

Bindloss Harold

Partners of the Out-Trail



Harold Bindloss

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PART I – THE LINESMAN

CHAPTER I

THE BROKEN WIRE

Winter had begun and snow blew about the lonely telegraph shack where Jim Dearham studied an old French romance. He read rather by way of mental discipline than for enjoyment, and partly with the object of keeping himself awake. Life is primitive in the British Columbian bush and Jim sometimes felt he must fight against the insidious influence of the wilds. Although he had chosen the latter when the cities palled, he had studied at McGill, with a view of embarking on a professional career. Want of money was the main obstacle, but love of adventure had counted for much. His adventures had been numerous since he left the university, and he now and then tried to remind himself that he was civilized.

Outside the shack, the stiff dark pines rolled back to the frozen North where a new city fed the mining camps. Jim had been up there and had found some gold, besides a copper vein, but when he got his patent for the latter his funds ran out and he returned to the South and followed a number of occupations. Some were monotonous and some exciting. None paid him well. Now his clothes were old and mended with patches cut from cotton flour-bags; his skin was browned by wind and frost. He was thin and muscular, and his eyes had something of the inscrutable calm that marks the Indian's, but the old French romance and one or two other books hinted at cultivated taste. As a matter of fact, Jim was afraid of getting like an Indian. Life in the wilds was good, but one ran some risks.

The shack was built of logs, notched where they crossed at the corners and caulked with moss. There was a stone chimney, and a big wood fire snapped on the hearth. Jim sat close to the blaze in a deerhide chair, with his old skin coat hung over the back to keep off the stinging draughts. He could see the telegraph instrument. His and his comrade's duty was to watch it day and night, because theirs was a bad section and accidents happened. Jake had gone hunting and since the gale outside was freshening Jim wondered why he stopped so long.

After a time Jim put down his book and mused. By comparison with the ragged tents in which he had lived in the northern barrens, the shack was comfortable. Axes and tools for mending the line stood in a corner; old clothes, slickers, and long boots that must be mended occupied another. A good supply of provisions was stowed on some shelves; a rifle and a shotgun hung on the wall. He had all a man needed in the woods and admitted that he was lucky to have so much, but the rudeness of his surroundings sometimes jarred. This was strange, because he had never known luxury. He wondered whether he had inherited his dislike for ugliness, and the instincts of which he was now and then vaguely conscious. It was possible, for his father, who died when Jim was young, had come from the Old Country.

Then he dwelt with languid enjoyment upon something that happened when he was a waiter at a fashionable restaurant at Montreal. A party of English tourists came in one day for lunch. Jim remembered the scene well: the spacious room with the sunshine on the pillars and the reflections on glass and silver; the flies about the tables, the monotonous throb of the electric fan, and the strangers looking for a place. There were two men, one older than the other, and a girl. Jim had often pictured her since, and always with a curious satisfaction. It was not that she was beautiful, although her face

was finely molded and her movements were graceful. It was her delicate fastidiousness and the hint one got of refinement and cultivation. Although she smiled now and then, Jim remembered her calm and the tranquillity of her voice. He had not met a girl like that before, but she went away with the others, one of whom gave him a dollar, and it was ridiculous to imagine he would see her again.

This, however, was not important and he got up and went to the telegraph instrument. He called the next station and was satisfied when he got an answer. Some Government messages that must not be delayed were to be sent North and the line was working well. Jim went back to his chair and soon afterwards leaned forward, listening. He heard the wind in the pine-tops and the thud of snow, shaken from the tossing branches, on the roof. That was all, but he had trained his senses in the woods until they worked unconsciously. Somebody was coming and he knew it was not Jake.

A minute or two afterwards he heard steps in the snow. The steps were heavy, as if the men were tired. Somebody knocked and Jim opened the door. Two men came in and throwing down their packs shook the snow from their ragged furs. Their boots were broken, their leggins badly worn, and their faces were pinched with cold.

"I don't suppose you'll turn us out. It's what our packers call pretty fierce to-night," one remarked.

"Certainly not," said Jim. "Come right up to the fire. How did you make the shack?"

The strangers advanced and Jim hid his surprise, although they were the men whose lunch he had served at the Montreal restaurant. He had learned in the wilds something of the Indian's reserve.

"We hit the wire at dusk," one replied. "We had been climbing with a party of the Canadian Alpine Club, and stopped among the high ranges longer than we meant. In fact, the snow rather surprised us. The others had gone before we started and we had a rough time coming South."

"You didn't make it without packers," said Jim, who knew they were English.

"We left the boys some distance back. There was not much shelter at the camp and although they were satisfied, we resolved to follow the line and try to find a shack. The boys will, no doubt, arrive in the morning."

Jim nodded, because a line was cut through the forest for the telegraph wires.

"You ran some risk. If you camped at sundown, it's a while since you had supper. I can give you coffee and a hot bannock."

He put the kettle on the fire and when the meal was over studied his guests as they lighted their pipes. One was about thirty years old, and in spite of his ragged clothes, Jim thought him a man with cultivated tastes and wide experience. The other was young and looked frank. He had a refined, intelligent face and was like the girl whom Jim had seen at the restaurant; she was, perhaps, a relation. For a time the strangers talked about their journey and then one looked at Jim rather hard.

"Haven't I seen you before?"

Jim smiled. "At Cibley's as you go to the new post-office at Montreal."

"Oh, yes! It was a very well-served lunch," said the other and picked up the French romance. "A curious book, but rather fine in parts. Do you understand the fellow?"

"On the whole. I like him; you feel he has a grip. Still he's puzzling now and then."

"These French' writers are puzzling; always trying to work off an epigram," the younger man remarked. "However, I suppose there's as much French as English spoken at Montreal and Quebec."

"Not French like this," the other said with a smile. "I doubt if an up-to-date *boulevardier* would own it for his mother's tongue. You would be surprised if you heard our Cumberland farmers use Chaucer's English."

"I don't know; they go back beyond him now and then. When they count their sheep I imagine they talk like Alfred or Canute. But suppose you give us an example of ancient French."

The older man opened the book and after turning a number of pages read a passage with taste and feeling. Then he looked at Jim.

"He's primitive; our thoughts run in another groove. But I daresay there's something archaic about Quebec French and you perhaps know the latter. Have I struck the right note?"

"Hit it first time! Anyhow, you've got my notion of what he meant," Jim replied. Then he paused and added thoughtfully: "But I don't know if we're as different as you think. In the North, men get back to primitive things."

The other nodded. "It's possible. One certainly gets a primitive hunger and learns something about bodily needs."

Jim lighted his pipe and mused. He had not talked to cultivated people since he left McGill. He felt rather moved and quietly excited; the strange thing was, their English voices and manner were not new. In a way, it was ridiculous, but he felt as if he had known them, or others of their kind, before.

"You are from the Old Country and your friend seems to know Cumberland," he said. "Do you know Langrigg Hall?"

He thought the older man gave him a keen glance, but next moment his face was inscrutable and with a little gesture of satisfaction he stretched his legs to the fire. His companion, however, looked interested.

"Why, yes," said the latter. "But there are a number of Langriggs in the North of England."

"At the place I mean there is a marsh."

"Then, I do know the hall. It stands upon a low ridge – what we call a knowe – with the big fells behind and the sands in front. At low-water, a river winds about the flats. It's a fine old house, although it's small."

"Isn't there a square tower with a battlement? The roof beams in the older part are bent, not straight."

The other looked surprised. "Have you been there?"

"No," said Jim, thoughtfully. "I've never left Canada, but a man I knew used to talk about Langrigg. I expect he told me about these things; he is dead now."

He glanced at the older man. The latter's eyes were half-closed and his pose was slack, as if he were languidly enjoying the warmth, but Jim thought he had been listening. Then he wondered why the other's short description had given him so distinct a picture; he could see the rugged blue hills in the background and the river winding among the sands. After all, his father had not talked about Langrigg often; in fact, only once or twice, when he was ill. Moreover, Jim reflected that he himself had used no Western colloquialisms; he had talked to the strangers like an Englishman.

"Then your friend must have been at Langrigg. It looks as if he knew the hall well," remarked the younger man.

His companion roused himself with a jerk. "I was nearly asleep. Give me your pouch; my tobacco's out."

He filled his pipe and turned to Jim. "Hope I didn't interrupt. I forget what we were talking about. It looks as if you didn't like a waiter's job."

Jim laughed and went to the telegraph, which began to click. He read the message and calling the next station waited for a time, and then turned to his guests.

"Line's broken and I've got to leave you. You can use the bunks; my partner must sit up and watch the instrument when he comes back. You can tell him I've gone to look for the break."

"Do you know where the break is?" the younger man asked.

"I don't know," said Jim, putting on his fur cap and old skin coat. "It mayn't be far off and it may be some distance. All I know is it's between here and the next shack."

"We found it hard to face the wind and there's more now."

Jim smiled. "One gets used to storms up here and the line must be mended. Some important messages from Ottawa are coming along."

He picked up some tools and when he opened the door the others heard the scream of the gale. The flames blew out from the snapping logs and an icy draught swept the room and roared in the chimney. Then the door shut, the fire burned steadily, and all was quiet in the shack.

"Our host excites one's curiosity," said the younger man.

"You mean he excited yours. You're an imaginative fellow, Dick."

Richard Halliday had remarked that since they reached the shack Mordaunt had not called him Dick and vaguely wondered why. Lance Mordaunt generally had an object. Dick doubted if he had been as sleepy as he pretended when he asked for his tobacco pouch.

"Oh, well," he said, "if we were in England, you wouldn't expect to find a fellow like this using his leisure to study old-fashioned French."

"We are not in England," Mordaunt rejoined. "When you judge Canadians by English standards you're likely to get misled. The country's, so to speak, in a transition stage; they haven't developed schools of specialists yet, and an intelligent man can often make good at an unaccustomed job. This fellow, for example, was a waiter."

He picked up the romance and put it on a shelf. Mordaunt was generally neat and Dick noted that he replaced the book in the spot from which it had been taken and put the rest against it.

"Anyhow, it's curious he knew about Langrigg," Dick insisted.

"I don't think so," said Mordaunt, carelessly. "A number of our farmers' sons have emigrated. He stated he had not left Canada and the man who told him about Langrigg was dead."

"The man who ought to own Langrigg vanished in Canada."

"On the whole, I imagine that's lucky. The trustees spent a large sum in trying to find him and were satisfied he was dead. His age made this probable."

"But he might have had a son."

