

“You seem surprised,” she said; “you know your cousin fairly well?”

“Yes,” he answered, nodding his head.

“Then you cannot suppose that I loved him, even though he was my husband! No girl could love Dick Bracknell when she knew him for what he was, and any woman, married as I was, would almost rejoice to know that – that she was released.”

“You do not know what you are saying,” protested the corporal quickly. “You cannot realize what implication your words may have to any one who knows what I know. It would almost seem that you had wished for Dick Bracknell’s death, and that fact in view of the circumstances in which I found him last night might assume a terrible significance.”

“You mean that people might think I shot my husband?”

“Yes,” was the reply. “At least many people would ask that question.”

“And you?” inquired the girl. “You have asked yourself that question?”

“Naturally,” replied Bracknell. “You must remember that I saw you coming from the place where he was lying.”

“I wonder what conclusion you have reached,” said Joy, looking at him keenly.

“None,” was the prompt reply.

“You are in doubt, then?”

“I am very loath to believe what the circumstances would seem to indicate,” answered the corporal quietly. “As you must see, they are terribly against you, and your visit to the place this morning – ”

“You know of that?”

“I saw you and Miss La Farge come in whilst Mr. Rayner and I were at breakfast, and whilst you were supposed to be still in your rooms. I found your tracks in the snow.”

“And you cannot guess why I – why we went?”

“No.”

“We went to look for that note which you showed me just now. I had meant to destroy it, and missed it this morning. Then I remembered that I had put it in my pocket last night, and naturally concluded that I had lost it outside. That is the explanation of the journey this morning. No one here but Miss La Farge has any idea that Dick Bracknell is my husband, and I did not want any of them to know.”

Corporal Bracknell was conscious of a sense of relief. The explanation was so simple that he felt it to be altogether true. But there were questions that still required answering, and he proceeded to ask them.

“I can well believe, that,” he answered slowly. “I suppose Mr. Rayner was among them from whom you wished to keep this knowledge?”

“Yes,” was the reply, given frankly. “I did not wish him to know how foolish I had been.”

The corporal remembered what Rayner had hinted as to his hopes of making Joy Gargrave his wife, and the girl’s answer started fresh questions in his mind. Did she love Rayner and favour his aspirations, and knowing herself to be already a wife, had she deliberately removed the barrier which lay between them, but of which Rayner had no knowledge? He could not tell, and looking steadily at the girl he proceeded to ask his next question.

“Miss Gargrave – I mean Mrs. Brack – ”

“No! No!” interrupted the girl. “Do not give me that name. I do not want it. I hate it. Call me Gargrave.”

He bowed. “As you please, Miss Gargrave. There is a question I wish to ask you. Tell me, did you have speech with Dick Bracknell last night?”

“Not a word.”

“But you saw him?”

“Yes,” she agreed quietly. “I saw him.”

“You stood in the shadow of the trees at a point which would give you a clear view of the place where you knew your husband would be waiting for you, and you took a rifle with you. Why did you take that rifle, Miss Gargrave?”

As he asked that question he saw the pallor of the beautiful face grow more pronounced. The frank blue eyes wavered, and for a second or two he thought she was going to faint. Then she drew a quick, gasping breath.

“You know these woods,” she said unsteadily. “There are wolves and – and bears. To carry a rifle is the merest prudence.”

A frown came on the corporal’s face. He knew that the answer was a mere evasion, and he was not pleased. But he did not challenge the answer directly.

“Miss Gargrave,” he asked, “were you afraid of Dick Bracknell?”

“Not afraid, exactly,” was the reply candidly given, “but I loathed him, and hated the thought of his coming into my life again.”

The corporal considered for a few seconds, and then asked his next question bluntly.

“Tell me, did you fire your rifle at all whilst you were out, or whilst you were waiting for your husband?”

As he made the inquiry the girl came to a sudden standstill, her lips trembling, her pale face working strangely, the blue eyes expressive of awful fear. He waited in far more distress than his impassive face indicated, and at last the answer came in a shaking whisper.

“Yes, I did. But, oh, believe me, I – I did not know that I had done so till afterwards. I do not know what happened... I saw him fall in the snow, and I waited. Then I went up to him. He seemed to be dead – and after that I must have fled homeward.”

