

Bindloss Harold

The Greater Power



Harold Bindloss

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CHAPTER I

OVERBURDENED

It was winter in the great coniferous forest which rolls about the rocky hills and shrouds the lonely valleys of British Columbia. A bitter frost had dried the snow to powder and bound the frothing rivers; it had laid its icy grip upon the waters suddenly, and the sound of their turmoil died away in the depths of the rock-walled cañons, until the rugged land lay wrapped in silence under a sky of intense, pitiless blueness that seemed frozen too. Man and beast shrink from the sudden cold snaps, as they call them, in that country, and the rancher, who has sheep to lose, sits shivering in his log house through the long forenights with a Marlin rifle handy, while the famished timber wolves prowl about his clearing. Still, it is the loggers toiling in the wilderness who feel the cold snaps most, for the man who labours under an Arctic frost must be generously fed, or the heat and strength die out of him, and, now and then, it happens that provisions become scanty when no canoe can be poled up the rivers, and the trails are blocked with snow.

There were four loggers at work in a redwood forest, one January afternoon, rolling a great log with peevies and handspikes out of a chaos of fallen trunks. The Bush, a wall of sombre green, spangled here and there with frost, and impressively still, closed in about the little gap they had made. Not a sound came out of the shadowy avenues between the tremendous colonnades of towering trunks, and the topmost sprays of the cedars and Douglas firs cut motionless against the blue high above. There was no wind, and the men's breath went straight up, a thin white vapour, into the biting air. Still, they were warm and comparatively well fed, which was a good deal to be thankful for, and three of them toiled contentedly, with now and then a glance at their companion, who realized at length that he was beaten. In fact, it was only by calling up all the resolution that was in him that this fourth man, Derrick Nasmyth, had held himself to his task since early morning, for there is no occupation which demands from man more muscular effort and physical courage than logging, as it is generally carried on in the forest of Western Canada.

Nasmyth was a tall man, apparently under thirty, and leanly muscular, as were his companions, for those who swing the axe from dawn to dusk in that wilderness seldom put on flesh. His bronzed face was also lean, and a trifle worn. Considering his occupation, it was, perhaps, too finely chiselled, and there was a certain elusive suggestion of refinement in it. He had clear blue eyes, and the hair beneath his battered fur cap was brown. For the rest, he wore a black leather jacket with several rents in it, ragged duck trousers, and long boots. His companions were the usual Bush choppers—simple, strong-armed men of kindly nature—and Nasmyth was quite aware that they had undertaken most of his share in the work during the last few hours.

“Another heave!” said one of the woodsmen. “Hit her hard, boys, and away she goes!”

They strained sinewy backs and splendid arms. The great log rolled a trifle farther, canted, as one of them slipped a handspike under the butt of it, and landed on the skids, which were laid like railway sleepers down the slope of a steep declivity. The snow was ground down and rammed back about the skids, and the worn-out hollow gleamed a faint blue-grey in the shadow of the firs. The men made another strenuous effort as the log started, but in another moment it rushed away, and, like a toboggan, sped downwards through the forest to the river-ice below. The skids screamed beneath it, the snow flew up like smoke, and then there was a thunderous crash and stillness again. Nasmyth gasped heavily, and dropped his handspike.

“Boys,” he said, “I’m used up. I’ll go along to the shanty and get my time.”

He generally expressed himself much as his comrades did, but now his clean English intonation was a little more noticeable than usual. One of the others nodded sympathetically, as he answered:

“Well, I guess I’ve seen the trouble trailing you for quite a while. Got to let up or play out. It’s one I’ve been up against myself.” He made a vague gesture. “A little rough on you.”

Then he and one of his comrades took up a big crosscut saw, while the other swung a gleaming axe. Nasmyth walked back wearily through the silent Bush towards the camp. His back ached, his head ached, and he felt a trifle dazed. The strength seemed to have gone out of him, and he fancied that he was not very far from a physical collapse. He was glad when he reached the shanty, where, after he had shaken the snow from his dilapidated boots, he sat down by the glowing stove, and smiled wryly as he looked about him. The shed was rudely built of logs, and a row of bunks packed with swamp-grass and spruce-twigs, from some of which there hung portions of greasy blankets, ran down one side of it. It smelt horribly of acrid tobacco and cookery, but at least, it was warm, which counted for much, and, during the last few months, Nasmyth had grown to look on it as home. He knew, also, that it would cost him something to leave it now, especially as he had nowhere else to go.

Lying back listlessly in a lounge an ingenious chopper had made out of a few branches and a couple of sacks, Nasmyth vaguely recalled the comfort of his London chambers and the great pillared smoking-room of a certain exclusive club, for he was a man acquainted with the smoother side of life. He had various gifts which were apparently of no account in British Columbia, and he had enjoyed an education that had, it seemed, unfitted him for anything strictly utilitarian. There are a great many men of his description chopping trees and driving cattle in Western Canada. Indeed, his story was one which, with slight variations, may be heard frequently in that country. Financial disaster had overtaken his family. Friends in high places had regarded him coldly, and he had been too proud to ask for favours, or to profit by those that were grudgingly offered him. That was why he had gone out to Canada and spent several years there earning his board, and, now and then, a few dollars as well, by bodily labour, until he went up into the Bush with the loggers.

For a time he had somehow contrived to hold his own with the other workers, though logging in heavy timber is one of the tasks one could almost fancy that man was never meant for, and the logger, whose overtaxed muscle fails him for a moment, is very likely to have the life crushed out of him by some ponderous, slipping trunk. Perhaps, his lack of endurance was due to the excessive strain, or the ill-cooked food, but during the last few weeks he had been conscious that a slackness was creeping over him. Once or twice the handspike or peevie had been torn from his grasp, and the lives of his comrades had been placed in peril. He had found it more and more difficult to drag himself out to his work each morning, but he had held on until that afternoon when his strength had suddenly failed him.

Nasmyth was half-asleep when the cook and the leader of the gang came in. The latter, who was a big, gaunt man with grizzled hair, stopped close by the stove and looked at him.

“Well,” said the gang leader, “what do you figure you’re doing here?”

Nasmyth explained with some difficulty, for in the Bush, men acquire a certain pride in their physical manhood, and it is never a pleasant thing to own oneself defeated. The logger, however, nodded comprehendingly. He was a reticent, grim-faced person from Ontario, where they breed hard men, though some have, also, kindly hearts in them.

“That’s quite right. I’ve noticed it myself,” he commented. “In fact, I’ve been figuring on asking you to get out the last week or two.”

Nasmyth smiled. Like other men of his description in that country, he had become accustomed to hearing such remarks addressed to him.

“I wonder,” he answered reflectively, “why you didn’t.”

The logger appeared to consider. It was characteristic of him and the stock he sprang from that he would never have admitted that he had borne with Nasmyth as long as possible out of kindness. The thing would have hurt him.

"Well," he said, "it seemed to me we might start you teaming, if I could have got a span or two of oxen in, but I'm most afraid I can't get them at my figure." He changed the subject abruptly. "Where are you heading for?"

"I don't quite know, though I shall probably land in Victoria sooner or later. I might strike something a little easier than logging there. Still, it would be most of a week's march before I could reach the railroad, and there's not a ranch anywhere near the trail."

The logger nodded. "Well," he said, "I'd head West instead. There'll be nothing going on along the railroad just now, and the mines are running easy, while you ought to fetch the settlement south of Butte Lake on the third day. Guess you might pick up a dollar or two in that neighbourhood, and, any way, there's a steamer running down the West Coast to Victoria. Seems to me quite likely one of those Bush-ranchers would take you in a while, even if he didn't exactly want a hired man; but they don't do that kind of thing in the city."

Nasmyth smiled. Experience had already taught him that, as a rule, the stranger who is welcomed in the cities arrives there with money in his pockets, and that it is the hard-handed men with the axes from whom the wanderer in that country is most likely to receive a kindness. Still, though he was naturally not aware of it, a great deal was to depend upon the fact that he followed the advice of the logger, who traced out a diagram on the bench upon which they sat.

"There's an Indian trail up the river for the first four leagues," said the logger. "Then you strike southwest, across the divide—here—and you come to the Butte River. She's running in a little cañon, and you can't get over 'cept where a prospector or somebody has chopped a big fir."

The log span across a stream is an old device, and was probably primitive man's first attempt at bridge-building, though it is one frequently adopted on the Pacific slope, where a giant tree grows conveniently close to an otherwise impassable river. It was, however, important that Nasmyth should be able to find the tree.

"You know exactly where that fir is?" he asked.

"Southwest of the highest ridge of the divide. Once you're over, you'll fetch the Butte Lake in a long day's march. When d'you figure you'll start?"

"To-night," said Nasmyth, "after supper. If there's sickness of any kind hanging round me—and I feel like it—you don't want me here, and I dare say they'd take me into the hospital at Victoria. Walking's easier than logging, anyway, and it seems wiser to try for that fir in daylight."

The logger nodded as if he concurred in this, and, taking a little book from his pocket, he turned it over, wrinkling his brows while Nasmyth watched him with a smile.

"Well," he said at length, "we'll count you full time to-day, but there's the four days off when you got crushed by that redwood, and the week when you chopped your leg. Then, counting the amount for your board, that's thirty-six dollars I'm due to you."

"Not quite," answered Nasmyth. "There was the day or two after I fell through the ice and had the shivers. I'd sooner you knocked off the few dollars."

The logger was said to be a hard man, and in some respects this was certainly the case; but a faint flush crept into his grim face. Perhaps he had noticed the weariness in Nasmyth's voice or the hollowness of his cheeks.

"All right," he said awkwardly. "Jake will put you up grub for four days, and we'll call it square."

He counted out the money, which Nasmyth slipped into the receptacle inside his belt. When the logger moved away the weary man crossed over to his bunk. Nasmyth had brought his few possessions up in a canoe, and now, knowing that he could not take them all away, he turned them over with a curious smile. There were one or two ragged pairs of duck trousers stained with soil, a few old tattered shirts, and a jacket of much the same description. He remembered that he had once been

fastidious about his tailoring, as he wondered when he would be able to replace the things that he left behind. Then he rolled up some of the garments and his two blankets into a pack that could be strapped upon his shoulders, and, as he did this, his comrades came trooping in, stamping to shake the snow off their leggings.

There were about a dozen of them—simple, strenuous, brown-faced Bush-ranchers for the most part—and they ate in haste, voraciously, when the abundant but rudely served supper was laid out. Nasmyth had not much appetite, and the greasy salt pork, grindstone bread, desiccated apples, flavoured molasses, and flapjacks hot from the pan, did not tempt him. He preferred to watch his companions, and now and then his glance was a trifle wistful. He had worked and eaten with them; they had slept about him, and he knew he had their rude good-will. When his strength had begun to give way, some of them had saddled themselves with more than their share of the tasks they were engaged in, and he knew that it was possible he might not fall in with comrades of their kind again. Now that the time had come, he, who had once been welcomed at brilliant London functions, felt that it would cost him an effort to part with these rough comrades. Perhaps this was not so astonishing, for, after all, strenuous, valiant manhood and rude kindness count for much.

The shanty was cheerfully lighted and cosily warm. Nasmyth had slept soundly there on the springy spruce-twigs, and there was at least abundance when the mealtimes came round. Now he was about to be cast adrift again to face a three days' march in the open, under the bitter frost, and what might await him at the end of it he did not know. At length, the meal was cleared away, and when the pipes were lighted, he told his comrades that he was going. They were not demonstrative in their expressions of regret, but they thrust upon him little plugs of tobacco, which could not well be replaced there, and several of them told him that, if he struck nothing he liked better, all he had to do was to present himself at this ranch or the other beside blue lake or frothing river when they went back in the spring. What was more to the purpose, they meant it.

Among those Western pines men are reared who, in point of primitive vigour, slow endurance, and the dogged courage that leads them to attempt, and usually to accomplish, the apparently impossible, are a match for any in the world, and no wanderer who limps up to their lonely ranches is turned away. Those who have no claim on them are honoured with their hospitality, and now and then one new to that country looks with wonder on their handiwork. Down all the long Pacific coast, from lonely Wrangel, wrapped in the Northern snow, to Shasta in the South, it is written on hewn-back forest, rent hillside, and dammed river. The inhabitants are subduing savage Nature; but, as time will surely show, their greatest achievement is the rearing of fearless men.

Though it cost him an effort, Nasmyth contrived to smile as he shook hands with the loggers. Then he set his lips tight as, with his pack strapped on his shoulders, he opened the door and looked out at the dimly shining snow. It was only natural that he hesitated for a moment. After all, brutal as the toil had been, he at least knew what he was leaving behind, and his heart sank as he drew the door to. The cold struck through him to the bone, though there was not a breath of air astir, and the stillness was almost overwhelming. The frost cramped his muscles and drove the courage out of him, and, as he plodded down the trail, he heard Jacques, the French-Canadian cook, tuning his battered fiddle. A little burst of laughter broke through the twanging of the strings, and Nasmyth closed one hand hard as he strode on faster into the darkness. There was as much of the animal in him as there is in most of us, and he longed for the cheerful light and the warmth of the stove, while one learns the value of human companionship when the Frost King lays his grip on that lonely land. He was once more homeless—an outcast—and it was almost a relief to him when at length the twanging of the fiddle was lost in the silence of the pines.