"Of course," Mordaunt agreed. "Suppose he had a son? The fellow obviously knows nothing about his inheritance; and for that matter, Langrigg is not worth much. I expect he's engaged in some useful occupation, chopping trees or keeping store, for example, and is, no doubt, satisfied with his lot. I don't suppose he is the kind of man you would like to see at Langrigg. Besides, if he turned up, a number of people would suffer."

"That is so," Dick said thoughtfully. "After all, however, if Franklin Dearham had a son, he ought to be at Langrigg. Joseph left the hall to Franklin and his heirs."

Mordaunt smiled. "It was as illogical as other things Joseph did. He was not a good business man and spent the most part of his money after he quarreled with Franklin and turned him out. Then, shortly before he died, when Franklin had vanished and the estate would hardly pay its debts, he left him Langrigg. However, the thing's done with, and if I found Franklin's heir, I doubt if I'd feel justified in meddling. Matters like this are better left alone." He got up and stretched himself. "Now I'm going to bed."

He got into the nearest bunk, which was filled with spruce-twigs and wild hay, and soon went to sleep, but for a time Dick sat by the fire. The linesman had excited his curiosity; it was strange the fellow knew about Langrigg. Then he was obviously a man with rather unusual qualities and character; his books indicated this. Dick resolved to find out something about him when he returned.

By and by the other linesman came in with a mule-tail buck, and when Dick gave him Jim's message sat down by the telegraph. Dick went to bed and did not wake until his packers arrived at daybreak. The linesman was watching the telegraph, but the finger had not moved and he owned that he was getting anxious about his comrade.

Dick suggested that they should look for him, but on the whole the linesman hardly thought this necessary. He said the man from the next post would have started to meet Jim. Then Mordaunt wanted to get off. The snow had stopped, the wind had fallen, and if they missed this opportunity, they might be held up by another storm, while their food was getting short. Dick hesitated, but Mordaunt

generally led him where he would and after some argument he agreed to start. Half an hour later they left the shack and pushed on down the line.

CHAPTER II IN THE SNOW

When Jim left the shack the cold pierced his furs like a knife. For a few moments he heard nothing but the roar of the gale and could hardly get his breath. His eyes ran water and the snow beat his smarting face. Then he braced himself, for he had gone out to mend the line on other bitter nights and could not lose his way. Where the telegraph runs through the forests of the North a narrow track is cut for packhorse transport to the linesmen's posts, and one could not push between the trunks that lined the gap without finding thickets and tangles of fallen logs. The track, however, was not graded like a road. Outcropping rocks broke its surface, short brush had grown up, and although the snow had covered some of the obstacles its top was soft.

For a time the trees broke the wind, and Jim pushed on, hoping that he might soon find a trailing wire, but the posts loomed up, undamaged, out of the tossing haze. Luck was obviously against him, and he might be forced to walk half-way to the next shack, from which the other linesman would start. The snow was loose and blew about in a kind of frozen dust that was intolerably painful to his smarting skin. Although his cap had ear-flaps, he could not cover his mouth and nose, and the fine powder, dried by the cold, clogged his eyelashes and filled his nostrils. His old coat did not keep out the wind and, although he was in partial shelter, he was now and then compelled to stop for breath. The gale was getting worse and, as sometimes happens when a blizzard rages, the temperature was falling.

Jim's flesh shrank from the Arctic blast, but he knew that in the North bodily weakness must be conquered. In the stern battle with savage Nature prudence is a handicap; one must risk all and do what one undertakes since there is no place in the wilderness for the man who counts the cost. Moreover, Jim had fought harder fights, when his strength was lowered by want of food, and he went forward, conscious of one thing: the line was broken and must be mended. There was no other way. He must give up his post if he could not make good.

In the meantime his physical senses, developed in the wilds, worked with mechanical regularity and guarded him. He could not hear much through his fur cap and often for some moments could not see, but he stopped when a tossing branch broke off and struck the snow in front, and sprang forward when a fir plunged down a few yards behind. He could not have stated that he knew the danger, but he avoided it where a stranger to the woods would have been crushed.

Perhaps the going was the worst. Plowing through the loose snow, he struck his feet against outcropping rocks and sometimes stubbed them hard on a fallen log. In places he sank deep; the labor was heavy and wind and cold made it awkward to breathe. His lungs seemed cramped; the blood could not properly reach his hands and feet. It was a comfort that they hurt, because when he no longer felt the painful tingling the real trouble would begin. One cannot feel when one's flesh is frozen. He could not have seen his watch had he taken it out, and doubted if there was warmth enough in his body to keep it going, because watches and gun-locks often freeze in the North. For all that, he knew how long he had left the shack and how much ground he had covered.

Men like Dearham learn such things, and by the half-instinctive faculties they develop Canadian traffic is carried on in winter storms. Telegraph linesmen in the bush and railroad hands on mountain sections use powers beyond the imagining of sheltered city men. They make good, giving all that can be demanded of flesh and blood; the wires work and Montreal-Vancouver expresses keep time in the snow.

One thing made Jim's task a little easier. The wire was overhead and when he reached the break he would see the trailing end. The trees had been chopped back; there was nothing to help the current's leap to earth, and he would not be forced to cut and call up the next shack with his battery. He wanted to find a fallen post, but as he struggled forward the half-seen poles came back out of

the icy mist in an unending row. He had been out two hours and had not reached the worst spot. The line had no doubt broken at Silver's Gulch.

Some time afterwards he stopped and leaned against a post. The woods broke off behind him and in front a gap, filled with waves of snow, opened up. He could not see across; indeed, for a few moments, he could hardly see at all, but the turmoil that came out of the dark hollow hinted at its depth. He heard the roar of tossing trees far below and his brain reproduced an accurate picture of the gulch that pierced the high tableland. It was wide just there, but narrowed farther on, and a river, fed by a glacier, flowed through the defile. The river was probably frozen, although it ran fast. The wires went down obliquely, and in one place there was a straight fall of a hundred feet. The rest of the rugged slope was very steep and one needed some nerve to follow the row of posts when the light was good.

Jim did not hesitate when he had got his breath. With a blizzard raging, his job would not bear thinking about. He let go the post and slipped down some distance. When he stopped he got up badly shaken and crawled down cautiously, trying to keep the line in sight, but it was not a logical sense of duty that urged him on; he only knew he must not be beaten. He fought instinctively, because this was a region where to give ground in the battle generally means to die.

He reached a bend of the line where a post stood on a broken pitch that was almost a precipice. Twenty or thirty yards below it became a precipice and Jim met the full force of the wind as he crept round the corner. Then he saw a trailing wire, and, a little farther on, a broken post that had slipped down some distance. Crouching in the snow behind a rock for a few minutes, he thought hard. Although the post was short and not very heavy, he could not drag it back while the wire was attached. The latter must be loosed, and fixed again when the post was in its place, but it would be enough if the line was lifted a foot or two from the ground. Proper repairs could be made afterwards; the important thing was the Government messages should not be held up. For all that, it would be hard to reach the spot.

He crawled down and stopped beside the post. The snow was blinding, the wind buffeted him savagely, and since he was near the top of the precipice it was risky to stand up. His fur mittens embarrassed him, but he could not take them off, because when the thermometer falls below zero one cannot touch steel tools with unprotected hands. After some trouble, Jim loosed the wire and then saw the broken ends would not meet. However, since the line curved, a post could be cut in order to shorten the distance, and he crawled back to the spot where he had left his ax. Had he not been used to the snowy wilds, he could not have found the tool.

He cut the post and, with numbed and clumsy hands, joined the wire, but it must now be raised from the ground. It was impossible to get the fallen post on end and had he been able to do so powder would have been needed to make a hole. He could, however, support the post on a rock, and he floundered up and down in the snow, looking for a suitable spot. When he found a place, it was some way from the post, which was too heavy to move, and he went cautiously down hill for the other. Although this was lighter, he did not see how he could drag it back to the level he had left, and he sat down behind a rock and thought.

His coat and cap were heavy with frozen snow that the wind had driven into the fur; in spite of his efforts, he was numbed, and the gale raged furiously. The snow blew past the rock in clouds that looked like waves of fog; he had been exposed to the icy blast for three or four hours and could not keep up the struggle long. The warmth was leaving his body fast. Yet he did not think much about the risk. His business was to mend the line and his acquiescence was to some extent mechanical. To begin with, he must get the post up the hill and he braced himself for the effort.

He could just lift the butt and, getting it on his shoulder, faced the climb, staggering forward a few steps while the thin end of the post dragged in the snow, and then stopping. It was tremendous labor, and he knew he would need all the strength he had left to reach the shack, but in the meantime this did not count. Getting home was a problem that must be solved after the line was mended.

At length he reached the spot he had fixed upon, fastened the wire to the insulator, and lifted the top of the post a few feet. The job was done, but his body was exhausted and his brain was dull. He had made good and was conscious of a vague satisfaction. He could not, however, indulge feelings like this: he must now nerve himself for the effort to get home.

He went down hill a little, in order to shorten the curve; and it was then, when he had conquered, his luck failed. His foot slipped and when he fell he started a small snowslide that carried him down. He could not stop, the dry snow flowed about him like a river, and he knew there was a precipice not far below. The snow carried him over a ledge; he plunged down a few yards, and brought up against a projecting rock. The blow shook him, he felt something snap, and for a minute or two nearly lost consciousness. Then he was roused by a sharp prick and a feeling that something grated in his side. He knew what had happened: one, or perhaps two, of his ribs had broken and an incautious movement had driven the broken end into the flesh.

The mechanical injury, however, was the worst, since Jim was too hard to collapse from shock, and he lay quiet, trying to think. One could walk in spite of a broken rib; Jim had known badly injured men walk two or three hundred miles to reach a doctor, but the blizzard would try his strength. It was a long way to the shack and farther to the next post, but on the whole he thought it prudent to make for the latter. The linesman, finding the line broken, would set out to look for the break, and when Jim met him his help would be useful. In fact, it might be necessary.

He felt a sharper prick as he got up, but he followed the posts down the gulch and toiled up the other side. His breathing was labored and painful as he climbed the rugged slope. At the top the ground was roughly level and the tossing pines gave some shelter from the wind. Jim coughed now and then and thought there was a salt taste in his mouth. This looked ominous and the stabs caused by his jolting movements hurt, but he would not think about it. It was pain, not blood, that gave him the salt taste. He had done his job and begun a harder fight. The claim of duty had been met and now he was fighting for his life.

