Bindloss Harold

Thurston of Orchard Valley

Harold Bindloss

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Bindloss H.

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
"THURSTON'S FOLLY"

It was a pity that Geoffrey Thurston was following in his grandfather's footsteps, the sturdy dalefolk said, and several of them shook their heads solemnly as they repeated the observation when one morning the young man came striding down the steep street of a village in the North Country. The cluster of gray stone houses nestled beneath the scarred face of a crag, and, because mining operations had lately been suspended and work was scarce just then, pale-faced men in moleskin lounged about the slate-slab doorsteps. Above the village, and beyond the summit of the crag, the mouth of a tunnel formed a black blot on the sunlit slopes of sheep-cropped grass stretching up to the heather, which gave place in turn to rock out-crop on the shoulders of the fell. The loungers glanced at the tunnel regretfully, for that mine had furnished most of them with their daily bread.

"It's in t' blood," said one, nodding toward the young man. "Ay, headstrong folly's bred in t' bone of them, an' it's safer to counter an angry bull than a Thurston of Crosbie Ghyll. It's like his grandfather – roughed out of the old hard whinstane he is."

A murmur of approval followed, for the listeners knew there was a measure of truth in this; but it ceased when the pedestrian passed close to them with long, vigorous strides. Though several raised their hands half-way to their caps in grudging salute, Geoffrey Thurston, who appeared preoccupied, looked at none of them. Notwithstanding his youth, there were lines on his forehead and his brows were wrinkled over his eyes, while his carriage suggested strength of limb and energy. Tall in stature his frame looked wiry rather than heavily built. His face was resolute, for both square jaw and steady brown eyes suggested tenacity of purpose. The hands that swung at his sides had been roughened by labor with pick and drill. Yet in spite of the old clay-stained shooting suit and shapeless slouch hat with the grease on the front of it, where a candle had been set, there was a stamp of command, and even refinement, about him. He was a Thurston of Crosbie, one of a family the members of which had long worked their own diminishing lands among the rugged fells that stretch between the West Riding and the Solway.

The Thurstons had been a reckless, hard-living race, with a stubborn, combative disposition. Most of them had found scope for their energies in wresting a few more barren acres from the grasp of moss and moor; but several times an eccentric genius had scattered to the winds what the rest had won, and Geoffrey seemed bent on playing the traditional *rôle* of spendthrift. There were, however, excuses for him. He was an ambitious man, and had studied mechanical science under a famous engineer. Perhaps, because the surface of the earth yielded a sustenance so grudgingly, a love of burrowing was born in the family. Copper was dear and the speculative public well disposed towards British mines. When current prices permitted it, a little copper had been worked from time immemorial in the depths of Crosbie Fell, so Geoffrey, continuing where his grandfather had ceased, drove the ancient adit deeper into the hill, mortgaging field by field to pay for tools and men, until, when the little property had well-nigh gone, he came upon a fault or break in the strata, which made further progress almost impossible.

When Thurston reached the mouth of the adit, he turned and looked down upon the poor climbing meadows under the great shoulder of the Fell. Beyond these, a few weatherbeaten buildings, forming a rude quadrangle pierced by one tall archway, stood beside a tarn that winked like polished steel. He sighed as his glance rested upon them. For many generations they had sheltered the Thurstons

of Crosbie; but, unless he could stoop to soil his hands in a fashion revolting to his pride, a strange master would own them before many months had gone. An angry glitter came into his eyes, and his face grew set, as, placing a lighted candle in his hat, he moved forward into the black adit.

Twenty minutes had passed when Thurston stood on the brink of a chasm where some movement of the earth's crust had rent the rocks asunder. Beside him was a mining engineer, whose fame for skill was greater than his reputation for integrity. Both men had donned coarse overalls, and Melhuish, the mining expert, held his candle so that its light fell upon his companion as well as upon the dripping surface of the rock. Moisture fell from the wet stone into the gloomy rift, and a faint monotonous splashing rose up from far below. Melhuish, however, was watching Thurston too intently to notice anything else. He was a middle-aged man, with a pale, puffy face and avaricious eyes. He was well-known to speculative financiers, who made much more than the shareholders of certain new mining companies.

"It's interesting geologically – wholly abnormal considering the stratification, though very unfortunate for you," said Melhuish. "I give you my word of honor that when I advised you to push on the heading I never expected this. However, there it is, and unless you're willing to consider certain suggestions already made, I can't see much use in wasting any more money. As I said, my friends would, under the circumstances, treat you fairly."

Thurston's face was impassive, and Melhuish, who thought that his companion bore himself with a curious equanimity for a ruined man, did not see that Thurston's hard fingers were clenched savagely on the handle of a pick.

"I fancied you understood my opinions, and I haven't changed them," said Geoffrey. "I asked you to meet me here to-day to consider whether the ore already in sight would be worth reduction, and you say, 'No.' You can advise your friends, when you see them, that I'm not inclined to assist them in a deliberate fraud upon the public."

Melhuish laughed. "You are exaggerating, and people seem perfectly willing to pay for their experience, whether they acquire it over copper, lead or tin. Besides, there's an average commercial probability that somebody will find good ore after going down far enough, and your part would be easy. You take a moderate price as vendor, we advancing enough to settle the mortgage. Sign the papers my friends will send you, and keep your mouth shut."

"And their expert wouldn't see that fault?" asked Geoffrey. Melhuish smiled pityingly before he answered:

"The gentlemen I speak of keep an expert who certainly wouldn't see any more than was necessary. The indications that deceived me are good enough for anybody. Human judgment is always liable to error, and there are ways of framing a report without committing the person who makes it. May I repeat that it's a fair business risk, and whoever takes this mine should strike the lead if sufficient capital is poured in. It would be desirable for you to act judiciously. My financial friends, I understand, have been in communication with the people who hold your mortgages."

Geoffrey Thurston's temper, always fiery, had been sorely tried. Dropping his pick, he gripped the tempter by the shoulder with fingers that held him like a vice. He pressed Melhuish backward until they stood within a foot of the verge of the black rift. Melhuish's face was gray in the candle-light as he heard the dislodged pebbles splash sullenly into the water, fathoms beneath. He had heard stories of the vagaries of the Thurstons of Crosbie, and it was most unpleasant to stand on the brink of eternity, in the grasp of one of them.

Suddenly Geoffrey dropped his hands. "You need better nerves in your business, Melhuish," he said quietly. "One would hardly have fancied you would be so startled at a harmless joke intended to test them for you. There have been several spendthrifts and highly successful drunkards in my family, but, with the exception of my namesake, who was hanged like a Jacobite gentleman for taking, sword in hand, their despatches from two of Cumberland's dragoons, we have hitherto drawn the line at stealing."

"I'm not interested in genealogy, and I don't appreciate jests of the sort you have just tried," Melhuish answered somewhat shakily. "I'll take your word that you meant no harm, and I request further and careful consideration before you return a definite answer to my friends' suggestions."

"You shall have it in a few days," Geoffrey promised; and Melhuish, who determined to receive the answer under the open sunlight, and, if possible, with assistance near at hand, turned toward the mouth of the adit. Because he thought it wiser, he walked behind Geoffrey.

The afternoon was not yet past when Thurston stood leaning on the back of a stone seat outside a quaint old hall, which had once been a feudal fortalice and was now attached to an unprofitable farm. Because the impoverished gentleman, who held a long lease on the ancient building, had let one wing to certain sportsmen, several of Geoffrey's neighbors had gathered on the indifferently-kept lawn to enjoy a tennis match. Miss Millicent Austin sat in an angle of the stone seat. Her little feet, encased in white shoes, reposed upon a cushion that one of the sportsmen had insisted on bringing to her. Her hands lay idly folded in her lap. The delicate hands were characteristic, for Millicent Austin was slight and dainty. With pale gold hair and pink and white complexion, she was a perfect type of Saxon beauty, though some of her rivals said the color of her eyes was too light a blue. They also added that the blue eyes were very quick to notice where their owner's interests lay.

An indefinite engagement had long existed between the girl and the man beside her, and at one time they had cherished a degree of affection for each other; but when the merry, high-spirited girl returned from London changed into a calculating woman, Geoffrey was bound up, mind and body, in his mine, and Millicent began to wonder whether, with her advantages, she might not do better than to marry a dalesman burdened by heavy debts. They formed a curious contrast, the man brown-haired, brown-eyed, hard-handed, rugged of feature, and sometimes rugged of speech; and the dainty woman who appeared born for a life of ease and luxury.

"Beauty and the beast!" said one young woman to her companion as she laid by her racquet. "I suppose he has the money?"

"Unless his mine proves successful I don't think either will have much; but if Miss Austin is a beauty in a mild way, he's a noble beast, one very likely to turn the tables upon a rash hunter," was the answer. "And yet he's stalking blindly into the snare. Alas, poor lion!"

"You seem interested in him. I'm not partial to wild beasts myself," remarked her companion, and the other smiled as she answered:

"Hardly that, but I know the family history, and they are a curious race with great capabilities for good or evil. It all depends upon how they are led, because nobody could drive a Thurston. It is rather, I must confess, an instinctive prejudice against the woman beside him. I do not like, and would not trust, Miss Austin, though, of course, except to you, my dear, I would not say so."

The young speaker glanced a moment towards the pair, and then passed on with a slight frown upon her honest face, for Thurston bent over his companion with something that suggested deadly earnestness in his attitude, and the spectator assumed that Millicent Austin's head was turned away from him, because she possessed a fine profile and not because of excessive diffidence. Nor was the observer wrong, for Millicent did little without a purpose, and was just then thinking keenly as she said:

"I am very sorry to hear about your misfortune, Geoffrey, but there is a way of escape from most disasters if one will look for it, you know, and if you came to terms with them I understand those London people would, at least, recoup you for your expenditure."

"You have heard of that!" exclaimed Geoffrey sharply, displeased that his *fiancée*, who had been away, should betray so accurate a knowledge of all that concerned his business affairs.

"Of course I did. I made Tom tell me. You will agree with them, will you not?" the girl replied.

"So," said Geoffrey, with a slight huskiness. "I wish I could, but it is impossible, and I am not pleased that Tom should tell you what I was waiting to confide to you myself. Let that pass, for I want you to listen to me. The old holding will have to go, and there is little room for a poor man in this

overcrowded country. As you know, certain property will revert to me eventually, but, remembering what is in our blood, I dare not trust myself to drag out a life of idleness or monotonous drudgery, waiting for the future here. The curse is a very real thing – and it would not be fair to you. Now I can save enough from the wreck to start us without positive hardship over seas, and George has written offering me a small share in his Australian cattle-run. You shall want for nothing, Millicent, that toil can win you, and I know that, with you to help me, I shall achieve at least a competence."

Millicent, who glanced up at him as if she were carefully studying him, could see that the man spoke with conviction. She knew that his power of effort and dogged obstinacy would carry him far toward obtaining whatever his heart desired. She dropped her long lashes as he continued:

"Hitherto, I have overcome the taint I spoke of – you knew what it was when you gave me your promise – and working hard, with you to cheer me, in a new land under the open sun, I shall crush it utterly. Semi-poverty, with an ill-paid task that demanded but half my energies, would try you, Millicent, and be dangerous to me. What I say sounds very selfish, doesn't it – but you will come?"

There was an appeal in his voice which touched the listener. It was seldom a Thurston of Crosbie asked help from anyone; but she had no wish to encourage Geoffrey in what she considered his folly, and shook her head with a pretty assumption of petulance.

"Don't be sensational," she said with a wave of her hand. "You are prone to exaggeration, and, of course, I will not go with you. How could I help you to chase wild cattle? Now, try to be sensible! Come to terms with these company people, and then you need not go."

"Would you have me a thief?" asked Geoffrey, gazing down upon her with a fierce resentment in his look of reproach, and the girl shrank from him a little.

"No, but, so far as I understand it, this is an ordinary business transaction, and if these people are willing to buy the mine, why should you refuse?" she returned in a temporizing tone.

If Thurston was less in love with Millicent Austin than he had been, he hardly realized it then. He was disappointed, and his forehead contracted as he struggled with as heavy a temptation as could have assailed the honor of any man. Millicent was very fair to look upon, as she turned to him with entreaty and anxiety in her face.

Nevertheless, he answered wearily: "It is not an ordinary business transaction. These people would pay me with the general public's money, and when the mine proves profitless, as it certainly will, they would turn the deluded shareholders loose on me."

"There are always risks in mining," Millicent observed significantly. "The investing public understands that, doesn't it? Of course, I would not have you dishonest, but, Geoffrey – "

Thurston was patient in action, but seldom in speech, and he broke out hotly:

"Many a woman has sent a man to his damnation for a little luxury, but I expected help from you. Millicent, if I assist those swindlers and stay here dragging out the life of a gentleman pauper on a dole of stolen money, I shall go down and down, dragging you with me. If you will come out to a new country with me, I know you will never regret it. Whatever is best worth winning over there, I will win for you. Can't you see that we stand at the crossroads, and whichever way we choose there can be no turning back! Think, and for God's sake think well! The decision means everything to you and me."

Again Millicent was aware of an unwilling admiration for the speaker, even though she had little for his sentiments. He stood erect, with a grim look on his face, his nostrils quivering, and his lips firmly set – stubborn, vindictive, powerful. Though his strength was untrained, she knew that he was a man to trust – great in his very failings, with no meanness in his composition, and clearly born for risky enterprise and hazardous toil. She was a little afraid of him, a fact which was not in itself unpleasant; but she dreaded poverty and hardship! With a shrug of the shoulder upon which he had laid his hand, she said:

"I think you are absurd to-day; you are hurting me. This melodramatic pose approaches the ludicrous, and I have really no patience with your folly. A little period of calm reflection may prove beneficial, and I will leave you to it. Clara is beckoning me."