The trees rose about him, towering high into the soft darkness in serried ranks, and the snow gleamed a cold blue-grey under them. Not a twig stirred; the tall spires were black, and motionless, and solemn, and he felt that their stateliness emphasized his own feebleness and inconsequence. In the meanwhile, though the snow was loose and frost-dried, it was not much above his ankles, and the

trail was comparatively good. It seemed to him advisable to push on as fast as possible, for he had only four days' provisions, and he was not sure of his strength. There was no doubt as to what the result would be if it failed him in the wilderness that lay between him and the settlement.

CHAPTER II

THE TRAIL

A half-moon rose above the black tops of the pines, and a faint light, which the snow flung back, filtered down between the motionless branches upon the narrow trail that wound sinuously in and out among fallen trunks and thickets draped with withered fern, for the Siwash Indians passed that way when the salmon came up the rivers, and the path an Indian makes is never straight. Over and over again, an Indian will go around an obstacle through which the Bush-rancher would hew a passage. This is essentially characteristic of both, for the primitive peoples patiently fit their lives to their environment, while the white man grapples with unfavourable conditions, and resolutely endeavours to alter them.

Until daylight Nasmyth made a tolerable pace. He had been troubled with a curious lassitude and an unpleasant dizziness, but walking is considerably easier than rolling ponderous logs, and he knew that it was advisable for him to push on as fast as possible. At length, the dawn broke high up in a dingy grey sky, and he stopped to build a fire. It did not take long to boil a can of strong green tea, and to prepare a piece of doughy bread, with a little salt pork, for his breakfast. Then he wrapped one of his blankets around him and took out his pipe. He did not remember how long he sat there, but it was clear daylight when he noticed that the fire was burning out, and, somewhat to his annoyance, he felt curiously reluctant to get up again.

Though it cost him an effort, he rose, and stood a minute or two shivering in the bitter wind, which now set the dark firs sighing. He could see the trees roll upwards before him in sombre ranks until their topmost sprays cut in a thin filigree very high up against the sky, and he knew that he must now leave the easy trail and cross the big divide. When he set out he was a little annoyed to find that the pack-straps hurt his shoulders, and that one of his boots galled his foot. Knee-boots are not adapted for walking long distances, but the only other ones that Nasmyth possessed were so dilapidated that he had left them behind.

He went up for several hours through withered fern and matted undergrowth, and over horrible tangles of fallen tree-trunks, some of which were raised high above the snow on giant splintered branches. The term "virgin forest" probably conveys very little to the average Englishman, since the woods with which he is acquainted are, for the most part, cleaned and dressed by foresters; but Nature rules untrammelled in the pine-bush of the Pacific slope, and her waste material lies piled in tremendous ruin until it rots away. There are forests in that country, through which a man accustomed to them can scarcely make a league in a day. Still, Nasmyth crossed the divide, struggling against a bitter wind, and then went down the other side, floundering over fallen branches, and smashing through thickets of undergrowth and brakes of willows. He wanted to find the river, and, more especially, the tree that bridged it, as soon as possible. It was, however, noon when he reached the river, and it frothed and roared a hundred feet below him in a smooth walled cañon, which had apparently kept the frost out, for there were only strips of crackling ice in the eddies.

It was clearly out of the question for him to get down to the river, even if he had wished to make the descent, and without stopping to make another fire, he plodded along the bank until the afternoon was almost spent. There were a good many fallen trees, as he discovered to his cost, since each one had to be painfully clambered over, but none of them spanned the chasm. Then, as his foot was becoming very sore, he decided to camp where a big cedar lay across a little ravine that rent the bank. It promised to afford him a partial shelter. He had no axe, but he tore off an armful or two of the thinner branches, with the twigs attached to them, to form a bed, and then, crawling down to the river, filled his smoke-blackened can and came back wearily to make a fire. Man needs very little in those solitudes, but there are two things he must have, and those are food to keep the strength

in him, and warmth, though there are times when he finds it singularly difficult to make the effort to obtain them. The most unpleasant hour of the long day of persistent toil is often the one when worn-out muscle and jaded intelligence must be forced to the task of providing the evening meal and shelter for the night.

Nasmyth ate his supper, so far as it went, voraciously, but with a prudent check upon his appetite, for he had set out with only four days' provisions, and he could not find the tree. When he had eaten, he took out his pipe, and crouched a while beside the fire, shivering, in spite of the blankets wrapped about him. The heat dies out of the man who has marched for twenty hours, as those who have done it know. In the meanwhile, darkness crept up from the east, and the pines faded into sombre masses that loomed dimly against a leaden sky. A mournful wailing came out of the gloom, and the smoke whirled about the shivering man in the nipping wind, while the sound of the river's turmoil and the crash of stream-driven ice drifted up out of the cañon. Nasmyth listened drowsily, while his thoughts wandered back to the loggers' shanty. He could see the men with bronzed faces sitting smoking about the snapping stove, two or three of them dancing, while Jacques coaxed music full of fire from his battered fiddle.

Then his thoughts went farther back to the chambers that he had once occupied in London, and he saw himself and Frobisher, who shared them with him, sitting at a little table daintily furnished with choice glass and silver covers. There were big candles upon it—Frobisher, who was a fastidious man, had insisted upon them. After that, the artistically furnished room faded out of his memory, and he recalled a larger one in which he had now and then dined. He could picture the wine, and lights, and costly dresses, the smiling faces of those who had at that time expected a great deal from him, and he saw the girl who usually sat at his side. She had a delicate beauty and a dainty mind, and he had sometimes fancied they might be drawn closer when he had made his mark, which in those days appeared a very probable thing. He wondered vaguely what she was doing then, or if she ever thought of him. After all, as she had not answered the one letter which he wrote, it scarcely seemed likely that she remembered him. Those who fail, he reflected, are soon forgotten.

Then, as he was falling forward into the fire, he roused himself, and smiled wryly. He was once more an outcast, shivering, half-asleep in the wilderness, worn out, ragged, and aching, with a foot that was now distinctly painful. It is, however, fortunate for such men as he, and others among the heavily burdened, that the exhaustion of the body has its deadening effect upon the mind. Rolling the blankets round him, he lay down on the cedar branches and went to sleep.

He did not hear the timber wolves howling in the blackness of the night, though several that got wind of him flitted across the ravine after the fire burned low, and, when at length he awakened, it was with the fall of a wet flake upon his face, and he saw the dim dawn breaking through a haze of sliding snow. It seemed a little warmer, and, as a matter of fact, it was so, for the cold snaps seldom last very long near the coast; but the raw damp struck through him as he raked the embers of the fire together. Again he felt singularly reluctant to start when he had finished breakfast, and he found that he could hardly place one foot upon the ground; but haste was imperative now, so he set off limping, with the pack-straps galling his shoulders cruelly. He also felt a little dizzy, but he pushed on all that day beside the river through a haze of snow without coming upon the tree. The dusk was creeping up across the forest when at length the river emerged from the cañon, and he ventured out upon the ice in a slacker pool. The ice heaved and crackled under him with the pulsations of the stream, but he got across, and roused himself with difficulty for the effort to make another fire. He was an hour gathering fuel, and then, after a sparing supper, he lay down in his wet clothing.

The snow that eddied about him whitened his spongy blankets, but he got a little sleep, and, awakening, found the fire out. He tried to light it and failed. His fingers seemed useless. He was cramped and chilled all through, and there was in one hip-joint the gnawing pain that those who sleep on wet ground are acquainted with. Sometimes it goes away when one gets warmed up, but just as often it does not. Nasmyth, who found it a difficult matter to straighten himself, ate a little damp

bread, and then, strapping his pack upon his shoulders, stumbled on into the forest. He afterwards fancied it did not snow very much that day, but he was not sure of anything except that he fell over many rotten branches, and entangled himself frequently in labyrinths of matted willows. Night came and he went to sleep without a fire. He contrived to push on next day, walking during most of it half asleep. Indeed, now and then he would stagger along for minutes after consciousness of what he was doing had deserted him, for there are men in that Bush, at least, who know what it is to stop with suddenly opened eyes on the verge of a collapse, and find that they have wandered from the path—only in Nasmyth's case there was no path at all.

He was never sure whether it was that day or the next when, floundering through an undergrowth of willows, he came upon a break in the forest that was covered with sawn-off stumps. As he made for it, he fell into a split-rail fence, some of which he knocked down until he could climb over it. There was a faint smell of burning fir-wood in the air, and it was evident to him that there was a house somewhere in the vicinity. The snow was not deep in the clearing, and he plodded through it, staggering now and then, until he came to a little slope, and fell down it headlong. This time he did not seem able to get up again, and it was fortunate that, when he flung the split fence down, the crash made by the falling rails rang far through the silence of the woods.

While Nasmyth lay in the slushy snow, a girl came out from among the firs across the clearing, and walked down the little trail that led to a well. She was tall, and there was something in her face and the way she held herself which suggested that she was not a native of the Bush, though everything she wore had been made by her own fingers—that is, except the little fur cap, whose glossy brown enhanced the lustre of her hair. This was of a slightly lighter tint, and had gleams of ruddy gold in it. Her eyes were large and brown, and there was a reposeful quietness in the face, which suggested strength. It was significant that her hands were a trifle hard, as well as shapely, and that her wrists were red.

She came to the top of the slope near the foot of which Nasmyth, who had now raised himself on one elbow, lay, and though this might well have startled her, she stood quietly still, looking down on him. Nasmyth raised himself a trifle further, and blinked at her stupidly, and she noticed that his face was drawn and grey.

“I heard the rails fall,” she said. “What are you doing there?”

It did not appear strange to Nasmyth that she should speak in well-modulated English, for there are probably as many insular English as Canadians in parts of that country. Besides, he was scarcely in a condition to notice a point of that kind just then.

“I think I upset the fence,” he answered. “You see, I couldn't get over. Then I must have fallen down.”

It naturally struck the girl as significant that he did not seem sure of what had happened, but the explanation that would have suggested itself to anyone fresh from England did not occur to her. There was not a saloon or hotel within eight or nine miles of the spot.

“Can you get up?” she asked.

“I'll try,” said Nasmyth; but the attempt he made was not a complete success, for, although he staggered to his feet, he reeled when he stood upon them, and probably would have fallen had she not run down the slope and taken hold of him.

“You can rest on me,” she said, laying a firm and capable hand upon his shoulder.

With her assistance, Nasmyth staggered up the slope, and there were afterwards times when he remembered the next few minutes with somewhat mixed feelings. Just then, however, he was only glad to have someone to lean upon, and her mere human presence was a relief, since Nature had come very near to crushing the life out of him.

“This is your ranch?” he inquired, looking at her with half-closed eyes, when at length she moved away from him, a pace or two, and, gasping a little, stood still, beneath a colonnade of towering firs.

"It is," she said simply; and a moment or two later he saw a little house of logs half hidden among the trees.

They reached it in another minute, and, staggering in, he sank into the nearest chair. A stove snapped and crackled in the middle of the little log-walled room, which in spite of its uncovered, split-boarded floor, seemed to possess a daintiness very unusual in the Bush. He did not, however, know what particular objects in it conveyed that impression, for the whole room seemed to be swinging up and down; but he was definitely conscious of a comforting smell of coffee and pork, which came from the stove. He sat still, shivering, and blinking at the girl, while the water trickled from his tattered clothing. He fancied from the patter on the shingle roof, that it was raining outside.

"I wonder if you would let me camp in the barn to-night," he said.

The girl's eyes had grown compassionate as she watched him, for there was a suggestive greyness in his face. It was evident to her that he was utterly worn-out.

"Go in there," she said, pointing to a door. "You will find some dry clothes. Put them on."

Nasmyth staggered into a very small room, which had a rude wooden bunk in it, and with considerable difficulty sloughed off his wet things and put on somebody else's clothing. Then he came back and sank into a deer-hide lounge at the table. The girl set a cup of coffee, as well as some pork and potatoes, before him. He drank the coffee, but finding, somewhat to his astonishment, that he could scarcely eat, he lay back in his chair and looked at the girl deprecatingly with half-closed eyes.

"Sorry I can't do the supper justice. I think I'm ill," he said.

Then his head fell back against the deer-hide lounge, and, while the girl watched him with a natural consternation, he sank into sleep or unconsciousness. She was not sure which it was, but he certainly looked very ill, and, being a capable young woman, she remembered that within the next hour, the weekly mail-carrier would strike a trail which passed within a mile of the ranch. Rising, she touched Nasmyth's shoulder.

"Stay there, and don't try to get up until I come back," she commanded in a kindly tone.

Nasmyth, as she had half-expected, said nothing, and, slipping into another room—there were three in the house—she returned, wearing a jacket of coarse fur, and went quietly out into the rain. It was dark now, but she had, as it happened, not long to wait for the mail-carrier.

"I want you to call at Gordon's ranch, Dave," she told the man. "Tell him he is to come along as soon as he can. There's a stranger here who seems very ill."

The mail-carrier would have asked questions, but she cut him short.

"How long will it be before you can tell Gordon?" she asked.

"Well," answered the man reflectively, "I'm heading right back for the settlement, but it's a league to Gordon's, anyway. He could be here in two hours, if he starts right off, and, considering what the trail's like, that's blamed fast travelling."

He disappeared into the darkness, and the girl went back to the ranch. It was, perhaps, significant that she should feel sure that the man she had sent for would obey the summons, but she grew anxious while the two hours slipped by. At last, a man opened the door and walked in, with the water dripping from the long outer garment he flung off. He was a young man, with a bronzed face and keen grey eyes, and he had swung the axe, as one could see by his lithe carriage and the hardness of his hands, but there was something professional in his manner as he stooped down, regarding Nasmyth closely while he gripped the stranger's wrist. Then he turned to the girl.

