FOOTE MARY HALLOCK

THE CUP OF TREMBLING, AND OTHER STORIES

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THE CUP OF TREMBLING

I

A miner of the Cœur d'Alêne was returning alone on foot, one winter evening, from the town in the gulch to his solitary claim far up on the timbered mountain-side.

His nearest way was by an unfrequented road that led to the Dreadnaught, a lofty and now abandoned mine that had struck the vein three thousand feet above the valley, but the ore, being low-grade, could never be made to pay the cost of transportation.

He had cached his snow-shoes, going down, at the Bruce boys' cabin, the only habitation on the Dreadnaught road, which from there was still open to town.

The snows that camp all summer on the highest peaks of the Cœur d'Alêne were steadily working downward, driving the game before them; but traffic had not ceased in the mountains. Supplies were still delivered by pack-train at outlying claims

and distant cabins in the standing timber. The miner was therefore traveling light, encumbered with no heavier load than his personal requisition of tobacco and whisky and the latest newspapers, which he circulated in exchange for the wayside hospitalities of that thinly peopled but neighborly region.

His homeward halt at the cabin was well timed. The Bruce boys were just sitting down to supper; and the moon, that would light his lonelier way across the white slopes of the forest, would not be visible for an hour or more. The boys threw wood upon their low cooking-fire of coals, which flamed up gloriously, spreading its immemorial welcome over that poor, chance suggestion of a home. The supper was served upon a board, or literally two boards, nailed shelf-wise across the lighted end of the cabin, beneath a small window where, crossed by the squares of a dusty sash, the austere winter twilight looked in: a sky of stained-glass colors above the clear heights of snow; an atmosphere as cold and pure as the air of a fireless church; a hushed multitude of trees disguised in vestments of snow, a mute recessional after the benediction has been said.

Each man dragged his seat to the table, and placed himself sidewise, that his legs might find room beneath the narrow board. Each dark face was illumined on one side by the fitful fire-glow, on the other by the constant though fading ray from the window; and, as they talked, the boisterous fire applauded, and the twilight, like a pale listener, laid its cold finger on the pane.

They talked of the price of silver, of the mines shutting down,

of the bad times East and West, and the signs of a corrupt generation; and this brought them to the latest ill rumor from town – a sensation that had transpired only a few hours before the miner's departure, and which friends of the persons discussed were trying to keep as quiet as possible.

The name of a young woman was mentioned, hitherto a rather disdainful favorite with society in the Cœur d'Alêne – the wife of one of the richest mine-owners in the State.

The "Old Man," as the miners called him, had been absent for three months in London, detained from week to week on the tedious but paramount business of selling his mine. The mine, with its fatalistic millions (which, it was surmised, had spoken for their owner in marriage more eloquently than the man could have spoken for himself), had been closed down pending negotiations for its sale, and left in charge of the engineer, who was also the superintendent. This young man, whose personal qualities were in somewhat formidable contrast to those of his employer, nevertheless, in business ways, enjoyed a high measure of his confidence, and had indeed deserved it. The present outlook was somewhat different. Persons who were fond of Waring were saying in town that "Jack must be off his head," as the most charitable way of accounting for his late eccentricity. The husband was reported to be on shipboard, expected in New York in a week or less; but the wife, without explanation, had suddenly left her home. Her disappearance was generally accounted a flight. On the same night of the young woman's evanishment,

Superintendent Waring had relieved himself of his duties and responsibilities, and taken himself off, with the same irrevocable frankness, leaving upon his friends the burden of his excuses, his motives, his whereabouts, and his reputation.

Since news of the double desertion had got abroad, tongues had been busy, and a vigorous search was afoot for evidence of the generally assumed fact of an elopement, but with trifling results.

The fugitives, it was easily learned, had not gone out by the railroad; but Clarkson's best team, without bells, and a bob-sleigh with two seats in it had been driven into the stable yard before daylight on the morning of the discovery, the horses rough and jaded, and white with frozen steam; and Clarkson himself had been the driver on this hard night trip. As he was not in the habit of serving his patrons in this capacity, and as he would give none but frivolous, evasive answers to the many questions that were asked him, he was supposed to be accessory to Waring in his crime against the morals of the camp.

While the visitor enlarged upon the evidence furnished by Clarkson's night ride, the condition of his horses, and his own frank lying, the Bruce boys glanced at each other significantly, and each man spat into the fire in silence.

The traveler's halt was over. He slipped his feet into the straps of his snow-shoes, and took his pole in hand; for now the moon had risen to light his path; faint boreal shadows began to appear on the glistening slopes. He shuffled away, and his shape was

soon lost in the white depths of the forest.

The brothers sat and smoked by their sinking fire, before covering its embers for the night; and again the small window, whitening in the growing moonlight, was like the blanched face of a troubled listener.

"That must have been them last night, you recollect. I looked out about two o'clock, and it *was* a bob-sleigh, crawlin' up the grade, and the horses hadn't any bells on. The driver was a thick-set man like Clarkson, in a buffaler coat. There was two on the back seat, a man and woman plain enough, all muffled up, with their heads down. It was so still in the woods I could have heard if they'd been talkin' no louder than I be now; but not a word was spoke all the way up the hill. I says to myself, 'Them folks must be pretty well acquainted, 'less they 're all asleep, goin' along through the woods the prettiest kind of a night, walkin' their horses, and not a word in the whole dumb outfit.'"

"I'm glad you didn't open your head about it," said the elder brother. "We don't know for certain it was them, and it's none of our funeral, anyhow. Where, think, could they have been going to, supposin' you was right? Would Jack be likely to harbor up there at the mine?"

"Where else could they get to, with a team, by this road? Where else could they be safer? Jack's inside of his own lines up there, and come another big snow the road'll be closed till spring; and who'd bother about them, anyway, exceptin' it might be the Old Man? And a man that leaves his wife around loose the way

he done ain't likely to be huntin' her on snow-shoes up to another man's mine."

"I don't believe Jack's got the coin to be meanderin' very far just about now," said the practical elder brother. "He's staked out with a pretty short rope, unless he's realized on some of his claims. I heard he was tryin' to dig up a trade with a man who's got a mine over in the Slocan country. That would be convenient, over the line among the Kanucks. I wouldn't wonder if he's hidin' out for a spell till he gathers his senses, and gets a little more room to turn in. He can't fly far with a woman like her, unless his pockets are pretty well lined. Them easy-comers easy-goers ain't the kind that likes to rough it. I'll bet she don't bile his shirts or cook his dinners, not much."

"It's a wild old nest up there," said the younger and more imaginative as well as more sympathetic of the brothers – "a wild road to nowhere, only the dropping-off place."

"What gets me is that talk of Jack's last fall, when you was in the Kootenai, about his intentions to bach it up there this winter, if he could coax his brother out from Manitoba to bach with him. I wouldn't like to think it of Jack, that he'd lie that way, just to turn folks off the scent. But he did, sure, pack a lot of his books and stuff up to the mine; grub, too, a lot of it; and done some work on the cabin. Think he was fixin' up for a hide-out, in case he should need one? Or wa'n't it anything but a bluff?"