She turned away, and Thurston, after vainly looking around for Clara, stalked sullenly into the hall, where he flung himself down in a chair beside an open window. It did not please him to see Millicent take her place before the net in the tennis court and to hear her laugh ring lightly across the lawn. A certain sportsman named Leslie, who had devoted himself to Miss Austin's service, watched him narrowly from a corner of the big hall.

"You look badly hipped over something, Thurston," commented the sportsman presently. "I suppose it's the mine, and would like to offer my sympathy. Might I recommend a brandy-and-soda, one of those Cubanos, and confidence? Tom left the bottle handy for you."

In spite of the family failing, or, perhaps, because it was the only thing he feared, Thurston had been an abstemious man. Now, however, he emptied one stiff tumbler at a gulp, and the soda frothed in the second, when he noticed a curious smile, for just a moment, in the eyes of his companion. The smile vanished immediately, but Thurston had seen and remembered. It was characteristic of him that, before two more seconds had passed, the glass crashed into splinters in the grate.

"Quite right!" exclaimed Leslie, nodding. "When one feels as you evidently do, a little of that sort of consolation is considerably better than too much. You don't, however, appear to be in a companionable humor, and perhaps I had better not intrude on you."

During the rest of the afternoon, Thurston saw little of Millicent and Leslie was much with her.

The weather changed suddenly when at dusk Geoffrey rode home. In forecast of winter, a bitter breeze sighed across the heather and set the harsh grasses moaning eerily. The sky was somber overhead; scarred fell and towering pike had faded to blurs of dingy gray, and the ghostly whistling of curlew emphasized the emptiness of the darkening moor. The evening's mood suited Geoffrey's, and he rode slowly with loose bridle. The bouquet of the brandy had awakened within him a longing that he dreaded, and though, hitherto, he had been too intent upon his task to trouble about his character, it was borne in upon him that he must stand fast now or never. But it was not the thought of his own future which first appealed to him. Those who had gone before him had rarely counted consequences when tempted by either wine or women, and he would have risked that freely. Geoffrey was, however, in his own eccentric fashion, a just man, and he dared not risk bringing disaster upon Millicent. So he rode slowly, thinking hard, until the horse, which seemed affected by its master's restlessness, plunged as a dark figure rose out of the heather.

"Hallo, is it you, Evans?" asked the rider, with a forced laugh. "I thought it was the devil. He's abroad to-night."

"Thou'rt wrang, Mr. Geoffrey," answered the gamekeeper. "It's Thursday night he comes. Black Jim as broke thy head for thee is coming with t' quarrymen to poach t' covers. Got the office from yan with a grudge against t' gang, an' Captain Franklin, who's layin' for him, sends his compliments, thinkin' as maybe thee would like t' fun."

Thurston rarely forgot either an injury or a friend, and, the preceding October, when tripping, he fell helpless, Black Jim twice, with murderous intent, had brought a gun-butt down upon his unprotected skull. Excitement was at all times as wine to him, so, promising to be at the rendezvous, he rode homeward faster than before, with a sense of anticipation which helped to dull the edge of his care.

CHAPTER II
A DISILLUSION

It was a clear cold night when Geoffrey Thurston met Captain Franklin, who held certain sporting rights in the vicinity, at the place agreed upon. The captain had brought with him several amateur assistants and stablehands besides two stalwart keepers. Greeting Thurston he said:

"Very good of you to help me! Our local constable is either afraid or powerless, and I must accordingly allow Black Jim's rascals to sweep my covers or take the law into my own hands. It is the pheasants he is after now, and he'll start early so as to get his plunder off from the junction by the night mail, and because the moon rises soon. We had better divide, and you might come with Evans and me to the beeches while the others search the fir spinney."

Geoffrey, assenting, followed the officer across a dew-damped meadow and up a winding lane hung with gossamer-decked briars, until the party halted, ankle-deep among withered leaves, in a dry ditch just outside the wood. There were reasons why each detail of all that happened on that eventful night should impress itself upon Geoffrey's memory, and, long afterwards, when wandering far out in the shadow of limitless forests or the chill of eternal snow, he could recall every incident. Leaves that made crimson glories by day still clung low down about the wide-girthed trunks beyond the straggling hedge of ancient thorns, but the higher branches rose nakedly against faintly luminous sky. Spruce firs formed clumps of solid blackness, and here and there a delicate tracery of birch boughs filled gaps against the sky-line between. The meadows behind him were silent and empty, streaked with belts of spectral mist, and, because it was not very late, he could see a red glimmer of light in the windows of Barrow Hall.

But if the grass told no story it was otherwise with the wood, for Geoffrey could hear the rabbits thumping in their burrows among the roots of the thorn. Twice a cock-pheasant uttered a drowsy, raucous crow, and there was a blundering of unseen feathery bodies among the spruce, while, when this ceased, he heard a water-hen flutter with feet splashing across a hidden pool. Then heavy stillness followed, intensified by the clamor of a beck which came foaming down the side of a fell until, clattering loudly, wood-pigeons, neither asleep nor wholly awake, drove out against the sky, wheeled and fell clumsily into the wood again. All this was a plain warning, and keeper Evans nodded agreement when Captain Franklin said:

"There's somebody here, and, in order not to miss him, we'll divide our forces once more. If you'll go in by the Hall footpath, Thurston, and whistle on sight of anything suspicious, I'd be much obliged to you."

A few minutes later Thurston halted on the topmost step of the lofty stile by which a footpath from the Hall entered the wood. Looking back across misty grass land and swelling ridges of heather, he could see a faint brightness behind the eastern rim of the moor; but, when he stepped down, it was very dark among the serried tree-trunks. The slender birches had faded utterly, the stately beeches resembled dim ghosts of trees and only the spruces retained, imperfectly, their shape and form. Thurston was country bred, and, lifting high his feet to clear bramble trailer and fallen twig, he walked by feeling instead of sight. The beck moaned a little more loudly, and there was a heavy astringent odor of damp earth and decaying leaves. When beast and bird were still again it seemed as if Nature, worn out by the productive effort of summer, were sinking under solemn silence into her winter sleep.

The watcher knew the wood was a large one and unlawful visitants might well be hidden towards its farther end. He stood still at intervals, concentrating all his powers to listen, but his ears told him nothing until at last there was a rustle somewhere ahead. Puzzled by the sound, which reminded him of something curiously out of place in the lonely wood, he instantly sank down behind an ash tree.

The sound certainly was not made by withered bracken or bramble leaves, and had nothing to do with the stealthy fall of a poacher's heavy boot. It came again more clearly, and Thurston was almost sure that it was the rustle of a woven fabric, such as a woman's dress. To confirm this opinion a soft laugh followed. He rose, deciding it could only be some assignation with a maid from the Hall, and no business of his. He had turned to retreat when he noticed the eastern side of a silver fir reflect a faint shimmer. Glancing along the beam of light that filtered through a fantastic fretwork of delicate birch twigs arching a drive, he saw a broad, bright disk hanging low above the edge of the moor. It struck him that perhaps the poachers had used the girl to coax information out of a young groom or keeper, and that she was now warning them. So he waited, debating, because he was a rudely chivalrous person, how he might secure the girl's companion without involving the girl's disgrace. Again a laugh rose from beyond a thicket. Then he heard the voice of a man.

Geoffrey was puzzled, for the laugh was musical, unlike a rustic giggle; and, though the calling of the beck partly drowned it, the man's voice did not resemble that of a laborer. Thurston moved again, wondering whether it was not some affair of Leslie's from the Hall, and whether he ought not to slip away after all. The birch boughs sighed a little, there was a fluttering down of withered leaves, and he remained undecided, gripping his stout oak cudgel by the middle. Then the hot blood pulsed fiercely through every artery, for the voice rose once more, harsh and clear this time, with almost a threat in the tone, and there was no possibility of doubting that the speaker was Leslie.

"This cannot continue, Millicent," the voice said. "It has gone on too long, and I will not be trifled with. You cannot have both of us, and my patience is exhausted. Leave the fool to his folly."

Geoffrey raised the cudgel and dropped it to his side. Turning suddenly cold, he remained for a second or two almost without power of thought or motion. The disillusion was cruel. The woman's light answer filled him with returning fury and he hurled himself at a thicket from which, amid a crash of branches, he reeled out into the sight of the speakers. The moon was well clear of the moor now, and silver light and inky shadow checkered the mosses of the drive.

With a little scream of terror Millicent sprang apart from her companion's side and stood for a space staring at the man who had appeared out of the rent-down undergrowth. The pale light beat upon Geoffrey's face, showing it was white with anger. Looking from Geoffrey, the girl glanced towards Leslie, who waited in the partial shadow of a hazel bush. Even had he desired to escape, which was possible, the bush would have cut off his retreat.

Geoffrey turned fiercely from one to the other. The woman, who stood with one hand on a birch branch, was evidently struggling to regain her courage. Her lips were twitching and her pale blue eyes were very wide open. The man was shrinking back as far as possible in a manner which suggested physical fear; he had heard the dalesfolk say a savage devil, easily aroused, lurked in all the Thurstons, and the one before him looked distinctly dangerous just then. Leslie was weak in limb as well as moral fiber, and it was Geoffrey who broke the painful silence.

"What are you doing here at such an hour with this man, Millicent?" he asked sternly. "No answer! It appears that some explanation is certainly due to me – and I mean to force it out of one of you."

Millicent, saying nothing, gazed at her companion, as if conjuring him to speak plainly and to end an intolerable position. Geoffrey read her meaning, even though Leslie, who glanced longingly over his shoulder down the drive, refused to do so. Because there was spirit in her, and she had recovered from the first shock of surprise, Millicent ground one little heel into the mosses with a gesture of disgust and anger when the man made answer:

"I resent your attitude and question. We came out to see the moon rise on the moor, and found the night breeze nipping."

Geoffrey laughed harshly before he repeated: "You found the breeze nipping! There is scarcely an air astir. And you understand the relations existing between Miss Austin and me? I want a better reason. Millicent, you, at least, are not a coward – dare you give it me?"

"I challenge your right to demand an account of my actions," said the girl. With an evident effort to defy Thurston, she added, after a pause, "But the explanation must have come sooner or later, and you shall have it now. I have grown – perhaps the brutal truth is best – tired of you and your folly. You would sacrifice my future to your fantastic pride – and this man would give up everything for me."

The first heat of Geoffrey's passion was past, and he was now coldly savage because of the woman's treachery.

"Including his conscience and honor, but not his personal safety!" he supplemented contemptuously. "Millicent, one could almost admire you." Turning to Leslie he asked: "But are you struck dumb that you let the woman speak? This was my promised wife to whom you have been making love, though, for delicacy would be superfluous, it is evident that she has not discouraged you. Until three days ago I could have trusted my life to her. Now, I presume, she has pledged herself to you?"

"Yes," answered Leslie, recovering his equanimity as his fears grew less oppressive. He began to excuse himself but Geoffrey cut him short with a gesture.

"Then, even if I desired to make them, my protests would be useless," said Geoffrey. "I am at least grateful for your frankness, Millicent; it prevented me from wringing the truth from your somewhat abject lover. Had you told me honestly, when this man first spoke to you, that you had grown tired of me, I would have released you, and I would have tried to wish you well. Now I can only say, that at least you know the worst of each other – and there will be less disappointment when, stripped of either mutual or self respect, you begin life together. But I was forgetting that Franklin's keepers are searching the wood. Some of them might talk. Go at once by the Hall path, as softly as you can."

The man and the girl were plainly glad to hurry away, and Geoffrey waited until the sound of their footsteps became scarcely audible before he heeded a faint rustling which indicated that somebody with a knowledge of woodcraft was forcing a passage through the undergrowth. He broke a dry twig at intervals as he walked slowly for a little distance. Then he dropped on hands and knees to cross a strip of open sward at an angle to his previous course, and lay still in the black shadow of a spruce. It was evident that somebody was following his trail, and the pursuer, passing his hiding-place, followed it straight on. Geoffrey's was a curious character, and the very original cure for a disappointment in love, that of baffling a game watcher while his faithless mistress escaped, brought him relief; it left no time for reflection.

Presently he dashed across a bare strip of velvet mosses and rabbit-cropped turf, slipped between the roots of the hedge, and, running silently beneath it, halted several score yards away face to face with the astonished keeper. "Weel, I'm clanged; this clean beats me," gasped that worthy. "Hello, behind there. It's only Mr. Geoffrey, sir. Didst see Black Jim slip out this way, or hear a scream a laal while gone by?"

"I saw no one," answered Geoffrey, "but I heard the scream. It was not unlike a hare squealing in a snare. You and I must have been stalking each other, Evans, and Black Jim can't be here."

The rest came up as they spoke, and Captain Franklin said, "You seem badly disappointed at missing your old enemy, Thurston. I never saw you look so savage. I expect Black Jim has tricked us, after all."

"I've had several troubles lately, and don't find much amusement in hunting poachers who aren't there," said Geoffrey. "You will excuse me from going back with you."

He departed across the meadows, at a swinging pace, and the keeper, who stared after him, commented:

"Something gradely wrang with Mr. Geoffrey to-night. They're an ill folk to counter yon, and it's maybe as well for Black Jim as Mr. Geoffrey didn't get hold on him."