As he listened the corporal visioned the tragedy of the night before, and as he looked into her troubled face, his heart smote him. His voice was almost sympathetic as he asked the next question.

“You say you saw your husband fall? Was it after your rifle was discharged or before?”

“I – do not know,” the girl replied. “This morning the whole thing is like a disordered nightmare dimly remembered. I know there was a moment when I was tempted to wickedness. There was a terrible hatred in my heart for my husband, and as I saw him standing there, it flashed on me how easy it would be to free myself from him for ever. It was only a moment – like a sudden madness, and then I saw him drop in the snow... I do not know what happened, but this morning I examined my rifle.”

Her voice quivered and failed, and suddenly she bent her face in her mittened hand and broke into a storm of weeping. The corporal himself was greatly moved by her distress, but the sight of it somehow relieved his worst fears.

“Miss Gargrave,” he said hopefully, “you examined your rifle this morning. Tell me what you found?”

“An empty shell in the chamber,” said the girl, sobbing bitterly.

“Yes,” he said quickly, a touch of excitement in his manner, “and in the magazine? Tell me, quick.”

“There was a full clip – but for the shell which had been fired.”

“Ah!” said Bracknell with a sigh of relief. “I thought so. Now think carefully, and tell me, did you hear another shot fired?”

The trouble in the girl's face cleared suddenly, and a light of hope flashed in her eyes. "Why do you ask?" she cried. "I thought I did, but this morning I could not be sure. I thought it might be the echo of my own rifle –"

"It was not an echo," interrupted the corporal quickly. "It was the discharge of a rifle. I was a little distance away, and I distinctly heard the reports, one so close on the heels of the other that the two seemed almost like one."

Wonder mingled with the hope in the girl's face.

"You are sure," she cried. "Yes! Then there must have been some one else, some one who fired at my husband, and perhaps I did not kill him after all. Oh! thank God! Thank God! I hated him, and though I was tempted, it was only a flaming moment of madness, from which I was saved. You think that? Say you think that, Mr. Bracknell?"

"Indeed I do," answered the corporal reassuringly, "I feel convinced of it. At first, I was doubtful, and will own I suspected you. But your frankness in the matter has set the whole affair in a new light."

A thoughtful look came on his face. For a full minute he stood there without speaking, and the girl watched him, wondering what was in his mind. Then he spoke again.

"The affair is very mysterious. There certainly were two reports and one only came from your rifle. It is evident to me that a third person was in the neighbourhood when your husband was shot. I have found the place where he stood, and I was following the track of a sled, when I came upon you just now. The track is a fairly recent one, made, I should say, no later than last night."

"Possibly it was my husband's team," suggested the girl.

The corporal nodded. "That of course is just possible, but the man who took it away cannot have been Dick Bracknell. If he were not dead – and I am sure he was – he certainly was in no condition to walk away. And the team did not go away of itself, for there is the track of a man's feet, both going and returning."

"If he should not be dead –" faltered the girl. The corporal looked at her, and the sight of her distress moved him to a deeper sympathy. He knew his cousin, and Koon Dick's record in the territory was not an attractive one. He wondered how this beautiful girl had been induced to marry Dick Bracknell, and frowned at the thought that if he were not dead, she was still his wife. The girl noticed the frown.

"What are you thinking, Mr. Bracknell?"

"I was wondering however you came to marry such a scally-wag as I know Dick Bracknell to have been."

Joy Gargrave flushed and then grew pale. "I am not surprised that you should wonder... If you will walk on I will tell you how – how it happened."

Without speaking he fell into step by her side, and waited for her to begin.

CHAPTER VI

THE CORPORAL HEARS A STORY

A LITTLE time passed before the girl spoke, and Corporal Bracknell, to avoid embarrassing her, looked steadily at the snowy waste ahead. The frozen river, bordered by the sombre pinewoods, was visible for some two miles, and where it turned round a high rampart of the cliff, a moving figure, clearly visible on the snow, caught his eyes. He watched it attentively as it came to a halt, and wondered idly who it might be. A wandering Indian possibly, or – The girl's voice broke on his speculations.

"I met your cousin first, whilst I was staying in the neighbourhood of Harrow Fell. There was a shooting party, and Dick Bracknell made himself very agreeable to me. You are to understand that I was rather lonely, and that I was new to English ways, having lived most of my life up here."