"He's very sick," Gordon said. "Guess you have no objections to my putting him in your father's bunk. First, we'll warm the blankets."

The girl rose to help him, and—for she was strong—they stripped off most of Nasmyth's garments and lifted him into the bunk in the next room. Then Gordon sent her for the blankets, and, when he had wrapped them round Nasmyth, he sat down and looked at her.

"Pneumonia," he said. "Anyway, in the meanwhile, I'll figure on it as that, though there's what one might call a general physical collapse as well. Where did he come from?"

“I don’t know,” said the girl.

“Your father won’t be back for a week?”

“It’s scarcely likely.”

The man appeared to reflect for a moment or two. Then he made a little expressive gesture.

“Well,” he said, “it’s up to us to do what we can. First thing’s a poultice. I’ll show you how to fix it; but while we’re here, I guess we might as well run through his things.”

“Is that needful?” and the girl glanced at Nasmyth compassionately.

“Well,” said the man with an air of reflection, “it might be. This thing’s quick. Leaves you or wipes you out right away. There’s very little strength in him.”

He turned out the pockets of Nasmyth’s clothes, which were, however, empty of anything that might disclose his identity.

“Not a scrap of paper, not a dollar; but I guess that wasn’t always the case with him—you can see it by his face,” he said. Then he laughed. “He’s probably like a good many more of us—not very anxious to let folks know where he came from.”

The girl, though he did not notice it, winced at this; but next moment he touched her shoulder.

“Get some water on,” he said. “After we’ve made the poultice, I’ll take charge of him. We may get Mrs. Custer round in the morning.”

The girl merely smiled and went out with him. She was aware that it was in some respects an unusual thing which she was doing, but that did not greatly trouble her. They are not very conventional people in that country.

CHAPTER III

WAYNEFLEET'S RANCH

Though he afterwards endeavoured to recall them, Nasmyth had never more than a faint and shadowy recollection of the next few days. During most of the time, he fancied he was back in England, and the girl he had left there seemed to be hovering about him. Now and then, she would lay gentle hands upon him, and her soothing touch would send him off to sleep again; but there was a puzzling change in her appearance. He remembered her as slight in figure—sylph-like he had sometimes called her—fastidious and dainty, and always artistically dressed. Now, however, she seemed to have grown taller, stronger, more reserved, and, as he vaguely realized, more capable, while her garments were of a different and coarser fashion. What was still more curious, she did not seem to recognize her name, though he addressed her by it now and then. He pondered over the matter drowsily once or twice, and then ceased to trouble himself about it. There were several other things that appeared at least as incomprehensible.

After a long time, however, his senses came back to him, and one evening, as he lay languidly looking about him in his rude wooden bunk, he endeavoured to recall what had passed since he left the loggers' camp. The little room was comfortably warm, and a plain tin lamp burned upon what was evidently a home-made table. There was nothing, except a rifle, upon the rough log walls, and nothing upon the floor, which was, as usual, rudely laid with split boards, for dressed lumber is costly in the Bush. Looking through the open door into the general living-room, which was also lighted, he could see a red twinkle beneath the register of the stove, beside which a woman was sitting sewing. She was a hard-featured, homely person in coarsely fashioned garments, which did not seem to fit her well, and Nasmyth felt slightly disconcerted when he glanced at her, for she was not the woman whom he had expected to see. Then his glance rested on a man, who had also figured in his uncertain memories, and now sat not far away from him. The man, who was young, was dressed in plain blue duck, and, though Nasmyth noticed that his hands were hard, and that he had broken nails, there was something in his bronzed face that suggested mental capacity.

"I suppose," the sick man said, "you are the doctor who has evidently taken care of me?"

He was not quite himself yet, and he spoke clean colloquial English, without any trace of the Western accentuation he usually considered it advisable to adopt, though, as a matter of fact, the accent usually heard on the Pacific slope is not unduly marked. The other man naturally noticed it, and laughed somewhat curiously.

"I have some knowledge of medicine and surgery," Gordon answered. "Now and then I make use of it, though I don't, as a rule, get a fee." Then he looked rather hard at Nasmyth. "Quite a few of us find it advisable to let our professions go when we come to this country."

Nasmyth nodded, for this was a thing he had discovered already. Many of the comrades he had made there were outcasts—men outside the pale—and they were excellent comrades, too.

"Well," he said, "I have evidently been very sick. How did I get here? I don't seem to remember."

"Miss Waynefleet found you lying in the snow in the clearing."

"Ah!" said Nasmyth—"a tall girl with a quiet voice, big brown eyes, and splendid hair?"

Gordon smiled. "Well," he said, "that's quite like her."

"Where is she now?" asked Nasmyth; and though he was very feeble still, there was a certain expectancy in his manner.

"In the barn, I believe. The working oxen have to be fed. It's very probable that you will see her in the next half-hour. As to your other question—you were very sick indeed—pneumonia. Once or twice it seemed a sure thing that you'd slip through our fingers. Where were you coming from when you struck the clearing?"

Nasmyth, who had no reason for reticence, and found his mind rapidly growing clearer, briefly related what had led him to set out on his journey through the Bush, and his companion nodded.

"It's very much as I expected," he said. "They paid you off before you left that logging camp?"

"They did," said Nasmyth, who was pleased to recall the fact. "I had thirty-two dollars in my belt."

His companion looked at him steadily. "When you came here you hadn't a belt on. There was not a dollar in your pockets, either."

This was naturally a blow to Nasmyth. He realized that it would probably be several weeks at least before he was strong enough to work again, and he had evidently been a charge upon these strangers for some little time. Still, he did not for a moment connect any of them with the disappearance of his belt. He was too well acquainted with the character of the men who are hewing the clearings out of the great forests of the Pacific slope. As a matter of fact, he never did discover what became of his belt.

"Well," he said, "I suppose I forgot to put it on, one of those mornings on the march. Still, it's not very astonishing that the thing should worry me. I can't expect to stay on at this ranch. When do you think I can get up and set out again?"

"How long have you been out here?"

"Been out?"

Gordon laughed. "You're from the Old Country—that's plain enough."

"Several years."

"In that case I'm not going to tell you we're not likely to turn you out until you have some strength in you. I believe I'm speaking for Miss Waynefleet now."

Nasmyth lay still and considered this. It was, at least, quite evident that he could not get up yet, but there were one or two other points that occurred to him.

"Does the ranch belong to Miss Waynefleet?" he inquired. "She can't live here alone."

"She runs the concern. She has certainly a father, but you'll understand things more clearly when you see him. He's away in Victoria, which is partly why Mrs. Custer from the settlement is now in yonder room. Her husband is at present building a trestle on the Dunsmore track. I come up here for only an hour every day."

Nasmyth afterwards discovered that this implied a journey of three or four miles either way over a very indifferent trail, but at the moment he was thinking chiefly of Miss Waynefleet, who had given him shelter.

"You practise at the settlement?" he asked.

"Yes," said his companion dryly, "chopping big trees. I've a ranch there. Still, I don't know that you could exactly call it practising. By this time, I've acquired a certain proficiency in the thing."

Nasmyth fancied that he must have gone to sleep soon after this, for when he opened his eyes again there was no sign of the doctor, and a girl was quietly moving about the room. She sat down, when she saw that he was awake, and looked at him with a little smile, and it was only natural that Nasmyth should also look at her. It struck him once more that she had wonderful hair. In the lamp-light, it seemed to glow with curious red-gold gleams. She had also quiet brown eyes, and a face that was a trifle darkened by sun and wind. He guessed that she was tall. She looked so as she moved about the room with a supple gracefulness that had a suggestion of strength in it. That was all he noticed in detail, for he was chiefly conscious of the air of quiet composure that characterized her. He was a trifle fanciful that night, and, while he looked her, he felt as he had sometimes felt when he stood at sunset in the silence of the shadowy Bush, or gazed down into the depths of some still river pool. Only her gleaming red-gold hair and her full red lips slightly counteracted this impression. There was in them at least a hint of fire and passion.

"You are much better," she said, and her softly modulated voice fell pleasantly on his ears. He contrived to raise himself a trifle.

"I believe I am," he answered, "In any case, I know I owe it to you that I'm alive at all. Still"—and he hesitated—"I can't help feeling a bit uncomfortable. You see, I have really no claim on you."

Laura Waynefleet laughed. "Did you expect me to leave you out in the snow?"

"If you had, I couldn't have complained. There wasn't the least obligation upon you to look after a penniless stranger."

"Ah!" said the girl, with a little smile which was curiously expressive, "after all, many of us are in one sense strangers in the Bush."

Nasmyth pondered over this, for, in view of what he had noticed in her voice and manner, he fancied he understood her meaning.

"Well," he said, "it's evident that I can do nothing in return for all your kindness, except take myself off your hands as soon as possible. That's partly why I'm particularly anxious to get better."

He stopped a moment, with a faint flush in his hollow face. "It sounds very ungracious, doesn't it? But, after all, it's sense. Besides, I scarcely feel up to expressing myself very neatly."

The girl moved across the room, and gently pressed him down again on the pillow.

"Go to sleep again at once," she said.

Nasmyth did as he was bidden, which, since he felt that he wanted to lie awake and watch her, was in one way significant. As a matter of fact, what Laura Waynefleet considered advisable was usually done. Nasmyth's head was clearer next morning, and, during the week that followed, he grew stronger rapidly, until one night, as he sat beside the stove, he realized that he could, in all probability, set out again on his journey in a day or two. While he talked to Laura Waynefleet, there were footsteps outside, and she ran towards the door as a man came into the room. Nasmyth fancied the newcomer was her father, for he was grey-haired and elderly, but he did not look in the least like a Bush-rancher. Beneath the fur coat, which he flung off when he had kissed his daughter, he was dressed as one who lived in the cities, though his garments were evidently far from new. He was tall, but his sparseness suggested fragility, and his face, which emphasized this impression, had a hint of querulous discontent in it.

"I didn't expect to get through until to-morrow, but they've altered the running of the stage," he said. "Wiston drove me up from the settlement, and said he'd send my things across to-morrow. I was glad to get out of Victoria. The cooking and accommodation at the hotel I stayed at were simply disgusting."

Nasmyth glanced at the speaker in amused astonishment, for the Bush-ranchers of the Pacific slope are not, as a rule, particular. They can live on anything, and sleep more or less contentedly among dripping fern, or even in a pool of water, as, indeed, they not infrequently have to do, when they go up into the forests surveying, or undertake a road-making contract. Laura Waynefleet directed her father's attention to her convalescent guest.

"This is Mr. Nasmyth," she said. "You will remember I mentioned him in my letter."

Waynefleet made the young man a little inclination that was formally courteous. "I am glad to see you are evidently recovering," he said. "I hope they have made you at home here." Then he turned to his daughter. "If you could get me some supper—"

Laura busied herself about the stove, while Waynefleet sat down and talked to Nasmyth about generalities. Waynefleet appeared to be a politician, and he criticized the Government, which, in his opinion, was neglecting the Bush-ranchers shamefully. It was evident that he considered it the duty of the Government to contribute indirectly towards the support of settlers. Then the supper was laid out. As he ate fastidiously, he made a few faintly sardonic observations about the cookery, and, after the girl had brought in a pot of coffee, he frowned at the cup he put down.

"There is one place in Victoria where you can get coffee, as it ought to be, but this is merely roasted wheat," he said. "You will excuse me from drinking any more of it. As you have probably discovered, Mr. Nasmyth, one has to put up with a good deal in this country. It is in many respects a barbarous land."

Nasmyth saw the faint flush in Laura Waynefleet's face, and said nothing. He fancied that he knew the establishment in Victoria to which Waynefleet referred, but it was not one which he had ever visited, or which the smaller Bush-ranchers usually frequented.

Soon after supper, Nasmyth withdrew to the bed, which he had insisted on preparing for himself in the loft above the stables, and it was next day when he spoke to Laura Waynefleet alone.

"I can't abuse your kindness any longer," he said. "I must go away."

The girl looked at him quietly. "You are far from strong yet, and—it must be mentioned—there was not a dollar in your pockets."

"That is certainly the case;" and Nasmyth flushed a little. "Still, I can get as far as the settlement, and I dare say somebody, who won't be too hard on me at first, may want a hand. I am really rather a good chopper."

Laura smiled as she glanced at his face, but it was not its hollowness she was thinking of. Nasmyth had not the appearance of the average chopper.

"Well," she said, "perhaps you had better see my father. I think he has something to say to you."

She left him, and, half an hour later, Waynefleet came up to Nasmyth, who was sunning himself outside the ranch-house. Like many other houses in that country, it stood beneath a few great firs on the edge of a desolate clearing, round which the primeval forest rose in an unbroken wall. Behind it, and a little farther back among the trees, was the rude barn, built of big notched logs, and roofed with cedar shingles. In front there lay some twenty acres of cleared land, out of which rose the fir-stumps, girdled with withered fern, for a warm wind from the Pacific had swept the snow away. Beyond that, in turn, and outside the split-rail fence, rows of giant trunks lay piled in the tremendous ruin usually called the "slashing." Some day, these would be sawn up and burnt, and the clearing driven farther back into the Bush. The little gap into which the sunlight shone, however, had been hewn out at the cost of several years of strenuous labour, and Nasmyth, who was aware of this, felt inclined to smile as the man who owned it strolled up to him. It was a little difficult to imagine that he had had any great share in the making of that clearing.