Geoffrey saw no more of Millicent, but once he visited her younger sister, a gentle invalid, who, because of the friendship which had long existed between them, said: "You must try to believe I mean

it in kindness when I say that I am not wholly sorry, Geoffrey. You and Millicent would never have gotten on well together, and while I wish the awakening could have happened in a more creditable way, you will realize – when somebody else makes you happy – that all has been for the best."

"That day will be long in coming," declared the man, grimly, and the sick girl laid a thin white hand on his hard one as she answered him.

"It is not a flattering speech, and you must not lose faith in all of us," the invalid went on. "Lying still here, helpless, I have often thought about both of you, and I feel that you have done well in choosing a new life in a new country. When you go out, Geoffrey, you will take my fervent wishes for your welfare with you."

Janet Austin was frail and worn by pain. Her pale face flushed a little as the man suddenly stooped and touched her forehead with his lips.

"God bless you for your kindly heart," he said. "A ruined man has very few friends, and many acquaintances are waiting to convince him that his downfall is the result of his own folly, but" – and he straightened his wiry frame, while his eyes glinted – "they have not seen the end, and even if beaten, there is satisfaction in a stubborn, single-handed struggle."

Janet Austin, perhaps thinking of her own helplessness, sighed as she answered:

"I do not think you will be beaten, Geoffrey, but if you will take advice from me, remember that over-confidence in your powers and the pride that goes with it may cost you many a minor victory. Good-by, and good luck, Geoffrey. You will remember me."

That afternoon, while Thurston was in the midst of preparations to leave his native land, the mining engineer called upon him with a provincial newspaper in his hand. "I suppose this is your answer," he remarked, laying his finger on a paragraph.

"Mr. G. Thurston, who has, in the face of many difficulties, attempted to exploit the copper vein in Crosbie Fell, has been compelled to close the mine," the printed lines ran. "We understand he came upon an unexpected break in the strata, coupled with a subsidence which practically precludes the possibility of following the lost lead with any hope of commercial success. He has, therefore, placed his affairs in the hands of Messrs. Lonsdale & Routh, solicitors, and, we understand, intends emigrating. His many friends and former employees wish him success."

"Yes," Geoffrey answered dryly, "I sent them the information, also a copy to London financial papers. Considering the interest displayed just now in British mines, they should insert a paragraph. I've staked down your backers' game in return for your threats, and you may be thankful you have come off so easily. Your check is ready. It is the last you will ever get from me."

The expert smiled almost good-naturedly. "You needn't have taken so much trouble, Thurston," he said. "The exploitation of your rabbit burrow would only have been another drop in the bucket to my correspondents, and it's almost a pity we can't be friends, for, with some training, your sledge-hammer style would make its mark in the ring."

"Thanks!" replied Geoffrey. "I'm not fishing for compliments, and it's probably no use explaining my motives – you wouldn't understand them. Still, in future, don't set down every man commonly honest as an uncommon fool. If I ever had much money, which is hardly likely, I should fight extremely shy of any investments recommended by your friends!"

CHAPTER III
GEOFFREY'S FIRST CONTRACT

It was springtime among the mountains which, glistening coldly white with mantles of eternal snow, towered above the deep-sunk valley, when, one morning, Geoffrey Thurston limped painfully out of a redwood forest of British Columbia. The boom of a hidden river set the pine sprays quivering. A blue grouse was drumming deliriously on the top of a stately fir, and the morning sun drew clean, healing odors from balsam and cedar.

The scene was characteristic of what is now the grandest and wildest, as it will some day be the richest, province of the Canadian Dominion. The serene majesty of snow-clad heights and the grandeur of vast shadowy aisles, with groined roofs of red branches and mighty colonnades of living trunks, were partly lost upon the traveler who, most of the preceding night, had trudged wearily over rough railroad ballast. He had acquired Colonial experience of the hardest kind by working through the winter in an Ontario logging camp, which is a rough school.

An hour earlier the man, to visit whom Thurston had undertaken an eight-league journey, had laughed in his face when he offered to drain a lake which flooded his ranch. Saying nothing, but looking grimmer than ever, Geoffrey had continued his weary journey in search of sustenance. He frowned as he flung himself down beneath a fir, for, shimmering like polished steel between the giant trees, the glint of water caught his eye, and the blue wood smoke curling over the house on a distant slope suggested the usual plentiful Colonial breakfast.

Although Geoffrey's male forbears had been reckless men, his mother had transmitted him a strain of north-country canniness. The remnant of his poor possessions, converted into currency, lay in a Canadian bank to provide working capital and, finding no scope for his mental abilities, he had wandered here and there endeavoring to sell the strength of his body for daily bread. Sometimes he had been successful, more often he had failed, but always, when he would accept it, the kindly bush settlers gave him freely of their best. As he basked in the warmth and brightness, he took from his pocket a few cents' worth of crackers. When he had eaten, his face relaxed, for the love of wild nature was born in him, and the glorious freshness of the spring was free to the poorest as well as to the richest. He stooped to drink at a glacier-fed rill, and then producing a corn-cob pipe, sighed on finding that only the tin label remained of his cake of tobacco.

Through the shadow of the firs two young women watched him with curiosity. The man looked worn and weary, his jean jacket was old and torn, and an essential portion of one boot was missing. The stranger's face had been almost blackened by the snow-reflected glare of the clear winter sun, and yet both girls decided that he was hardly a representative specimen of the wandering fraternity of tramps.

Helen Savine was slender, tall, and dark. Though arrayed in a plain dress of light fabric, she carried herself with a dignity befitting the daughter of the famous engineering contractor, Julius Savine, and a descendant, through her mother, from Seigneurs of ancient French descent who had ruled in patriarchal fashion in old-world Quebec. Jean Graham, whose father owned the ranch on the slope behind them, was ruddy in face, with a solidity of frame that betokened Caledonian extraction, and true trans-Atlantic directness of speech.

"He must be hungry," whispered Jean. "Quite good-looking, too, and it's queer he sits there munching those crackers, instead of walking straight up and striking us for a meal. I don't like to see a good-looking man hungry," she added, reflectively.

"We will go down and speak to him," said Helen, and the suggestion that she should interview a wandering vagrant did not seem out of place in that country where men from many different walks of life turned their often ill-fitted hands to the rudest labor that promised them a livelihood. In any

case, Helen possessed a somewhat imperious will, which was supplemented by a grace of manner which made whatever she did appear right.

Geoffrey, looking round at the sound of approaching steps, stood suddenly upright, thrusting the more dilapidated boot behind the other, and wondering with what purpose the two girls had sought him. One he recognized as a type common enough throughout the Dominion – kindly, shrewd, somewhat hard-featured and caustic in speech; but the other, who looked down on him with thinly-veiled pity, more resembled the women of birth and education whom he had seen in England.

"You are a stranger to this district. Looking for work, perhaps?" said Helen Savine. Geoffrey lifted his wide and battered felt hat as he answered, "I am."

"There is work here," announced Helen. "I can offer you a dollar now – if you would care to earn it. Yonder rock, which I believe is a loose boulder, obstructs our wagon trail. If you are willing to remove it and will follow us to the ranch, you will find suitable tools."

Geoffrey flushed a little under his tan. When seeking work he had grown used to being sworn at by foremen with Protectionist tendencies, but it galled him to be offered a woman's charity, and the words "If you would care to earn it," left a sting. Nevertheless, he reflected that any superfluous sensitiveness would be distinctly out of place in one of his position, and, considering the wages paid in that country, the man who rolled the boulder clear would well earn his dollar. Accordingly he answered: "I should be glad to remove the rock, if I can."

The two young women turned back towards the ranch, and Thurston followed respectfully, as far as possible in the rear, that they might not observe the condition of his attire. This was an entirely superfluous precaution, for Helen's keen eyes had noticed.

Reaching the ranch, Geoffrey possessed himself of a grub-hoe, which is a pick with an adz-shaped blade with an ax and shovel; also he returned with the girls to the boulder. For an hour or two he toiled hard, grubbing out hundredweights of soil and gravel from round about the rock. Then cutting a young fir he inserted the butt of it as a lever, and spent another thirty minutes focusing his full strength on the opposite end. The rock, however, refused to move an inch, and, because a few crackers are not much for a hungry man to work on after an all-night march, Thurston became conscious that he had a headache and a distressful stitch in his side. Still, being obstinate and filled with an unreasoning desire to prove his trustworthiness to his fair employer, he continued doggedly, and after another hour's digging found the stone still immovable. Then it happened that while, with the perspiration dripping from him, he tugged at the lever, the rancher who had rebuffed him that morning, drew rein close beside.

"Hello! What are you after now? You're messing all this trail up if you're doing nothing else," he declared in a tone of challenge.

"If you have come here to amuse yourself at my expense, take care. I'm not in the mood for baiting," answered Thurston, who still smarted under the recollection of the summary manner in which the speaker had rejected his proffered services. "There are, however, folks in this country more willing to give a stranger a chance than you, and I've taken a contract to remove that rock for a dollar. Now, if you are satisfied, ride on your way."

"Then you've made a blame bad bargain," commented the rancher, with unruffled good humor. "I was figuring that I might help you. I thought you were a hobo after my chickens, or trying to bluff me into a free meal this morning. If you'd asked straight for it, I'd have given it you."

Geoffrey hesitated, divided between an inclination to laugh or to assault the rancher, who perhaps guessed his thoughts, for, dismounting, he said:

"If you're so mighty thin-skinned what are you doing here? Why don't you British dukes stop right back in your own country where folks touch their hats to you? Let me on to that lever."

For at least twenty minutes, the two men tugged and panted. Then Bransome, the rancher, said:

"The blame thing's either part of the out-crop or wedged fast there forever, and I've no more time to spare. Say, Graham's a hard man, and has been playing it low on you. What's the matter with turning his contract up and going over to fill oat bags for me?"

"Thank, but having given my word to move that rock, I'm going to stay here until I do it," answered Geoffrey; and Bransome, nodding to him, rode on towards the ranch.

When he reached it Bransome said to Jean Graham in the hearing of Miss Savine:

"The old man has taken in yonder guileless stranger who has put two good dollars' worth of work into that job already, and the rock's rather faster than it was before."

"Did he say Mr. Graham hired him?" asked Helen, and she drew her own inference when Bransome answered:

"Why, no! I put it that way, and he didn't contradict me."

It was afternoon when Thurston realized at last that even considerable faith in one's self is not sufficient, unaided, to move huge boulders. He felt faint and hungry, but the pride of the Insular Briton restrained him from begging for a meal. His own dislike to acknowledge defeat also prompted him to decide that where weary muscles failed, mechanical power might succeed, and he determined to tramp back a league to the settlement in the hope of perhaps obtaining a drill and some giant powder on credit. He had not studied mining theoretically as well as in a costly practical school for nothing.

It was a rough trail to the settlement. The red dust lay thick upon it and the afternoon sun was hot. When at last, powdered all over with dust and very weary, Thurston came in sight of the little wooden store, he noticed Bransome's horse fastened outside it. He did not see the rancher, who sat on an empty box behind a sugar hogshead inside the counter.

"I want two sticks of giant powder, a fathom or two of fuse, and several detonators," said Geoffrey as indifferently as he could. "I have only two bits at present to pay for them, but if they don't come to more than a dollar you shall have the rest to-morrow. I also want to borrow a drill."

The storekeeper was used to giving much longer credit than Geoffrey wanted, but the glance he cast at the applicant was not reassuring, and it is possible he might have refused his request, but that, unseen by Thurston, Bransome signaled to him from behind the barrel.

"We don't trade that way with strangers generally," the storekeeper answered. "Still, if you want them special, and will pay me what they're worth to-morrow, I'll oblige you, and even lend you a set of drills. But you'll come back sure, and not lose any of them drills?" he added dubiously.

"I haven't come here to rob you. It's a business deal, and not a favor I'm asking," asserted Geoffrey grimly, and when he withdrew the storekeeper observed:

"Why can't you do your own charity, Bransome, instead of taxing me? That's the crank who wanted to run your lake down, isn't he? I guess I'll never see either him or them drills again."

"You will," the rancher assured him. "If that man's alive to-morrow you'll get your money; I'll go bail for him. He's just the man you mention, but I'm considerably less sure about the crankiness than I was this morning. There's a quantity of fine clean sand in him."

Meanwhile, and soon after Geoffrey had set out for the store, the two girls strolled down the trail to ascertain how he was progressing. They looked at each other significantly when they came upon the litter of débris and tools.

"Lit out!" announced Jean Graham. "The sight of all that work was too much for him. He'll be lying on his back now by the river thinking poetry. This country's just thick with reposeful Britishers nobody at home has any use for, and their kind friends ship off onto us. In a way I'm sorry. He lit out hungry, and he didn't look like a loafer."

"I'm afraid we were a little hard upon him," said Helen, smiling. "Still, I am somewhat surprised he did not carry out his bargain."

"You can never trust those gilt-edge Britishers," said Jean Graham with authority. "There was old man Peters who took one of them in, and he'd sit in the store nights making little songs to his banjo, and talking just wonderful. Said he was a baronet or something, if he had his rights, and made

love to Sally. Old fool Peters believed him, and lent him three hundred dollars to start a lawsuit over his English property with. Dessay Peters thought red-haired Sally would look well trailing round as a countess in a gold-hemmed dress. The baronet took the money, but wanted some more, and lit out the same night with Lou of the Sapin Rouge saloon."

"I should hardly expect all that from our acquaintance of this morning, but I am disappointed, though I'm sure I don't know why I should be," said Helen Savine.