"Naw," the other drawled impatiently. "Jack's no such a deep schemer as all that comes to. More'n likely he seen he was

workin' the wrong lead, and concluded 't was about time for him to be driftin' in another direction. 'T ain't likely he give in to such foolishness without one fight with himself. And about when he had made up his mind to fire himself out, and quit the whole business, the Old Man puts out for London, stuck on sellin' his mine, and can't leave unless Jack stays with it. And Jack says to himself, 'Well, damn it all, I done what I could! What is to be will be.' That's about the way I put it up."

"I wouldn't be surprised," the other assented; "but what's become of the brother, if there ever was a brother in it at all?"

"Why, Lord! a man can change his mind. But I guess he didn't tell his brother about this young madam he was lookin' after along with the rest of the Old Man's goods. I hain't got nothin' against Jack Waring; he's always been square with me, and he's an awful good minin' man. I'd trust him with my pile, if it was millions, but I wouldn't trust him, nor any other man, with my wife."

"Sho! she was poor stuff; she was light, I tell ye. Think of some of the women we've known! Did they need watchin'? No, sir; it ain't the man, it's the woman, when it's between a young man and a married woman. It's her foolishness that gits away with them both. Girls is different. I'd skin a man alive that set the town talkin' about my sister like *she's* bein' talked about, now."

The brothers stepped outside and stood awhile in silence, regarding the night and breathing the pure, frosty air of the forest. A commiserating thankfulness swelled in their breasts

with each deep, clean inspiration. They were poor men, but they were free men – free, compared with Jack. There was no need to bar their door, or watch suspiciously, or skulk away and hide their direction, choosing the defense of winter and the deathlike silence of the snows to the observation of their kind.

They stared with awe up the white, blank road that led to the deserted mine, and they marveled in homely thinking: "Will it pay?" It was "the wrong lead this time, sure."

The brothers watched the road from day to day, and took note that not a fresh track had been seen upon it; not a team, or a traveler on snow-shoes, had gone up or down since the night when the bob-sleigh with its silent passengers had creaked up it in the moonlight. Since that night of the full moon of January not another footprint had broken the smoothness of that hidden track. The snow-tides of midwinter flowed over it. They filled the gulch and softly mounting, snow on snow, rose to the eaves of the little cabin by the buried road. The Bruce boys dug out their window; the hooded roof protected their door. They walked about on top of the frozen tide, and entered their house, as if it were a cellar, by steps cut in a seven-foot wall of snow.

One gray day in February a black dog, with a long nose and bloodshot eyes, leaped down into the trench and pawed upon the cabin door. Opening to the sound, the Bruce boys gave him a boisterous welcome, calling their visitor by name. The dog was Tip, Jack Waring's clever shepherd spaniel, a character as well known in the mountains as his master. Indeed, he was too

well known, and too social in his habits, for a safe member of a household cultivating strict seclusion; therefore, when Tip's master went away with his neighbor's wife, Tip had been left behind. His reappearance on this road was regarded by the Bruce boys as highly suggestive.

Tip was a dog that never forgave an injury or forgot a kindness. Many a good bone he had set down to the Bruce boys' credit in the days when his master's mine was supposed to be booming, and his own busy feet were better acquainted with the Dreadnaught road. He would not come in, but stood at the door, wagging his tail inquiringly. The boys were about to haul him into the cabin by the hair of his neck, or shut him out in the cold, when a shout was heard from the direction of the road above. Looking out, they saw a strange young man on snow-shoes, who hailed them a second time, and stood still, awaiting their response. Tip appeared to be satisfied now; he briskly led the way, the boys following, up the frozen steps cut in their moat-wall of snow, and stood close by, assisting, with all the eloquence his honest, ugly phiz was capable of, at the conference that ensued. He showed himself particularly anxious that his old friends should take his word for the stranger whom he had introduced and appeared to have adopted.

Pointing up the mountain, the young man asked, "Is that the way to the Dreadnaught mine?"

"There ain't anybody workin' up there now," Jim Bruce replied indirectly, after a pause in which he had been studying the

stranger's appearance. His countenance was exceedingly fresh and pleasing, his age about twenty years. He was buttoned to the chin in a reefing-jacket of iron-gray Irish frieze. His smooth, girlish face was all over one pure, deep blush from exertion in the cold. He wore Canadian snow-shoes strapped upon his feet, instead of the long Norwegian skier on which the men of the Cœur d'Alêne make their winter journeys in the mountains; and this difference alone would have marked him for a stranger from over the line. After he had spoken, he wiped away the icy moisture of his breath that frosted his upper lip, stuck a short pipe between his teeth, drew off one mitten and fumbled in his clothing for a match. The Bruce boys supplied him with a light, and as the fresh, pungent smoke ascended, he raised his head and smiled his thanks.

"Is this the road to the Waring mine – the Dreadnaught?" he asked again, deliberately, after a pull or two at his pipe.

And again came the evasive answer: "Mine's shut down. Ain't nobody workin' up there now."

The youngster laughed aloud. "Most uncommunicative population I ever struck," he remarked, in a sort of humorous despair. "That's the way they answered me in town. I say, is this a hoodoo? If my brother isn't up there, where in the devil is he? All I ask is a straight answer to a straight question."

The Bruce boys grinned their embarrassment. "You'll have to ask us somethin' easier," they said.

"This is the road to the mine, ain't it?"

"Oh, that's the road all right enough," the boys admitted; "but you can see yourself how much it's been traveled lately."

The stranger declined to be put off with such casual evidence as this. "The wind would wipe out any snow-shoe track; and a snow-shoer would as soon take across the woods as keep the road, if he knew the way."

"Wal," said Jim Bruce, conclusively, "most of the boys, when they are humpin' themselves to town, stops in here for a spell to limber up their shins by our fire; but Jack Waring hain't fetched his bones this way for two months and better. Looks mighty queer that we hain't seen track nor trace of him if he's been livin' up there since winter set in. Are you the brother he was talkin' of sending for to come out and bach it with him?"

The boys were conscious of their own uneasy looks as the frank eyes of the stranger met theirs at the question.

"I'm the only brother he's got. He wrote me last August that he'd taken a fit of the sulks, and wanted me to come and help him work it off up here at his mine. I was coming, only a good job took me in tow; and after a month or so the work went back on me, and I wrote to Jack two weeks ago to look out for me; and here I am. And the people in town, where he's been doing business these six years, act as if they distantly remembered him. 'Oh, yes,' they say, 'Jack Waring; but he's gone away, don't you know? Snowed under somewhere; don't know where.' I asked them if he'd left no address. Apparently not. Asked if he'd seemed to be clothed in his proper senses when last seen. They

thought so. I went to the post-office, expecting to find his mail piled up there. Every scrap had been cleaned up since Friday last; but not the letter I wrote him, so he can't be looking for me. The P. M. squirmed, like everybody else, when I mentioned my brother; but he owned that a man's mail can't leave the box without hands, and that the hands belonged usually to some of the boys at the Mule Deer mine. Now, the Mule Deer is next neighbor to the Dreadnaught, across the divide. It's a friendly power, I know; and that confirms me that my brother has done just what he said he was going to do. The tone of his letter showed that he was feeling a bit seedy. He seemed to have soured on the town for some reason, which might mean that the town has soured on him. I don't ask what it is, and I don't care to know, but something has queered him with the whole crowd. I asked Clarkson to let me have a man to show me the way to the Dreadnaught. He calmly lied to me a blue streak, and he knew that I knew he was lying. And then Tip, here, looked me in the eye, with his head on one side, and I saw that he was on to the whole business."