The pines roared as he struggled on and at times a blinding haze of snow filled the gap. He had thrown away his tools, but his coat was getting heavy. Now and then he tried to brush off the snow and wiped his lips. The salt taste was plainer; but he was not going to admit he knew what it meant and was glad he could not see his mittens when he took them from his mouth. Speed was important and he labored on. He could not remember afterwards how long he stumbled forward, but at length he stopped and stood swaying dizzily when an indistinct object loomed through the snow. It was like a man and came towards him.

"Hallo! Why, Pete – " he gasped and with an effort reached and leaned against a pine.

The other stopped. "It's Pete, all right: but what d'you allow you're doing on my piece of the section?"

"Reckoned I might meet you coming along," Jim replied, leaning hard against the tree. "You can take the back trail. The line's fixed."

"That's good. But why are you heading this way? I don't get you yet."

"I fell down the gulch. Some ribs broke."

"Ah!" said Pete. "Which side?"

Jim indicated the spot where he felt the stabs and Pete went to his other side.

"It's a blamed long hike to my shack, but you've got to make it. If we stop here, we freeze. Put your arm on my shoulder."

They set off, and Jim was glad to use such help as the other could give. He was getting dull and began to doubt if he could reach the shack, but although both would freeze if they stopped, Pete would not leave him. It was not a thing to argue about. Pete was a white man and in the North the white man's code is stern. One here and there might have a yellow streak, but as a rule such a man soon left the wilds. Anyhow, Pete was going to see him through. Both would make the shack, or both would be buried in the snow. It was not a matter of generous sentiment; one did things like that.

They made it somehow, at a cost neither afterwards talked about, for at length a pale glimmer pierced the blowing snow. Then the dark bulk of a building loomed up ahead and Pete pushed open a door. He was forced to use both hands to shut the door and Jim, left without support, staggered into the room. His head swam, his eyes were dim, and his chin was red. There was a chair, if he could reach it, but it seemed to be rocking about and when he stretched out his hand it had gone. Next moment he fell with a heavy thud. He felt a horrible stab, a fit of coughing shook him, and he knew nothing more.

CHAPTER III

THE THIRD PARTNER

Some weeks after he mended the line, Jim sat by a window in a small frame house at Vancouver city. He had been very ill and knew little about his journey on a hand-sledge from the telegraph shack to the railroad. There was no doctor in the woods and Jake Winter, his helper, engaging two Indians, wrapped Jim in furs and started in a snowstorm for the South. It was an arduous journey, and once or twice Jake thought his comrade would succumb, but they reached the railroad and he put Jim on the cars.

Now Jim was getting better and had left his bed for a rocking-chair. The house stood on the hill, and he looked down, across tall blocks of stores and offices, on the Inlet. Plumes of dingy smoke from locomotives burning soft coal moved among the lumber stacks, a tug with a wave at her bows headed for the wharf, the water sparkled in the sunshine, and there was a background of dark forest and white mountains. The picture had some beauty that was not altogether spoiled by the telegraph wires, giant posts, and advertisement signs. These emphasized the contrast between the raw and aggressive civilization that is typical of Western towns and the austerity of the surrounding wilds. In the foreground were steamers, saw-mills, and street-cars; in the distance trackless woods and untrodden snow.

The house stood in a shabby street and on the ground floor Jake's mother and sister sold drygoods and groceries. The business was not remarkably profitable, but Mrs. Winter was a widow and Carrie had sacrificed her ambitions for her sake. Now she sat opposite Jim, whom she had nursed. Carrie did not know much about sickness when she began, but she was capable and Jim liked to have her about. She knew when to stimulate him by cheerful banter and when he needed soothing. Carrie could be quiet, although she could talk. Jim imagined all girls were not like that.

He studied her with languid satisfaction. Carrie was tall and vigorous: he had seen her handle heavy boxes the transfer men dumped on the sidewalk. She did such things when Jake was not about, and Jim knew she baked the cakes and biscuit Mrs. Winter sold. For all that, her strength was not obtrusive; her movements were graceful and when not occupied she was calm. She had some beauty, for her face was finely molded and her color was warm, and Jim liked her level glance. He liked her voice; it was clear without being harsh, and she seldom used smart colloquialisms. In fact, Carrie was not the girl one would expect to meet at a second-class store.

"You are looking bright this afternoon," she remarked.

"I feel bright," said Jim. "For one thing, I've got up, and then you have been here some time. You brace one. I felt that when I was very sick."

Carrie laughed. "You're trying to be polite!"

"No," said Jim, whose brain did not work quickly yet; "I don't think I tried at all. The remark was, so to speak, spontaneous. You helped me get better; you know you did!"

"Oh, well," said Carrie, smiling, "you needed some control. You wouldn't take the doctor's stuff and we couldn't keep you quiet. I reckon you are pretty obstinate."

"One has got to be obstinate in the North."

"That's possible. It's a hard country and Jake took some chances when he brought you out across the snow. Do you remember much about what happened when you were on the trail?"

"I don't," said Jim, in a thoughtful voice. "All I do remember is the talk I had with two Englishmen who made the shack just before I went to mend the line. I've been bothering about the fellows since."

"But why?"

Jim pondered languidly. If he kept on talking, Carrie might stop; moreover, he wanted to formulate his puzzling thoughts and Carrie was intelligent. He would like to see if he could make her understand.

"To begin with, they were people who had traveled and knew the world; I know the North and some Canadian cities, but there I stop. The curious thing was, they didn't talk like strangers; I felt I'd got their point of view."

"Did you like them?"

"I don't know. I might have hit it with the younger man; he was frank and I reckon he meant well, though you got a hint of something careless and weak. There was more to the other fellow; you couldn't tell right off if you'd trust him or not. But I'm afraid I make you tired."

"Oh, no," said Carrie, and was silent for a few moments.

She was frankly interested by Jim. For one thing, she had helped him to get well and this gave her a motherly curiosity. Then his remarks seemed to promise a clue to something she had found puzzling. In a way, Jim was different from the young men she knew. The difference was elusive, but she felt it now and then.

"Well," she said, "why don't you go on?"

"I'd met the men before," Jim resumed with a laugh. "Handed them their lunch at the Montreal restaurant; they had a girl with them then. I'd certainly not met a girl like that, but somehow I'd a notion I could get in touch with her."

"What kind of a girl was she?" Carrie asked, with keener curiosity.

"The kind we call a looker, but it wasn't that. She was fine-drawn, if you get me; clever and fastidious. I think fastidious is the word I want. She belonged to clean, quiet places where everything is right. That's what made my notion I understood her strange. You see, I have had to struggle in the dust and mud."

Carrie imagined Jim had, so far, come through the struggle without getting much hurt or soiled. He wore no obvious scars. She smiled, and he resumed: "Perhaps the strangest thing was, they knew a place in the Old Country my father sometimes talked about."

"Did you tell them your father knew the place?" Carrie asked, for the clue was leading her on.

"I did not; they were strangers," Jim replied, and she saw he had a reserve that was not common in Canada. "Besides, my father didn't talk about Langrigg much. Still I had, so to speak, got the place; I could see it. I wonder whether one remembers things one's parents knew."

"It doesn't look possible," Carrie replied. "But do you know your father's people?"

"I don't," said Jim, with a touch of dryness. "There was a Joseph Dearham who lived at Langrigg. I imagine he was my grandfather, but he and the others left my father alone and we cut out the lot."

"Were your father and you like each other?"

"Not in a way. I reckon I'm like my mother, but my father has kind of faded; I'm often sorry I can't locate him well. He was not the man to go far in this country. Things I do remember show he had fine grit, but he hadn't punch enough. I think he was too proud to grab what was his."

"You are not like that?"

Jim smiled. "I take what's mine, but I don't want more. You see, I had to hustle for my mother's sake and I'd got the habit when she died and left me all alone. Well, that's all there is to my story, and I've certainly made you tired."

"You are tired," Carrie replied. "Go to sleep. I have made you talk too much, and must get busy."

She went off and Jim mused about her. Carrie was not like the English girl, but she had charm and he felt she was somehow wasted at the shabby store. She was pretty and clever; although she was kind, she was sometimes firm. Then his eyes got heavy and he went to sleep. When he woke Carrie had come back and was lighting the lamp. Jake had entered with her and put a tray on the table.

"Supper's served," he said. "It's better hash than you used to hand out in the woods, and Carrie has fixed some hot biscuit with Magnolia drips in the way you like. Well, you better get busy, and we'll play we're in camp. I'll locate at the bottom of the snow bank."

Jake sat down on a rug, with his back to the wall and a plate on his knee, and Jim's thoughts wandered. He had got the habit of remembering things when he was ill, and the little shabby room, with the cheap rug on the rough, stained floor, seemed to melt like a dissolving view. He saw black pines, with the moon shining between their stiff branches, wood smoke drifting past, and a red fire snapping in the snow. Jake wore ragged furs and his eyes twinkled, as they twinkled now. Jake was a humorous philosopher and if his humor was sometimes thin his philosophy was sound. He was white; one could trust him. Then Jim came back to the room above the store. He liked the way Jake waited on Carrie, although Jake owned he had not been a success when he made a trip in the Mount Stephen dining-car.

"We're going to talk business," Jake remarked presently. "I've been getting after the telegraph department since we came home and one of the construction bosses was in town to-day. He allowed you made good the night they sent the Government messages through, and if we wanted the contract for the new line they're going to run across the ranges, he'd back our tender."

"Jim isn't well enough to go back yet. You mustn't bother him," Carrie said firmly.

"We can't do much until the thaw comes," Jake rejoined. "It's a fighting chance and I don't see many chances for us in this old town."

Carrie looked thoughtful. She knew the wilds would draw Jake back and Jim must soon go, but the North was a stern country and she wanted to keep them for a time. She was honest and owned that she wanted to keep both.

"Can you finance the job?" she asked.

"It's going to come hard, but we might put it over. Our pay was pretty good and the construction boss could get us a check as we go on if the work was approved. Of course, if we were pushed, we could sell out the Bluebird. The assay's all right and one or two of the big syndicates are looking up copper. Still I don't want to sell."

"You mustn't sell."

"Very well," Jake agreed. "What you say about it goes."

Jim looked up with some surprise. Jake and he had done enough work on the copper vein to get their patent, but could develop the mine no further without capital. Jim did not understand what Carrie had to do with this.

"He doesn't know," Jake remarked, and turned to Jim with a smile. "We put in the stakes and filed the record, but Carrie's a partner. She helped us out."

"Ah," said Jim, "I begin to see!"

He felt disturbed. The placer gold they had found was all spent before they proved the copper vein. Food cost much and nobody would let them have supplies. Copper mines were hardly thought worth exploiting then, since transport was expensive. When it looked as if they must give up the claim, Jake got some money from home, and now Jim knew who had sent the sum. He did not know how Carrie had saved it, but she must have used stern economy.