The sunlight had faded from the valley, though the peaks still shimmered orange and red, and the broken edge of a glacier flashed like a great rose diamond, when the two girls sat on the veranda encircling Graham's ranch-house. The rancher and his stalwart sons were away rounding up his cattle, but Jean was expecting both them and her mother and the delayed supper was ready. The evening was very still and cool. The life-giving air was heavy with the breath of dew-touched cedars, while the hoarse clamor of the river accentuated the hush of the mountain solitude. Strange to say, both of the girls were thinking about the vagrant, and Helen Savine, who considered herself a judge of character, had been more impressed by him than she would have cared to admit. There was no doubt, she reflected, that the man was tolerably good-looking and had enjoyed some training, though perhaps not the best, in England. He had also known adversity, she deduced from the gauntness of his face and a certain grimness of expression. She had noticed that his chin indicated a masterful expression and she was, therefore, the more surprised that he had allowed himself to be vanquished by the boulder.

Suddenly a heavy crash broke through the musical jangle of cow bells that drew nearer up the valley, and a cloud of yellow smoke curling above the dark branches spread itself across the fir tops in filmy folds.

"I guess that's our hobo blowing the rock up!" cried Jean. "I wonder where he stole the giant powder from. Well, daddy's found his cattle, and the swearing will have made him hungry. I'll start Kate on to the supper, and we'll bring the man in when he comes round for his dollar."

Presently Thurston knocked at the door, and strode in at a summons to enter. Slightly abashed, he halted inside the threshold. Jean, looking ruddy and winsome in light print dress, with sleeves rolled clear of each plump fore-arm, was spreading great platefuls of hot cakes and desiccated fruits among the more solid viands on the snowy tablecloth. Geoffrey found it difficult to refrain from glancing wolfishly at the good things until his eyes rested upon Miss Savine, and then it cost him an effort to turn them away. Helen reclined on an ox-hide lounge. An early rose rested among the glossy clusters of her thick, dark hair. A faint tinge of crimson showed through the pale olive in her cheek, and he caught the glimmer of pearly teeth between the ripe red lips. In her presence he grew painfully conscious that he was ragged, toil-stained and dusty, though he had made the best toilet he could beside a stream.

"I have removed the rock, and have brought the tools back," he said.

"How much did the explosives cost you?" asked Helen, and Geoffrey smiled.

"If you will excuse me, is not that beside the question? I engaged to remove the boulder, and I have done it," he answered.

Ever since her mother's death, Helen Savine had ruled her father and most of the men with whom she came in contact. She had come to the ranch with Mr. Savine, who was interested in many enterprises in the neighborhood and she was prepared to be interested in whatever occurred. Few of her wishes ever had been thwarted, so, naturally, she was conscious of a faint displeasure that a disheveled wanderer should even respectfully slight her question. Placing two silver coins on the table, the said coldly:

"Then here are your covenanted wages, and we are obliged to you."

Geoffrey handed one of the coins back with a slight inclination of his head. "Our bargain was one dollar, madam, and I cannot take more. Perhaps you have forgotten," he replied.

Helen was distinctly annoyed now. The color grew a little warmer in her cheek and her eyes brighter, but she uttered only a "Thank you," and took up the piece of silver.

Jean Graham, prompted by the Westerner's generous hospitality, and a feeling that she had been overlooked, spoke:

"You have earned a square meal any way, and you're going to get it," she declared. "Sit right down there and we'll have supper when the boys come in."

Uneasily conscious that Helen was watching him, Thurston cast a swift hungry glance at the food. Then, remembering his frayed and tattered garments and the hole in his boot, he answered: "I thank you, but as I must be well on my way to-morrow I cannot stay."

"Then you'll take these along, and eat them when it suits you," said the girl, deftly thrusting a plateful of hot cakes upon him. Divided between gratitude and annoyance, Geoffrey stood still, stupidly holding out the dainties at arm's length, while flavored syrup dripped from them. It was equally impossible to return them without flagrant discourtesy or to retire with any dignity. Finally, he moved out backwards still clutching the plate of cakes, and when he had disappeared Helen laughed softly, while Jean's merriment rang out in rippling tones.

"You saved the situation," said Helen. "It was really getting embarrassing, and he made me ashamed. I ought to have known better than to play that trick with the dollar, but the poor man looked as if he needed it. He is certainly not a hobo, and I could wonder who he is, but that it does not matter, as we shall never see him again."

Meanwhile, Geoffrey Thurston walked savagely down the trail. He felt greatly tempted to hurl the cakes away, but, on second thoughts, ate them instead. It was a trifling decision, but it led to important results, as trifles often do, because, if he had not satisfied his hunger, he would have limped back through the settlement towards the railroad and probably never would have re-entered the valley. As it was, when the edge of his hunger was blunted he felt drowsy, and, curling himself up among the roots of hemlock, sank into slumber under the open sky. Early next morning Bransome stopped him on the trail.

"I've been thinking over what you told me about making a rock cutting to run the water clear of my meadows," said the rancher, "and if you're still keen on business I'm open to talk to you."

"Why didn't you talk yesterday morning?" inquired Thurston, and Bransome answered frankly: "Well, just then I had my doubts about you; now I figure that if you say you can do a thing, you can. Come over to the ranch, and, if we can't make a deal, I'll give you a week's work, any way."

"Thanks!" replied Thurston. "I should be glad to, but I have some business at the settlement first. Will you advance me a dollar, on account of wages, so that I can discharge a debt to the storekeeper?"

"Why, yes!" agreed the rancher. "But didn't you get a dollar from Graham yesterday? Do you want two?"

"Yes!" said Thurston. "I want two," and Bransome laughed.

"You're in a greater hurry to pay your debts than other folks from your country I've met over here," he observed with a smile. "But come on to the ranch and breakfast; I'll square the storekeeper for you."

Thurston accepted the chance that offered him a sustaining meal, but he did not explain that, owing to some faint trace of superstition in his nature, he intended to keep Helen Savine's dollar. It was the first coin that he had earned as his own master, in the Dominion, and he felt that the successfully-executed contract marked a turning point in his career.

CHAPTER IV
GEOFFREY MAKES PROGRESS

Thurston did justice to his breakfast at Bransome's ranch, and he frankly informed his host that he had found it difficult to exist on two handfuls of crackers and one of hot corn cakes. When the meal was finished and pipes were lighted, the two men surveyed each other with mutual interest. They were not unlike in physique, for the Colonial, was, as is usual with his kind, lean and wiry. His quick, restless movements suggested nervous energy, but when advisable, he could assume the bovine stolidity which, though foreign to his real nature, the Canadian bushman occasionally adopts for diplomatic purposes. Thurston, however, still retained certain traits of the Insular Briton, including a curtness of speech and a judicious reserve.

"That blame lake backs up on my meadows each time the creek rises," Bransome observed at length. "The snow melts fast in hay-time, and, more often than I like, a freshet harvests my timothy grass for me. Now cutting down three-hundred-foot redwoods is good as exercise, but it gets monotonous, and a big strip of natural prairie would be considerably more useful than a beaver's swimming bath. You said you could blow a channel through the rocks that hold up the outlet, didn't you?"

"I can!" Geoffrey asserted confidently. "From some knowledge of mining I am inclined to think that a series of heavy charges fired simultaneously along the natural cleavage would reduce the lake's level at least a fathom. Have you got a pencil?"

Here it was that the national idiosyncrasies of the men became apparent; for Thurston, leaning on one elbow, made an elaborate sketch and many calculations with Bransome's pencil. A humming-bird, resplendent in gold and purple, blundered in between the roses shrouding the open window, and hovered for a moment above him on invisible wings. Thurston did not notice the bird, but Bransome flung a crust at it as he smiled on his companion.

"We'll take the figures for granted. Life is too short to worry over them," the rancher said. "Let's get down to business. How much are you asking, no cure no pay, I finding tools and material? I want your bottom price straight away."

Thurston had never done business in so summary a fashion before, but he could adapt himself to circumstances, and he mentioned a moderate sum forthwith.

"Can't come down? – then it's a deal!" Bransome announced. "Contract – this is the Pacific slope, and we've no time for such foolery. I'm figuring that I can trust you, and my word's good enough in this locality. Run that pond down a fathom and you'll get your money. Any particular reason why you shouldn't start in to-day? Don't know of any? Then put that pipe in your pocket, and we'll strike out for the store at the settlement now."

So it came about that at sunset Geoffrey was deposited with several bags of provisions, a blanket, and a litter of tools, outside a ruined shack on the edge of the natural prairie surrounding Bransome's lake. He had elected to live beside his work.

A tall forest of tremendous growth walled the lake, and then for a space rotting trees and willow swale showed where the intermittent rise of waters had set a limit to the all-encroaching bush. The wail of a loon rang eerily out of the shadow, and was answered by the howl of a distant wolf. A thin silver crescent sailed clear of the fretted minarets of towering firs clear cut against a pale pearl of the sky.

"Carlton's prairie, we call it," said Bransome, leaning against his light wagon, which stood, near the deserted dwelling. "Land which isn't all rock or forest is mighty scarce, and Carlton figured he'd done great things when he bought this place. Five years he tried to drain it, working night and day, and pouring good money into it, and five times the freshets washed out his crops for him. The creek

just laughed at his ditches. Then when he'd no more money he went out to help track-laying, and a big tree flattened him. The boys said he didn't seem very sorry. This prairie had broken his heart for him, and I've heard the Siwash say he still comes back and digs at nights when the moon is full."

"Carlton made a mistake," said Geoffrey, who had been examining the surroundings rather than listening to the tale. "He began in what looked the easiest and was the hardest way. He should have cut the mother rock instead of trenching the forest." When Bransome drove away Thurston rolled himself in the thick brown blanket, and sank into slumber under the lee of the dead man's dwelling, through which a maple tree had grown from the inside, wrenching off the shingle roof.

An owl that circled about the crumbling house, stooped now and then on muffled wing to inspect the sleeper. Once a stealthy panther, slipping through the willows, bared its fangs and passed the other way, and the pale green points of luminescence that twinkled in the surrounding bush, and were the eyes of timber wolves, faded again. Neither did the deer that panther and wolves sought, come down to feed on the swamp that night, for a man, holding dominion over the beasts of the forest, lay slumbering in the desolate clearing.

Geoffrey began work early next day, and afterwards week by week toiled from dawn until nearly sunset, blasting clear minor reefs and ledges until he attacked the mother rock under the lip of a clashing fall. The fee promised was by no means large, and, because current wages prohibited assistance, he did all the work himself. So he shoveled débris and drilled holes in the hard blue grit; and drilling, single-handed, is a difficult operation, damaging to the knuckles of the man attempting it. He waded waist-deep in water, learned to carry heavy burdens on his shoulder, and found his interest in the task growing upon him. He felt that much depended upon the successful completion of his contract. It was not, however, all monotonous labor, and there were compensations, for, after each day's toil was done, he lay prone on scented pine twigs, and heard the voices of the bush break softly through the solemn hush as, through gradations of fading glories along the lofty snows, night closed in. He would watch the black bear grubbing hog-fashion among the tall wild cabbage, while the little butter duck, paddling before its brood, set divergent lines creeping across the steely lake until the shadows of the whitened driftwood broke and quivered.

Sometimes he would call the chipmunks, which scurried up and down behind him, or tap on a rotten log until a crested woodpecker cried in answer, and by degrees the spell of the mountains gained upon him, until he forgot his troubles and became no more subject to fits of berserk rage. He was growing quiet and more patient, learning to wait, but his energy and determination still remained. But he was not wholly cut off from human intercourse, for at times some of the scattered ranchers would ride over to offer impracticable advice or to predict his failure, and Geoffrey listened quietly, answering that in time it would be proved which was right. Sometimes, he tramped through scented shadow to Graham's homestead and discussed crops and cattle with the rancher. On these occasions, he had long conversations with Helen Savine, who, finding no person of liberal education thereabouts, was pleased to talk to him. There was nothing incongruous in this, for petty class distinctions vanish in the bush, where, when his daily task is done, the hired man meets his master on terms of equality.

At last the day on which Thurston's work was to be practically tested arrived, and most of the ranchers drove over to witness what they regarded as a reckless experiment.

Jean Graham and Helen Savine stood a little apart from the rest on the edge of the forest looking down on the glancing water and talking with the experimenter. The rich wet meadows were heavy with flag and blossom to the edge of the driftwood frieze, and the splash of rising trout alone disturbed the reflection of the mighty trunks and branches crowning a promontory on the farther side.

"It is very beautiful, and now you are going to spoil it all, Mr. Bransome," said Helen.

The rancher glanced at her with admiration in his eyes. Helen was worthy of inspection. Her thin summer dress, with the cluster of crimson roses tucked into the waist of it, brought out her rich beauty which betokened a Latin ancestry.

"Yes, it's mighty pretty; a picture worth looking at – all of it," he said, and there was a faint smile on Helen's lips as she recognized that the general tribute to the picturesque was as far as Bransome dared venture in the direction of a compliment. He was not a diffident person, but he felt a wholesome respect for Helen Savine.

"Mighty pretty, but what's the good of it, and I'm not farming for my health," he continued. "It's just a beautiful wilderness, and what has a man brains given him for, unless it's to turn the wilderness into cheese and butter. It has broken one man's heart, and my thick-headed neighbors said a swamp it would remain forever, but a stranger with ideas came along, and I told him, 'Sail ahead.'"

"I did hear you told him not to be a – perhaps I had better say – a simple fool," Helen answered mischievously; and Bransome coughed before he made reply.