"Smartest dog that ever lived!" Jim Bruce ejaculated. "I wouldn't wonder if he knew you was Jack's brother."

"I won't swear that he could name the connection; but he knows I'm looking for his master, and he's looking for him too; but he's afraid to trail after him without a good excuse. See? I don't know what Tip's been up to, that he should be left with a man like Clarkson; but whatever he's done, he's a good dog now.

Ain't you, Tip?"

"*He* done!" Jim Bruce interrupted sternly. "Tip never done nothing to be punished for. Got more sense of what's right than most humans, and lives up to it straight along. I'd quar'l with any man that looked cross at that dog. You old brute, you rascal! What you doin' up here? Ain't you 'shamed, totin' folks 'way up here on a wild-goose chase? What you doin' it fer, eh? Pertendin' you're so smart! You know Jack ain't up here; Jack ain't up here, I say. Go along with ye, tryin' to fool a stranger!"

Tip was not only unconvinced by these unblushing assertions on the part of a friend whose word he had never doubted: he was terribly abashed and troubled by their manifest disingenuousness. From a dog's point of view it was a poor thing for the Bruce boys to do, trying to pass upon him like this. He blinked apologetically, and licked his chaps, and wagged the end of his tail, which had sunk a trifle from distress and embarrassment at his position.

The three men stood and watched the workings of his mind, expressed in his humble, doggish countenance; and a final admission of the truth that he had been trying to conceal escaped Jim Bruce in a burst of admiration for his favorite's unswerving sagacity.

"Smartest dog that ever lived!" he repeated, triumphant in defeat; and the brothers wasted no more lies upon the stranger.

There was something uncanny, thought the young man, in this mystery about his brother, that grew upon him and waxed

formidable, and pursued him even into the depths of the snow-buried wilderness. The breath of gossip should have died on so clean an air, unless there had been more than gossip in it.

The Bruce boys ceased to argue with him on the question of his brother's occupancy of the mine. They urged other considerations by way of delaying him. They spoke of the weather; of the look of snow in the sky, the feeling of snow in the air, the yellow stillness of the forest, the creeping cold. They tried to keep him over night, on the offer of their company up the mountain in the morning, if the weather should prove fit. But he was confident, though graver in manner than at first, that he was going to a supper and a bed at his brother's camp, to say nothing of a brother's welcome.

"I'm positive he's up there. I froze on to it from the first," he persisted. "And why should I sleep at the foot of the hill when my brother sleeps at the top?"

The Bruce boys were forced to let him go on, with the promise, merely allowing for the chance of disappointment, that if he found nobody above he would not attempt to return after nightfall by the Dreadnaught road, which hugs the peak at a height above the valley where there is always a stiff gale blowing, and the combing drifts in midwinter are forty feet high.

"Trust Tip," they said; "he'll show you the trail across the mountain to the Mule Deer" – a longer but far safer way to shelter for the night.

"Tip is fly; he'll see me through," said Jack's brother. "I'd trust

him with my life. I'll be back this way possibly in the morning; but if you don't see me, come up and pay us a visit. We'll teach the Dreadnaught to be more neighborly. Here's hoping," he cried, and the three drank in turn out of the young fellow's flask, the Bruce boys almost solemnly as they thought of the meeting between the brothers, the sequel to that innocent hope. Unhappy brother, unhappy Jack!

He turned his face to the snows again, and toiled on up the mountain, with Tip's little figure trotting on ahead.

"Think of Jack's leavin' a dog like that, and takin' up with a woman!" said Jim Bruce, as he squared his shoulders to the fire, yawning and shuddering with the chill he had brought with him from outside. "And such a woman!" he added. "I'd want the straight thing, or else I'd manage to git along without. Anything decent would have taken the dog too."

"'Twas mortal cute, though, of the youngster to freeze on to Tip, and pay no attention to the talk. He knows a dog, that's sure. And Tip knowed him. But I wish we could 'a' blocked that little rascal's game. 'Twas too bad to let him go on."

"I never see anybody so stuck on goin' to a place," said the elder Bruce. "We'll see him back in the morning: but I'll bet he don't jaw much about brother Jack."

The manager's house at the Dreadnaught had been built in the time of the mine's supposititious prosperity, and was the ideal log cabin of the Cœur d'Alêne. A thick-waisted chimney of country rock buttressed the long side-wall of peeled logs chinked

with mud. The front room was twenty feet across, and had a stone hearth and a floor of dressed pine. Back of it were a small bedroom and a kitchen into which water was piped from a spring higher up on the mountain. The roof of cedar shakes projected over the gable, shading the low-browed entrance from the sun in summer, and protecting it in winter from the high-piled snows.

Like a swallow's nest it clung in the hollow of the peak, which slopes in vast, grand contours to the valley, as if it were the inside of a bowl, the rim half broken away. The valley is the bottom of the bowl, and the broken rim is the lower range of hills that completes its boundary. Great trees, growing beside its hidden streams far below, to the eye of a dweller in the cabin are dwarfed to the size of junipers, and the call of those unseen waters comes dreamily in a distant, inconstant murmur, except when the wind beats up the peak, which it seldom does, as may be seen by the warp of the pines and tamaracks, and the drifting of the snows in winter.

To secure level space for the passage of teams in front of the house, an embankment had been thrown up, faced with a heavy retaining-wall of stone. This bench, or terrace, was now all one with the mountain-side, heaped up and smoothed over with snow.

Jack, in his winter nest-building, had cleared a little space for air and light in front of each of the side windows, and with unceasing labor he shoveled out the snow which the wind as constantly sifted into these pits, and into the trench beneath the hooded roof that sheltered the gable entrance.

The snow walls of this sunken gallery rose to the height of the door-frame, cutting out all view from without or within. A perpetual white twilight, warmed by the glow of their hearth-fire, was all that the fugitives ever saw of the day. Sun, or stars were alike to them. One link they had with humanity, however, without which they might have suffered hardship, or even have been forced to succumb to their savage isolation.

The friendly Mule Deer across the mountain was in a state of winter siege, like the Dreadnaught, but had not severed its connections with the world. It was a working mine, with a force of fifty or more men on its pay-roll, and regular communication on snow-shoes was had with the town. The mine was well stocked as well as garrisoned, and Jack was indebted to the friendship of the manager for many accustomed luxuries which Esmée would have missed in the new life that she had rashly welcomed for his sake. No woman could have been less fitted than she, by previous circumstances and training, to take her share of its hardships, or to contribute to its slender possibilities in the way of comfort. A servant was not to be thought of. No servant but a Chinaman would have been impersonal enough for the situation, and all heathen labor has been ostracized by Christian white labor from the Cœur d'Alêne.