"You don't like my sending the money?" she remarked, with a quick glance at Jim.

"I don't like to think of your going without things you probably wanted and ought to have had. We could have let the mine go and worked for somebody else."

Carrie laughed. "I don't know if you're nice or not. Anyhow, I had the money; I'd been clerking for a time at the Woolsworth store and they had given me a good job. Why shouldn't I send Jake the money I didn't know how to spend?"

"You're exaggerating," Jim rejoined. "A pretty girl can always spend money on hats and clothes. In fact, I think she ought."

"Now you're certainly nice, but we'll let it go. Your taking the money made me a partner, and in the meantime the Bluebird is not for sale. If you wait long enough, somebody will give you what the mine is worth."

"I think so. Copper's hard to smelt and when transport's expensive speculators stick to gold, but things will be different now the country's opening up. We will hold the patent until you are willing to sell."

"Thank you," said Carrie. "It cost you something to prove the vein, up there in the melting snow, and no greedy city man is going to get your reward. However, we'll get on. If they give you the telegraph contract, I'm going North."

Jim turned to his comrade. "She can't go! You had better tell her it's impossible."

"I'll leave it to you. There's not much use in telling Carrie she can't do a thing when she thinks she can."

Jim began a labored argument about the hardships and the ruggedness of the country and Carrie listened with inscrutable calm. Then she said, "You don't want me to go?"

"It isn't that. You don't know what you are up against."

"I have a notion," Carrie remarked with some dryness. "Perhaps you imagine all goes smooth and I have a soft job here?"

Jim was silent. He was sometimes sorry for Carrie, but she resumed: "You haven't lived in a shabby street, doing chores you don't like and trying to please people who are often rude. Well, I've stood for it a long time, for mother's sake; but now cousin Belle is coming, and she knows all there is to know about keeping store. Do you think a girl ought to be kept at home? That she never hears the call of adventure like the rest of you?"

"Adventure palls. One soon gets enough," said Jim. Then he saw Jake's smile and added: "After all, I don't know –"

"I know," said Carrie. "You are going back, and I am going too. But you won't have to take care of me. I mean to manage things."

"She has some talent that way," Jake observed. "If you're not very firm, Jim, she'll manage you. But what's your particular job, Carrie?"

"Supplies. When it comes to handling foodstuff, menfolk don't know how to buy. Then they waste, and the hash a man camp-cook puts up is seldom fit to eat."

"There's some truth in that," Jake remarked with feeling. "It looks as if you had got your program fixed."

"I have," said Carrie, with resolute quietness. "I'm going."

Jake smiled at his comrade. "You had better agree. When Carrie talks like that she can't be moved by argument. Anyhow, the trail's broken to the wirehead and if she gets tired she can come back."

"I may get tired," said Carrie. "But I shall not come back. There's another thing: I have a share in the Bluebird and want a stake on the telegraph line. Well, I've saved a hundred dollars."

"Carrie's pile!" Jake remarked. "She means to throw it in; that's the kind of girl my sister is. As a business proposition, our venture's humorous. We haven't capital enough to stand for one setback, and if luck's against us we'll sure go broke. To begin with, I've got to put up a big bluff on the construction department in order to get the job; look as if I owned a bank roll and didn't care if we got paid or not. Well, one takes steep chances in this country, and I allow there's something to be said for the small man who goes out with an ax, five dollars, and a bag of flour, to make a road or build a log bridge. Folks don't know how much he means and all he has to stand for."

Carrie's eyes sparkled. "You and Jim know. I'm going to find out."

Then Mrs. Winter came in. She was a pale, quiet woman whom Jim had thought dull until he saw her work. She listened, making a few remarks, while Jake talked about their plans.

"Well," she said at length, "your cousin is coming and she'll help me run the store. It has certainly got to be run; you'll need some money if you go broke."

"We're not going broke," Carrie rejoined with a hint of emotion. "Jake has got to make good for your sake. Some day we'll sell out the business and you shall rest as long as you like."

Mrs. Winter smiled, rather wearily. "I don't know if I'd like to do nothing; I've hustled so long. Still I've sometimes thought I'd like to find out how it feels just to sit quiet for a piece. Now the oven's good and hot; there's a batch of biscuit ready and you'd better come and help."

She took Carrie away and when they had gone Jake looked at his comrade.

"I allow the women's part is most as hard as ours, and Carrie hit it when she said I had to make good."

Jim nodded. "I like your sister, and your mother's very fine. I want to help you help them all I can."

"Sure, I know," said Jake, and then his eyes twinkled, for he had noted Jim's slight awkwardness. "You went rather farther than you meant, didn't you? Your English streak makes you shy, but you won't hurt my feelings; I'm all Canadian. Now, however, you are going to bed."

Jim went to bed and soon went to sleep. He was not well yet and had had an exciting day.

CHAPTER IV ON THE TRAIL

Heavy rain swept the valley, the evening was cold, and Jim stood near the big rusty stove at Tillicum House, drying his wet clothes. He had eaten a very bad supper and imagined the wooden hotel on the North trail was perhaps the worst at which he had stopped. The floor was torn by lumbermen's spiked boots; burned matches and the ends of cheap cigars lay about. The board walls were cracked and stained by resin and drops of tarry liquid fell from the bend where the stove pipe went through the ceiling. A door opened on a passage where a small, wet towel hung above a row of tin basins filled with dirty water. There was no effort for comfort and Jake, who was tired and did not like the hard chairs, sat, smoking, on a box.

Outside, shabby frame houses ran down hill to the angry green river where drifting ice-floes shocked. Dark woods rolled up the other bank and trails of mist crawled among the pines. Patches of snow checkered the rocks above; in the distance a white range glimmered against leaden cloud. The settlement looked strangely desolate in the driving rain, but the small ugly houses were the last Jim's party would see for long. The wagon road ended there and a very rough pack trail led into the wilds. There was another hotel, to which the men Jim had engaged had gone.

"Where's Carrie?" he asked by and by.

"I guess she's tired," Jake replied. "It has been pretty fierce for Carrie since we left the cars."

Jim frowned. They had been some days on the road and the rain had not stopped. It was cold rain; belts of road were washed away and the rest was full of holes, in which the loaded wagons sometimes stuck. The men got wet and their clothes could not be dried, and Carrie was not sheltered much by a rubber sheet, while when they struck a wash-out all were forced to carry their tools and stores across slippery gravel. Carrie had not grumbled, but it was rough work and Jim knew she must have felt some strain.

"She oughtn't to have come," he said. "Why weren't you firm?"

"I've a notion you agreed; but if you imagine I could have kept her back, you don't know Carrie yet. Anyhow, the bad weather won't last and we must make the head of the wire soon. Summer's short."

Jim nodded. They had grounds for speed that disturbed them both. Supplies and transport had cost more than they calculated; wages were high, and their money was running out. It was obviously needful to push on the work until enough of the line was finished to justify their asking for some payment. While Jim mused a man came in. The stranger was big, and looked rather truculent, although he wore neat store-clothes and new long boots. His glance was quick and got ironical when he fixed his eyes on Jake.

"Been some time beating it from the railroad, haven't you?" he asked.

"I expect the trip has been made in better time," Jake admitted. "We struck a number of wash-outs and didn't want to leave our truck along the road."

"You were short of transport."

"We had all we could pay for. Transport comes high."

"When you leave the railroad, everything comes high, as you're going to find out. Guess your trouble is you haven't enough capital."

"The trouble's pretty common," Jake rejoined. "You don't find rich men hitting the trail to the woods."

"A sure thing," said the other. "Well, you're not going to get rich cutting the new telegraph line. Your outfit's not strong enough; you haven't stores and tools. Tell you what I'll do; I'll give you seven hundred and fifty dollars to let up."

"I don't know if you're generous or if you're rash," Jake remarked with a twinkle. "The truck we're hauling in cost us more than that."

"I'll take it at a valuation and you can find the men to fix the price."

Jake looked at Jim, who pondered and hesitated. He was dispirited and tired, and felt that the chance of their carrying out the contract was not good. It would be something of a relief to get their money back.

"I don't know who you are and why you want to buy us off," he said.

"Then I'll put you wise. I'm Probyn, Cartner and Dawson's man. They wanted the new branch-line job, and if you get out, it, will go to them. Anyhow, you can't put it over. The bush is thick in the valley and there's loose gravel on the range that will roll down when you cut your track."

"Loose gravel's bad," Jake remarked. "If there's much of it, I don't see why Cartner and Dawson want the contract."

"For one thing, they reckon it's theirs. Then they have money enough to get to work properly. You have taken up too big a job, and now's your chance to quit. If you're prudent, you won't let it go."

Jim pondered, for he thought he had got a hint. Cartner and Dawson were contractors and with one or two more did much of the public work. In fact, it was said that the few large firms pooled the best jobs and combined to keep off outsiders. Jim had been somewhat surprised when Jake secured the contract and imagined this was because it was not large enough for the others to bother about. The branch line was short.

"Oh, well," he said as carelessly as he could, "we've got to try to put it over. Seven hundred and fifty dollars wouldn't pay us for the time we've spent."

Probyn leaned forward. "You want to call me up? Well, I'll stand for a thousand dollars, but that's my best."

Jake looked at Jim and both hesitated. A thousand dollars was a useful sum, and in a way they would get it for nothing. Cartner and Dawson would pay, but if the offer were refused, their opposition must be reckoned on. It was obvious that they did not mean to allow poaching on the preserves they claimed. Then Jim thought about Carrie, and felt half ashamed of his caution. She was a partner and although she did not know the difficulties she would not hesitate. He did not know if he was weak or not, but he did not want her to think he had no pluck. While he mused, Carrie came in, looking pale and tired, but she stopped and gave Probyn a direct glance.

"Who is this?" she asked.

"He comes from Cartner and Dawson, the big contractors, and wants to buy us off," Jake replied. "He offers a thousand dollars if we'll get out."

"Ah!" exclaimed Carrie. "What did you say?"

"We haven't said much. We were thinking about it when you came in."

Carrie's eyes sparkled and her tired look vanished. "It won't stand for thinking about! Tell him you undertook the job and are going to make good."

Jake shrugged humorously and turned to Jim. "Well, I guess we needed bracing. What do you say, partner?"

"We'll hold on."

Probyn frowned. "Is the dame a member of the firm?"

"She is," Jake said, smiling. "In fact, when we're up against it, she's the boss partner."

"Very well. I want you to get this, miss. Here's a thousand dollars; they're yours for picking up and you take no risk. If you refuse and hold down the contract, you'll certainly go broke."