Waynefleet was dressed in duck, but it was whole and unsoiled, and Nasmyth made his own deductions from a glance at the delicate hands. As a rule, Waynefleet's expression was discontented and querulous, but for the time being his manner was gracious. In fact, he was generally more or less courteous to Nasmyth.

"Miss Waynefleet tells me you are thinking of going away," said the owner of the ranch.

Nasmyth replied that he intended to leave the ranch, and was explaining that he felt he had already abused his host's kindness, when Waynefleet cut him short.

"We have been glad to have you here," he said; "in fact, I have been wondering if you might feel disposed to stay. It is probably evident to you that I cannot do all that is necessary about this place with one pair of hands."

Nasmyth knew, from what he had seen on other and larger ranches, that one man could do the work, though he felt that it was more than one could reasonably have expected from Waynefleet. It was, however, clear that somebody did a great deal, and he fancied that it was the rancher's daughter.

"Well," continued Waynefleet, "I am disposed to spend a little upon the ranch. They are talking of building a pulp-mill near the settlement. That will make land more valuable, and probably lead to a demand for produce. With that in view, I wish to raise a larger crop, and I'm open to hire somebody." He made a little gesture. "My strength scarcely permits me to undertake any severe physical effort, and I may confess that my faculty is rather that of administration. Now I will make you an offer."

Nasmyth considered it gravely. As it happened, he was feeling sorry for the rancher's daughter, and it was this fact chiefly which led him to come to terms with the man, since it seemed to him that there were tasks the girl must shrink from—tasks of which he could relieve her. Though he was quite aware that when his strength came back, he could probably earn more than Waynefleet offered

him, he accepted the chance to stay at the ranch. Moreover, the varied work was likely to be much easier than logging.

"It's a bargain. I'll make a start now, and haul one or two of those logs out with the oxen," he said. "Still, I'm afraid you must not expect too much from me for a week or two."

Waynefleet made no objections. There was, as a matter of fact, a great deal to be done, and Nasmyth went back to his new quarters over the stable almost too weary to hold himself upright that night. He, however, gathered strength rapidly, and a few days later he was chopping a great tree, standing on a narrow plank notched into the trunk of it several feet from the ground as he swung the axe, when the man who had instructed Miss Waynefleet how to nurse him came up the trail. Gordon sat down on a log close by, and looked at Nasmyth.

"I was coming round to make sure I was quite through with your case, but it's tolerably evident you have no more use for me," he said. "Stopping here?"

Nasmyth said he was, and Gordon nodded.

"Well," he said, "in several ways I'm rather glad. It's going to make things easier for Miss Waynefleet. Guess you understand what I meant when I said she ran the ranch?"

Nasmyth said he thought he did, and then, with a certain diffidence, he changed the subject.

"You must have spent a good deal of time looking after men—professionally," he said.

Gordon laughed in a somewhat curious fashion. "We'll let that go. In one sense, I've dropped my profession. I had to, and it's scarcely likely that I shall take it up again."

"I wonder," said Nasmyth reflectively, "if it's admissible for me to mention that I had fancied something of the kind. You see, in the Bush, I have naturally come across a good many men who have turned their backs upon the cities."

Gordon made a little gesture. "It's a sure thing you'll hear a good deal about me at the settlement, where, though the boys don't cast it up to me, I'm credited with having killed somebody back East, and as I've had an idea that I could hit it rather well with you, I'd sooner tell you the thing myself. Well, I was making my mark in a big city, several years ago, when I lost my head. When success comes too quickly, it's a thing you're rather apt to do. The trouble is that you have usually to face the results of it."

He broke off for a moment with a little wry smile. "In my case they were serious. There was a woman of hysterical temperament with a diseased imagination. I was overworked and a trifle overwrought, and had a glass of brandy too much at a certain committee lunch. Then there was a rather delicate operation in a hospital, and though I'm not sure yet that I blundered, it was suggested that I did, and the thing was complicated by what the woman said when the committee took it up. It didn't matter that the patient recovered, for when he took action against the woman, the thing made a sensation in the Eastern papers."

He looked at Nasmyth with a question in his eyes.

"Now," he said, "you more or less understand my reasons for ranching here. How's it going to affect you?"

Nasmyth gazed reflectively towards the East. "I think," he replied, "there are more of us who have left a good deal behind back yonder. Perhaps it's fortunate that the thing is possible."

Then he swung his axe again, and Gordon, who saw Waynefleet approaching, strolled away towards the ranch-owner.

CHAPTER IV

LAURA WAYNEFLEET'S WISH

It was a hot summer evening, and a drowsy, resinous fragrance stole out of the shadowy bush when Nasmyth, who had now spent six months at Waynefleet's ranch, lay among the wineberries by the river-side. Across the strip of sliding water the sombre firs rose in a great colonnade from the grey rock's crest, with the fires of sunset blazing behind their wide-girthed trunks. The river was low and very clear, and the sound of it seemed to intensify the solemn stillness of the Bush. Nasmyth had come there to fish, after a long day of tolerably arduous labour, but he did not expect much success, though the trout rise freely just after sunset in those rivers. Indeed, he had almost forgotten that the rod and net lay near his side, for his employer's daughter sat on a fallen cedar not far away from him.

She had laid her hat aside, and, as it happened, two humming-birds that flashed, bejewelled, in a ray of ruddy light hung poised on invisible wings about the clustered blossoms of an arrow-bush that drooped above her head. She was, however, not looking at them, but watching Nasmyth with thoughtful eyes. Everything she wore was the work of her own fingers, but the light print dress became her curiously well.

"You have been here six months now," she said.

"I have," answered Nasmyth, with a little laugh. "I almost venture to think I do you credit, in view of the state I was in when I reached the ranch. If you hadn't taken me in hand, two or three days would probably have been the length of my stay."

The girl made no disclaimer. She was one who admitted facts, even when they did not chime with her wishes, and she still regarded Nasmyth thoughtfully. He certainly did her credit, so far as his physical appearance went, for his strength had fully come back to him, and, as he lay among the wineberries in an easy pose, his thin duck garments displayed the fine proportions of a figure that had been trained almost to muscular perfection by strenuous labour. The light of the paling sunset was on his bronzed face, and it revealed the elusive delicacy that characterized it. Nasmyth was certainly a well-favoured man, but there were respects in which his companion was not altogether satisfied with him. She had, as she admitted, restored him to bodily health, but, after all, that was only going so far, and she felt it was possible that she might accomplish a little more, though there was no very evident reason why she should wish to do so. Still, she was conscious of the wish.

"I was wondering," she said, "how long you would be content to stay."

Nasmyth gazed at her in evident astonishment. "Stay!" he exclaimed. "Oh, you can call it twenty years, if one must be precise."

"Ah!" replied Laura, "in one sense, that is an admission I'm not exactly pleased that you should make."

The man raised himself slowly, and his face became intent as he strove to grasp her meaning. He was not in the least astonished that she should speak to him as she did, for there are few distinctions drawn between the hired man and those who employ him on the Pacific slope, and he had discovered already that the girl was at least his equal in intelligence and education. In fact, he had now and then a suspicion that her views of life were broader than his. In the meanwhile it was in one respect gratifying to feel that she could be displeased at anything he might think or do.

"I'm not quite sure I see the drift of that," he said.

"You would be content to continue a ranch-hand indefinitely?"

"Why not?" Nasmyth asked, with a smile.

Laura once more looked at him with an almost disconcerting steadiness, and she had, as he was already aware, very fine eyes. She, however, noticed the suggestive delicacy of his face, which had, as

it happened, more than once somewhat displeased her, and a certain languidness of expression, with which she had also grown almost impatient. This man, she had decided, was too readily acquiescent.

"That," she continued, "is rather a big question, isn't it?"

"Ah!" said Nasmyth reflectively. "Now I begin to understand. Well, I don't mind admitting that I once had ambitions and the means of gratifying them, as well as an optimistic belief in myself. That, however, was rudely shattered when the means were withdrawn, and a man very soon learns of how little account he is in Western Canada. Why shouldn't I be content to live as the ranch-hands do, especially when it's tolerably evident that I can't do anything else?"

"You are forgetting that most of them were born to it. That counts for a good deal. Have you noticed how far some of the others drift?" A faint trace of heightened colour crept into her cheeks. "Perhaps one couldn't blame them when they have once acquired the whisky habit and a Siwash wife."

Nasmyth lay very still for a few moments, resting on one elbow among the wineberries, for she had, after all, only suggested a question that had once or twice troubled him. It was, however, characteristic of him that he had temporized, and, though he knew it must be answered some day, had thrust it aside.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "you want to send me away. Now, I had almost fancied I had made things easier in various ways for you, and we have been good comrades, haven't we? One could call it that?"

"Yes," agreed Laura slowly; "I think one could call it that."

"Then," returned Nasmyth, "why do you want me to go?"

It was difficult to answer, and, to begin with, Laura did not exactly know she desired him to leave the ranch—in fact, she was willing to admit that there were several reasons why she wished him to stay. Still, perhaps because she had watched over him in his sickness, and, so Gordon said, had snatched him back to life again, she had a certain pride in him, and vaguely felt that. In one sense, he belonged to her. She would not have him throw away the life she had saved, and she had recognized, as many of his English friends had not, the perilously acquiescent side of his character. He was, she feared, one who had an unfortunate aptitude for drifting.

"That," she said, "is rather more than I could explain either to myself or to you, but I will tell you something. They are going to build the pulp-mill down the valley, and they are now asking for tenders for the construction of the dam. The thing, I have heard, is not big enough to interest contractors from the cities, and most of the men round here have their hands full with their ranches."

Nasmyth became a trifle more intent. "Still," he remarked, "I have never built a dam."

"You told me you were rather a good chopper, and I think you are. You have made roads, too, and know how to handle giant-powder in the rock-cutting, and how to use the drill."

"There are shoals of men in this country who know considerably more about those things than I do."

Laura made a little impatient gesture. "Yes," she admitted, "there are, but they are simple Bushmen for the most part; and does intellect count for nothing at all? Are a trained understanding and a quick comprehension of no use when one builds a dam?"

Nasmyth frowned, though she saw a little glow kindle in his eyes. "I'm by no means sure that I possess any of those desirable qualities. Besides, there's a rather serious objection—that of finance."

Then Laura Waynfleet made it clear that she had considered the question, and she favoured the man with a glimpse of the practical side of her character.

"The stores give long credit, and partial payments are generally made as a work of that kind goes on. Then it is not a very unusual thing for workmen to wait for their wages until the contract is carried through."

Nasmyth lay still for at least another minute. He had gradually lost his ambition during the few years he had wandered through the Bush of British Columbia. The aimless life was often hard, but it had its compensations, and he had learned to value its freedom from responsibility and care. When he did not like a task he had undertaken, he simply left it and went on again. Still, he had had

misgivings now and then when he noticed how far some of his comrades had drifted. Presently he rose slowly to his feet.

“Well,” he said, “you’re right, I think, and, if I’m given an opportunity, I’ll undertake the thing. The credit will be yours if I’m successful.”

The girl rose. “Then,” she admonished, with a faint smile, “don’t tell me that you have failed.”

She turned away and left him somewhat abruptly, but Nasmyth did not resume his fishing, though he could hear the big trout splashing in the pool as the sunset light faded off the water. He lay down among the wineberries, which were scattered among the glossy leaves like little drops of blood, to think harder than he had thought for a considerable time. An hour ago, as he had told Laura Waynefleet, he would have been well content to stay on at the ranch, and, though she had roused him, he knew that it would cost him an effort to leave it. He was not, he fancied, in love with her. Indeed, he now and then admitted that she would probably look for more from the man who won her favour than there was in him, but the camaraderie—he could think of no better word for it—that had existed between them had been very pleasant to him.

He realized that he was in one sense hers to dispose of. She had, in all probability, saved his life, and now she was endeavouring to arouse his moral responsibility. She was sending him out to play a man’s part in the battle of life. He admitted that he had shrunk from it, of late, or, at least, had been content to sink back among the rank and file. He had made the most of things, but that, he was beginning to realize, was, after all, a somewhat perilous habit. Laura Waynefleet evidently considered that a resolute attempt to alter conditions was more becoming than to accept them, even though one was likely to be injured while making it. He heard footsteps, and, looking up, saw Gordon sit down upon the cedar-log.

“I came to look at Wiston’s hand, and walked across when I heard that Waynefleet hadn’t been about,” he explained. “I don’t think you need feel any particular anxiety about your employer.”

Nasmyth grinned at this. Waynefleet had spent part of one day chopping a big balsam, and was apparently feeling the effects of the very unusual exertion. Then Gordon took out his pipe.

“I guess you’re fishing?” he observed.

“I came here to get a trout for breakfast.”

“You look like it.” Gordon smiled. “As it happened, I saw Miss Waynefleet crossing the clearing. It occurs to me that she may have said something that set you thinking.”

“I wonder,” said Nasmyth reflectively, “what made you fancy that?”

Gordon regarded him with a little twinkle in his eyes. “Well,” he replied, “I have the honour of Miss Waynefleet’s acquaintance, and have some little knowledge of her habits.”

Men make friends with one another quickly in the Western forests, and Nasmyth had acquired a curious confidence in his companion, in spite of the story Gordon had told him. As the result of this he related part, at least, of what the girl had said. Gordon nodded.