So Jack waited upon his love, and was inside man and outside man, and as he expressed it, "general dog around the place." He was a clever cook, which goes without saying in one who has known good living, and has lived eight years a bachelor on

the frontier: but he cleaned his own kitchen and washed his own skillets, which does not go without saying, sooner than see Esmée's delicate hands defiled with such grimy tasks. He even swept, as a man sweeps; but what man was ever known to dust? The house, for all his ardent, unremitting toil, did not look particularly tidy.

Its great, dark front room was a man's room, big, undraped and uncurtained, strongly framed, – the framework much exposed in places, – heavy in color, hard in texture, yet a stronghold, and a place of absolute reserve: a very safe place in which to lodge such a secret as Esmée. And there she was, in her exotic beauty, shivering close to a roaring fire, scorching her cheeks that her silk-clad shoulders might be warm. She had never before lived in a house where the fires went out at night, and water froze beside her bed, and the floors were carpetless and cold as the world's indifference to her fate. She was absolutely without clothing suited to such a change, nor would she listen to sensible, if somewhat unattractive, suggestions from Jack. Now, least of all times, could she afford to disguise her picturesque beauty for the sake of mere comfort and common sense, or even to spare Jack his worries about her health.

It was noon, and the breakfast-table still stood in front of the fire. Jack, who since eight o'clock had been chopping wood and "packing" it out of the tunneled snow-drift which was the woodshed into the kitchen, and cooking breakfast, and shoveling snow out of the trenches, sat glowing on his side of the table,

farthest from the fire, while Esmée, her chair drawn close to the hearth, was sipping her coffee and holding a fan spread between her face and the flames.

"Jack, I wish you had a fire-screen – one that would stand of itself, and not have to be held."

"Bless you! I'd be your fire-screen, only I think I'm rather hotter than the fire itself. I insist that you take some exercise, Esmée. Come, walk the trench with me ten rounds before I start."

"Why do you start so early?"

"Do you call this early? Besides, it looks like snow."

"Then, why go at all?"

"You know why I go, dearest. The boys went to town yesterday. I've had no mail for a week."

"And can't you exist without your mail?"

"Existence is just the hitch with us at present. It's for your sake I cannot afford to be overlooked. If I fall out of step in my work, it may take years to get into line again. I can't say like those ballad fellows:

> 'Arise! my love, and fearless be,
> For o'er the southern moors I have a home for thee.'

"I wish I had. We'll put some money in our purse, and then we'll make ourselves a home where we please. Money is the first thing with us now. You must see that yourself."

"I see it, of course; but it doesn't seem the nearest way to a

fortune, going twice a week on snow-shoes to play solo at the Mule Deer mine. Confess, Jack dear, you do not come straight away as soon as you get your mail."

"I do not, of course. I must be civil, after a fashion, to Wilfrid Knight, considering all that he is doing for me."

"What is he doing for you?"

"He's working as hard as he can for me in certain directions. It's best not to say too much about these things till they've materialized; but he has as strong a backing as any man in the Cœur d'Alêne. To tell you the truth, I can't afford *not* to be civil to him, if it meant solo every day in the week."

Esmée smiled a little, but remained silent. Jack went around to the chimney-piece and filled his pipe, and began to stalk about the room, talking in brief sentences as he smoked.

"And by the way, dearest, would you mind if he should drop in on us some day?" Jack laughed at his own phrase, so literally close to the only mode of gaining access to their cellarage in the snow.

Esmée looked up quickly. "What in the world does he want to come here for? Doesn't he see enough of you as it is?"

"He wants to see something of you; and it's howling lonesome at the Mule Deer. Won't you let him come, Esmée?"

"Why, do you want him, Jack?"

"I want him! What should I want him for? But we have to be decent to a man who's doing everything in the world for us. We couldn't have made it here, at all, without the aid and comfort of

the Mule Deer."

"I'd rather have done without his aid and comfort, if it must be paid for at his own price.

"Everything has got to be paid for. Even that inordinate fire, which you won't be parted from, has to be paid for with a burning cheek."

"Not if you had a fire-screen, Jack," Esmée reminded him sweetly.

"We will have one – an incandescent fire-screen on two legs. Will two be enough? A Mule Deer miner shall pack it in on his back from town. But we shall have to thank Wilfrid Knight for sending him. Well, if you won't have him here, he can't come, of course; but it's a mistake, I think. We can't afford, in my opinion, not to see the first hand that is held out to us in a social way – a hand that can help us if it will, but one that is quite as strong to injure us."

"Have him, then, if he's so dangerous. But is he nice, do you think?"

"He's nice enough, as men go. We're not any of us any too nice."

"Some of you are at least considerate, and I think it very inconsiderate of Mr. Wilfrid Knight to wish to intrude himself on me now."

"Dearest, he has been kindness itself, and delicacy, in a way. Twice he has sent a special man to town to hunt up little dainties and comforts for you when my prison fare" —

"Jack, what do you mean? Has Wilfrid Knight been putting his hand in his pocket for things for me to eat and drink?"

"His pocket's not much hurt. Don't let that disturb you; but it is something to send a man fifteen miles down the mountain to pack the stuff. You might very properly recognize that, if you chose."

"I recognize nothing of it. Why did you not tell me how it was? I thought that you were sending for those things."

"How can I send Knight's men on my errands, if you please? I don't show up very largely at the mine in person. You don't seem to realize the situation. Did you suppose that the Mule Deer men, when they fetch these things from town, know whom they are for? They may, but they are not supposed to."

"Arrange it as you like, but I will not take presents from the manager of the Mule Deer."

"He has dined at your table, Esmée."

"Not at *my* table," said Esmée, haughtily averting her face.

"But you have been nice to him; he remembers you with distinct pleasure."

"Very likely. It is my rôle to be nice to people. I should be nice to him if he came here now; but I should hate him for coming. If *he* were nice, he would not dream of your asking him or allowing him to come."

"Darling, darling, we can't keep it up like this. We are not lords of fate to that extent. Fellows will pay you attention; they always have and they always will: but you must not, dearest, imply that I

am not sensitive on the point of what you may or may not receive in that way. I should make myself a laughing-stock before all men if I should begin by resenting things. I could not insult you so. I will resent nothing that a husband does not resent."

"Jack, don't you understand? I could have taken it lightly once; I always used to. I can't take it lightly now. I cannot have him come here – the first to see us in this *solitude à deux*, the most intimate, the most awful – "

"Of course, of course," murmured Jack. "It is awful, I admit it, for you. But it always will be. Ours is a double solitude for life, with the world always eying us askance, scoring us, or secretly envying us, or merely wondering coarsely about us. It takes tremendous courage in a woman; but you will have the courage of your honesty, your surpassing generosity to me."

"Generosity!" Esmée repeated. "We shall see. I give myself just five years of this 'generosity.' After that, the beginning of the end. I shall have to eliminate myself from the problem, to be finally generous. But five years is a good while," she whispered, "to dare to love my love in, if my love loves me."

There could be no doubt of this as yet. Esmée could afford to toy sentimentally with the thought of future despair and final self-elimination.

"Come, come," said Waring; "this will never do; we must get some fresh air on this." He knocked the ashes out of his pipe, pocketed it, and marched into an inner room whence he fetched a warm, loose cloak and a pair of carriage boots.