"It's possible," said Carrie. "All the same, we mean to hold it down."

Probyn shrugged. "Then I quit. If you can put the job over, you're luckier than I think."

He went off and Carrie sat down. "Looks as if I came along when I was needed. The fellow talked in hints. What did he mean?"

"It's pretty obvious," Jake replied. "His employers don't like our butting in. Since they can't buy us, they'll try to freeze us out."

"Then I reckon we must fight."

Jake looked thoughtful. "They're strong antagonists; but I've a notion there's somebody on our side. In fact, I was puzzled when we got the contract. It's not often a job of this kind goes past the others, but the department may be using us to see if it's possible to shake the combine." He paused, and laughed as he resumed: "Anyhow, we have made the plunge and if we're not going under have got to go ahead."

Jim agreed and for a time they talked about something else, but next morning Jake got a jar when he went to load the pack-horses and found two of his helpers gone.

"They pulled out at sun-up," one of the rest explained. "A stranger came along, looking for choppers; offered fifty cents more than you promised, and Steve and Pete went off with him."

"He'll probably shake them in a week," Jake replied. "Still fifty cents a day's some inducement, and all of you can chop."

The packer laughed. "That's a sure thing! We reckoned we were fixed well and had better stop with a boss we knew. Besides, now we've a dame for commissary, the hash is pretty good."

Jake went back to the hotel, disturbed about Probyn, but satisfied with his men. The two who had gone were strangers, but two of the rest had been with him in the North and the others had worked upon the telegraph line. One could trust them. For all that, he was quiet when they set off on the muddy trail that plunged into the bush. A cold wind blew the rain in their faces, the horses stumbled in the holes, and the wet men grumbled as they plodded through the mud. They knew the wilderness and felt themselves a small company for the work they must do. Moreover, Jake imagined they might have to meet the antagonism of rich and unscrupulous rivals.

"You don't say much," he remarked to Jim.

"One doesn't say much the morning one pulls out to start a big job. Anyhow, I'll own it's not my habit. For one thing, I know what we're up against," Jim replied. Then he saw Jake's twinkle, and smiled. "My notion is you have been quieter than me."

"Oh, well," said Jake, "you're not always very bright, but this trip's a picnic after some we've made. If we go broke, we can come down again; the last time we took the North trail we had to make good or freeze."

"You hadn't your sister with you then."

"That's so," Jake agreed. "I reckon it makes some difference. Perhaps you had better go ahead and talk to her. Carrie's rather fed up, but she mayn't be as frank to you."

Jim urged the pack-horse he was leading and came up with Carrie, who was a short distance in front. He wondered what he had better talk about, but found it easier to amuse her than he had thought. Carrie did not look tired now; she had a touch of color and her eyes were bright. She laughed at his remarks, although he admitted that his humor was clumsy, and did not seem to mind when the horse splashed her with mud. Carrie had pluck, but he imagined her cheerfulness was forced. By and by a knot on the pack-rope slipped and some tools and cooking pans fell with a clash. When Jim began to pick them up Carrie stopped a yard or two in front.

"You needn't hurry; I'll go on," she said. "It's cleaner away from the horses, and one can look for the dry spots."

Jim gave her a quick glance. Although she smiled, her voice had a note of strain. It had not been easy for her to pretend and he had forced her to the effort.

"I'm sometimes dull, but I mean well," he said apologetically.

"Of course, you meant well. Jake sent you, didn't he? He knows something about my moods."

Jim colored and, seeing his embarrassment, she laughed.

"You don't deserve that; I get mad now and then. The thing's my fault, any way. I started well, but hadn't grit enough to keep it up. However, hadn't you better pick those pans out of the mud?"

Jim replaced the articles and when he had refastened the load waited for Jake.

"It looks as if Carrie had turned you down," the latter remarked.

"I'm not surprised," Jim rejoined. "I've been talking like a drummer when she wanted to be alone."

"Oh, well," said Jake, "you haven't a very light touch, but I expect she saw your intention was good."

"She did not; she saw you had sent me. Your sister is cleverer than you think."

Jake grinned and pulled his horse round a hole. "They're all cleverer than we think. Sometimes it's an advantage and sometimes a drawback. Anyhow, I guess I won't meddle again. Carrie will make good if we leave her alone – "

He turned, for the horse behind them pushed forward and bit the animal he led.

"Watch out!" he shouted. "Drive your beast on!"

Jim did so and then stopped a few yards off, while the animals plunged round each other and a man behind ran up. Jake, sticking to the bridle, was dragged about; his horse's load struck against a tree and a flour-bag burst. While he tried to stop the white stream running from the hole, the other horse seized his arm and shook him savagely. Its driver joined in the struggle with a thick branch, and the men and animals floundered about the trail while the flour ran into the mud.

"Let up with the club!" Jake shouted. "The dried apples have gone now. You have hit the bag."

"Hold your beast, then," gasped the other. "This trouble's not going to stop until mine gets in front."

Jake with an effort pulled the kicking animal between two trees and there was quietness when the other passed. It looked round for a moment, and then plodded forward steadily while the desiccated apples ran down on the trail.

"Now we'll stop and fix those bags," Jake remarked. "Why in thunder did you let the brute go, Bill?"

"He was mushing along good and quiet and I wanted to light my pipe. Reckon he forgot he wasn't in his place."

Then they heard a laugh and saw Carrie close by. Jake was covered with mud and flour, and his hat, which had been trampled on, hung over his hot face.

"You look the worse for wear," she said.

"I guess I feel like that," Jake replied, indicating his torn overalls. "Putting some of the damage right will be a job for you, but my hat's past your help. You wouldn't think it cost three dollars, not long since!"

"But what was the kicking and biting about?"

"You heard the explanation! Bill's cayuse forgot he wasn't in his proper place. When he remembered, he tried to get there."

"I don't understand yet."

"A pack-horse knows his place in the row. He's a creature of habit and hates to see another animal where he ought to be, but Bill was late in loading up and we didn't stop for him. If I'd known what was coming to me, I'd have waited. Now you have got the thing."

Carrie laughed and Jim noted there was no reserve in her amusement. Her moodiness had vanished.

"It's ridiculous, but you must indulge him another time," she said. "Food is dear."

They went on with lighter hearts. The struggle and Carrie's laugh had braced them, and by and by bright sunbeams touched the trunks beside the narrow trail.

CHAPTER V

CARRIE'S WEAK MOMENT

The rain had stopped and big drops fell from the dark firs about the camp. Daylight was going; all was very quiet but for the distant sound of falling water, and the smoke of the sulky fire went straight up. White chips and empty provision cans lay beside the freshly-chopped logs. Jake had left camp after supper, the men had gone to fish, and Carrie had taken off her wet boots and sat by the fire, trying to dry her clothes. For the last three or four days the party had traveled across very rugged country, and had now reached the spot where the new line would branch off.

Carrie was cold and depressed. One of the men who joined Probyn was cook, and although she had undertaken his duties cheerfully she found them harder than she thought. Then when they pitched camp the wood the men brought was wet, the fire would not burn well, and the extra good supper she had meant to cook was spoiled. This was the climax of a number of small troubles and hardships, and Carrie's patience had given way. By and by, Jim came out of the gloom and stopped by the fire.

"Crying, Carrie! Why is that?"

Carrie, who had not heard his steps, started and tried to hide her feet behind her draggled skirt.

"I wasn't," she said, rather sharply. "Anyhow, if I was, you oughtn't to have noticed."

"Perhaps not. Jake told me not long since my touch wasn't light. But what has gone wrong?"

"It's all gone wrong," she answered drearily. "I oughtn't to have come. Supper was the last thing – "

"The supper was quite good," Jim declared.

"Quite good! Well, I suppose that's all you can say for it honestly. If you liked it, it's curious you didn't eat very much. Then, you see, I can cook, and I wanted to make a little feast to celebrate your beginning the job."

"Nobody could cook at a fire like that. Besides, folks are not fastidious in camp. When you're chopping and cutting rock all day, you can eat whatever you get."

"Your touch is certainly not light; I'd sooner you were fastidious," Carrie rejoined.

"Looks as if I'd taken the wrong line," Jim said gently. "I hate to see you disturbed."

"Do you hate it very much?"

"Yes," said Jim. "That's why I'm awkward."

Carrie gave him a quick glance and turned her head. The firelight touched his face and she noted his grave sympathy.

"Oh!" she said, "I'm a silly little fool! I would come – although I knew you didn't want me."

"I thought you would find things hard," Jim replied, with some embarrassment.

"I do find them hard; that's the trouble, because they're really not hard. The fault's mine; I haven't enough grit."

"You are full of grit," Jim declared. "I've known men knocked out by an easier journey."

"You're trying to be nice and I don't like that. I didn't want you to come just now, but since you have come, sit down and smoke. I meant to be a partner and help you both along."

"But you have helped – "

Carrie looked up quickly. "Oh, you are dull! You don't see I want to confess. It's sometimes a comfort to make yourself look as mean as possible. Afterwards you begin to imagine you're perhaps not quite so bad."

"I don't know if it's worth while to bother about such things," Jim remarked.

"You don't bother. When you're on the trail, you're occupied about the horses and how far you can go. Nothing else matters, and Jake, of course, never bothers at all. He grins. But I insisted on coming and when the man at the hotel wanted to buy you off I made you refuse. You know I did. You were hesitating."

"On the whole, I'm glad you were firm."

"It was easy to be firm at the hotel, but I ought to have kept it up. I was vain and sure of myself, when I'd come up in a wagon, over a graded road."

"The road was pretty bad," said Jim.

"Anyhow, it was a road and I sat in a wagon," Carrie rejoined. "When the road stopped and we hit the real wild country, I got frightened, like a child. What use is there in starting out, if you can't go on?"

"You have gone on. I don't think many girls from the cities would have borne the journey with an outfit like ours. But I don't quite get your object for leaving home."

"Ah," said Carrie, "you have done what you wanted, although it was perhaps hard. You have tasted adventure, seen the wild North, and found gold. You haven't known monotony, done dreary things that never change, and tried to make fifty cents go as far as a dollar. If you had talents, you could use them, but it wasn't like that with me. I don't know if I have talent, but I felt I could do something better than bake biscuit and sell cheap groceries. I longed to do something different; to go out and take my chances, and see if I couldn't make my mark. Then I wanted money, for mother's sake. So I came, but as soon as I got wet and tired I was afraid."