“It’s quite likely you’ll get that contract if you apply for it. The folks about the settlement haven’t sent an offer in,” he said. “The notion is naturally Miss Waynefleet’s. It’s the kind of thing that would appeal to her, and, in a way, it’s fortunate you have fallen into her hands. She’s one of the protesters.”

“The protesters?”

“Yes,” answered Gordon; “I can’t think of a better name for them, though it doesn’t exactly convey all I mean. To make the thing a little clearer, we’ll take the other kind—in this country they’re best typified by the Indians. The Siwash found it a wilderness, and made the most of it as such. They took their toll of the salmon, and fed their ponies on the natural prairie grass. If we’d left it to them for centuries it would have remained a wilderness. We came, and found Nature omnipotent, but we challenged her—drove the steel road down the great cañon to bring us provisions in, dyked the swamp meadows, ploughed up the forest, and rent the hills. We made our protest, and, quite often, it was no more than that, for the rivers were too strong for us, and the Bush crept back upon our little clearings. Still, we never let go, and it’s becoming evident that we have done more than hold our own.”

He paused, and laughed in a deprecatory fashion before he went on again. "Now and then I have an outbreak of this kind," he added lightly. "The thing would make an epic, but, if one could write it, it wouldn't be worth while. The protest that counts in this land is made with the axe and drill."

The outbreak was comprehensible, for it must be remembered that the average Westerner, either by birth or adoption, is seldom a reticent man. He is, in fact, usually characterized by a daring optimism, and not infrequently filled to overflowing with the clean pride of achievement. One can hear this new-world enthusiasm bubble over on public platforms and at brilliant functions, as well as in second-rate saloons, but it is most forcibly expressed where men toil waist-deep in icy water building dyke and dam, or blast their waggon roads out of the side of the gloomy cañons. Their handiwork is not always beautiful, but one wonders to see what they have made of that great desolation.

Nasmyth lay still among the wineberries, for a minute or two, and, though a cold green transparency had replaced the fires of sunset behind the tall trunks now, and the trout were splashing furiously in the pool, he forgot all about the rod beside him as he pondered over a question which had often occurred to him.

"How is it that Miss Waynefleet is content to stay here?" he asked.

"You would hardly expect her to leave her father."

"No," said Nasmyth. "Any way, that is scarcely an answer. What keeps Waynefleet here? One wouldn't fancy he likes living in the Bush."

"It's a little curious that you haven't heard. Anyway, somebody is bound to tell you. Waynefleet had to get out of the Old Country. Some trouble about trust-money. He came out to Victoria and set up in the land agency business, but it was his misfortune that he couldn't keep out of politics. There are folks like that. When they can't handle their own affairs, they're anxious to manage those of the community. Somebody found out the story and flung it in his face. The man hadn't the grit in him to live it down; he struck up into the Bush and bought the half-cleared ranch."

For the next minute or two Nasmyth gazed straight in front of him with a very thoughtful face, for he had now a vague recollection of hearing or reading of the affair in which his employer had played a discreditable part. He had already decided that he was not in love with Laura Waynefleet—in fact, it was perhaps significant that he had done so more than once, but he had a warm regard for the girl who had saved his life, and, after all, his ideas were not quite so liberal as he fancied they had become in the Western forest. It was a trifle disconcerting to discover that she was the daughter of a swindler.

"It hurts?" inquired Gordon dryly.

Nasmyth rose. "To be frank," he admitted, "it does. Still, though the subject's a rather delicate one, I don't want you to misunderstand me. After all, Miss Waynefleet is not in the least responsible for anything her father may have done."

"That," said Gordon, "is a sure thing. Well, I must be hitting the trail home. Aren't you going to try for some of those trout in the pool?"

"No," answered Nasmyth, and his smile was a trifle grim; "I don't think I am."

He watched Gordon stride away through the undergrowth, and then, in the creeping dusk, went slowly back to the ranch. Waynefleet was out when he reached it, but Laura was sitting sewing by the lamp, and she looked at him sharply when he came in. He was unpleasantly conscious that the light was on his face. Then the girl laid down her sewing and turned fully towards him.

"I saw Mr. Gordon cross the clearing. He has told you why we are living here?" she said.

"I think," said Nasmyth, with a slowness that was very expressive, "it was not done out of unkindness."

"Oh, no," and Laura smiled in a rather curious fashion, "he had probably quite another motive." Then she leaned forward a little, looking at him steadily. "I knew that he would tell you."

Nasmyth stood still, with his forehead deeply furrowed, and an unusual gravity in his eyes. The girl's courage and serenity appealed to him, and he was conscious that his heart was beating rapidly.

He said nothing, for a moment or two, and afterwards remembered how still the little room was, and how the sweet, resinous scent of the firs flowed in through the open window. Then he made a vague gesture.

“There is, perhaps, a good deal one could say; but I fancy most of it would savour of impertinence,” he said. “After all, the thing doesn’t affect you in any way.”

Laura glanced down at her hands, and Nasmyth guessed what she was thinking, for they were hard, and work-roughened. The toil that her hands showed was, as he realized, only a part of her burden.

“I think it affects me a very great deal,” she declared slowly.

Then a curious compassion for her troubled the man. She was young and very comely, and it was, he felt, cruelly hard on her that, bearing her father’s shame, she must lead a life of hard labour at that desolate ranch. He felt an almost uncontrollable desire to comfort her, and to take her cares upon himself, but that was out of the question, since he was merely a ranch-hand, a Bush-chopper, who owed even the food he ate and the clothes he wore to her. There is, as he realized then, after all, very little one can do to lighten another’s load, but in that moment the half-formed aspirations that she had called into existence in his mind expanded suddenly. There was, he felt, no reason why he should not acquire money and influence, once he made the effort.

“Miss Waynefleet,” he said haltingly, “I can only offer you my sincere sympathy. Still”—and perhaps he did not recognize how clear the connection of ideas was—“I am going down to see about that dam-building contract to-morrow.”

Then Laura smiled, and took up her sewing again. Her burden, as she realized, was hers alone, but she knew that this man would no longer drift. She had called up his latent capacities, and he would prove his manhood.

CHAPTER V

THE FLOOD

The autumn afternoon was oppressively hot when Gordon, floundering among the whitened driftwood piled along the river-bank, came upon Nasmyth, who lay upon a slope of rock, with his hands, which were badly bruised, clenched upon a drill. Another man, who stood upon a plank inserted into a crevice, swung a hammer, and its ponderous head came ringing down upon the drill, which Nasmyth jerked round at every stroke, so many times to the minute, with rhythmic regularity. As Nasmyth was apparently too busily engaged just then to trouble about him, Gordon sat down on a big log, and taking out his pipe, looked about him when he had lighted it.

The river had made a gap for itself in the great forest that filled the valley, and the sombre firs that rose in serried ranks upon its farther bank rolled back up the hillside, streaked here and there with a little thin white mist. A mile or so away, and lower down the valley, there was an opening in their shadowy masses, out of which rose the ringing of hammers and a long trail of smoke, for workmen from the cities were building the new wood-pulp mill there. In the foreground the river swirled by, frothing at flood level, for a week's fierce sunshine had succeeded a month of torrential rain, and the snow high up on a distant peak was melting fast.

Nobody about the little settlement at the head of the deep inlet had seen the water quite so high at that season, and Gordon noticed how it frothed and boiled about the row of stone-backed piles that stretched out from either bank. As he listened to the hoarse roar of the pent-up torrent, he understood what that partly completed dam must have cost Nasmyth. After a little time Nasmyth rose, and, stepping on the plank, wearily straightened his back.

"We're down far enough," he announced. "Let me have the two sticks of giant-powder, and then tell the boys to jump for cover."

The other man, who sprang down from his perch, handed him what appeared to be two thick sticks of yellow wax, and Gordon watched him as he carefully nipped a copper detonator down on a length of snaky fuse, and embedded it in the plastic material. Then he cautiously tamped the two yellow rolls down into the drilled-out hole. After that he lighted the fuse, and, clambering down the slope of rock, saw Gordon.

"We'll get out of this. It's a short fuse," he said.

Gordon, who was acquainted with the action of giant-powder, had no desire to stay, and they floundered as fast as possible over the driftwood and masses of shattered rock until Nasmyth drew his companion behind a towering fir. Then there was a sharp detonation, a crash, and a shower of flying stones went smashing through the forest and into the river. One, which Gordon fancied must have weighed about two hundred pounds, drove close past them, and struck a young cedar, which snapped off beneath the impact. Then there was a sudden silence, and Nasmyth stretched out his arms with a suggestive weariness before he sat down and took out his pipe.

"No one could have expected that stone to come this way," he remarked, with a little laugh. "It's an example of how contrary things can be. In fact, they've been about as contrary as it's possible the last month or so. As no doubt you have noticed, one very seldom gets much encouragement when he takes the uphill trail. It's very rarely made any easier for him."

Gordon grinned, though he realized that the trail his companion had set out upon was very steep indeed. He had secured the dam-building contract, which was not astonishing, since nobody else appeared anxious to undertake it, and he had already acquired a certain proficiency with the axe and drill. There is as yet very little specialization in that land, which is in many respects fortunate for those who live in it, and the small rancher cheerfully undertakes any kind of primitive engineering that seems likely to provide him with a few dollars, from building timber bridges to blasting waggon

roads out of the hardest rock. What is more, he usually makes a success of it. In Nasmyth's case, however, the rise of water had made his task almost insuperably difficult, and it had already left a certain mark on him. Gordon, who was, after all, a doctor, naturally noticed this as he watched him.

Nasmyth was very lean now, but he was also hard and muscular, and the old blue shirt, which hung open at the neck, and torn duck trousers, which clung about him still wet with river-water, accentuated the wiry suppleness of his frame; but it was in his face that Gordon noticed the greatest change. The good-humoured, tolerant indifference he remembered had melted out of it, the lips seemed set more firmly, and the eyes were resolute and keen. Nasmyth, so Gordon noticed, had grown since he first took up his duties as Waynefleet's hired hand. Still, though it was less apparent, the stamp of refinement and what Gordon called, for want of a better term, "sensibility," clung to him, and it seemed to the trained observer that the qualities it suggested might yet handicap his comrade in a country where the struggle with primitive forces chiefly demands from man an unreasoning animal courage. In that land the small contractor and Bush-rancher must bear the brunt on his body every day, toiling waist-deep in icy waters, or gripping the drill with bleeding hands, while each fresh misfortune that follows flood and frost is met with a further strain on weary muscles and sterner resolution. It is a fight that is usually hardest for the man who thinks, and in which the one thing that counts is the brutal, bulldog valour that takes hold and holds on in spite of each crushing blow.

"This high water," said Gordon, "has kept you back considerably."

"It has," Nasmyth replied with emphasis. "It has cost me more money than I care to figure up the last month, and we're considerably behind. The dam's still at the mercy of the next big flood."

"It's a little curious that you seem to stand it better than you did the logging," said Gordon, with a quick glance at him.

Nasmyth appeared to consider this. "I do, and that's a fact. For one thing, I'm fighting for my own hand, and no doubt that counts, though, perhaps, it doesn't go quite far enough. After all, it's a point you ought to know more about than I do."

His companion smiled. "I can describe the mechanical connection between the thought in a man's brain and the movement of his muscles. It's comparatively simple; but when you understand that, you're only beginning. There's much more behind. To particularize, if you had done what you're doing now when you were logging, it would, in all probability, have broken you up again."

Nasmyth fancied that this was correct, though, as he had admitted, he could give no reason for it. He was only conscious that he was being constrained by some new influence, and, under the pressure it laid upon him, he became almost insensible to physical weariness. He had now a motive for fighting, in place of drifting, that no mere hired hand can possess. His indolent content had been rudely dissipated, and something that had lain dormant in the depths of his nature had come uppermost. It was certainly Laura Waynefleet who had given it the first impulse, but why he had permitted her to impose her will on him was a matter that was still incomprehensible to him. Seeing that he did not answer, Gordon changed the subject.

"Some of the boys and I have been wondering how you contrived to finance the thing," he said.

Nasmyth smiled, though there was just a trace of darker colour in his face. "Well," he replied, "one can get tolerably long credit from most of the Bush stores, and Clipton has let me have provisions for the boys on quite reasonable terms. Besides, as it happens, there is money in the family. There was a time when one might have considered it almost the duty of certain relatives of mine to give me a lift, but I didn't offer them the opportunity. I came out here and set about driving cows and chopping trees instead."

"You felt you'd sooner cut your hand off than give them a gentle hint," remarked Gordon. "It's not an uncommon feeling, but, when you give way to it, it clears the other people. Won't you go on?"

"When I undertook this affair, I laid the opportunity before them, and one—the last I expected anything of that kind from—sent me out a draft. He kindly pointed out that there appeared to be in me certain capabilities, which he had never supposed I possessed, and added that, if I ever really

succeeded in building a dam or anything else useful, he would be pleased to take a share in my next venture. In the meanwhile, he would charge me interest on the amount of that draft. Perhaps I may mention that the man in question was naturally the one the rest of them rather looked down upon.”

Gordon laughed. “Oh, yes,” he said, “I like that, naturally. I guess you would have taken their view of him once. Well, since you can put your pride in your pocket, you’re evidently growing. There’s just one way of putting anything through here, and that’s to take hold and hang right on, no matter what it costs. I guess there’s one of the boys wanting you.”

A man stood knee-deep in the river waving his hand. Nasmyth rose and stretched himself.