"Fresh air and exercise!"

Esmée, seeing there was to be no escape from Jack's favorite specific for every earthly ill, put out her foot, in its foolish little slipper, and Jack drew on the fur-lined boots, and laced them around the silken ankles.

He followed her out into the snow-walled fosse, and fell into step beside her.

"May I smoke?"

"What affectation! As if you didn't always smoke."

"Well, hardly, when I have a lady with me, in such a public place."

"Oh me, oh me!" Esmée suddenly broke forth, "why did I not meet you when you were in New York the winter before! Well, it would have settled one or two things. And we might be walking like this now, before all the world, and every one would say we were exactly suited to each other. And so we are – fearfully and wonderfully. Why did that fact wait to force itself upon us when to admit it was a crime? And we were so helpless *not* to admit it. What resources had I against it?"

"God knows. Perhaps I ought to have made a better fight, for your sake. But the fight was over for me the moment I saw that you were unhappy. If you had seemed reasonably content with your life, or even resigned, I hope I should have been man enough to have taken myself off and had it out alone."

"I had no life that was not all a pretense and a lie. I began by thinking I could pretend to you. But you know how all that broke

down. Oh, Jack, *you* know the man!"

"I wouldn't go on with that, Esmée."

"But I must. I must explain to you just once, if I can."

"You need not explain, I should hope, to me."

"But this is something that rankles fearfully. I must tell you that I never, never would have given in if I hadn't thought there was something in him, really. Even his peculiarities at first seemed rather picturesque; at least they were different from other men's. And we thought him a great original, a force, a man of such power and capacity. His very success was supposed to mean that. It was not his gross money that appealed to me. You could not think that I would have let myself be literally sold. But the money seemed to show what he had done. I thought that at least my husband would be a man among men, and especially in the West. But" —

"Darling, need we go into all this? Say it to yourself, if it must be said. You need not say it to me."

"*I* am saying it, not you. It is not you who have a monstrous, incredible marriage to explain. I must explain it as far as I can. Do you think I can afford to be without your respect and comprehension simply because you love me?"

"But love includes the rest."

"Not after a while. Now let me speak. It was when he brought me out here that I saw him as he is. I measured him by the standards of the life that had made him. I saw that he was just a rough Western man, like hundreds of others; not half so

picturesque as a good many who passed the window every day. And all his great success, which I had taken as a proof of ability, meant nothing but a stroke of brutal luck that might happen to the commonest miner any day. I saw how you pretended to respect his judgment while privately you managed in spite of it. I could not help seeing that he was laughed at for his pretensions in the community that knew him best. It was tearing away the last rag of self-respect in which I had been trying to dress up my shameful bargain. I knew what you all thought of him, and I knew what you must think of me. I could not force myself to act my wretched part before you; it seemed a deeper degradation when you were there to see. How could I let you think that *that* was my idea of happiness! But from the first I never could be anything with you but just myself – for better or for worse. It was such a rest, such a perilous rest, to be with you, just because I knew it was no use to pretend. You always seemed to understand everything without a word."

"I understood *you* because I gave my whole mind to the business. You were in my thoughts night and day, from the moment I first saw you."

"Yes," said Esmée, passing over this confession as a thing of course in a young man's relations with his employer's wife. "It was as if we had been dear friends once, before memory began, before anything began; and all the rest came of the miserable accident of our being born – mis-born, since we could not meet until it was too late. Oh, it was cruel! I can never forgive life,

fate, society – whatever it was that played us this trick. I had the strangest forebodings when they talked about you, before I saw you – a premonition of a crisis, a danger ahead. There was a fascination in the commonest reports about you. And then your perfectly reckless naturalness, of a man who has nothing to hide and nothing to fear. Who on earth could resist it?"

"I was the one who ought to have resisted it, perhaps. I don't deny that I was 'natural.' We're neither of us exactly humbugs – not now. If the law that we've broken is hunting for us, there will be plenty of good people to point us out. All that we shall have to face by and by. I wish I could take your share and mine too; but you will always have it the harder. That, too, is part of the law, I suppose."

"I must not be too proud," said Esmée. "I must remember what I am in the eyes of the world. But, Jack dear, if Wilfrid Knight does come, do not let him come without telling me first. Don't let him 'drop in on us,' as you said."

"He shall not come at all if it bothers you to think of it. I am not such a politic fellow. It's for your sake, dearest one, that I am cringing to luck in this way. I never pestered myself much about making friends and connections; but *I* must not be too proud, either. It's a handicap, there's no doubt about that; it's wiser to accept the fact, and go softly. Great heavens! haven't I got you?"

"I suppose Wilfrid Knight is a man of the world? He'll know how to spare the situation?"

"Quite so," said Jack, with a faint smile. "You needn't be

uneasy about him." Then, more gravely, he added: —

"He knows this is no light thing with either of us. He must respect your courage – the courage so rare in a woman – to face a cruel mistake that all the world says she must cover up, and right it at any cost."

"That is nonsense," said Esmée, with the violence of acute sensitiveness. "You need not try to doctor up the truth to me. You know that men do not admire that kind of courage in women – not in their own women. Let us be plain with each other. I don't pretend that I came here with you for the sake of courage, or even of honesty."

Esmée stopped, and turned herself about, with her shoulders against the wall of snow, crushing the back of her head deep into its soft, cold resistance. In this way she gained a glimpse of the sky.

"Jack, it does look like a storm. It's all over gray, is it not? and the air is so raw and chilly. I wish you would not go to-day."

"I'll get off at once, and be back before dark. There shall be no solo this afternoon. But leave those dishes for me. I despise to have you wash dishes."

"I hate it myself. If I do do it, it will be to preserve my self-respect, and partly because you are so slow, Jack dear, and there's no comfort in life till you get through. What a ridiculous, blissful, squalid time it is! Shall we ever do anything natural and restful again, I wonder?"

"Yes; when we get some money."

"I can't bear to hear you talk so much about money. Have I not had enough of money in my life?"

"Life is more of a problem with us than it is with most people."

"Let us go where nature solves the problem. There was an old song one of my nurses used to sing to me —

> 'Oh, islands there are, in the midst of the deep,
> Where the leaves never fade, and the skies never weep.'

"Can't we go, Jack dear? Let us be South Sea Islanders. Let's be anything where there will be no dishes to wash, or somebody to wash them for us."

"We will go when we get some money," Jack persisted hauntingly.

"Oh, hush about the money! It's so uncomplimentary of you. I shall begin to think" —

"You must not think. Thinking, after a thing is done, is no use. You must 'sleep, dear, sleep.' I shall be back before dark; but if I am not, don't think it strange. One never knows what may happen."

When he was gone Esmée was seized with a profound fit of dawdling. She sat for an hour in Jack's deep leather chair by the fire, her cloak thrown back, her feet, in the fur boots, extended to the blaze. For the first time that day she felt completely warm. She sat an hour dreaming, in perfect physical content.

Where did those words that Jack had quoted come from, she

mused, and repeated them to herself, trying their sound by ear.

"Then sleep, dear, sleep!"