"Maybe!" he acknowledged. "I didn't know him then, but to-day I'm ready to back that man to put through just whatever he sets his mind upon."

As Bransome spoke, the subject of this encomium came up from the little gorge by the lake outlet, and it struck Helen Savine that the rock worker had changed to advantage since she first saw him. His keen eyes, which she had noticed were quick to flash with anger, had grown more kindly and the bronzed face was more reposeful. The thin jean garments and great knee boots, which had no longer any rents in them, suited the well-proportioned frame.

"I was disappointed about the electric firing gear ordered from Vancouver, but I think the coupled time-fuses should serve almost as well," said Thurston, acknowledging Helen's presence with a bow that was significant. "You appear interested, Miss Savine. We are trusting to the shock of a number of charges fired simultaneously, and perhaps you had better retire nearer the bush, for the blast will be powerful. I should like your good wishes, since you are in a measure responsible for this venture. You will remember you gave me my first commission."

"You have them!" said Helen, with a frank sincerity, for though the man was a mere enterprising laborer, she was too proud to assume any air of condescension. She was Helen Savine, and considered that she had no need to maintain her dignity.

Geoffrey returned a conventional answer, and there was a buzz of voices as he and Bransome walked back together towards the gorge. The rancher halted discreetly when his companion, taking a brand from a fire near it, clambered over the boulders. Geoffrey disappeared among the rocks, and the voices grew louder when he came into view again walking hurriedly.

Several trails of thin blue vapor began to crawl in and out among the rocks. Bransome joined Thurston, and both men broke into a smart trot. They were heading for the bush until Geoffrey, halting near it, ran back at full speed towards the gorge. All who watched him were astonished, for they were already bracing themselves to face the heavy shock.

"He's mad – stark mad!" roared Graham. "Come back for your life, Bransome. It's smashed into small pieces both of you will be," and the eyes of the spectators grew wide as they watched the two running figures, for the rancher also had turned, and the lines of vapor were creeping with ominous swiftness across the face of the stone.

There was a roar as the behind man clutched at the other, missed him, and staggered several paces, leaving his hat behind him before he took up the chase again. Single cries sharper than the rest rose out of the clamor, "Blown to glory both of them! Two sticks of giant powder in most of the holes. All that's left of the Britisher won't be worth picking up!"

The two men disappeared among the boulders almost under the white foam of the fall, and for a brief space there was heavy silence emphasized by the song of hurrying water and the drumming of a blue-grouse on the summit of a fir. Helen Savine fancied she could hear the assembly breathing unevenly, and felt a pricking among the roots of her hair, while she struggled with an impulse which prompted her to cry aloud or in any wild fashion to break the torturing suspense. Jean Graham, whose eyes were wide with apprehension, noted that her face was bloodless to the lips. Neither had as yet been rudely confronted with tragedy, and both felt held fast, spellbound, without the power to move.

"The Lord have mercy on them," said the hoarse voice of a man somewhere behind the girls.

Once more a murmur swelled into a roar, and Jean, twining her brown fingers together, cried, "There! They're coming. They may be in time!"

A figure, apparently Bransome's, leaped down from a boulder close in front of one that climbed over the stone, and there followed harsh, breathless cries of encouragement as the two headed at mad speed for the sheltering forest, the rear runner, who came up with hands clenched and long swinging strides, gaining steadily on the one before him. They were near enough for those who watched to see that the fear of sudden death was stamped upon their perspiring faces. Then, as they passed a spur of rock out-crop, Thurston leaped upon the leader, hurled him forward so that he lost his balance and the pair went down out of sight among the rocks, while a shaft of radiance pale in the sunlight blazed aloft beside the outlet of the lake. Thick yellow-tinted vapor followed it, and hillside and forest rang to the shock of a stunning detonation.

The smoke curling in filmy wreaths spread itself across the quaggy meadows, while the patter of falling fragments filled the quivering bush, and was mingled with a loud splashing, or a heavy crash as some piece of greater weight drove hurtling through the trees or plunged into the lake. Then for the last time the assembly gave voice, raising a tumultuous cheer of relief as the two men came forth uninjured out of the eddying smoke.

Geoffrey, shaking the dust from his garments, turned to his companion with a somewhat nervous laugh:

"We cut it rather fine," he said, "but I felt reasonably sure there would be just sufficient time, and it might have spoiled the whole blast if the two bad fuses had failed to fire their shots. Of course, I'm grateful for your company, but as it was my particular business I don't quite see why you turned back after me."

Bransome, who mopped his forehead, stared at the speaker with some wonder and more admiration before he answered:

"There's a good deal of cast iron about you, and I guess I'd a long way sooner have trusted the rest than have gone back to stir up those two charges. What took me? – well, I figured you had turned suddenly crazy, and I was in a way responsible for you. Made the best bargain for your time I could, but I didn't buy you up bones and body – see?"

"I think I do," answered Geoffrey, and that was all, but it meant the recognition of a bond between them. Bransome, as if glad to change the subject, asked:

"Say, after you had fired the fuse what did you waste precious seconds looking for? If I wasn't too scared to notice anything clearly I'd swear you found something and picked it up."

"I did!" declared Geoffrey, smiling. "It was something I must have dropped before. Only a trifle, but I would not like to lose it, and – I had one eye on the fuses – there seemed a second or two to spare. However, for some reason my throat feels all stuck together. Have you any cider in your wagon?"

Half-an-hour later, when most of the spectators stood watching the released waters thunder down the gorge, for the blast had been successful, Helen Savine said:

"I don't quite understand what happened, Mr. Bransome."

"It was this way!" answered the rancher, glad to profit by any opportunity of interesting the girl. "That Thurston is a hard, tough man. Two fuses that were to fire small charges petered out, and sooner than risk anything he must light them again. I don't quite understand all the rest of it, either, for he's not a mean man, and why he should stay fooling on top of a powder mine looking for one dollar when I've a hatful to pay him is away beyond me. Yet I'm sure he picked up a piece of silver just before we ran. Curious kind of creature, isn't he?"

Helen thought the incident distinctly odd. She could not comprehend why a man should risk his life for the sake of a silver coin. She could not find a solution of the mystery until it was explained that evening.

Geoffrey Thurston, attired in white shirt, black sash, and new store clothes, had tramped over to Graham's ranch and by degrees he and Miss Savine gravitated away from the others. They were interested in subjects that did not appeal to the rest, and, though Jean smiled mischievously at times, this excited no comment.

Clear moonlight sparkled upon the untrodden snows above them, snows that had remained stainless since the giant peaks were framed when the world was young. The pines were black on their lower slopes, and white mists filled the valley, out of which the song of the river rose in long reverberations. Geoffrey and Helen leaned on the veranda balustrade, both silent, for the solemnity of the mountains impressed them, and speech seemed superfluous.

After a while, the girl told Geoffrey that he ought to be glad to live after his narrow escape from death. "There was really no great risk, and, if there had been, the results would have justified it," Geoffrey replied. "The failure of two charges might have spoiled all my work for me. Since I left you the Roads and Trails Surveyor voluntarily offered me a rock work contract he had refused before, and I at once accepted it."

"You have not been used to this laborious life. Have you no further ambition, and do you like it?" asked Helen, flashing a quick glance at him.

"It is not exactly what I expected, but as there appears to be no great demand in this country for mental abilities, one is glad to earn a living as one can," he said. "I am afraid I am a somewhat ambitious person. I consider this only the beginning, and Miss Savine responsible for it. You will remember who it was offered me my first contract."

"Don't!" commanded Helen, averting her eyes. "That is hardly fair or civil. You really looked so – and how was I to know?"

Geoffrey's pulse beat faster, and the smile faded out of his eyes as he noticed, for the moon was high, the trace of faintly heightened color in the speaker's face.

"I doubtless looked the hungry, worn-out tramp I was," he interposed gravely. "And out of gentle compassion, you offered me a dollar. Well, I earned that dollar, and I have it still. It has brought me good luck, and I will keep it as a talisman."

Instinctively his fingers slid to one end of a thin gold chain, and for a moment a look of consternation came into his face, for the links hung loose; then as the hard hand dropped to his pocket, he looked relieved and Helen found it judicious to watch a gray blur of shadow moving across the snow. She had sometimes wondered what he wore at one end of that cross-pattern chain, for rock cutters do not usually adorn themselves with such trinkets, but, remembering Bransome's comments, she now understood what had happened just before the explosion. Geoffrey's quick eyes had noticed something unusual in her air, and his old reckless spirit, breaking through all restraint, prompted him to say:

"It will, I fancy, still bring me good fortune. I come of a superstitious race, and nothing would tempt me to part with it. This, as I said, is only the beginning. It appeared impossible to move the boulder from your wagon trail, and I did it. The neighbors declared nobody could drain Bransome's prairie, and a number of goodly acres are drying now, while to-night I feel it may be possible to go on and on, until – "

"Does not that sound somewhat egotistical?" interposed Helen.

"Horribly," said Thurston, with a curious smile. "But you see I am trusting in the talisman, and some day I may ask you to admit that I have made it good. I'm not avaricious, and desire money only as means to an end. Dollars! If all goes well, the contract for the wagon road rock work should bring me in a good many of them."

"You are refreshingly certain," averred Helen. "But will the end or dominant purpose justify all this?"

Thurston answered quietly:

"I may ask you to judge that, also, some day!"

Helen was conscious of a chagrin quite unusual to her. Hitherto, she had experienced little difficulty in making the men she knew regret anything that resembled presumption, but with this man it was different. What he meant she would not at the moment ask herself, but, though she rather admired his quietly confident tone, it nettled her, and yet, without begging an awkward question she could not resent it. Geoffrey's reckless frankness was often more unassailable than wiser men's diplomacy – and she was certainly pleased that he had recovered the dollar.

"The dew is getting heavy, and I promised Jean some instruction in netting," she told him rather unsteadily. She paused a second, and, with an assumed carelessness, added, "isn't it useless to forecast the future?"

CHAPTER V
THE LEGENDS OF CROSBIE GHYLL

Helen Savine had passed two years in England, and, because her father was a prosperous man who humored her slightest wishes, she occasionally returned to take her pleasure in what she called the Old Country. It is a far cry from the snowy heights of the Pacific slope to the pleasant valleys of the North Country, but in these days of quadruple-expansion engines, distance counts but little when one has sufficient money.

The Atlantic express had brought Helen and her aunt by marriage, Mrs. Thomas P. Savine, into Montreal, whence a fast train had conveyed them to New York in time to catch a big Southampton liner, but Mrs. Savine was a restless lady, and had grown tired of London within six weeks from the day she left Vancouver. She was an American, and took pains to impress the fact upon anybody who mistook her for a Canadian, and, finding a party of her countrymen and women, whom she had hoped to overtake in the metropolis, had departed northwards, she determined to follow them to the English lakes.

"It's a big, hot, dusty wilderness, Tom, and we've seen all they've got to show us here before," she said to her long-suffering husband, as she stood in the vestibule of a fashionable hotel. "Say, we'll pull out to-day and catch the Schroeders' party meditating around Wordsworth's tomb. Young man, will you kindly get us a railroad schedule?"

The silver-buttoned official, who watched the big plate-glass door, started at a smart rap on his shoulder, and blinked at the angular lady in a startling costume and a blue veil. Thomas Savine interposed meekly:

"A time-table; and that's evidently not the man to ask, my dear."

"Then he can tell the right one," Mrs. Savine answered airily, and presently halted before a row of resplendently-gilded books adorning one portion of the vestibule. She thereupon explained for the benefit of all listeners that it was hard to see the necessity for so many railways in so small a country, and finally, with a clerk's assistance, selected a train which would deposit her at Oxenholme, from which place the official suggested that she might find means of transport into the district in which, to the best of his belief, Coleridge and Wordsworth, or one of them, wrote what Mrs. Savine entitled charming little pieces. It proved good counsel, and two of the party passed a delightful week at Ambleside, where their sojourn was marred only by Mrs. Savine's laments that potatoes were not served at supper and breakfast.

"I want some potatoes with my ham," she said, and when the attendant explained that the vegetables were never eaten in England at that meal, she inquired, "Don't you grow potatoes anywhere in this country?"

The attendant said that very fine ones were produced in the immediate vicinity, and Mrs. Savine waved a jeweled hand majestically.

"Then away you go and buy some. I'll sit right here until they're boiled," she said.

"It really isn't the custom, and you know you never got them in London, and hardly ate them at home," said Thomas Savine, but Mrs. Savine remained superior to such reasoning.

"That's quite outside the question. I want those potatoes, and I'm going to have them," she insisted.

There was a whispering at the end of the breakfast hall, somebody whistled up a tube, and the hotel manager appeared to announce, with regrets, that it was unfortunately impossible in the busy season to upset the culinary arrangements for the benefit of a single guest.

"Then we'll start again and follow the Schroeders' trail to that place in Cumberland," Mrs. Savine decided. "Tom, you go out and buy one of those twenty five cent guide-books which tell you all about everything. Hire some ponies and a man, and we'll drive a straight line across the mountains."

The manager respectfully suggested it would be better to take the train, even though the railway went round, because the mountains were lofty, and the roads were indifferent in the region traversed. To this the lady answered with some truth that the highest peak in Britain was a pigmy to the lowest of the Selkirks, and that she had spent two summers camping among the fastnesses of the snow-clad Olympians.

"Your aunt is a smart woman, but she can't help upsetting things," said Thomas Savine, when his niece went out with him to make arrangements for the trip. Helen smiled pleasantly, for she knew her aunt's good qualities, and also she was fond of adventurous wanderings.