She was silent for a moment, and Corporal Bracknell nodded.

"I think I understand how you must have felt, Miss Gargrave, and I know that Dick could make himself attractive."

As he spoke his eyes looked in the direction of the bluff where the river turned. The small black figure which he had observed was moving again, and if he were not mistaken was coming down the river. He kept an observant eye upon it, whilst his companion resumed.

"You are quite right. All the vacation, which I spent in Westmorland, your cousin was very attentive to me, and knowing that he was Sir James Bracknell's heir, I was flattered by his attentions, and a little proud that he should find me attractive, when there were others who – who might have meant more to him."

"You were too humble, Miss Gargrave," said the corporal.

"Perhaps I was," replied the girl, smiling wanly. "But that is how I felt at the time... At the end of the autumn, just before I went back to Newnham for the Michaelmas term, he proposed to me."

Again for a moment she was silent, and the corporal glancing at her caught a pensive look upon her face, and guessed that she was reviewing that occasion in her mind. He waited for what seemed quite a long time, then he said encouragingly, "Yes?"

"I did not accept him then."

"Why not?"

"For two reasons; the first because I was not quite sure that I loved him, and the second because I was not prepared to take such a step without first consulting my father."

"They were both very excellent reasons."

"So they seemed to me, but Lady Alcombe, under whose care I was whilst in England, did not agree with me."

"You were under the care of Lady Alcombe?"

There was an accent of surprise in the young man's voice, which the girl was quick to note.

"You know her?" she asked quickly. "You are surprised that I should have been under her chaperonage?"

"Yes," he admitted frankly. "I know Lady Alcombe, and I know her set. It is a fast and exclusive one. I am a little surprised that any one should have selected her to chaperone a young girl."

"My father did not understand," was the quick reply. "He had known Lady Alcombe before her marriage, and she was a distant relation of ours. He did not know the set to which she belonged, and it was perhaps natural that he should have looked to her to watch over me... For myself, I was young, I had no experience, and though there were things that I did not understand, things that shocked me, I did not mention them to my father, or indeed to any one."

"And Lady Alcombe approved of my cousin Dick?"

“She did. She laughed at my scruples, and urged me to accept him, declaring that my father would be only too ready to see me the wife of a man who would some day be the Squire of Harrow Fell. But I did not yield – then. I knew there was plenty of time, and as my father was expecting to visit England a few months later, I said that I would wait until he arrived.”

“And afterwards?” asked the corporal.

“Afterwards!” A tragic look came on the girl’s face, and to his surprise she broke again into tears.

He waited patiently, and as he did so noted that the figure up the river was certainly drawing nearer. After a little time the girl recovered her composure, and when she resumed there was a tragic note in her voice.

“I was very ignorant, and your cousin and Lady Alcombe presumed upon my ignorance. I was to stay with her at Alcombe Manor for the Christmas season, and towards the end of the term she sent word that she and Dick were going to fetch me by car, as the rail journey was rather an awkward one... When the day came, your cousin showed up alone, explaining that Lady Alcombe had an attack of influenza which, of course, had made it impossible for her to accompany him. It was all so natural that I thought nothing of it until afterwards, and I set out on the journey accompanied only by your cousin.”

A stern look came on the corporal’s face, though the girl, looking straight ahead and absorbed in her thoughts, did not notice it.

“We missed the way, and went astray, I say missed the way, though now I am quite sure that it was done of deliberate purpose, and that your cousin knew our whereabouts all the time. It began to snow, and late in the evening we reached a little village in Wiltshire when something went wrong with the engine. I do not believe now that there was anything at all the matter with the car, but Dick said there was, and as it was impossible to proceed further, and there was no train service on the little local line five miles away, there was nothing for it but to stay the night at the little inn, half tavern, half farm, which was all the accommodation that the village afforded... There was a motherly woman there who did her best to make me comfortable, and I shared a room with her two daughters, whilst your cousin was accommodated with a settle in the kitchen. Next morning, Dick tinkered at the car, and about noon we started afresh, and reached the Manor just before dinner time... Lady Alcombe, who had apparently recovered from her influenza, was in a great state of perturbation, and when I entered the hall, where a number of guests were assembled, she rushed to me. ‘My dear Joy,’ she cried, ‘where *have* you been? I have been worried almost to death about you, and have been telegraphing and telephoning all over the place.’