“They seem to want me all the time from sun-up until it’s dark,” he said. “In one way it’s a little curious, since there’s reason to believe that most of them know a good deal more about what we’re doing than I do myself. You’ll excuse me.”

Gordon smiled as his comrade strode away. He was one who had studied human nature, and because he was well acquainted with the Bushman’s capabilities, he knew that there were also limitations to them. Even in such matters as the splitting of hard rock and the driving of massive piles into the river-bed, the higher intelligence of the man of intellect had its effect. Gordon smoked his pipe out as he watched Nasmyth flounder into the stream among the other men, pushing a little car loaded with broken rock that apparently ran along a submerged track. Then he strolled back toward the settlement.

Nasmyth toiled on in the river until the camp-cook hammered upon a suspended iron sheet as a signal that supper was ready. The summons was answered without delay. With the water running from their clothing Nasmyth and his men went back to the little log shanty. One or two changed their dripping garments, but the rest left their clothes to dry upon them, as their employer did. When the plentiful, warm supper had been eaten, Nasmyth went back to the little hut that served him as store and sleeping quarters. A big, grizzled man from Mattawa, Ontario, went in with him, and lounged upon the table while he sat in his bunk, which was filled with fresh spruce twigs.

“I’m pretty well played out, and if I’m to work to-morrow, I’ve got to sleep to-night,” said Nasmyth.

The grizzled axeman nodded. “Well,” he volunteered, “I’ll stand watch. I was in the last two nights, and I guess it’s up to me to see you through. We’re going to have trouble, if one of those big logs fetches up across the sluiceway. The river’s full of them, and she’s risen ’most a foot since sun-up.”

Nasmyth held up one hand, and both heard the deep roar of frothing water that came in with the smell of the firs through the open door. The Bush was very still outside, and that hoarse, throbbing note flung back by the rock slope and climbing pines filled the valley. Nasmyth smiled grimly, for it was suggestive of the great forces against which he had pitted his puny strength. Then there was a crash, and, a few moments later, a curious thud, and both men listened, intent and strung up, until the turmoil of the river rose alone again.

“A big log,” said the older man. “She has gone through the run. Guess we’ll get one by-and-by long enough to jamb. Now, if you’d run out those wing-frames I was stuck on, she’d have took them straight through, every one.”

“The trouble was that I hadn’t the money, Mattawa,” said Nasmyth dryly.

His companion nodded, for this was a trouble he could understand. “Well,” he answered, “when you haven’t got it you have to face the consequences. I’ll roust you out if a big log comes along.”

Mattawa went out, and soon afterwards Nasmyth, whose clothes were now partly dry, lay down, dressed as he was, in his twig-packed bunk, with his pipe in his hand. It was growing a little colder, and a keen air, which had in it the properties of an elixir, blew in, but that was a thing Nasmyth scarcely noticed, and the dominant roar of the river held his attention. He wondered again why he had been drawn into the conflict with it, or, rather, why he had permitted Laura Waynefleet to set him such a task, and the answer that it was because he desired to hold her good opinion, and, as he had said, to do her credit, did not seem to go far enough. It merely suggested the further question

why he should wish to keep her friendship. Still, there was no disguising the fact that, once he had undertaken the thing, it had got hold of him, and he felt he must go on until his task was successfully accomplished or he was crushed and beaten. It seemed very likely, then, that utter defeat would be his fate. While he pondered, the pipe fell from his hand, and the river's turmoil rang in deep pulsations through his dreams. He was awakened suddenly by a wet hand on his shoulder, and, scrambling out of his bunk on the instant, he saw Mattawa with a lantern in his hand.

"Log right across the sluice-run," said the watcher. "More coming along behind it. They'll sure get piling up."

Nasmyth did not remember that he gave any directions when he sprang, half asleep, out of the shanty. The roar of water had a different note in it, and the clangour of the iron sheet one of the men was pounding rang out harshly. A half-moon hung above the black pines, and dimly-seen men were flitting like shadows toward the waterside. They appeared to know what it was advisable to do, but they stopped just a moment on the edge of the torrent, for which nobody could have blamed them. The water, streaked with smears of froth and foam, swirled by, and there was a tumultuous white seething where the flood boiled across the log in the midst of the stream. The log blocked the gap left open to let the driftwood through, and, as Nasmyth knew, great trees torn up in distant valleys were coming down with the flood. It seemed to him that he could not reasonably have expected to clear that obstacle with a battalion of log-drivers, and he had only a handful of weary men. Still the men went in, floundering knee-deep in the flood, along the submerged pile of stone and clutching at the piles that bound it to save themselves when the stream threatened to sweep their feet from under them, until they came to the gap where the great tree, rolling in the grip of the torrent, thrashed its grinding branches against the stone.

Then, though it was difficult to see how a man of them found a foothold, or kept it on the heaving trunk, the big axes flashed and fell, while a few shadowy figures ran along the top of the log to attack the massy butt across the opening. It would have been arduous labour in daylight and at low-water, but these were men who had faced the most that flood and frost could do. They set about their task in the dark, for that land would have been a wilderness still if the men in it had shown themselves unduly careful of either life or limb.

The great branches yielded beneath the glinting blades, and went on down river again, but Nasmyth, who felt the axe-haft slip in his greasy hands, did not try to lead. It was sufficient if he could keep pace with the rest of the wood-choppers, which was, after all, a thing most men, reared as he had been, would certainly not have done. The lust of conflict was upon him that night, and, balancing himself ankle-deep in water on the trunk that heaved and dipped beneath him, he swung the trenchant steel. He felt that he was pitted against great primeval forces, and, with the gorged veins rising on his forehead and the perspiration dripping from him, man's primitive pride and passions urged him to the struggle.

How long it was before they had stripped the tree to a bare log he did not know, but twice, as they toiled on, he saw a man splash into the river, and, rising in the eddy beneath the submerged dam, crawl, dripping, out again, and at length he found himself beside Mattawa, whirling his axe above a widening notch, and keeping rhythmic stroke. He knew he was acquitting himself creditably then, for Mattawa had swung the axe since he could lift it, and there are men, and mechanics, too, who cannot learn to use it as the Bushmen do in a lifetime; but he also knew that he could not keep pace with his comrade very long. In the meanwhile, he held his aching muscles to their task, and the gleaming blades whirled high above their shoulders in the pale light of the moon. As each left the widening gap the other came shearing down.

The other men were now plying peevie and handspike at the butt of the log, and he and Mattawa toiled on alone, two dim and shadowy figures in the midst of the flood, until at last there was a rending of fibres, and Mattawa leapt clear.

"Jump!" he gasped. "She's going."

Nasmyth jumped. He went down in four or five feet of water, and had the sense to stay there while the log drove over him. Then he came up, and clutching it, held on while it swept downstream into a slacker eddy. There were several other figures apparently clinging to the butt of it, and when he saw them slip off into the river one by one, he let go, too. He was swung out of the eddy into a white turmoil, which hurled him against froth-lapped stones, but at length he found sure footing, and crawled up the bank, which most of his companions had reached before him. When the others came up, he found that he was aching all over, and evidently was badly bruised. He stood still, shivering a little, and blinked at them.

“You’re all here?” he said. “Where are those axes?”

It appeared that most of them were in the river, which was not very astonishing, for a man cannot reasonably be expected to swim through a flood with a big axe in his hand, and when somebody said so, Nasmyth made a little gesture of resignation.

“Well,” he said, “the logs will just have to pile up, if another big one comes along before the morning.”

This was evident. They were all dead weary, and most of them were badly bruised, as well, and they trooped back to the shanty, while Nasmyth limped into his hut. Nasmyth sloughed off his dripping garments, and was asleep in five minutes after he had crawled into his bunk.

CHAPTER VI

THE BREAKING OF THE DAM

A faint grey light was creeping into the shanty when Nasmyth awoke again, and lay still for a minute or two, while his senses came slowly back to him. The first thing of which he was definitely conscious was a physical discomfort that rendered the least movement painful. He felt sore all over, and there was a distressful ache in one hip and shoulder, which he fancied was the result of falling on the log, or perhaps of having been hurled against the boulders by the rapids through which he had reached the bank. His physical condition did not trouble him seriously, for he had grown more or less accustomed to muscular weariness, and the cramping pains which spring from toiling long hours in cold water, and, although he made a grimace, as he raised himself a trifle, it was the sound outside that occupied most of his attention.

The door stood open, as he had left it, and a clean, cold air that stirred his blood came in, with the smell of fir and cedar, but what he noticed was the deeper tone in the roar of the river that seemed flung back in sonorous antiphones by the climbing pines. It had occurred to him on other occasions when he was in a fanciful mood that they were singing a majestic *Benedicite*, but just then he was uneasily conscious that there was a new note in the great reverberating harmonies. Stately pine and towering cedar had raised their voices, too, and a wild wailing fell through the long waves of sound from the highest of them on the crest of the hill. It was evident that a fresh breeze was blowing down the valley, and, as it must have swept the hollow farther up among the ranges, which was filled with a deep blue lake, Nasmyth realized that it would drive at least another foot of water into the river as well as set adrift the giant logs that lay among the boulders. Even then they were, he fancied, in all probability driving down upon his half-finished dam.

Rousing himself with an effort, he clambered out of his bunk, and then gripped the little table hard, for his hip pained him horribly as his weight came upon it. Then, as he struggled into his clothing, there was a heavy thud outside, that was followed by a crashing and grinding, and a gasping man appeared in the door of the shanty.

"Big log across the run," he cried, "three or four more of them coming along."

Nasmyth, who said nothing, set his lips tight, and was out of the shanty in another moment or two. A glance at the river showed him that any effort he could make would, in all probability, be futile; but he and the others waded out into the flood and recommenced the struggle. That, at least, was a thing they owed to themselves, and they toiled for an hour or two very much as they had done in the darkness; only that fresh logs were now coming down on them every few minutes, and at last they recognized that they were beaten. Then they went back dejectedly, and Nasmyth sat down to breakfast, though he had very little appetite. He felt that all the strength he had would be needed that day.

After breakfast he lay among the boulders gnawing his unlighted pipe and watching the growing mass of driftwood that chafed and ground against the piles of the dam. Nothing, he recognized, could save the dam now. It was bound to go, for the piles were only partly backed with stone, and, in any case, men do not build in that new country as they do in England. Their needs are constantly varying, and their works are intended merely to serve the purpose of the hour. It is a growing country, and the men in it know that the next generation will not be content with anything that they can do, and, what is more to the purpose, they themselves will want something bigger and more efficient in another year or two. Hence the dam was a somewhat frail and temporary structure of timber as well as stone, but it would probably have done what was asked of it had it been completed before the floods set in. As it was, Nasmyth knew that he would see the end of it before another hour slipped by.

It came even sooner than he had expected. There was a dull crash; the piles that rose above the flood collapsed, and the mass of grinding timber drove on across the ruined dam. Then Nasmyth rose, and, stretching himself wearily, went back to his shanty. He felt he could not face the sympathy of his workmen. He was still sitting there in a state of utter physical weariness and black dejection, when, towards the middle of the afternoon, the door was quietly opened, and Laura Waynefleet came in. She looked at him as he remembered she had done once or twice at the ranch, with compassion in her eyes, and he was a little astonished to feel that, instead of bringing him consolation, her pity hurt him. Then he felt the blood rise to his face, and he looked away from her.

“You have heard already?” he asked.

“Yes,” said the girl softly. “I was at the settlement, and they told me there. I am so sorry.”

Nasmyth winced, but he contrived to say, “Thank you,” and then glanced round the untidy shanty, which was strewn with dripping clothes. “Of course,” he added, “it is something to know that I have your sympathy; but I must not keep you here.”

It was not a tactful speech, but Laura smiled. “I meant to take you out,” she said. “You have been sitting here brooding since the dam went, and from what Mattawa told me, you haven’t had any dinner.”

“No,” said Nasmyth; “now I come to think of it, I don’t believe I have. I’m not sure it’s very astonishing.”

“Then we’ll go away somewhere and make tea among the pines.”

Nasmyth glanced suggestively at his attire. His duck jacket had shrunk with constant wetting, and would not button across the old blue shirt, which fell apart at his bronzed neck. The sleeves had also drawn up from his wrists, and left the backs of his hands unduly prominent. His hands were scarred, and the fingers were bruised where the hammer-head had fallen on them in wet weather as it glanced from the drill. The girl was immaculate in a white hat and a dress of light flowered print.

“Do I look like going on a picnic with you?” he said. “The few other things I possess are in much the same condition.”

Laura had naturally noticed the state of his attire, but it was his face that troubled her. It was haggard and his eyes were heavy. As she had decided long before, it was a face of Grecian type, and she would sooner have had it Roman. This man, she felt, was too sensitive, and apt to yield to sudden impulses, and just then her heart ached over him. Still, she contrived to laugh.

“Pshaw!” she said. “I told Mattawa to get me a few things ready.”

Nasmyth followed her out of the shanty, and when he had picked up the basket and kettle somebody had left at the door, she turned to him.

“Where shall we go?” she asked.

“Anywhere,” said Nasmyth, “that is, as long as it’s away from the river.”

Laura saw the shrinking in his eyes as he gazed at the swirling flood, and though she was sorry for him, it roused in her a momentary spark of anger. Then she went with him up the hillside beneath the climbing pines until they reached a shadowy hollow near the crest of it, out of which a little stream trickled down.

“Now light a fire, while I see what there is in the basket,” she said.