It was perfect weather, and the three tourists enjoyed their journey among the less frequented fells, during which they camped, so Thomas Savine termed it, each night in some high-perched hostelry or trout-fisher's haunt. Helen realized that never before had she fully appreciated the beauty of England. Quite apart from its wonders of industrial enterprise, tide of world-wide commerce, and treasury of literature and art, the old country was to be loved for its quiet, green restfulness, she thought.

Suddenly there came a change. A south-wester drove thick rain-clouds scudding across peak and valley, and filled the passes with dank, white mists from the Irish Sea, and so, towards the close of a threatening day, Mrs. Savine's party came winding down in a hurry from a bare hill shoulder and under the gray crags of Crosbie Fell. The hollows beneath them were lost in a woolly vapor, low-flying scud raked the bare ridges above, and even as they passed a black rift in the hillside the first heavy drops of rain fell pattering. Helen Savine had seen many a mining adit in British Columbia, and, turning to glance at the mouth of the tunnel, she read, scratched on the rock beside it, "Thurston's Folly." That careless glance over her shoulder was to lead to important results.

"There's wild weather brewing," said Thomas Savine. "Make those ponies rustle, and we'll get in somewhere before it comes along."

When they reached the little wind-swept village, it became evident that no shelter for the night could be found there, for it was seldom that even an enterprising pedestrian tourist came down from the high moors behind Crosbie Fell. Still, one inhabitant informed their guide, in a tongue none of the others could comprehend, that if he was in an unusually good humor old Musker, the keeper, might take them in at Crosbie Ghyll. Thus it happened that just as the rain began in earnest, such a cavalcade as had probably never before passed its gloomy portals rode up to the gate of the dilapidated edifice. Some of the iron-bound barriers still lay moldering in the hollow of the arch, and Helen noticed slits for muskets in the stout walls above, for the owners had been a fighting race, and several times in bygone centuries the tide of battle had rolled about and then had ebbed away from the stubbornly-held stronghold. The observer had gathered so much from a paragraph in her guide-book.

The romance of English history appealed to Helen as it does to the citizens of the wider Britain over seas, and she turned in her saddle to look about her. Framed by the weather-worn archway she could see the black rampart of the fells fading into the rain, and the bare sweep of moss and moor, which had once stretched unbroken to the feet of the great ranges above the Solway shore. Inside the quadrangle, for the place had during the past century served as farm instead of hall, barn, cart-shed and shippon were ruinous and empty, but she could fill the space in fancy with sturdy archer, man-at-arms, and corsleted rider, for that the present venerable edifice had been built into an older one the stump of a square tower remained to testify.

Thomas Savine pounded on the oaken door at one end of the courtyard until it was opened by a bent-shouldered man with frosted hair and wrinkled visage.

"We are unfortunate strangers with a guide who has lost his way, and it would be a favor if you could take us in to-night out of the storm," he said. The older man glanced at the party suspiciously.

"If you ride straight on across the moor you'll find a road, and a brand new hotel in twelve miles, where you'll get whatever you have been used to," he said. "I once took some London folks in, and after the thanks they gave me I never will again."

"We're not Londoners, only forlorn Canadians," explained Thomas Savine. "Never mind, Matilda; he'll find out that you're an American in due time. We have all learned to rough it in our own country, and would trouble you very little."

"What part of Canada?" asked the forbidding figure in the doorway, and when Savine answered, "British Columbia," called "Margery!" A little weazened woman, with cheeks still ruddy from much lashing of the wind, appeared in the portal.

"Strangers from British Columbia! Perhaps they know the master," said the man, and there was a whispering until the woman vanished, saying, "I'll ask Miss Gracie."

She returned promptly, and, with a reserved courtesy, bade the party enter. Then she sent her husband and the guide to stable the ponies, and fifteen minutes later the travelers reassembled beside the deep-seated window of a great stone-flagged room, darkly wainscoted, which apparently once had been the hall, and was now kitchen. There were a spotless cloth and neat cutlery on the table by the window; trout and bacon, hacked from the sides hanging beneath the smoke-blackened beams, frizzled upon a peat fire; and, though she found neither wine nor potatoes, Mrs. Savine said that she had not enjoyed such a meal since she left Vancouver.

"We can't give you a sitting-room to yourselves," apologized the withered dame as the removed the cloth. "What furniture there is above is covered up, and it will be ill finding you sleeping quarters even. Nobody lives here beside ourselves, except when Mr. Forsyth comes down for a few weeks' shooting. His wife was a Thurston, and he bought the old place to please her sooner than let it go out of the family."

"A Thurston!" said Helen Savine. "We saw 'Thurston's Folly' written beside a mining tunnel on the fell. Was that one of the former owners? Being Colonials we are interested in all ancient buildings and their traditions."

"Oh, yes!" broke in Mrs. Savine. "We just love to hear about wicked barons and witches and all those quaint folk of the olden time."

Musker had drawn nearer meanwhile, and Thomas Savine held out the cigar case that lay upon his knee. "If we may smoke in the great hearth there, just help yourself," said he. "My wife is fond of antiquities, and if you have any to talk of, we should be glad of your company."

Musker glanced keenly at his guests. Though, having lived elsewhere, he spoke easy colloquial English, he was a son of the North Country dogged and slow, intensely self-respecting, and, while loyal with feudal fealty to superiors he knew, quick to resent a stranger's assumption of authority. Thomas Savine, brown-faced, vigorous, a pleasant Colonial gentleman, smiled upon him good-naturedly, and Musker took a cigar awkwardly. Mrs. Savine surveyed the great bare hall with respectful curiosity and evident interest, while Helen, visibly interested, leaned back in her chair.

"Maybe you met the master in British Columbia?" Musker hazarded with an eager look in his dim eyes.

"What is his full name, and what is he like?" asked Helen, bending forward a little. The old woman, reaching over, lifted a faded photograph from the window seat.

"Geoffrey Thurston!" she answered. "That was him when he was young. My husband yonder broke the pony in."

Helen started as she gazed at the picture of the boy and the pony. The face was like, and yet unlike, that of the gaunt and hungry man whom she had first seen sitting upon the fallen fir. "Yes," she answered gravely; "I know him. I met Mr. Thurston in British Columbia."

"We would take it very kindly if you would tell us how and where you found him, miss," said Musker in haste.

"I found him in a great Canadian forest. He was looking very worn and tired," Helen answered, with a trace of color in her face. "I – I hired him to do some work for me, and it was hard work – much harder than I fancied – but he did it, and, as we afterwards discovered, spent all I paid him on the powder he found was necessary."

"Ay," said the old man. "That was Mr. Geoffrey. They were all hard and ill to beat, the Thurstons of Crosbie. And you'll kindly tell us, miss, you saw him again?"

"Yes," repeated Helen, "I saw him again. By good fortune the work he did for me procured him a contract he carried out daringly, and when I last saw him he was no longer hungry or ragged, but, I fancy, on the way to win success as an engineer."

Musker straightened his bent shoulders and smiled a slow, almost reluctant smile of pride, while his wife's eyes were grateful as she fixed them on the speaker. "Ay! What Mr. Geoffrey sets his heart on he'll win or ruin himself over. It was the way of all of them; and this is gradely news," he told her.

"Now," said Helen, nodding towards him graciously, "we don't wish to be unduly inquisitive, but – if you may tell us – why did Mr. Thurston emigrate to Canada?"

Musker was evidently tempted to embark upon a favorite topic, and his wife went out hurriedly. But he hesitated, sitting silent for a minute or two. Savine, rising under the arch of the great hearth, flung his cigar into the fire, as a young woman, wearing what Helen noticed was a decidedly antiquated riding habit, came forward out of the shadows.

"I hope we are not intruding here," said the Canadian. "We were tired out before the rain came down, and almost afraid to cross the moor."

"You are very welcome," said the stranger. "I am not, however, mistress, only a relative of the old place's owner, and, therefore, a kinswoman of Geoffrey Thurston. I heard that you had shown him a passing kindness, and should like to thank you."

There was no apparent reason why the two young women should scrutinize each other, and yet both did so by the fading daylight and red blaze of the fire. Helen saw that the stranger was ruddy and blonde – frank by nature and impulsive, she imagined. The stranger noted only that the Colonial was pale and dark and comely, with a slightly imperious presence, and a face that it was not easy to read.

"I am Marian Thwaite of Barrow Hall, and regret I cannot stay any longer, having three miles to ride in the rain," she said. "Still, I may return to-morrow before you set out. Mrs. Forsyth will be pleased if she hears you have made these Canadian strangers comfortable, Musker, and I think you may tell them why Mr. Geoffrey left England. May I ask your names?"

Helen told her, and after Miss Thwaite departed, Musker began the story of Thurston's Folly. It had grown quite dark. Driving rain lashed the windows. The ancient building was filled with strange rumblings and the wailing of the blast when the old man concluded: "Mr. Geoffrey was too proud to turn a swindler, and that was why he shook off his sweetheart, who tried to persuade him, though he knew old Anthony Thurston would have left him his money, if they married."

"Some said it was the opposite," interposed his wife; but Musker answered angrily, "Then they didn't tell it right. No woman born could twist Geoffrey Thurston from his path, and when she gave him bad counsel he turned his back on her. A fool these dolts called him. He was a leal, hard man, and what was a light woman's greediness to him?"

"And what became of the lady?" asked Helen, with a curious flash in her eyes.

"She married a London man, who came here shooting, married him out of spite, and has rued it many times if the tales are true. She was down with him fishing, looking sour and pale, and the Hall maids were say – "

"Just gossip and lies!" broke in his spouse; and Helen, who apparently had lapsed into a disdainful indifference, asked no further questions. Mrs. Savine, however, made many inquiries, and Musker, who became unusually communicative, presently offered to show the strangers what he called the armory.

They followed him down a draughty corridor to the black-wainscoted gun-room at the base of the crumbling tower, and when he had lighted a lamp its glow revealed a modern collection of costly guns. There were also trout-rods hung upon the wall, and a few good sporting etchings, at all of which Musker glanced somewhat contemptuously. "These are Mr. Forsyth's, and I take care of them, but he only belongs to the place by purchase and marriage. Those belonged to the Thurstons – the old, dead Thurstons – and they hunted men," he said.

He ran the lamp up higher by a tarnished brass chain, and pointed first to a big moldering bow. "A Thurston drew that in France long ago, and it has splitted many an Annandale cattle thief in the Solway mosses since. Red Geoffrey carried this long spear, and, so the story goes, won his wife with it, and brought her home on the crupper from beside the Nith. She pined away and died just above where we stand now in this very tower. That was another Geoffrey's sword; they hanged him high outside Lancaster jail. He was for Prince Charlie, and cut down single-handed two of King George's dragoons carrying a warrant for a friend's arrest when the Prince's cause was lost. His wife, she poisoned herself. Those are the spurs Mad Harry rode Hellfire on a wager down Crosbie Ghyll with, and broke his neck doing it, besides his young wife's heart. The women who married the Thurstons had an ill lot to grapple with. Even when they settled down to farming, the Thurstons were men who would walk unflinchingly into ruin sooner than lose their grip on their purpose, and Mr. Geoffrey favors them."

"They must have been just lovely," sighed Mrs. Savine. "Say, I've taken a fancy to some of those old things. That rusty iron lamp can't be much use to anybody, but it's quaint, and I'd give it's weight in dollars for it. Can't you tell me where Mr. Forsyth lives?"

Musker stared at her horrified, Thomas Savine laughed, and even Helen, who had appeared unusually thoughtful, smiled. Musker answered:

"No money could buy one of them out of the family, and if any but a Thurston moves that lamp from where it hangs the dead men rise and come for it when midnight strikes. It is falling to pieces, but once when they took it to Kendal to be mended, the smith sent a man back with it on horseback before the day had broken."

There was a few moments' silence when Musker concluded, and the ancient weapons glinted strangely as the lamp's flame wavered in the chilling draughts. A gale from the Irish Sea boomed about the crumbling tower, and all the lonely mosses seemed to swell it with their moaning. Helen shivered as she listened, for those clamorous voices of wind and rain carried her back in fancy to the old unhappy days of bloodshed and foray. The associations of the place oppressed her. She had acquired a horror of those grim dead men whose mementos hung above her, and whose spirits might well wander on such a night vainly seeking rest. Even Mrs. Savine became subdued, and her husband said:

"We can't tell tales like these in our country, and I'm thankful we can't. Still, I daresay it was such men as these who bred in us the grit to chase the whales in the Arctic, build our railroads through the snow-barred passes, and master the primeval forest. Now we'll try to forget them, and go back out of this creepy place to the fire again."

An hour later Mrs. Musker escorted Helen to her quarters. A bright fire glowed in the rusty grate, and two candles burned on the dressing-table. "It's Mrs. Forsyth's own room, and the best in the house," the old caretaker assured the girl. "Musker has been telling you about the old Thurstons. He's main proud of them, but you needn't fear them – it's long since the last one walked. You have a kind heart, and nothing evil dare hurt you. See! I've tried to make you comfortable. You were kind to the old place's real master – many a time I've nursed him – God bless you!"

Helen was not in the least afraid of the dead Thurstons. She was filled with the common-sense courage which characterizes the inhabitants of her new country, but she had been affected by the stories, and she sat for a time with her feet on the hearth irons, gazing thoughtfully into the blaze. She had met a modern Thurston, and found the instincts of his forbears strong within him.