They gathered meaning from some fragmentary connection in her memory.

"If thou wilt ease thine heart
Of love, and all its smart —
Then sleep, dear, sleep!"

"And not a sorrow" —

She could recall no more. The lines had an echo of Keats. She looked across the room toward the low shelves where Jack's books were crammed in dusty banishment. It was not likely that Keats would be in that company; yet Jack, by fits and starts, had been a passionate reader of everybody, even of the poets.

She was too utterly comfortable to be willing to move merely to lay the ghost of a vanished song. And now another verse awoke to haunt her: —

"But wilt thou cure thine heart
Of love, and all its smart —
Then die, dear, die!"

"'T is deeper, sweeter" —

Than what? She could not remember. She had read the verses long ago, as a girl of twenty measures time, when the sentiment had had for her the palest meaning. Now she thought it not extravagant, but simply true.

"Then die, dear, die!"

She repeated, pillowing her head in the satin lining of her cloak. A tear of self-forgiving pity stole down her cheek. Love, – of her own fair, sensitive self; love of the one who could best express her to herself, and magnify her day by day, on the highest key of modern poetic sympathy and primal passion and mediæval romance, – this was the whole of life to her. She desired no other revelation concerning the mission of woman. In no other sense would she have held it worth while to be a woman. Yet she, of Beauty's daughters, had been chosen for that stupidest of all the dull old world's experiments in what it calls success – a loveless marriage!

When at length the fire went down, and the air of the draughty room grew cool, Esmée languidly bestirred herself. The confusion that Jack had left behind him in his belated departure began to afflict her – the unwashed dishes on the table, the crumbs on the floor, the half-emptied pipe and ashes on the mantel, the dust everywhere. She pitied herself that she had no one at her command to set things right. At length she rose, reluctantly dispensing with her cloak, but keeping the fur boots

on her feet, and began to pile up the breakfast dishes, and carry them by separate journeys to the kitchen.

The fire had long been out in the cook-stove; the bare little place was distressingly cold; neither was it particularly clean, and the nature of its disorder was even more objectionable than that of the sitting-room. Poor Jack! Esmée had profoundly admired and pitied his struggles with the kitchen. What man of Jack's type and breeding had ever stood such a test of devotion? Even young Sir Gareth, who had done the same sort of thing, had done it for knighthood's sake, and had taken pride in the ordeal. With Jack such service counted for nothing except as a preposterous proof of his love for her.

Suppose she should surprise him in house-wifely fashion, and treat him to a clean kitchen, a bright fire, and a hot supper on his return? The fancy was a pleasing one; but when she came to reckon up the unavoidable steps to its accomplishment, the details were too hopelessly repellent. She did not know, in fact, where or how to begin. She mused forlornly on their present situation, which, of course, could not last; but what would come next? Surely, without money, plucked of the world's respect and charity, they were a helpless pair. Jack was right; money they must have; and she must learn to keep her scruples out of his way; he was sufficiently handicapped already. She hovered about the scene of his labors for a while, mourning over him, and over herself for being so helpless to help him. By this time the sitting-room fire had gone quite down; she put on a pair of gloves

before raking out the coals and laying the wood to rebuild it. The room had still a comfortless air, now that she was alone to observe it. She could have wept as she went about, moving chairs, lifting heavy bearskins, and finding dirt, ever more dirt, that had accumulated under Jack's superficial housekeeping.

Her timid attempt at sweeping raised a hideous dust. When she tried to open the windows every one was frozen fast, and when she opened the door the cold air cut her like a knife.

She gave up trying to overhaul Jack's back accounts, and contented herself with smoothing things over on the surface. She possessed in perfection the decorative touch that lends an outward grace to the aspect of a room which may be inwardly unclean, and therefore unwholesome, for those who live in it.

It had never been required of her that she should be anything but beautiful and amiable, or do anything but contribute her beauty and amiability to the indulgent world around her. The hard work was for those who had nothing else to bestow. She laid Jack's slippers by the fire, and, with fond coquetry, placed a pair of her own little mouse-colored suedes, sparkling with silver embroidery, close beside them. Her velvet wrap with its collar of ostrich plumes she disposed effectively over the back of the hardwood settle, where the shimmering satin lining caught a red gleam from the fire. Then she locked the outer door, and prepared to take Jack's advice, and "sleep, dear, sleep."

At the door of her bedroom she turned for a last survey of the empty room – the room that would live in her memory as

the scene of this most fateful chapter of her life. That day, she suddenly remembered, was her younger sister's wedding-day. She would not permit the thoughts to come. All weddings, since her own, were hateful to her. "Hush!" she inwardly breathed, to quell her heart. "The thing was done. All that was left was dishonor, either way. This is my plea, O God! There was no escape from shame! And Jack loved me so!"

About five o'clock of that dark winter day Esmée was awakened from her warm sleep by a loud knocking on the outside door. It could not be Jack, for he had carried with him the key of the kitchen door, by which way he always entered on his return. It was understood between them that in his absences no stranger could be admitted to the house. Guests they did not look for; as to friends, they knew not who their friends were, or if, indeed, they had any friends remaining since their flight.

The knocking continued, with pauses during which Esmée could fancy the knocker outside listening for sounds within the house. Her heart beat hard and fast. She had half risen in her bed; at intervals she drew a deep breath, and shifted her weight on its supporting arm.

Footsteps could be heard passing and repassing the length of the trench in front of the house. They ceased, and presently a man jumped down into the pit outside her bedroom window; the window was curtained, but she was aware that he was there, trying to look in. He laid his hand on the window-frame, and leaped upon the sill, and shook the sash, endeavoring to raise it;

but the blessed frost held it fast. The man had a dog with him, that trotted after him, back and forth, and seconded his efforts to gain entrance by leaping against the door, and whining, and scratching at the lock.

The girl was unspeakably alarmed, there was something so imperative in the stranger's demand. It had for her startled ear an awful assurance, as who should say, "I have a right to enter here." Who was it, what was it, knocking at the door of that guilty house?

It seemed to Esmée that this unappeasable presence had haunted the place for an hour or more, trying windows, and going from door to door. At length came silence so prolonged and complete that she thought herself alone at last.

But Jack's brother had not gone. He was standing close to the window of the outer room, studying its interior in the strong light and shadow of a pitch-pine fire. The room was confiding its history to one who was no stranger to its earlier chapters, and was keen for knowledge of the rest.

This was Jack's house, beyond a doubt, and Jack was its tenant at this present time, its daily intimate inhabitant. In this sense the man and his house were one.

The Dreadnaught had been Jack's first important mining venture. In it he had sunk his share of his father's estate, considerable time and reputation, and the best work he was capable of; and he still maintained, in accordance with his temperament, that the mine was a good mine, only present

conditions would not admit of the fact being demonstrated. The impregnable nature of its isolation made it a convenient cache for personal properties that he had no room for in his quarters in town, the beloved impedimenta that every man of fads and enthusiasms accumulates even in a rolling-stone existence. He was all there: it was Jack so frankly depicted in his belongings that his young brother, who adored him, sighed restlessly, and a blush of mingled emotions rose in his snow-chilled cheek.