She found a splendid trout, a packet of tea, and a little bag of self-raising flour, among other sundries, and for the next half-hour she kept Nasmyth busy making flapjacks and frying the trout. Then they sat down to a simple meal, and when it was over, Nasmyth laughed.

“It’s a little astonishing, in view of how I felt at breakfast, but there’s nothing left,” he sighed. “In one way the admission’s a little humiliating, but I almost feel myself again.”

“It’s supposed to be a very natural one in the case of a man,” said Laura. “You can smoke if you like. I want to talk to you.”

Nasmyth stretched himself out on the other side of the fire, and Laura, leaning forward a little, looked at him. Without knowing exactly why, he felt somewhat uneasy beneath her gaze.

“Now,” she said, “I would like to hear what you are going to do.”

The man made a little rueful gesture. “I don’t know. Chop trees again for some rancher, most probably—in fact, I was wondering whether you would have me back as a ranch-hand.”

“Ah!” cried the girl sharply, while a trace of hardness crept into her eyes, “that is very much what I expected. As it happens, I am far from satisfied with the man we have, but I should not think of replacing him with you just now.”

Nasmyth winced, and it was characteristic of him that he endeavoured to beguile her away from the object she evidently had in view.

“What’s the matter with the man?” he asked.

“A diversity of gifts. Among other things, he appears to possess an extensive acquaintance with Colonial politics, and he and my father discuss the regeneration of the Government when they might with advantage be doing something else.”

Nasmyth frowned. “I understand. That’s one reason why I wanted to come back. After all, there is a good deal I could save you from. In fact, I get savage now and then when I think of what you are probably being left to do upon the ranch. I ventured a hint or two to your father, but he seemed impervious.” He hesitated for a moment. “No doubt it’s a delicate subject, but it’s a little difficult quietly to contemplate the fact that, while those men talk politics, you—”

“I do their work?” suggested Laura with a lifting of her arched eyebrows. “After all, isn’t that or something like it what generally happens when men turn their backs upon their task?”

Nasmyth flushed. “I admit that I was trying to break away from mine, but it seems you have undertaken to head me off and drive me back to it again.”

“That was more or less what I wished,” said Laura quietly.

“Well,” Nasmyth replied, “as I think you’re a little hard on me, I’ll try to put my views before you. To begin with, the dam is done for.”

“You are quite sure? You built it so far once. Is it altogether out of the question for you to do as much again?”

Nasmyth felt his face grow hot. She was looking at him with quiet eyes, which had, however, the faintest suggestion of disdain in them.

“The question is why I should want to do it,” he said.

“Ah!” rejoined Laura, “you have no aspirations at all? Still, I’m not quite sure that is exactly what I mean—in fact, I think I mean considerably more. You are quite content to throw away your birthright, and relinquish all claim to the station you were born in?”

The man smiled somewhat bitterly. “I think you understand that it’s a custom of this country not to demand from any man an account of what he may have done before he came out to it. In my particular case it was, however, nothing very discreditable, and I once had my aspirations, or, as you prefer to consider it, I recognized my obligations. Then the blow fell unexpectedly, and I came out here and became a hired man—a wandering chopper. After all, one learns to be content rather easily, which is in several ways fortunate. Then you instilled fresh aspirations—it’s the right word in this case—into me, and I made another attempt, only to be hurled back again. There doesn’t seem to be much use in attempting the impossible.”

“Then a thing is to be considered impossible after one fails twice? There are men who fail—and go on again—all their lives long.”

“I’m afraid,” Nasmyth declared in a dull tone, “I am not that kind of man. After all, to be flung down from the station you were born to—I’m using your own words—and turned suddenly adrift to labour with one’s hands takes a good deal of the courage out of one. I almost think if you could put yourself in my place you would understand.”

Laura smiled in a suggestive fashion, and looked down at the hands she laid upon her knee. They were capable, as well as shapely, and, as he had noticed more than once, the signs of toil were very plain on them.

“I never did an hour’s useful work before I came out West,” she said.

She had produced the effect she probably desired, for in the midst of his sudden pity for her Nasmyth was troubled with a sense of shame. This girl, he realized, had been reared as gently as he had been himself, and he knew that she now toiled most of every day at what in the older country would have been considered most unwomanly tasks. Still, she had borne with it cheerfully, and had courage to spare for others whose strength was less than hers.

He sat silent for almost a minute, looking down between the great pines into the valley, and, as he did so, he vaguely felt the influence of the wilderness steal over him. The wind had fallen now, and there was a deep stillness in the climbing forest which the roar of the river emphasized. Those trees were vast of girth, and they were very cold. In spite of whirling snow, and gale, and frost, they had grown slowly to an impressive stateliness. In Nature, as he recognized, all was conflict, and it was the fine adjustment of opposing forces that made for the perfection of grace, and strength, and beauty. Then it seemed to him that his companion was like the forest—still, and strong, and stately—because she had been through the stress of conflict too. These were, however, fancies, and he turned around again to her with a sudden resolution expressed in his face and attitude.

“There’s an argument you might have used, Miss Waynefleet,” he told her. “I said I would try to do you credit, and it almost seems as if I had forgotten it. Well, if you will wait a little, I will try again.”

He rose, and, crossing over, stood close beside her, with his hand laid gently on her shoulder, looking down on her with a quiet smile. “After all,” he added, “there’s a good deal you might have said that you haven’t—in fact, it’s one of your strong points that, as a rule, you content yourself with going just far enough. Well, because you wish it, I am somehow going to build that dam again.”

She looked up at him swiftly with a gleam in her eyes, and Nasmyth stooped a little, while his hand closed hard upon her shoulder.

“You saved my life, and you have tried to do almost as much in a different way since then,” he went on. “It is probably easier to bring a sick man back to health than it is to make him realize his obligations and to imbue him with the courage to face them when it’s evident that he doesn’t possess it. Still, you can’t do things of that kind without results, and I think you ought to know that I belong to you.”

There was a trace of colour in Laura Waynefleet’s face, and she quivered a little under his grasp, but she looked at him steadily, and read his mind in his eyes. The man was stirred by sudden, evanescent passion and exaggerated gratitude, while pity for her had, she fancied, also its effect on him; but that was the last thing she desired, and, with a swift movement, she shook off his hand.

“Ah!” she said; “don’t spoil things.”

Her tone was quiet, but it was decisive, and Nasmyth, whose face flushed darkly, let his hand fall back to his side. Then she rose, and turned to him.

“If we are to be friends, this must never happen again,” she added.

Then they went down the hillside and back to the settlement, where Nasmyth harnessed the team, which the rancher who lived near occasionally placed at Waynefleet’s disposal, to a dilapidated wagon. When she gathered the reins up, Laura smiled down on him.

“After all,” she reminded him, “you will remember that I expect you to do me credit.”

She drove away, and Nasmyth walked back to his camp beside the dam, where the men were awaiting the six o’clock supper. He leaned upon a pine-stump, looking at them gravely, when he had called them together.

“Boys,” he said, “the river, as you know, has wiped out most of the dam. Now, it was a tight fit for me to finance the thing, and I don’t get any further payment until the stone-work’s graded to a certain level. Well, if you leave me now, I’ve just enough money in hand to square off with each of you. You see, if you go you’re sure of your pay. If you stay, most of the money will go to settle the storekeeper’s and the powder bills, and should we fail again, you’ll have thrown your time away. I’d like you to understand the thing; but whether you stay or not, I’m holding on.”

There was silence for half a minute, and then the men, gathering into little groups, whispered to one another, until Mattawa stood forward.

“All you have to do is to go straight ahead. We’re coming along with you solid—every blame one of us,” he said.

A red flush crept into Nasmyth’s face.

“Thank you, boys. After that I’ve got to put this contract through,” he answered.

CHAPTER VII

LAURA MAKES A DRESS

The frost had grown keener as darkness crept over the forest, and the towering pines about the clearing rose in great black spires into the nipping air, but it was almost unpleasantly hot in the little general room of Waynefleet's ranch. Waynefleet, who was fond of physical comfort, had gorged the snapping stove, and the smell of hot iron filled the log-walled room. There was also a dryness in its atmosphere which would probably have had an unpleasant effect upon anyone not used to it. The rancher, however, did not appear to feel it. He lay drowsily in a big hide chair, and his old velvet jacket and evening shoes were strangely out of harmony with his surroundings. Waynefleet made it a rule to dress for the six o'clock meal, which he persisted in calling dinner.

He had disposed of a quantity of potatoes and apples at the settlement of late, and had now a really excellent cigar in his hand, while a little cup of the Mocha coffee, brought from Victoria for his especial use, stood on the table beside him. Waynefleet had cultivated tastes, and invariably gratified them, when it was possible, while it had not occurred to him that there was anything significant in the fact that his daughter confined herself to the acrid green tea provided by the settlement store. He never did notice a point of that kind, and, if anyone had ventured to call his attention to it, he would probably have been indignant as well as astonished. As a rule, however, nobody endeavours to impress unpleasant facts upon men of Waynefleet's character. In their case it is clearly not worth while.

"Do you intend to go on with that dressmaking much longer?" he asked petulantly. "The click of your scissors has an irritating effect on me, and, as you may have noticed, I cannot spread my paper on the table. It cramps one's arms to hold it up."

Laura swept part of the litter of fabric off the table, and it was only natural that she did it a trifle abruptly. She had been busy with rough tasks, from most of which her father might have relieved her had he possessed a less fastidious temperament, until supper, and there were reasons why she desired an hour or two to herself.

"I will not be longer than I can help," she said.

Waynefleet lifted his eyebrows sardonically as he glanced at the scattered strips of fabric. "This," he said, "is evidently in preparation for that ridiculous pulp-mill ball. In view of the primitive manners of the people we shall be compelled to mix with, I really think I am exercising a good deal of self-denial in consenting to go at all. Why you should wish to do so is, I confess, altogether beyond me."

"I understood that you considered it advisable to keep on good terms with the manager," said Laura, with a trace of impatience. "He has bought a good deal of produce from you to feed his workmen with."

Her father made a gesture of resignation. "One has certainly to put up with a good deal that is unpleasant in this barbarous land—in fact, almost everything in it jars upon one," he complained. "You, however, I have sometimes wondered to notice, appear almost content here."

Laura looked up with a smile, but said nothing. She, at least, had the sense and the courage to make the most of what could not be changed. It was a relief to her when, a minute or two later, the hired man opened the door.

"If you've got the embrocation, I guess I'll give that ox's leg a rub," he said.

Waynefleet rose and turned to the girl. "I'll put on my rubber overshoes," he announced. "As I mentioned that I might have to go out, it's a pity you didn't think of laying out my coat to warm."

Laura brought the overshoes, and he permitted her to fasten them for him and to hold his coat while he put it on, after which he went out grumbling, and she sat down again to her sewing with a strained expression in her eyes, for there were times when her father tried her patience severely. She

sighed as she contemplated the partly rigged-up dress stretched out on the table, for she could not help remembering how she had last worn it at a brilliant English function. Then she had been flattered and courted, and now she was merely an unpaid toiler on the lonely ranch. Money was, as a rule, signally scarce there, but even when there were a few dollars in Waynefleet's possession, it seldom occurred to him to offer any of them to his daughter. It is also certain that nobody could have convinced him that it was only through her efforts he was able to keep the ranch going at all. She never suggested anything of the kind to him, but she felt now and then that her burden was almost beyond her strength.

She quietly went on with her sewing. There was to be a dance at the new pulp-mill, which had just been roofed, and, after all, she was young, and could take a certain pleasure in the infrequent festivities of her adopted country. Besides, the forest ranchers dance well, and there were men among them who had once followed other occupations; while she knew that Nasmyth would be there—in fact, having at length raised his dam to the desired level, he would be to a certain extent an honoured guest. She was not exactly sure how she regarded him, though it was not altogether as a comrade, and she felt there was, in one sense, some justice in his admission that he belonged to her. She had, in all probability, saved his life, and—what was, perhaps, as much—had roused him from supine acquiescence, and inspired him with a sustaining purpose. After the day when she had saved him from abject despair over his ruined dam, he had acquitted himself valiantly, and she had a quiet pride in him. Moreover, she was aware of a natural desire to appear to advantage at the approaching dance.

There was, however, difficulty to be grappled with. The dress was old, and when remade in a later style would be unfortunately plain. The few pairs of gloves she had brought from England were stained and spotted with damp, and her eyes grew wistful as she turned over the stock list of a Victoria dry goods store. The thing would be so easy, if she had only a little more money, but she sighed as she glanced into her purse. Then she took up the gloves and a strip of trimming, and looked at them with a little frown, but while she did so there were footsteps outside, and the door was opened. A man, whom she recognized as a hired hand from a ranch in the neighbourhood, stood in the entrance with a packet in his hand.

"I won't come in," he said. "I met Nasmyth down at the settlement. He'd just come back from Victoria, and he asked me to bring this along."

He went away after he had handed her the packet, and a gleam of pleasure crept into Laura's eyes when she opened it. There was first of all a box of gloves of various colours, and then inside another packet a wonderful piece of lace. The artistic delicacy of the lace appealed to her, for though she possessed very few dainty things she was fond of them, and she almost fancied that she had not seen anything of the kind more beautiful in England.

As she unfolded it a strip of paper fell out, and the warm blood swept into her face as she read the message on it.

"Considering everything, I really don't think you could regard it as a liberty," it ran. "You have given me a good deal more than this."