“I laughingly explained, and whilst I was doing so, one of the men gave a whistle of surprise, and a girl whom I had never liked began to giggle. Lady Alcombe allowed me to finish my explanation, there before all her guests, then she said icily —

“‘After so many adventures you must be tired. You had better go to your room. I will come to you.’

“As I went, I knew there was something wrong somewhere. One or two of the men looked at me in an unpleasant way, and the girl whom I have mentioned was giggling hatefully... Lady Alcombe came to me before I had changed, and ordered the maid out of the room, then she said, ‘My dear Joy, you have behaved most indiscreetly... I do not know what to say ... what to think. And to tell a story like that before all those people not one of whom will believe it! It is dreadful, positively dreadful!’

“I was bewildered. I did not know what was wrong, and I said so, adding that I had only told the simple truth.

“‘They will not believe it,’ she said. ‘You and Dick will be the talk of the place. I really do not know what to say. I am surprised at Dick Bracknell, and at you for being so simple as to tell... That Jolivet girl was openly laughing at you.’

“Her tone and manner told me better than her words the vile thing she was hinting at, and when I realized it, I broke down and cried.”

She paused, and as the corporal recalled what Lady Alcombe was, and visioned that scene between the fast woman of the world and the innocent girl in her care, he ground his teeth, and looked away from the beautiful face which was working with emotion.

“... When I did that Lady Alcombe changed her tone. ‘There’s only one thing to do,’ she said, ‘and that is to make the best of it. Thank goodness! Dick is over head and ears in love with you, and, as you know, he is only too anxious to marry you. You will have to take him now – to save your good name, Joy. It is the only way, for no one will believe your story, however true it may be, and so I advise you to make up your mind to the inevitable... Things might be a great deal worse. Dick will be a baronet some day, and his wife will have a position that no one will challenge. Just think it over, my dear, and you will see that I am altogether right.’

“I did think it over,” said the girl slowly, “and in the end I agreed to marry Dick privately, making up my mind to explain the matter to my father, later. What else was there that I could do? I had no suspicion of anything at the time. Dick wanted me, and I liked him, whilst there were people at Alcombe who did not fail to let me see what they thought, and Lady Alcombe did not stint persuasion.”

“When did you find out that the delay in arriving at Alcombe was anything but an accident?” asked the corporal thoughtfully.

“On the very morning I was married. We had returned from the church, just Dick and myself and Lady Alcombe, and I was in the library writing a note to a friend at Newnham, when I heard two people enter. The library is a little draughty, and a footman had placed a screen for me, and this completely hid me from any one entering at the door. The two who entered were Lady Alcombe and Dick. I heard her laugh and say —

“‘You owe me five thousand pounds, Dick. I hope you won’t be very long in paying, for the truth is, I am beastly hard up, and I daren’t ask Sir Alfred for a penny at the present time.’

“Dick laughed also, and I caught his answer. ‘As soon as that old duffer in the Klondyke makes his settlements I’ll pay you, Mary. You deserve it. That was a pretty little scheme of yours, and it has gone like clockwork...’

“It came on me like a flash then. I saw how everything had been arranged, and how I had been trapped and hustled into marrying your cousin. In that moment I hated him, and I have done so ever since... I sat there too startled to make my presence known, and after a little time they went out, without learning that I had overheard them. I continued to sit there thinking. I scarcely knew what to do. It was arranged that we were to go to Paris for the honeymoon; and I was afraid that they would somehow make me accept that arrangement, and bewildered though I was, I was determined that I would not do so, that I would never allow Dick Bracknell to be in fact what he was in name... I went to my room, secured my travelling coat and some money, and fled from the house, without leaving so much as a note to indicate where I was going – I went to Cambridge to the friend to whom I had been writing, and who was staying there reading through the vacation. I told her everything, and on her advice wrote to Lady Alcombe, explaining the situation, and averring that I would never live with Dick Bracknell. In reply I got a telegram from him saying that he would be down to see me the next day, and praying me to grant him an interview. He never came. Something happened and he had to leave England. Do you know what it was? I have never heard.”

“Yes,” answered the corporal slowly. “I know, and I think it is only right that you should know. You knew perhaps that Dick was in the Artillery?”