What reminder is so characteristic of a man as the shoes he has lately put off his feet? And, by token, there were Jack's old pumps waiting for him by the fire.

But now suspicion laid its finger on that very unnamed dread which had been lurking in the young man's thoughts. Jack, the silent room confessed, was not living here alone. This could hardly be called "baching it," with a pair of frail little feminine slippers moored close beside his own. Where had Jack's feet been straying lately, – on what forbidden ground, – that his own brother must be kept in ignorance of such a step as this? If he had been mad enough to fetch a bride to such an inhuman solitude as this, – if this were Jack's lawful honeymoon, why should his bliss be hedged about with an awkward conspiracy of silence on the part of all his friends?

The silent room summoned its witnesses; one by one each mute, inanimate object told its story. The firelight questioned them in scornful flashes; the defensive shadows tried to confuse the evidence, and cover it up.

But there were the conscious slippers reddening by the hearth. The costly Paris wrap displayed itself over the back of Jack's honest hardwood settle. On the rough table, covered with a blanket wrought by the hands of an Indian squaw, glimpsed a gilded fan, half-open, showing court ladies, dressed as shepherdesses, blowing kisses to their ephemeral swains. Faded hot-house roses were hanging their heads – shriveled packets of sweetness – against the brown sides of a pot-bellied tobacco-jar, the lid of which, turned upside down, was doing duty as an ash-receiver. A box of rich confectionery imported from the East had been emptied into a Dresden bowl of a delicate, frigid pattern, reminding one of such pure-bred gentlewomen as Jack's little mother, from whom he had coaxed this bit of the family china on his last home visit.

We do not dress up our brother's obliquity in euphemistic phrases; Jack might call it what he pleased; but not the commonest man that knew him had been willing to state in plain words the manner of his life at present, snowed in at the top of the Dreadnaught road. Behold how that life spoke for itself: how his books were covered with dust; how the fine, manly rigor of the room had been debased by contact with the habits of a luxurious dependent woman!

Here Jack was wasting life in idleness, in self-banishment, in inordinate affections and deceits of the flesh. The brother who loved him too well to be lenient to his weakness turned away with a groan of such indignant heartbreak as only the young can

know. Only the young and the pure in heart can have such faith in anything human as Jack's brother had had in Jack.

Esmée, reassured by the long-continued silence, had ventured out, and now stepped cautiously forward into the broad, low light in the middle of the room. The fireshine touched her upraised chin, her parted lips, and a spark floated in each of her large, dark, startled eyes. Tip had been watching as breathless and as motionless as his companion, but now at sight of Esmée he bounded against the sash, and squealed his impatience to be let in. Esmée shrank back with a cry; her hands went up to her breast and clasped themselves. She had seen the face at the window. Her attitude was the instinctive expression of her convicted presence in that house. And the excluded pair who watched her were her natural judges: Fidelity that she had outraged, and Family Affection that she had wronged.

Tip made further demonstrations at the window, but Esmée had dragged herself away out of sight into her own room.

The steps of the knocker were heard, a few minutes later, wandering irresolutely up and down the trench. For the last time they paused at the door.

"Shall we knock once more, Tip? Shall we give her one more chance? She has seen that I am no ruffian; she knows that you are a friend. Now if she is an honest woman let her show herself! For the last time, then!"

A terrific peal of knocking shocked the silence. Esmée could have screamed, there was an accent so scornfully accusative

in this last ironical summons. No answer was possible. The footsteps turned away from the door, and did not come back.

II

The snow that had began to fall softly and quietly about the middle of the afternoon had steadily increased until now in the thickening dusk it spread a white blindness everywhere. From her bedroom window Esmée looked out, and though she could not see the sky, there were signs enough to tell her what the coming night would be. Fresh snow lay piled in the trench, and snow was whirling in. The blast outside wailed in the chimney, and shook the house, and sifted snow in beneath the outer door.

Esmée was not surprised that Jack, when he came home, should be as dismal and quiet as she was herself; but it did surprise her that he should not at once perceive that something had happened in his absence.

At first there was supper to cook, and she could not talk to him then. Later, when they were seated together at the table, she tried to speak of that ghostly knocking; but Jack seemed preoccupied and not inclined to talk, and she was glad of an excuse to postpone a subject that had for her a peculiar terror in its suggestions.

It was nine o'clock before all the little house tasks were done, and they drew up to the fire, seeking in each other's eyes the assurance that both were in need of, that nothing of their dear-bought treasure of companionship had altered since they had sat that way before. But it was not quite the same Esmée, nor the

same Jack. They were not thinking exclusively of each other.

"Why don't you read your letters, dear?"

"I can't read them," said Esmée. "They were not written to me – the woman I am now."

These were the home letters, telling of her sister's coming wedding festivities, that Esmée could not read, especially that one from Lilla – her last letter as a girl to the sister who had been a bride herself, and would know what a girl's feelings at such a time must be.

"I have tried to write to mama," said Esmée; "but it's impossible. Anything I could say by way of defense sounds as if I were trying to lay the blame on some one else; and if I say nothing, but just state the facts, it is harsh, as if I were brazening it out. And she has never seen you, Jack. You are my only real defense. By what you are, by what you will be to me, I am willing to be judged."

"Dearest, you make me ashamed, but I can say the same of you. Still, to a mother, I'm afraid it will make little difference whether it's 'Launcelot or another.'"

"It certainly made little difference to her when she made her choice of a husband for me," said Esmée, bitterly. One by one she dropped the sheets of her letters in the fire, and watched them burn to ashes.

"When they know – if they ever write to me after that, I will read those letters. These have no meaning." They had too much meaning, was what Esmée should have said.

After a silence Jack spoke somewhat hoarsely: "It's a beastly long time since I have written to any of my people. It's a pity I didn't write and tell them something; it might have saved trouble. But how can a fellow write? I got a letter to-day from my brother Sid. Says he's thinking of coming out here."

"Heaven save us!" cried Esmée. "Do write at once – anything – say anything you like."

Jack smiled drearily. "I'm afraid it's too late. In fact, the letter was written the day before he was to start, and it's dated January 25. There's a rumor that some one is in town, now, looking for me. I shouldn't be surprised if it were Sid."

"What if it were?" asked Esmée. "What could you do?"

"I don't know, indeed," said Jack. "I'm awfully cut up about it. The worst of it is, I asked him to come."

"You asked him!"

"Some time ago, dearest, when everything was different. I thought I must make the fight for both our sakes, and I sent for Sid, thinking it might help to have him here with me."

"Did you indeed," said Esmée, coldly. "What a pity he did not come before it was too late; he might have saved us both. How long ago was it, please?"

"Esmée, don't speak to me like that."

"But do you realize what you are saying?"

"You should not mind what I say. Think – what shall we do if it should be Sid? It rests with you, Esmée. Could you bear to meet him?"

"What is he like?" said Esmée, trembling.

"Oh, he's a lovely fellow. There's nobody like Sid."

"What does he look like?"