She considered that strength, courage, and resolution well became a man, but that gentleness and chivalrous respect for women were desirable attributes, too. The Thurstons, however, had taken to bloodshed as a pastime, and broken most of their wives' hearts until it seemed that they had brought a curse upon their race. She suspected there was a measure of their brutality in the one she knew. Remembering something Geoffrey once had said, her face grew flushed and she clenched a little hand with an angry gesture, saying, "No man shall ever make a slave of me, and my husband, if I have one, must be my servant before he is my master."

Thereupon she dismissed the subject, tried to blot the stories from her memory, and presently buried her ears in the pillow to shut out the clamor of the storm. After a sound night's slumber, and an interview with Miss Thwaite she resumed her journey next morning.

Musker stood in the gate to watch the party ride away, and glancing at the coins in his hand said to Margery, "I wish they'd come often. Main interested in my stories they were all of them, and it's double what any of the shooting folks ever gave me. This one came from the young lady, and there's a way about her that puzzles me after seeing her."

CHAPTER VI
MILLICENT'S REWARD

The late Autumn evening was closing in. Millicent Leslie stood out on the terrace of the old North Country hall, where, the year before, she had first met her husband. A pale moon had climbed above the high black ridge of moor, which shut in one end of the valley, and the big beech wood that rolled down the lower hillside had faded to a shadowy blur, but she could still see the dim, white road running straight between the hedgerows, and could catch the faint gleam of a winding river. Twilight and night were meeting and melting into each other, the dew lay heavy upon the last of the dahlias beneath the terrace wall, and there was a chill of frost in the air. It was very still, though now and then the harsh call of a pheasant came up faintly through the murmur of the river from the depths of the wood. Millicent could hear no other sound, though she strained her ears to listen and it seemed to her that the rattle of wheels should carry far down the silent valley.

She was waiting somewhat anxiously for the return of her husband, who had set off that morning with three or four other men to walk certain distant stubble and turnip fields for partridges. They had passed a week at the hall, for, although Millicent would have preferred to avoid that particular place, Leslie had said he did not know of any other place where one could obtain rough shooting, as well as a more or less congenial company, in return for what was little more than a first-class hotel bill. He had also added that he needed a holiday, in which Millicent had agreed with him. There was no doubt that he had looked jaded and harassed.

Millicent knew little about her husband's business, except that it was connected with stocks and shares, and the flotation of companies; but she was quite aware that he had met with a serious reverse soon after he married her, since it had been necessary for them to give up their town house and install themselves temporarily in a London flat. Leslie had informed her that reverses were not uncommon in his profession, and he had appeared quite convinced of his ability to recover his losses in a new venture which had something to do with South African gold or diamonds. Of late, however, he had grown dejected and moody. On the previous evening she had seen his face set hard, as he read a letter which bore the London postmark. He had not given her any information about the contents of the letter, for there had been no great measure of confidence between them; but there were one or two telegrams for him among those a groom had brought over from the nearest station during the day, and she felt a little uneasy as she thought of them.

By and by, with a little shiver and a suppressed sigh, she glanced up at the highest part of the climbing wood. It was there she had had her last memorable interview with Geoffrey, almost a year ago. Though she had not cared to face the fact, she was troubled by a suspicion that she had made an unwise choice then. Leslie had changed since their marriage. He was harsh at times, and though he had, even in their more humble quarters, surrounded her with a certain amount of luxury, there was a laxity in his manners and conversation that jarred upon her. Geoffrey, she remembered, had not been addicted to mincing words, but, at least, he had lived in accordance with a Spartan moral code. Millicent was not a scrupulous woman, and her ideas of ethical justice were rudimentary, but she possessed in place of a conscience a delicate sense of refinement which her husband frequently offended.

Feeling chilly at length, and seeing no sign of the shooter's return, Millicent went back into the house. She stopped when she reached the square entrance hall which served the purpose of a lounging-room. The hall had been rudely ceiled and paneled at a time when skilled craftsmen were scarce in the North Country, and in the daylight it was more or less dim and forbidding, but with the lamps lighted and a fire blazing in the wide, old-fashioned hearth, the place looked invitingly comfortable. When she entered, Millicent was not altogether pleased to see another woman there.

Marian Thwaite, whom she knew but had not expected to meet, lay in a big chair near the fire. The glow of health which the keen air of the moors had brought there was in her face. She wore heavy boots and severely simple walking attire. Her features suggested a decided character, and she had unwavering blue eyes.

"Mrs. Boone won't be down for some minutes, and I believe the rest are dressing," Marian said. "I haven't seen you since your marriage, and to tell the truth, you're not looking by any means as fresh as you did before you left us. I suppose it's one effect of living in London?"

She studied Millicent with a steady contemplative gaze, and there was no doubt that her comment was justified. Millicent's face was pallid, there was a certain weariness in her eyes, and on the whole, her expression was languidly querulous.

"I didn't know you were coming to-night," said Millicent, as she sank into a chair.

"I didn't know it myself," Marian explained. "I was out on the fells, and I met Boone as I came down this way. He said somebody would drive me home, if I'd stay. You have been here a week, haven't you? How is it you haven't come over to see us yet?"

"As a matter of fact, I didn't intend to call, and it was rather against my wishes that we came up here," said Millicent with the candor of an old acquaintance. "You were not very cordial when I last saw you, and I can't help a feeling that you are all of you prejudiced against me."

Quite unembarrassed Marian looked at her with a reflective air. "Yes," she admitted, "to some extent that's true. We're closely connected with the Thurstons, and I've no doubt we make rather intolerant partisans. After all, it's only natural that we sympathize with Geoffrey. Besides – you can make what you like of it – he was always a favorite of mine. I suppose you haven't heard from him since he went to Canada?"

"Would you have expected him to write?"

Marian smiled. "Perhaps it would have been unreasonable, but taking it for granted that he hasn't been communicative, I've a piece of news for you. Some Canadian tourists stayed a night at the Ghyll, two or three months ago, and it seems they met him in British Columbia. I understand he is by no means prosperous, but at least getting a footing in the country, and the people apparently have rather a high opinion of him. Did I mention that one of the party was a girl?"

She saw the quickened interest in Millicent's eyes. With assumed indifference in her voice Millicent asked: "What kind of people were they?"

"The girl was handsome – well-finished, too. In fact, she struck me as rather an imperious young person of some consequence in the place she came from. She would pass in any circle that you or I are likely to get an entry to. I don't know whether it's significant, but I understand from Margery that she took some interest in Musker's stories of the Thurstons."

There was nothing to show whether Millicent was pleased with this or not. She did not speak for a moment or two.

"Did they mention what Geoffrey had been doing?" she inquired presently.

"Chopping down trees for sawmills, or something of the kind. The man said Geoffrey had evidently been what they call 'up against it' until lately when he seems to have got upon his feet. It will probably convince you that you were perfectly right in not marrying him."

This time Millicent laughed. "It wouldn't have counted for much with you?"

Marian looked at her with unwavering eyes. "No," she replied, "if I'd had any particular tenderness for Geoffrey it certainly wouldn't have had the least effect beyond making me more sorry for him, but, as it happens, he never did anything to encourage vain ideas of the kind in me." She changed the subject with the abruptness which usually characterized her. "I suppose you haven't seen old Anthony Thurston since you married Leslie? He, at least, is openly bitter against you."

"I haven't. In a way, I suppose he is right. Of course, he would take the stereotyped view that it was all my fault – that is to say, that I had discarded Geoffrey?"

"I believe he did, but it struck me once or twice that Geoffrey proclaimed that view a little too loudly. Of course, with his rather primitive notions of delicacy and what is due to us, it's very much what one would have anticipated in his case. He naturally wouldn't want to leave room for any suspicion that he – wasn't altogether satisfied with you."

Millicent's face clouded. "That is a point which concerns nobody except Geoffrey and myself," she declared.

"And Anthony Thurston," Marian broke in. "Of course, it's an open secret that if you had married Geoffrey you would both have benefited by his will. As things have turned out, my own opinion is that the question whether either of you ever gets a penny of the property depends a great deal on the view he continues to take of the matter. Any way, that's not the least concern of mine, except that I'm sorry for Geoffrey. I wonder if I'm going too far in asking what it was you and he actually split upon. I'm referring to the immediate cause of the trouble."

"I can tell you that," Millicent answered quickly, for she was glad to remove the ground for one suspicion, which was evidently in Marian's mind. "Geoffrey insisted on giving up the mine when he could have sold it, and going out to Australia or Canada. I wouldn't go with him. I think nobody could have reasonably expected me to."

Marian smiled. "Well," she said, "I wonder if you know that your husband was one of the men who were willing to take the mine over. There are reasons for believing it was what brought him here in the first place."

Millicent's start betrayed the fact that this was news to her, but just then there was a rattle of wheels outside, and Marian rose. A murmur of voices and laughter grew clearer when the outer door was opened, and the two could hear the returning shooters talking with their host, who had gone out another way to meet them.

"The birds were scarce and very wild," announced one of them. "We had only two or three brace all morning, though we were a little more fortunate when we got up onto the higher land. It's my candid opinion that we should have done better there, but Leslie had all the luck in the turnips, and he made a shocking bad use of it."

"That's a fact," assented Leslie with what struck Millicent as a rather strained laugh. "I was right off the mark. There are some days when you simply can't shoot."

Several of the women guests now entered the hall, but the men did not come in. Judging from the sounds outside they seemed to be waiting while coats or cartridge bags were handed down to them from the dog-cart, and they were evidently bantering one another in the meanwhile.

"It depends upon how long you sit up in the smoking-room on the previous night," said one of them, and another observed:

"If you happen to be in business, the state of the markets has its effect."

Millicent started again at this, for she remembered her husband's expression when he had read his letter on the preceding evening. A third speaker took up the conversation.

"I don't think any variation in the price of Colonials or Kaffirs, or of wheat and cotton, for that matter, should prevent a man from telling the difference between a hare and a dog. I've a suspicion that if Tom cares to look he'll find one or two number six pellets in the hindquarters of the setter. It's a good thing our friend wasn't quite up to his usual form that time."

A burst of laughter followed, and Leslie's voice broke through it rather sharply as he replied: "He should have kept the brute in hand. The difference isn't a big one when you can only see a liver-colored patch through a clump of bracken. Besides, there was a hare."

"Undoubtedly," cried somebody. "Lawson got it."

Then they came in one after another, and while some of them spoke to their hostess and the other women Leslie walked up to the little table where several letters were spread out. Millicent watched him as he did it, and there was no doubt that the very way he moved was suggestive of restrained eagerness. She saw him tear open a telegram and crumple it in his hand, after which he

seized a second one and ripped it across the fold in his clumsy haste. Then as he put the pieces together his face grew suddenly pale and haggard. Nobody else, however, appeared to notice him, and he leaned with one hand upon the table for a moment or two with his head turned away from her. She felt her heart beat painfully fast, for it was clear that a disaster of some kind had befallen him, though a large part of her anxiety sprang from the question how far the fact was likely to affect herself. He moved away from the table, and went towards the stairway at the further end of the hall, and she followed him a few minutes later. He was sitting by an open window when she reached their room. A candle flickered beside him and a little bundle of papers was clenched in one hand.

"What is it, Harry?" she asked.

He looked up at her, and his voice sounded hoarse. "I'll try to tell you later," he answered. "There's a dinner to be got through, and it will be a big enough effort to sit it out. Slip away as soon as you can afterward without attracting attention. You'll find me on the terrace."

He dismissed her with a wave of his hand, and she turned towards the little dressing-room. When she came out again he had gone, leaving his outdoor clothing scattered on the floor.

The dinner that followed was an ordeal to Millicent, but she took her part in the conversation, and glanced towards her husband only now and then. He did not eat a great deal, and though he spoke when it seemed necessary, she noticed the trace of unsteadiness in his voice. At last, however, the meal, which seemed to drag on interminably, was finished and as soon as possible she slipped out upon the terrace where she found Leslie leaning against a seat. The moon which had risen higher was brighter now, and she could see his face. It showed set and somber in the pale silvery light.

"Well?" she said impatiently. "Can't you speak?"

"I'll try," he answered. "Winkleheim Reef Explorations went down to four and six pence to-day, and as there's 5 shillings a share not paid up, it's very probable that one wouldn't be able to give the stock away before the market closes to-morrow."

"Ah," replied Millicent sharply, "didn't you tell me that they were worth sixteen shillings not very long ago? Why didn't you sell them then?"

"Because, as it seems to me now, my greediness was greater than my judgment. I wanted twenty shillings, and I thought I saw how I could get it." He paused with a little jarring laugh. "As a matter of fact – strange as it may seem – I believed in the thing. That is why I let them send out their independent expert, and held on when the stock began to drop. At the worst, I'd good reasons for believing Walmer would let me see the cipher report in time to sell. As it happened, he and the other traitor sold their own stock instead and that must have started the panic. Now they've got their report. There's no ore that will pay for milling in the reef."

It was not all clear to Millicent, but she understood from his manner that her husband was ruined. "Then what are we to do?" she asked. "Is there nobody who will give you a start again? You must be known in the business."

"That is the precise trouble. I'm too well known. So long as a man is a winner at this particular game and can make it worth while for interested folks to applaud him, or, at least, to keep their mouths shut, he can find a field for his talents when he wants it, but once he makes a false move or comes down with a bang, they get their claws in him and keep him from getting up again. Nobody has any sympathy with a broken company exploiter, especially when he has for once been crazy enough to believe in his own venture."