Jim pondered. Carrie had pluck; it meant much that she had owned her fears. She meant to conquer them and he imagined she looked to him for help. His business was to give her back her confidence, but this could not be done by awkward flattery. In the meantime, he looked about. The fire had sunk, the moon was rising, and through a gap between the trunks one could see a dark gulf, out of which thin mist rolled. The vapor streamed across long rows of ragged pines that ran up among the rocks until they melted in the gloom. In the distance, a glimmering line of snow cut against the sky. The landscape had grandeur but not beauty. It was stern and forbidding.

"I think we are all afraid now and then," he said. "I never hit the North trail without shrinking. Perhaps it's instinct, or something like that. In the cities, man lives in comfort by using machines, but he's up against Nature all the time in the wilds. She must be fought and beaten and he must leave behind the weapons he knows. Up North, a small accident or carelessness may cost you your life; an ax forgotten, a bag of flour lost, mean frostbite and hunger that may stop the march. You have got to be braced and watchful; it's a grim country and it kills off the slack. But we are only on its edge and things are different here. If we are beaten, we can fall back. The trail to the cities is open."

"Would you fall back?" Carrie asked.

"Not unless I'm forced," Jim answered with a laugh.

"Nor will I," said Carrie. "I've been a fool to-night, but if I'm up against silly old things like instincts, I'm going to put them down."

"You will make good all right. But what did your mother think when you resolved to come with us?"

Carrie hesitated, and then gave Jim a level glance.

"You didn't see mother much. She was busy; she's always busy, and you don't know her yet. She's quiet, you don't feel her using control, but one does what she wants, and I can't remember when that was wrong. Well, I suppose she felt, on the surface, I oughtn't to go. It was the proper, conventional view, but when it's needful mother can go deep. I think she was willing to give me a chance of finding out, and trying, my powers; she knew I wouldn't be so restless afterwards, if I was happier or not." Carrie paused and there was a touch of color in her face as she resumed: "Besides, she knew she could trust Jake and I think she trusts you."

Jim said nothing. It looked as if the little faded woman who had been occupied about the store all day had qualities he had not imagined, although he now remembered he had sometimes got a hint of reserved force. All was quiet for a minute or two while he mused, and then they heard steps and Jake came up.

"I've been prospecting up the line. We have got our job," he said.

"What's the trouble? Bush pretty thick?"

"Rocks! They're lying loose right up the slope and it's going to cost us high to roll them away. Then it's possible another lot will come down."

Jim frowned. They had undertaken to clear a track of stated width, along which pack-horses could travel, as well as fix the telegraph posts; and a bank of big loose stones would, be a troublesome obstacle. Much depended on the steepness of the hillside and he had not yet seen the ground.

"If we have to build up and underpin the line, it will certainly cost us something," he said. "However, we'll find that out as we go on. The main thing is to start."

"I allow that's so. When you start you finish," Jake remarked. "Still dollars will count in this fight and we may go broke."

"It's possible. Anyhow, we'll hold on until we are broke."

Carrie laughed. "And that's all there is to it, Jim? I like your way of looking at things. It's simple and saves trouble."

"It puts it off," Jim rejoined dryly. "The trouble sometimes comes at the end. But it's rather curious how often you can make good by just holding on."

"Oh, well!" said Carrie. "I hear the boys coming. Go and see if they have caught some fish."

Jim went off and presently returned with a string of big gray trout. Sitting down, he began to sharpen his knife, but Carrie stopped him.

"Leave them alone! How many will the boys eat for breakfast?"

"To some extent, it depends on how many they get. If they're up to their usual form, I reckon they'll eat the lot. But what has that to do with it? I'll fix the trout."

"No," said Carrie. "Give me your knife."

"Certainly not. Do you like dressing fish?"

"I expect I'll hate it, but I'm going to try. Do you want me to struggle with a small blunt knife?"

Jim looked hard at her. Her mouth was firm and he knew what her touch of color meant.

"I undertook to help cook," she resumed, and smiled. "It's curious how often you can make good by just holding on! Now, however, you and Jake can go away."

They went off, but presently Jim sat down and lighted his pipe. Although he approved Carrie's resolve to be useful, he felt annoyed. She had pretty white hands; he did not like her dressing trout. Yet somebody must cook, and now the gang was two men short, he did not know whom he could spare. It was not a job for Carrie, but she was obstinate. There was no use in going back, because she could beat him in argument, and he went to his bed of fir branches in a bark shack the men had built. Carrie had a tent, with a double roof that would keep out rain and sun. Jim had seen to this, although the tent was expensive.

He got up rather early, but when he went out a big fire burned between the parallel hearth logs. Aromatic wood-smoke hung about the camp in a thin blue haze. There was an appetizing smell of cooking, and Carrie got up from beside the logs as he advanced. She gave him a cheerful glance, and then stood looking past him to the east. Mist streamed out of the deep valley and rolled across the climbing pines; in the distance, snow cut, softly blue, against the dazzling sky. Carrie looked fresh and vigorous. There was color in her face and her eyes were bright.

"How long have you been about?" Jim asked.

"An hour," she said, smiling. "I was often up at daybreak at home, and it was different there. The street looked mean, the store smelt stale, and all was dreary. Sun-up is glorious in the bush."

"Sometimes! I have wakened half-frozen and felt most too scared to look about."

"Ah," said Carrie, "I was scared last night, but last night has gone and can't come back. I'll own I don't like the dark."

Jim studied her. Her pose was unconsciously graceful; her tall figure and plain gray dress harmonized with the background of straight trunks and rocks. Her head was slightly tilted back as she breathed the resin-scented air. Jim thought she looked strangely virile and alert.

"You belong to the dawn," he said.

Carrie laughed, a laugh of frank amusement, untouched by coquetry. "Oh, Jim! You're not often romantic."

"I suppose that is so," he agreed. "Anyhow, my feeling was quite sincere. You *are* like the dawn."

She turned her head for a moment and then said carelessly: "Let's look if the bannocks I made are cooked."

Jim scattered a pile of wood ashes and lifted two or three large thick cakes from the hot stones beneath. He broke off a piece from one and when it cooled began to eat.

"I imagine this is the best bannock that was ever made in the bush," he remarked.

"Do you feel you must be nice?"

"No," said Jim. "In a way, I don't care if I'm nice or not. The bannock is first grade; I think that's all that matters. If you don't mind, I'll take another bit."

Carrie laughed. "Looks as if one could make you happy by giving you things to eat! But let's see if the trout are fried; I've got the spider full."

She put the fish on a big tin plate and while she made coffee Jim beat a piece of iron that hung from a branch. The sharp, ringing notes pierced the shadows and half-dressed men came out of the shack and plunged down the slope to the river.

"Some of them would be mad if they knew I'd roused them out ten minutes early," Jim remarked. "A breakfast like this, however, is too good to spoil. Now if you'll let me have the coffee, I'll take the truck along."

He came back with the empty plates in about a quarter of an hour, for Canadian choppers do not loiter over meals, and Carrie, sitting on the hearth log, looked up anxiously.

"Well?" she asked, "were the boys satisfied?"

"They were. I don't think I could have stood for it if they were not. One allowed he hoped Probyn would keep the cook we lost. The others were enthusiastic."

Carrie blushed. "I'm glad. I was tired when things went wrong last night."

"The trouble is, you can't go on. It's one thing to superintend, and cook a meal now and then, but quite another to cook all the time."

"But this is what I want to do."

"It can't be allowed," Jim declared.

Carrie put down the forks she was cleaning. "You look very firm and solemn, but you can't bluff me. Are you and Jake very rich?"

"You know we're not rich."

"If you want to put your contract over, you have got to work, and it's obvious you can't work and cook. Then, if you bring in a man to cook, he couldn't do much else and wages are high. Aren't they high?"

"I suppose they are," Jim agreed.

"Very well! I came because I wanted to be useful, and if you won't let me, I'll go back. Then Jake and one of the boys would have to go down with me to the railroad. That would be awkward, wouldn't it?"

"It certainly would be awkward. Do you mean you'll insist on taking two of us away from the job unless I give in?"

Carrie smiled. "Yes, Jim. If you're going to be obstinate, there's no other plan. Besides, you see, the trail's rough and I couldn't go very fast."

"I'm beaten," said Jim. "You will do what you like. You're a good sort, Carrie, and if you find the job too hard, you can stop."

"I may find it hard, but I don't know if I'll stop. Anyhow, your control is gone. If you are not very nice, I'll spoil the hash, and then you'll have trouble with the boys."

Jim got up, moved by her pluck and yet half annoyed, for he had meant to make things easy for her. Before he went off she laughed and remarked: "You'll find Jake will understand why you gave way. Sometimes he bluffs mother; he never bluffs me."

CHAPTER VI

ROLLING STONES

Sweet resinous smells drifted down the hill. The mists were melting and Jim lighted his pipe and thoughtfully looked about. The sun had just risen above the distant snow and a streak of blue smoke, drawn across the woods, marked the camp. Breakfast would not be ready for half an hour, but he knew Carrie had been occupied for some time, although he had stolen out of camp without talking to her.

Jim did not like her working as she had worked for the last week or two, and if he had stopped they might have begun an argument. He would have gained nothing by this, for Carrie was obstinate and he admitted that he was now and then impatient. Carrie was plucky and they needed help, but cooking for the hired men was not the kind of thing she ought to do. Then he had been disturbed in the night by a rattle of stones, and now saw he must grapple with a difficulty that was worse than he had thought.

The hillside ran up steeply to a wall of crags, split by frost and thaw. Tall firs clung to the slope where they could find a hold, but there were gaps, in which broken trunks lay among the rubbish a snow-slide had brought down. Then, for some distance, large, sharp stones rested insecurely on the slope, and Jim imagined that a small disturbance would set them in motion. Below the spot where he sat, the stones ran down into a gulf obscured by rolling mist. The turmoil of a river rose from the gloomy depths.

A row of telegraph posts crossed the stony belt, but one or two had fallen in the night and Jim carefully studied the ground. His business was to put up the posts and clear a track in order to protect them from damage and enable pack-horses to travel along the line. It was plain that the stones were an awkward obstacle, but this was not all. As a rule, the provincial Government allowed the small ranchers to undertake the construction of telegraphs, rude bridges, and roads. The plan helped the men to stop upon their half-cleared holdings, but it was not economical and rich contractors had recently got the large jobs. Jim imagined they meant to keep the business in their hands and he knew something about political influence and graft. His contract was not important but he had grounds for believing the others resented his entering the field, and if he got behind schedule, the agreement might be broken. Well, he must not get behind, and when he went back for breakfast he had made his plans.