“Yes!” answered the girl.

“He was interested in his job. He was a good officer. It is the one thing to his credit that I know. There was a new gun, and he had access to the plans. He stole a copy, and sold them to the agent of a foreign government. The theft was discovered and traced, but a friend dropped Dick a telegram which was forwarded to Alcombe Manor – and he ran for it, and got clear away. I imagine

that explains why he did not visit you at Cambridge. Of course, the affair was hushed up, as such affairs are, and it is nearly forgotten now, though England would not be a safe place for him. Did you ever hear from him afterwards?"

"Not until last night," was the reply. "When his note came to me, it was a great shock."

The corporal nodded. "I can readily imagine that it would be... Did your father ever know of your marriage?"

"No, thank God! I wrote to him, but before he received the letter the accident occurred by which he lost his life. I found the letter here unopened, when I came here to comply with the terms of his will. I was glad to get here. I was so overborne by the deceit and vileness of those I had thought were my friends in England!"

"They were not all deceitful, surely?" expostulated the young man.

"No! Some are my friends still. I am going to England very shortly, and I shall stay with one of them in Westmorland."

"Will you ever return here?"

"Most certainly. North Star is my home – I love it, and I have always felt myself safe here – until last night."

Bracknell understood that she meant that she had felt that in this lodge in the wilderness she was safe from his cousin, and nodded his head.

"I understand," he said, but forbore to add what was in his mind; namely, that if Dick Bracknell had not died on the previous night, North Star would be no longer the sanctuary it had been.

They walked forward for a moment without speaking. A rise in the ground covered with snow-laden saskatoon bushes hid the river from them for a little time, and as they breasted it, and the river came into view again, they surprised a pedestrian climbing up the bank. It was Mr. Rayner.

He was obviously a little startled by the meeting, but a moment later recovered himself.

"Been out for a constitutional," he explained, "as far as the bend of the river, and I've had quite sufficient. Are you ready to return?"

The girl nodded, but the corporal, whose eyes were surveying the empty landscape in front, shook his head.

"I shall walk on a little," he said, "I may be going up stream tomorrow. The Elkhorn falls in somewhere about here, doesn't it?"

"Just beyond the bluff there," answered Joy.

"Then I'll take a look at it, and see what the trail is like."

He nodded and walked on leaving Joy Gargrave to return with Rayner. He waited until they were out of sight and then descended to the frozen surface of the river, where the going was easier, the trail having been packed by prospectors moving up and down. He reached the bluff in a short time, but did not go round it. His gaze was arrested by the trail of a sled which had come down the bank to the river at a point just below the bluff, and by recent footmarks. He remembered the figure he had seen whilst walking with Joy Gargrave, unquestionably that of Rayner, for there were his footmarks turning south from the bluff. A thought struck him, and examining the snow carefully, he found no tracks running northward. A little puzzled he looked at the sled trail again, and there made the discovery that the single footmarks that ran side by side with the sled-trail, had been made not by one pair of feet but by two, some one having quite recently adapted his stride to the tracks already made. Puzzled and interested he followed the sled trail up the bank and began to trace it through the wood at the top.

An hour later, still following the sled-trail he struck the river again, and found himself exactly opposite the landing which led to North Star Lodge. As he realized this he nodded thoughtfully. The sled trail he had been following, when he had encountered Joy Gargrave, led directly across the river. But whose sled was it? And why had Rayner traced it so carefully, at the same time endeavouring to cover his own trail? The first question was one for which he had no answer, and the second was

an equal puzzle. Clearly Rayner had been interested in the sled-trail since he had followed it for two miles; and plainly he was anxious to conceal his interest, since he had walked so carefully in the footsteps of the unknown driver, and had made no reference to the matter whatever. Did he know something – something that he did not wish to make known?

The corporal thought that very likely he did, but could not even conjecture what the secret knowledge might be. There was a puzzled frown on his face, as he turned in the direction of the Lodge, and when he came in sight of the house he became aware of a considerable bustle. In the open space in front two sleds were drawn up, and a considerable number of dogs were lying about or nosing in the snow for lost fragments of food. Two Indians and a half-breed were standing near the sleds smoking and talking. Bracknell recognized the half-breed for a man who had been in the service of the police as a driver.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.