Leslie found it a small relief to run on with ironical bitterness, but Millicent, who was severely practical in some respects, checked him.

"You haven't answered my other question."

"Then I won't keep you waiting. In a few weeks we'll go out to the Pacific Slope of North America. I may save enough from the wreck to start me in the land-agency business somewhere in British Columbia."

Millicent turned from him, and gazed down the moon-lit valley. Troubled as she was, its rugged beauty and its stillness appealed to her, and she knew it would be a wrench to leave the land which had hitherto safely sheltered her. She had known only the smoother side of life in it, and nobody could appreciate the ease and luxury it could offer some of its inhabitants better than she did. Now, it seemed, she must leave it, and go out to struggle for a mere living in some unlovely town in what she supposed must be a wild and semi-barbarous country. She felt bitter against the man who, as she thought of it, had dragged her down, but she hid her resentment.

"But you know nothing about the land-agency business," she pointed out.

Leslie laughed ironically. "I have a few ideas. Milligan – we had him over at dinner once – made a good deal of money that way, and from what he told me it doesn't seem very different from the business I have been engaged in. Success evidently depends upon one's ability to sell the confiding investor what he thinks he'd like to get. Somehow I fancy that, with moderately good luck, two or three years of it should set us on our feet."

"But those two or three years. It's unthinkable!" Millicent broke out.

"I'm afraid you will have to face them," said Leslie dryly. He turned and looked hard at her. "You can't reasonably rue your bargain. You knew when I married you that while I had the command of money my business was a risky one."

Again Millicent stood silent a moment or two. She recognized that it was largely because Leslie enjoyed that command of money that she had discarded Geoffrey. Now his riches had apparently taken wings and vanished, but the man was bound to her still. One could fancy that there was something like retribution in the thing.

"It's rather dreadful, but I suppose I shall not make it any better by complaining," she remarked after a long silence.

Her husband's manner became embarrassed. "I understand that Anthony Thurston is well off and you were a favorite of his," he said. "Would it be of any use if you explained the trouble to him?"

"No," was the answer, "it would be perfectly useless, and for other reasons that course is impossible. He meant me to marry Geoffrey and I've mortally offended him. He's a hard, determined man."

Leslie made a sign of assent, though there was a suggestion of grim amusement in his manner. "I suppose you couldn't very well explain that it was Geoffrey who threw you over? That would, no doubt, be too much to expect of you, and, after all, when you get to the bottom of the matter it wouldn't be true. In reality you finished with Geoffrey when he decided to emigrate instead of selling the mine, didn't you?"

Millicent flashed a swift glance at him, but he met it half-mockingly, and she turned her head away. "Why should you make yourself intolerable?" she returned. "I'm sorry for you – that is, I want to be, if you will let me."

Leslie shrugged his shoulders as he lit a cigar. "Well," he said, "it can't be helped. We must face the thing! And now I don't want to set the others wondering why we have slipped away; we had better go in again." They walked back info the house.

Leslie, with one or two of the other men, sat up late in the smoking-room. Leslie told a number of stories with force and point, and when at length two of his companions went up the stairway together, one of them looked at the other with a lifting of the eyebrows.

"After what Leslie has got through to-night, I'll take the farthest place in the line from him to-morrow," he said. "If his nerves aren't unusually good it seems quite possible that there'll be more than a setter peppered."

CHAPTER VII
THE BREAKING OF THE JAM

It was late one moonlight night when Geoffrey Thurston sat inside his double-skinned tent which was pitched above a river of British Columbia. A few good furs checkered the spruce twigs which served as a carpet, and the canvas dwelling was both commodious and comfortable. A bright brass lamp hung from the ridge pole, a nickeled clock ticked cheerily upon a hanging shelf behind the neat camp cot, while the rest of the well-made furniture betokened a degree of prosperity. One of Savine's junior assistants, sent up there in an emergency to replace an older man, sat close by, and, because he dwelt in a bark shanty, envied Thurston his tent.

Geoffrey was studying a bridge-work tracing that lay unrolled upon his knees.

"I can only repeat what I said months ago. The wing slide of the log pass is too short and the angle over sharp," he said, glancing at the jam. "An extra big log will jam there some day and imperil the whole bridge. Did you send a man down to keep watch to-night?"

"The slide is in accordance with the Roads and Trails specification," answered the young man, airily. "There was no reason why we should do more work than they asked for. You're an uneasy man, Thurston, always looking for trouble, and I've had enough of late over the rascally hoboes who, when they feel inclined, condescend to work for me. Oh, yes! I posted the lookout as soon as I heard Davies was running his saw logs down."

Thurston hitched his chair forward and threw the door-flap back so that he could look out into the night. The tent stood perched on the hillside. Long ranks of climbing pines stretched upwards from it to the scarped rocks which held up the snow-fields on the shoulders of the mighty peaks above. Thin white mist and the roar of water rose up from the shadowy gorge below, but in one place, where the rock walls which hemmed it in sloped down, a gossamer-like structure spanned the chasm. This was a wagon-road bridge Julius Savine, the contractor of large interests and well-known name, was building for the Provincial authorities, and on their surveyor's recommendation he had sub-let to Thurston the construction of a pass through which saw-logs and driftwood might slide without jamming between the piers. Savine, being pressed for time, had brought in a motley collection of workmen, picked up haphazard in the seaboard cities. After bargaining to work for certain wages, these workmen had demanded twenty per cent. more. Thurston, who had picked his own assistants carefully, among the sturdy ranchers, and had aided Savine's representative in resisting this demand, now surmised that the malcontents were meditating mischief. There were some mighty mean rascals among them, his foreman said.

"You're looking worried again," observed his companion, presently, and Thurston answered, "Perhaps I am. I wish Davies would run his logs down by daylight, but presumably the stream is too fast for him when the waters rise. It might give some of your friends yonder an opportunity, Summers."

"You don't figure they're capable of wrecking the bridge?" replied Summers, showing sudden uneasiness.

"One or two among them, including the man I had to thrash, are capable of anything. Perhaps you had better hail your watchman," Thurston said.

Summers blew a whistle, and an answer came back faintly through the fret of the river: "Plenty saw logs coming down. All of them handy sizes and sliding safely through."

"That's good enough," declared Summers. "I'm not made of cast-iron, and need a little sleep at times, so good-night to you!"

He departed with the cheerful confidence of the salaried man, and Thurston, who fought for his own interests, flung himself down on his trestle cot with all his clothes on. Neither the timber slide nor the bridge was quite finished, but because rivers in that region shrink at night when the

frost checks the drainage from the feeding glaciers on the peaks above, the saw-miller had insisted on driving down his logs when there was less chance of their stranding on the shoals that cumbered the high-water channel. Thurston lay awake for some time, listening to the fret of the river, which vibrated far across the silence of the hills, and to the occasional crash of a mighty log smiting the slide. Hardly had his eyelids closed when he was aroused by a sound of hurried footsteps approaching the tent. He stood wide awake in the entrance before the newcomer reached it.

"There's a mighty big pine caught its butt on one slide and jammed its thin end across the pier," said the man. "Logs piling up behind it already!"

As he spoke somebody beat upon a suspended iron sheet down in the valley and drowsy voices rose up from among the clustered tents. Summers went by shouting, "Get a move on, before we lose the bridge!"

Five minutes later Thurston, running across a bending plank, halted on the rock which served as foundation for the main bridge pier. Beside him Summers shouted confused orders to a group of struggling men. The moonlight beat down mistily through the haze that rose from the river, and Geoffrey could see the long wedge-headed timber framing that he had built, beside the wing on the shore-side, so that any trunk floating down would cannon off at an angle and shoot safely between the piers. But one huge fir had proved too long for the pass, and when its butt canted, the other end had driven athwart the point of the wedge, after which, because the river was black with drifting logs, other heavy trunks drove against it and jammed it fast. Panting men were hard at work with levers and pike-poles striving to wrench the massive trunk clear, and one lighted an air-blast flare, whose red glare flickered athwart the strip of water foaming between the piers. It showed that some of the logs forced up by the pressure were sliding out above the others, while, amid a horrible grinding, some sank. One side of the river was blocked by a mass of timber that was increasing every moment. Thurston feared that the unfinished piers could not long withstand the pressure, and he remembered that his own work would be paid for only on completion. Nevertheless, he passed several minutes in a critical survey, and then glanced towards certain groups of dark figures watching for the approaching ruin.

"She'll go down inside an hour – that is certain, and Savine will lose thousands of dollars," said Summers, whose eyes were wide with apprehension. "I'm rattled completely. Can't you think of anything that might be done?"

"Yes!" answered Thurston, coolly. "It is, however, almost too late now. It could have been done readily, if the man who should have seen to it had not turned traitor. Hello! Where's Mattawa Tom?"

A big sinewy ax-man from the forests of Northern Ontario sprang up beside him, and Thurston said:

"I'm going to try to chop through the king log that's keying them. It's rather more than you bargained for, but will you stand by me, Tom?"

"Looks mighty like suicide!" was the dry answer. "But if you're ready to chance it, I'm coming right along."

The workmen had divided into two hostile camps, but there was a growl of admiring wonder from friends and foes alike when two figures, balancing bright axes, stood high up on the pier slides ready to leap down upon the working logs. Then disjointed cries went up: "Too late!" "You'll be smashed flatter than a flapjack when the jam breaks up!" "Get hold of the fools, somebody!" "Take their axes away!"

"I'll brain the first man who touches mine," threatened Thurston, turning savagely upon those who approached him with remonstrances, and there was a simultaneous murmur from all the assembly when the two adventurous men dropped upon the timber. The logs rolled, groaned, and heaved beneath them and Thurston, trusting to the creeper spikes upon his heels, sprang from one great tree trunk to another behind his companion, who had a longer experience of the perilous work of log-driving. Here a gap, filled with spouting foam, opened up before him; there a trunk upon which he

was about to step rolled over and sank. But he worked his way forward towards the center of the fir which keyed the growing mass. This log was many feet in girth. Pressed down level with the water, it was already bending like a slackly-strung bow.

The example proved inspiring. Thurston's assistants were sturdy, fearless men, who often risked their lives in wresting a living from the forest, so several among them prepared to follow. Two seamen deserters sprang out from the ranks of the mutineers. One stalwart forest rancher, however, tripped his comrade up, and sat upon his prostrate form shouting, "You'll stop just where you are, you blame idiot! You couldn't do nothing if you got there. Hardly room for them two fellows already where they can get at the log!"

The remaining volunteers saw the force of this argument and when somebody increased the blast of the lamp so that the roaring column of flame leapt up higher, the men stood very still, staring at the two who had now gained the center of the partly submerged log.

It requires considerable practice to acquire full mastery of the long-hafted ax, but Thurston, who was stout of arm and keen of eye, had managed to earn his bread with it one winter in an Ontario logging camp. When he swung aloft the heavy wedge of steel, it reflected the blast lamp's radiance, making red flashes as it circled round his head. It came down hissing close past his knee. Mattawa Tom's blade crossed it when it rose, and the first white chip leapt up. More chips followed in quick succession until they whirled in one continuous shower, and the razor-edged steel losing definite form became a confused circling brightness, in the center of which two supple figures swayed and heaved. The red light smiting the faces of the two showed great drops of sweat, the swell of toil-hardened muscles on the corded arms, and the rise of each straining chest. There was not a clash nor a falter, but, flash after flash, the blades came down chunking into the ever-widening notch. Summers had seen sword play in Montreal armories, and had heard the ax clang often on the side of Western firs, but – for Thurston was fighting to stave off ruin – this grim struggle in the face of a desperate risk surpassed any remembered exhibition of fencers' skill with the steel. The trunk was bending visibly beneath the hewers, the river frothed more at their feet, and the giant logs were rolling, creeping, shocking close behind, ready to plunge forward when the partly severed trunk should yield.

Thurston felt as if his lungs were bursting, his heart throbbed painfully, and something drummed deafeningly inside his head. His vision grew hazy, and he could scarcely see the widening gap in the rough bark into which the trenchant steel cut. It was evident that the steadily increasing jam would rub the bridge piers out of existence long before any two men could hew half way through the great trunk, but, fortunately, the log was now bending like a fully-drawn bow, and the pressure would burst it asunder when a little more of its circumference had been chopped into. So, choking and blinded with perspiration, Geoffrey smote on mechanically, until the man from Mattawa said, "She's about busted."

Just then there was a clamor from the watchers on the piers. Men shouted, "Come back." "Whole jam's starting!" "King log's yielding now!" "Jump for your lives before the wreckage breaks away with you!"

Mattawa Tom leapt shorewards from moving log to log, but for a few moments Thurston, who scarcely noticed his absence, chopped on alone. Filled with the lust of conflict, he remembered only that it was necessary to make sure of victory before he relaxed an effort. Thrice more in succession he whirled the heavy ax above his head, while, with a sharp snapping of fibers, the fir trunk yielded beneath his feet. Flinging his ax into the river he stood erect, breathless, a moment too late. The logs behind the one which perilously supported him were creeping forward ready for the mad rush that must follow a few seconds later.

There remained now but one poor chance of escape and he seized it instinctively. Springing along the sinking trunk, he threw himself clear of it into the river, while running men jostled each other as they surged toward the side of the timber when he sank. A wet head broke the surface, a swinging left hand followed it. The swimmer clutched the edge of a loosely-fitted beam, and held it

until strong hands reached down to him. Some gripped his wet fingers, some the back of his coat, one even clutched his hair. There was a heave, then a scramble, and, amid hoarse cheers, the rescued man fell over backwards among his rescuers.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.