"He's good-looking, of course, being my brother," said Jack, with a wretched attempt at pleasantry, which met with no response. Esmée was staring at him, a strange terror in her eyes. "But there is more to his looks, somehow, than to most pretty boys. People who are up in such things say he's like the Saint George, or Saint Somebody, by Donatello. He's blond, you know; he's as fresh as a girl, but he has an uncommonly set look at times, when he's serious or a bit disgusted about something. He has a set in his temper, too. I should not care to have Sid hear our story – not till after he had seen you, Esmée. Perhaps even then he could not understand. He has never loved a woman, except his mother. He doesn't know what a man's full-grown passion means. At least, I don't think he knows. He was rather fiercely moral on some points when I talked to him last; a little bit inhuman – what is it, Esmée?"

"There is that dog again!"

Jack looked at her in surprise at her shocked expression. Every trace of color had left her face. Her eyes were fixed upon the door.

"What dog? Why, it's Tip."

A creature as white as the storm sprang into the room as he opened the door, threw himself upon Jack, and whimpered and groaned and shivered, and seemed to weep with joy. Jack hugged

him, laughing, and then threw him off, and dusted the snow from his clothing.

Tip shook himself, and came back excitedly for more recognition from his master. He took no notice at all of Esmée.

"Speak to him, won't you, dear? It's only manners, even if you don't care for him," Jack prompted gently. But Tip refused to accept Esmée's sad, perfunctory greeting; his countenance changed, he held aloof, glancing at her with an unpleasant gleam in his bloodshot eyes.

He had satisfied the cravings of affection, and now made it plain that his visit was on business that demanded his master's attention outside of the house. Jack knew the creature's intelligent ways so well that speech was hardly needed between them. "What's the racket, Tip? What's wrong out there? No, sir; I don't go back to town with you to-night, sir. Not much. Lie down! Be quiet, idiot!"

But Tip stood at the door, and began to whine, fixing his eyes on his master's face. As nothing came of this, he went back and stood in front of him, wagging his tail heavily and slowly; troubled wrinkles stood out over his beseeching eyes.

"What under heaven's the matter with you, dog? You're a regular funeral procession." Jack shoved the creature from him, and again he took up his station at the door. Jack rose, and opened it, and playfully tried to push him out. Tip stood his ground, always with his eyes on his master's face, and whimpered under his breath with almost tearful meaning.

"He's on duty to-night," said Jack. "He's got something on his mind, and he wants me to help him out with it. I say, old chap, we don't keep a life-saving station up here. Get out with your nonsense."

"There was some one with him when he was here this afternoon," Esmée forced herself to say.

"Has Tip been here before?"

"Yes, Jack. But a man was with him – a young, strange man. It was about four o'clock, perhaps five; it was getting dusk. I had been asleep, and I was so frightened. He knocked and knocked. I thought he would never stop knocking. He came to my window, and tried to get in, but the sash was frozen fast." Esmée paused, and caught her breath. "And I heard a dog scratching and whining."

"Did you not see the man?"

"I did. I saw him," gasped Esmée. "It was all quiet after a while. I thought he had gone. I came out into the room, and there he stood close by that window, staring in; and the dog was with him. It was Tip."

"And you did not open the door to Tip?"

"Jack dear, have you not told me that I was never to open the door when you were away?"

"But didn't you speak to the man? Didn't you ask him who he was or what he wanted?"

"How could I? He did not speak to me. He stared at me as if I were a ghost, and then he went away."

"I would have questioned any man that came here with Tip. Tip doesn't take up with toughs and hobos. What was he like?"

Esmée had retreated under this cross-questioning, and stood at some distance from Jack, pale, and trembling with an ague of the nerves.

"What was he like?" Jack repeated.

"He was most awfully beautiful. He had a face like – like a death-angel."

Jack rejected this phrase with an impatient gesture. "Was he fair, with blue eyes, and a little blond mustache?"

"I don't know. The light was not good. He stood close to the window, or I could not have seen him. What have I done? Was it wrong not to open the door?"

"Never mind about that, Esmée. I want you to describe the man."

"I can't describe him. I don't need to. I know – I know it was your brother."

"It must have been; and we have been sitting here – how many hours?"

"I did not know there could be anybody – who – had a right to come in."

"Such a night as this? Get away, Tip!"

Jack had risen, and thrown off his coat. Esmée saw him get down his snow-shoe rig. He pulled on a thick woolen jersey, and buttoned his reefer over that. His foot-gear was drying by the fire; he put on a pair of German stockings, and fastened them

below the knee, and over these the India-rubber buskins which a snow-shoer wears.

"Tip had better have something to eat before we start," he suggested. He did not look at Esmée, but his manner to her was very gentle and forbearing; it cut her more than harsh words and unreasonable reproaches would have done.

"He seems to think that I have done it," she said to herself, with the instinct of self-defense which will always come first with timid natures.

Tip would not touch the food she brought him. She followed him about the room meekly, with the plate in her hand; but he shrunk away, lifting his lip, and showing the whites of his blood-rimmed eyes.

Except for this defect, the sequel of distemper or some other of the ills of puppyhood, Tip had been a good-looking dog. But this accident of his appearance had prejudiced Esmée against him at the first sight. Later he had made her dislike and fear him by a habit he had of dogging his master to her door, and waiting there, outside, like Jack's discarded conscience. If chidden, or invited to come in, the unaccountable creature would skulk away, only to return and take up his post of dumb witness as before; so that no one who watched the movements of Jack's dog could fail to know how Jack bestowed his time. In this manner Esmée had come almost to hate the dog, and Tip returned her feeling in his heart, though he was restrained from showing it. But to-night there was a new accusation in his gruesome eye.

"He will not eat for me," said Esmée, humbly.

"He must eat," said Jack. "Here, down with it!" The dog clapped his jaws on the meat his master threw to him, and stood ready, without a change of countenance, at the door.

"Can't you say that you forgive me?" Esmée pleaded.

"Forgive you? Who am I, to be forgiving people?" Jack answered hoarsely.

"But say it – say it! It was your brother. If it had been mine, I could forgive you."

"Esmée, you don't see it as it is."

"I do see it; but, Jack, you said that I was not to open the door."

"Well, you didn't open it, did you? So it's all right. But there's a man out in the snow, somewhere, that I have got to find, if Tip can show me where he is. Come, Tip!"

"Oh, Jack! You will not go without" – Jack turned his back to the door, and held out his arms. Esmée cast herself into them, and he kissed her in bitter silence, and went out.

These two were seated together again by the fire in the same room. It was four o'clock in the morning, but as dark as midnight. The floor in spots was wet with melted snow. They spoke seldom, in low, tired voices; it was generally Esmée who spoke. They had not been weeping, but their faces were changed and grown old. Jack shivered, and kept feeding the fire. On the bed in the adjoining room, cold as the snow in a deserted nest, lay their first guest, whom no house fire would ever warm.

"I cannot believe it. I cannot take it in. Are you sure there is

nothing more we could do that a doctor would do if we had one?"

"We have done everything. It was too late when I found him."

"How is it possible? I have heard of persons lost for days – and this was only such a few hours."

"A few hours! Good God, Esmée! Come out with me, and stand five minutes in this storm, if you can. And he had been on snow-shoes all day; he had come all the way up-hill from town. He had had no rest, and nothing to eat. And then to turn about, and take it worse than ever!"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.