Afterwards he got to work and rolled the stones down hill all day, without returning to camp for dinner. It was getting hot, and in the afternoon fierce sunshine beat upon the long slope. The shadow of the pines looked inviting and Jim felt that half an hour might be occupied profitably by a quiet smoke and review of the undertaking, but resisted the temptation. The argument was false; he was a working boss and must set the pace for his men. His back began to ache, he tore his old blue shirt, and bruised his hands, while as the shadows lengthened he got disturbed. Rolling heavy stones was slow and expensive work. It kept him from getting forward and wages were high. When the sun was low he stopped to wipe his bleeding hand and saw Jake leaning on his shovel.

"I've let up for a minute or two to think. Sometimes it pays," Jake observed.

"It depends on what you think about," Jim rejoined. "I don't know if there's much profit in wondering what's for supper."

Jake smiled. "Perhaps not. I reckon you thought how you could hit up the pace. My notion is, you've put it most as high as the boys will stand for."

"In this country, it's usual to work as hard as the boss."

"Something depends on the boss," Jake said dryly. "When we're up against a hard streak, you are near the limit."

Jim gave him a sharp glance. "Do you mean anything in particular? Aren't you satisfied with the boys?"

"On the whole, they're a pretty good crowd. There are two I'm not quite sure about."

Jim's eyes rested on two men who were languidly throwing stones down the hill. "I think we agree, but they have earned their pay so far, and I mean them to go on."

He stopped and the men put down their tools, for a sharp, ringing noise rolled across the woods. When they reached camp Jim was surprised to note two hobbled horses among the springing fern. The big pack-saddles stood near the fire and a man was helping Carrie to fill the tin plates. He stopped when Jim advanced, and Carrie said, "This is Mr. Davies; he was at the Woolsworth store with me."

Jim said he was glad to see him and studied the fellow when they sat down. Davies was young and rather handsome. He wore overalls, long leggings, and an expensive buckskin jacket, but although his skin was brown, he did not look like a bushman. In fact, Jim thought him a type that is common in Western towns; superficially smart, and marked by an aggressive confidence. He was somewhat surprised the fellow was a friend of Carrie's; Jim had not expected her to like that kind of man, but hospitality is the rule in the bush and he tried to be polite. When supper was over and they lit their pipes he asked:

"Have you come to see the country, Mr. Davies?"

"I'm out on business; going through to the new settlement. I belong to the Martin outfit and we're bidding on the construction of a new bridge."

"Ah," said Jim, for Martin was a contractor and one of the ring. "This is not the shortest way to settlement," he added.

"It is not," Davies agreed. "I reckoned I'd go in up the Vaughan river and hired two Indians who know the way. Wanted to look at the country; there's some talk about making a new wagon road. Then, you see, I knew Miss Winter and heard she was at your camp."

Something about Davies' manner hinted that the girl and he were good friends, and Jim was sorry Carrie was not there, since he wanted to see how she accepted the fellow's statement. For no very obvious reason, Davies jarred him.

"Looking for a wagon road line is a different job from keeping store," he remarked.

"I did keep store, but I've had other occupations and know the bush. If I didn't know it, they would have no use for me in the Martin gang."

Jim nodded. The fellow was plausible, and in British Columbia a man often puts his talents to very different uses. He thought Davies had talent, although perhaps not of a high kind. By and by the latter got up.

"If the boys are going fishing, I'll try my luck with them," he said. "I'd like a few gray trout and have brought a pole."

Two or three of the men picked up rods they had made from fir-branches, and when the party set off Jim walked across to the fire where Carrie was sitting.

"Davies has gone off to the river," he remarked. "It's curious!"

"Why do you think this curious?"

Jim hesitated, feeling that tact was needful. He was not jealous about Davies. Carrie and he were friends; he liked her much, but she had not inspired him with romantic sentiment. His imagination dwelt upon the girl he had met at the Montreal restaurant. For all that, he was puzzled.

"Well," he said, "it looks as if he had come out of his way in order to see you."

"Did he tell you this?"

"No," said Jim. "He hinted at something like it. I suppose you knew him well?"

Carrie gave him a quick glance. His face was thoughtful and he frowned. She was quiet for a moment or two, and then smiled. "I do not know him well. He was at the Woolsworth Store, but his was a better post than mine, and we didn't often meet. In fact, I don't think I liked him much."

"Ah," said Jim, whose satisfaction was plain. "Well, of course, it is not my business."

"But you're rather glad I didn't like him?"

"Of course," said Jim. "The fellow's a poor type; not your type –"

He stopped with some embarrassment and Carrie laughed.

"We'll let that go. You are puzzled, Jim?"

"I am. Why did the fellow hint he'd come because he wanted to see you? He said something about looking for a line for a wagon road, but he'd have struck the valley the road will go through sooner if he'd pushed on east. I can't see what he did want."

"Perhaps he had some reason for stopping at our camp and felt he must account for his coming out of his way."

"Yes," said Jim. "I believe you've hit it."

"Well, now you know I don't like Davies and you have found out why he's here, you ought to be satisfied."

"But I haven't found out why he's here; that's the trouble," Jim rejoined, and was silent for a few moments. "However, perhaps you have put me on the track," he went on. "I was something of a fool when I wanted to leave you behind. You have helped us all the time. But you haven't enough wood for morning; I'll go and chop some."

He went off and Carrie sat quietly by the fire. There was faint amusement in her eyes, but they were soft. By and by the light began to fade and rousing herself she made some bannocks for breakfast. When Davies came back with a string of fish she had vanished and the light that had burned in her tent was out.

Next morning Davies left the camp and Jim sent three or four men to build a wall to protect the line, while he and some others put up the posts. Their progress was slow, because it was necessary to make the wall strong and Jim was occupied for a week before he was satisfied with the length he had built. He thought it ought to stand, but felt disturbed when he calculated what the extra work had cost. It was, however, a comfort to know he had covered the worst ground, and soon after supper one evening he went off in better spirits than usual to a little bark shelter he had built for himself.

He was tired and soon went to sleep, but after some hours awoke. He supposed he was rather highly strung after working hard, because he did not feel sleepy, and lifting his head he looked about. The end of the shelter was open and the pines outside rose like vague black spires, their tapered tops cutting against the sky. Although there was no moon, the first row of trunks stood out against the deeper gloom behind. One could smell the resin and the warm soil, damped by heavy dew. All was very quiet, but after a few moments Jim began to listen. He had lived in the wilds, his senses were keen, and sometimes he received unconsciously impressions of minute noises. Although the stillness was only broken by the turmoil of the river far down in the valley, he imagined it was not for nothing he had wakened.

Then he raised himself on his elbow as he heard another sound. It was very faint, but somehow definite, although he could not tell what it was. A few moments afterwards, he knew; a stone was rolling down hill and disturbing others as it went. Then there was a sharp crash and a rattle that began to swell into a roar, and Jim, leaping up, ran along the hill. The bank he had built had broken and the stones behind it were plunging down.

When he reached the line he struck his foot against a rock and stumbled. The ground was rough, the night was dark, but it was unthinkable that he should stop. He clenched his hands and ran, although he did not know what he could do. When trouble threatened he must be on the spot. In the meantime, the noise got louder. He heard great blocks strike the ledges down the slope and smash; trees broke and branches crashed, while behind the detached shocks there was a steady, dull roar of small gravel grinding across the rocks and tearing up the brush. The wall had obviously gone and its collapse had started a slide that might not stop until all the stones above the line had run down. If so, they might plane off a wide belt of hillside and carry the soil and broken timber into the valley. Then Jim would be forced to dig out another line.

He gasped as he labored on, but the uproar had begun to die away when he reached an opening in the thin forest. At sunset, straggling trees had dotted the slope, but they had gone and, so far as he

could see, nothing but a few stumps broke the smooth surface of the hill. The wall had vanished with the line it was meant to protect. Now and then a big stone rolled by, but Jim did not think about the risk. He must try to find out if much of the surface was left and if there was rock beneath.

When he left the end of the line, small stones slipped away from his feet and plunged down into the dark. This was ominous, since gravel is awkward stuff to work among when it does not lie at rest. However, with plenty of stakes and some underpinning, he might be able to build up a new bank. By and by his foot struck something sharp and he looked up. He had kicked the edge of a large, ragged stone, and an indistinct, broken mass ran up the hill. The blocks had obviously come down from the bottom of the crags and, since they had gone no farther, the pitch was easy enough for them to lie. This would enable him to clear a line across the mass and build a fresh bank.

Jim sat down and took out his pipe. He had lost his labor and money he could not spare, but it was possible to run the line across the treacherous belt, although he was half afraid to count the cost. When he struck a match Jake came up and indistinct figures moved in the gloom behind.

"Have you any use for us, Boss?" one asked.

"Nothing doing now," said Jim. "We'll get busy in the morning."

The man looked about and then remarked:

"Something started the blamed wall off and I guess she didn't stop until she hit the river. It's surely bad luck!"

"It is," said Jim. "Anyhow, we took this job and are going to make good. I don't want you and you'll probably need some sleep."

"I reckon that's so, if you mean to speed us up," the other agreed, with a laugh, and when he went back to the others Jim lighted his pipe.

"A nasty knock, but not a knock-out," Jake remarked. "At sun-up we'll have a better notion –"

"Oh, yes," said Jim, rather impatiently, and added: "I've been wondering why I awakened."

"I reckon that's plain enough. The noise would have roused me three miles off."

"It was before the noise began," Jim replied, in a thoughtful voice. "I think something woke me, but don't know what it was."

"Tom remarked that something had started off the wall. I allow he mayn't have reflected much, but perhaps it's significant he and you agree."

Jim was silent for a minute or two, and then asked: "Did all the boys come along?"

"So far as I remember. I didn't count."

"Well," said Jim. "It's too soon to state what I think. After all, I don't know very much."

Jake said nothing. He knew his partner was generally marked by a grim reserve after a bad setback. When Jim was ready, he would talk, and in the meantime Jake imagined his brain was occupied. Crossing the track of the landslide cautiously, they returned to camp, but when they reached it Jim lighted his pipe again and did not go to sleep.

CHAPTER VII

A COUNCIL

Jim got up at daybreak and went to the spot where the landslide had carried away the line. A hundred yards had gone and a great bank of soil and gravel ran down at an even slant to the river, where the current foamed about the rubbish that blocked its channel. The slope was dotted by broken trees and rocks, and in one place farther up a belt of smaller stones rested loosely at the top of a steep pitch. Jim thought a slight disturbance would start another slide.