Then for just a moment her eyes grew hazy. In proportion to the man's means, it was a costly gift, and, except for him, nobody had shown her much consideration since she had left England. She was a trifle perplexed, for she did not think there was lace of that kind on sale often in Victoria, and, in regard to the gloves, it was not evident how he had known her size. Then she remembered that one of the cotton ones she sometimes wore had disappeared some little time before, and once more the flush crept into her cheeks. That almost decided her not to wear his lace, but she felt that to refrain from doing so would raise the question as to how they stood with regard to one another, which was one she did not desire to think out closely then; and, after all, the lace was exactly what she wanted to complete the dress. She rolled it together, and put it and the gloves away, but she treasured the little note.

It was a week later when her father drove her to the pulp-mill in a jolting waggon, and arrived there a little earlier than he had expected. A dance usually begins with a bountiful supper in that

country, but Waynefleet, who was, as a rule, willing to borrow implements or teams from his Bush neighbours, would seldom eat with them when he could help it. He was accordingly not quite pleased to find the supper had not yet been cleared away, but Laura, who understood what he was feeling, contrived to lead him into a vacant place at one of the tables. Then she sat down, and looked about her.

The great room was hung with flags and cedar boughs, and the benches down the long uncovered tables were crowded. The men's attire was motley—broadcloth and duck; white shirts, starched or limp, and blue ones; shoes with the creeper-spikes filed down, and long boots to the knees. There were women present also, and they wore anything from light print, put together for the occasion, to treasured garments made in Montreal or Toronto perhaps a dozen years before, but for all that the assembly was good to look upon. There was steadfast courage in the bronzed faces, and most of those who sat about the long tables had kindly eyes. The stamp of a clean life of effort was upon them, and there was a certain lithe gracefulness in the unconscious poses of the straight-limbed men. There was no sign of limp slovenliness about them. Even in their relaxation they were intent and alert, and, as she watched them, Laura realized something of their restless activity and daring optimism. They believe in anything that is good enough in that country, and are in consequence cheerfully willing to attempt anything, even if to other men it would appear altogether visionary and impossible, and simple faith goes a long way when supplemented by patient labour. Laura suddenly became conscious that the manager of the pulp-mill, a little wiry man, in white shirt and store clothes, was speaking at the head of the table.

"In one way, it's not a very big thing we have done, boys," he said; and Laura was quick to notice the significance of the fact, which was also characteristic of the country, that he counted himself as one of them. "We've chopped a hole in the primeval forest, held back the river, and set up our mill. That's about all on the face of it, but there's rather more behind. It's another round with Nature, and we've got her down again. It's a thing you have to do west of the Rockies, or she'll crush the life out of you. There are folks in the Eastern cities who call her beneficent; but they don't quite understand what was laid on man in Eden long ago. Here he's up against flood and frost and snow. Well, I guess we've done about all we can, and now that I've paid my respects to the chopper and carpenter-gang, there's another man I want to mention. He took hold of the contract to put us up our dam, and kept hold through the blamest kind of luck. There's hard grit in him and the boys he led, and the river couldn't wash it out of them. Well, when the big turbines are humming and the mill's grinding out money for all of you, I guess you're going to remember the boys who built the dam."

There was a shout which shook the wooden building, and Laura sat very still when Nasmyth stood up. There was no doubt that he was a favourite with everybody there, and she knew that she had nerved him to the fight. He did not appear altogether at ease, and she waited with a curious expectancy for what he had to say. It was very little, but she appreciated the tact which made him use the speech his audience was accustomed to.

"I had a good crowd," he said. "With the boys I had behind me I couldn't back down." Then his voice shook a little. "Still, I was mighty near it once or twice. It was the boys' determination to hold on—and another thing—that put new grit in me."

Without being conscious of what he was doing, he swept his glance down the long table until it rested on Laura Waynefleet's face. She felt the blood creep into her cheeks, for she knew what he meant, but she looked at him steadily, and her eyes were shining. Then he spread his hands out.

"I felt I daren't shame boys of that kind," he said, and hastily sat down.

His observations were certainly somewhat crude, but the little quiver in his voice got hold of those who heard him, and once more the big building rang with cheering. As the sound of hearty acclamation died away there was a great clatter of thrust-back benches through which the tuning of a fiddle broke. Then out of the tentative twang of strings rose, clear and silvery, the lament of Flora Macdonald, thrilling with melancholy, and there were men and women there whose hearts went back to the other wild and misty land of rock and pine and frothing river which they had left far away across

the sea. It may be that the musician desired a contrast, or that he was merely feeling for command of the instrument, for the plaintive melody that ran from shift to shift into a thin elfin wailing far up the sobbing strings broke off suddenly, and was followed by the crisp jar of crashing chords. Then “The Flowers of Edinburgh” rang out with Caledonian verve in it and a mad seductive swing, and the guests streamed out to the middle of the floor. That they had just eaten an excellent supper was a matter of no account with them.

Nasmyth, in the meanwhile, elbowed his way through the crowd of dancers until he stood at Laura’s side, and as he looked at her, there was a trace of embarrassment in his manner. She wore his lace, but until that moment her attire had never suggested the station to which she had been born. Now she seemed to have stepped, fresh and immaculate, untouched by toil, out of the world to which he had once belonged. She was, for that night at least, no longer an impoverished rancher’s daughter, but a lady of station. With a twinkle in his eyes, he made her a little formal inclination, and she, knowing what he was thinking, answered with an old-world curtsy, after which a grinning ox-teamster of habitant extraction turned and clapped Nasmyth’s shoulder approvingly.

“V’la la belle chose!” he said. “Mamselle Laura is altogether ravissante. Me, I dance with no one else if she look at me like dat.”

Then Nasmyth and Laura laughed, and glided into the dance, though, in the case of most of their companions, “plunged” would have been the better word for it. English reserve is not esteemed in that land, and the axemen danced with the mingled verve of grey Caledonia and light-hearted France, while a little man with fiery hair from the misty Western Isles shrieked encouragement at them, and maddened them with his fiddle. Even Nasmyth and Laura gave themselves up to the thrill of it, but as they swung together through the clashing of the measure, which some of their companions did not know very well, confused recollections swept through their minds, and they recalled dances in far different surroundings. Now and then they even fell back into old tricks of speech, and then, remembering, broke off with a ringing laughter. They were young still, and the buoyancy of the country they had adopted was in both of them.

The dance ended too soon, and, when the music broke off with a crash of clanging chords, Nasmyth led his partner out of the press into a little log-walled room where the half-built dynamos stood. It was lighted, but a sharp cool air and the fret of the river came in through a black opening in one wall. Laura sat upon a large deal case, and Nasmyth, looking down upon her, leaned against a dynamo. He smiled as he recognized that she grasped the significance of the throbbing roar of water.

“It was very pleasant while it lasted, but—and it’s a pity—the music has stopped,” he said. “What we are now listening to is the turmoil of a Canadian river.”

Laura laughed, though there was a wistfulness in her eyes. “Oh, I understand, but couldn’t you have let me forget it just for to-night?” she said. “I suppose that privilege was permitted to Cinderella.”

The man felt curiously sorry for her as he remembered how hard her life was at the lonely ranch, but he knew she would not be pleased if he expressed his thoughts.

“Well,” he observed reflectively, “a thing often looks most attractive when it’s forbidden you, or a long way off, and, you see, there are always compensations. In fact, I’m beginning to come across quite a few of them.”

He broke off for a moment, and Laura, who noticed that he looked at her, fancied she understood in what direction his thoughts were drifting; but he went on again with a laugh.

“After all,” he said, “there are exiles who realize that they are in various ways better off than in all probability they would have been had they stayed in the land they were driven out of.”

“Ah,” answered Laura, “would you go back if you were given the opportunity?”

“No,” Nasmyth asserted slowly, “I don’t think I should do that—now.”

Again she understood him, the more clearly because she saw by the slight wrinkling of his forehead, during the significant pause, that he had grappled with the question. She did not think he

was altogether in love with her, but she knew, at least, that he did not wish to go away while she was left behind in Canada. It seemed desirable to change the subject, and she touched the lace.

"I have to thank you for this," she said. "It has given me pleasure." Then—and the words were wholly unpremeditated—she added: "I wanted to look well—just for once—to-night."

She was sorry, a moment later, when she saw the quick change in the man's expression, for she remembered that they had always seemed to understand what the other meant. It was clear that the qualification just for once had not misled him, but, after all, it seemed to her that he must presently realize that the admission was not one a reticent woman really in love with him would have made.

"Oh," he said, "you are always beautiful." Then his manner became deprecatory. "I didn't think you'd mind. In one way what I owe you makes me a privileged person. I felt that I could venture—"

This, too, was clear to her, and though she considered his attitude the correct one, it jarred a little upon her. She was content that they should be merely comrades, or, at least, that was what she had endeavoured to convince herself, but, after all, there was no reason why he should emphasize the fact.

"Yes," she replied quickly, "I think I understand." Then once more she changed the subject. "I want to compliment you on building the dam."

Nasmyth laughed, but there was a light in his eyes. "I should never have built it, if it hadn't been for you. Still"—and he made her a reverent bow—"I owe you a good deal more than that."

Laura made no response to this. She had thrilled at his achievement, when she had heard the manager's speech, and it became still plainer that there was a certain hazard in dwelling upon his success. She could also be practical.

"In one way," she said, "I suppose the result was not quite so satisfactory?"

"It certainly wasn't. Of course, the work is not quite completed yet, but after settling up everything, the interim payment left me with about fifteen dollars in hand."

Laura was not astonished at this, but she was more than a little perplexed, for she fancied that the lace she was wearing must have cost a good deal more than fifteen dollars. Still, she had no wish to make it evident that he had been extravagant; and, while she considered the matter, a man appeared in the doorway.

"I guess you two have got to come right out," he said. "What d'you figure you were asked here for?"

Nasmyth held his arm out, but when Laura would have laid her hand upon it, the man broke in with a grin.

"No, sir," he said severely, "Miss Waynefleet's going right round. Now you're coming along with me, and we'll show them how to waltz."

Laura smiled good-humouredly, and he swept her into the dance, while Nasmyth was seized upon by a girl, who drove him through it much as she did her brother's steers in the Bush.

"A bump or two don't count for much. What you want to do is to hump yourself and make things hum," said Nasmyth's partner, when another couple jostled them.

Nasmyth expressed his concurrence in a gasp, and contrived to save her from another crash, but when the dance was over, he felt limp, and was conscious that his partner was by no means satisfied with him.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Still, I really think I did what I could."

The girl regarded him half compassionately. "Well," she said, "it wasn't very much, but I guess you played yourself out building that blamed dam."

CHAPTER VIII BY COMBAT

Nasmyth's partner condescended, as she said, to give him another show, but he escaped from that dance with only a few abrasions, and, though he failed to obtain another with Laura, he contrived to enjoy himself. All his Bush friends were not primitive. Some of them had once played their parts in much more brilliant functions. They had cultivated tastes, and he had learned to recognize the strong points of those who had not. After all, kindly hearts count for much, and it was not unnatural that, like other exiles who have plodded up and down that rugged land, he should think highly of the hard-handed men and patient women who willingly offer a night's shelter and a share of their dried apples, salt pork, and grindstone bread to the penniless wanderer.

What was more to the purpose, a number of the guests at the dance had swung the axe by his side, and fought the river with him when the valley was filled with the roar of water.

They had done their work gallantly, when it seemed out of the question that they would ever receive the money he had promised them, from sheer pride in their manhood, and to keep their word, and now they danced as determinedly.

There are no cramping conventions and very few shams—and the shams in those forests, it must be confessed, are as a rule imported ones. In fact, there was that evening, among all those in the pulp-mill, only one man who seemed to disassociate himself from the general good-will. That man was Waynefleet. He wore his old velvet jacket as a cloak of superciliousness—or, at least, that was how it seemed to the Bush-ranchers, who recognized and resented an effete pride in the squeak of his very ancient lacquered shoes. It is possible that he did not mean to make himself in any way offensive, and merely desired to indicate that he was graciously willing to patronize their bucolic festivities. There would have been something almost pathetic in his carefully preserved dignity had it not been so obtrusively out of place; and when they stood watching him for a moment or two, Gordon expressed Nasmyth's thoughts.

"How a man of that kind ever came to be Laura Waynefleet's father is more than I can figure out!" he said. "It's a question that worries me every time I look at him. Guess she owes everything to her mother; and Mrs. Waynefleet must have been a mighty patient woman."

Nasmyth smiled, but Gordon went on reflectively: "You folks show your sense when you dump your freaks into this country," he said. "It never seems to strike you that it's a little rough on us. What's the matter with men like Waynefleet is that you can't teach them sense. I'd have told him what I thought of him once or twice when I saw the girl doing his work up at the ranch if I'd figured it would have made any impression."

"I expect it would have been useless," remarked Nasmyth. "After all, I'm not sure that it's exactly your business."

Gordon watched Laura Waynefleet as she swung through a waltz on the arm of a sinewy rancher, and his eyes softened curiously.

"Only on the girl's account," he admitted. "I'm sorry for her. Stills the blamed old image isn't actively unkind."

Then he saw the sudden contraction of Nasmyth's face, and turned toward him. "Now," he said, "I want you to understand this thing. If it would be any comfort to her, I'd let Miss Waynefleet wipe her boots on me, and in one way that's about all I'm fit for. I know enough to realize that she'd never waste a moment thinking of a man like me, even if I hadn't in another way done for myself already."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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