He had wasted a week or two's labor and saw it would cost him some time to clear the ground before he could get to work again. Even then, there would be a risk of the new line's being swept away. This was daunting, because money was short and he had no margin to provide against expensive accidents. When he took the contract he had trusted much to luck, and now his luck was bad.

Moreover, the thing was puzzling and his curiosity was aroused. He imagined he had made the line secure, and had worked among treacherous gravel in shallow mines long enough to know something about the job. The wall had obviously broken and started the landslide when it gave way, but he could not see why it had broken. This, however, must wait. He meant to solve the puzzle, but, to begin with, the line must be run across the gap and he occupied himself with the necessary plans. His habit was to concentrate and, sitting absorbed, he studied the ground until he felt a touch on his arm. Then he looked up with a start and saw Carrie.

"I'm sorry, Jim," she said. "Is it very bad?"

"It's bad enough," said Jim, who began to get up, but she stopped him.

"Never mind; sit still! You're very polite, but I don't know if you need always use your best manners."

"I don't know if I do," Jim rejoined. "Sometimes I'm too savage; I'm rather savage now. But don't you like me to be polite?"

"If you get what I mean, I want you to feel I'm a working partner."

"You are a partner," Jim declared. "In fact, you're a remarkably useful member of the firm."

Carrie gave him a smile. "Thank you! But you mustn't feel this bad luck too much. You've met worse."

"Much worse, but it was in the North, where we knew what we were up against and had nothing to lose. It's different now; I've staked all I've got on this undertaking. So has Jake; and then you have joined us. I hate to think about your going back to the city broke."

"Oh," said Carrie, smiling, "that doesn't count at all. Besides, we're not going broke. We may have some set-backs, but we'll make good."

"We'll try; but that's another thing. I don't know why you're so confident."

Carrie studied him with a twinkle of amusement. "I am confident. You're not a quitter, and it's wonderful what one can often do by just staying with a thing!"

"The trouble is, you can't stay with this particular job when your money's gone. That's the difference between it and placer mining in the North. Up there, we had no wages to pay, and could stop and root up the tundra until we froze, and when our money is spent the boys will light out."

"But you'll stay until every dollar is gone."

Jim laughed. "It might be prudent to pull out before; but I rather think I'll hold on."

"Ah," said Carrie, "that's what I like! You're bracing up; I knew you would! However, I must go back. Breakfast must be cooked."

Jim went with her, feeling comforted. Carrie did not know much about the mechanical difficulties, but her confidence was inspiring. In a sense, the thing was illogical; the difficulties would not vanish because she did not see them. It was ridiculous for him to feel cheered, but he was cheered and he glanced at Carrie as they went along. She was pretty and her impulsive frankness was

often charming; but somehow he did not think of her as an attractive girl. She was a partner whom he trusted and a staunch friend. Yet he had been annoyed by Davies' stopping at the camp and had felt relieved when she told him she did not like the fellow. This was strange, but Jim gave up the puzzle and helped Carrie with breakfast when they reached the camp.

When the meal was over he got to work and did not come back until supper was ready. Jake and he had not time for quiet talk all day, but there was something to be said, and when the men went off to fish, Jim sat down opposite Carrie, while Jake lay among the pine-needles close by. The shadows had crept across the camp and the hollows between the rows of trunks were dark. The snow had changed from white to an ethereal blue and the turmoil of the river hardly disturbed the calm.

"Have you any notion yet what started off the wall?" Jake asked.

"I have," said Jim. "The trouble began at the underpinning. A king post broke and let down the stones."

"So far, we are agreed. But do you know why the post broke? We used good logs."

"I don't know. Although it may take some time, I'm going to find out. We can't have this kind of thing happening again."

Jake nodded. "Perhaps I have got a clew. When Davies was here, he said he'd like to go fishing and some of the boys went along."

"That is so," Jim said with a puzzled look.

"The two who moved first were the boys we allowed we were not quite sure about. I don't know if it means anything, but when they got to the river, they and Davies lost the others."

"It may mean much," Jim said quietly. "The clew's worth following."

Carrie's eyes sparkled as she interrupted: "Do you imply Davies hired the boys to wreck the line?"

"I allow it's possible," Jim replied in a thoughtful voice.

"And I cooked an extra good supper for him!" Carrie exclaimed. "I'm beginning to understand why folks get poisoned. But now you know, what are you going to do about it?"

"We don't know," said Jim. "That's the trouble. We have got to wait."

Jake made a sign of agreement and Carrie said nothing. She knew her brother and imagined she understood Jim's quietness. After a time, the latter resumed: "I've been thinking, and the matter puzzles me. We're up against the big contractors. They'd be glad to see us broke and Probyn took two of our outfit when we stopped at the hotel. But he was willing to buy us out and his offering the boys higher wages was, in a way, a fair deal. I allow he left two we didn't trust."

"The two who went fishing with Davies!" Carrie remarked.

"That is so," Jim agreed. "Davies, however, works for another boss. It's possible the big men would pool their resources to freeze us off, but I know something about Martin and doubt if he would play a low-down game."

"Davies might," said Jake.

"I think he did," Carrie interposed, and her voice was sharp. "In fact, it's obvious. He's poison mean; I knew this at the store."

"I didn't like him," Jim replied and added thoughtfully: "After all, the contract's not important, from the big men's point of view. No doubt, they'd sooner we let up, but somehow I can't see their finding it worth while to get after us."

"It is puzzling," Jake admitted; "I think we'll let it go. If we have any fresh bad luck, our money will run out long before we can make good. This would leave us without resources except for the Bluebird claim."

Jim frowned. "I'll hold on while I have a dollar, but I don't want to sell the mine. For one thing, we couldn't get a price that would help us much, although I expect northern copper claims will soon be valuable. The country's fast being opened up and some day there'll be a railroad built."

"Perhaps it's significant that Baumstein made us another offer for the Bluebird."

"When did he make the offer?" Jim asked sharply.

"When you were ill; I refused. Thought I'd told you. He raised his limit a thousand dollars."

"Shucks!" said Jim. "Does the fellow think we'll give him the mine? Anyhow, I'd sooner not sell to Baumstein at all. He's a crook and has made his pile by freezing poor men off their claims."

Jake smiled. "Poor men with mines to sell get used to freezing, and if we refuse to deal with anybody whose character isn't first grade, we're not going to progress much. I doubt if rich folks who like a square deal are numerous."

"There are some," said Jim. "For all that, the unscrupulous, grab-all financier is a blight on the country. The prospector risks his life in the struggle with half-frozen tundra bog, rotten rock, and snow, and the other fellow, with his net of bribes and graft, gets the reward. But, we won't stand for that kind of thing."

"Let's be practical. We're not running a purity campaign, and it looks as if nobody but Baumstein is willing to buy the mine."

"Then my proposition is, we hold tight until the Combine come into the field. They'll be forced to get busy before long, and while I don't know if all their deals are straight, they're better than Baumstein's. In the meantime, we have got to stay with this telegraph contract while our money lasts."

There was silence for a moment or two and Carrie's eyes rested on Jim. He looked tired, and his brown face was thin, but his mouth was firm. Jim was resolute; she sometimes doubted if he was clever, but he could hold on. Had he been weak or greedy, he would have sold the copper vein and taken Probyn's offer to let the telegraph contract go. Perhaps this would have been prudent, but she was glad Jim had refused. She wanted to think he would not give way.

"Well? You claim you're a partner!" Jake remarked with a twinkle.

"Jim's plan is my plan," she said quietly.

"Then it goes," Jake agreed, and gave her a curious glance when Jim got up and went off across the hill. "I don't know if you're rash or not, but you're playing up to Jim. Since I've known you to be cautious, your object isn't very plain."

Carrie hesitated, although she was generally frank with Jake. "Oh, well," she said, "I feel he ought to take a bold line; that's the kind of man he is."

"Rather a romantic reason. Particularly as his boldness may cost us much."

"I'm tired of thinking about what things cost," Carrie rejoined. "Sometimes it's fine to take one's chances. I'm going to be rash, if I want."

"After all, it may pay as well as the other plan. However, if you mean to sketch a leading-character part for Jim and see he plays it as you think he ought, perhaps he deserves some sympathy and you may get a jolt. Jim's not theatrical."

"I hate theatrical people," Carrie declared.

Jake laughed. "You hate posers. You feel you'd like Jim to play a romantic part, without his meaning it? Well, I expect he'll miss his cues and let you down now and then, but he certainly won't pose."

"You're rather clever sometimes," Carrie admitted, with a blush. "But I think we have talked enough and I want some wood."

She sat for a time, thinking, while the thud of Jake's ax rang across the bush; and then went off to her tent with an impatient shrug.

"I mustn't be a romantic fool," she said.

For the next eight or nine days Jim and the men were occupied running the line across the gap. When he had done so, he stole quietly out of camp for three or four nights, and returning before daybreak, imagined nobody had remarked his absence. Then, one morning, Carrie came up as he was lighting the fire.

"You look tired, Jim," she said. "If you mean to work hard, you must get some sleep."

Jim gave her a sharp glance and she smiled. "You see, I know your step!"

"Ah," said Jim, who did not grasp all her statement implied, "you are very smart, Carrie, and it's plain that I am clumsier than I thought. But do you think anybody else heard me?"

"No. I listened and all was quiet. However, if it's needful for somebody to watch, you must let Jake go."

Jim shook his head. "I've got to see this thing through. Somehow I imagine I can do so better than Jake."

"But you can't keep it up, after working hard all day."

"It won't be for long. We'll break camp soon and move to the next section. You're a good sort, Carrie, but you really mustn't meddle."

Carrie blushed. "I won't meddle if you forbid it. All the same, I'd hate to see you worn out and ill. You're boss, and it would be awkward if you lost control."

"It's only for another night or two. The fellow I'm watching for will have to try again, or let up, before we move camp."

"But if you caught him, you and he would be alone."

"Yes," said Jim, whose face got hard, "that's what I want. If I'm on the right track, the thing must be fixed without the boys knowing."

Carrie hesitated and then made a sign of acquiescence. "I don't like it, Jim, but reckon you can't be moved. Anyhow, you'll be cautious."

Jim promised he would not be rash and went off, half amused, to get some water. Carrie was very staunch, but he did not want her to be disturbed about him. He was sorry she had heard him steal out of camp.

In the evening Jake came for a gun he kept in the tent. The game laws that limit the time for shooting are seldom enforced against bush ranchers and prospectors who kill deer and grouse for food.

"I'd better oil the barrels to keep off the damp," he said. "It's a pretty good gun."

Carrie watched him push across the top lever and open the breech.

"Is that where you put the cartridges?" she asked.

"You push the shells forward with your thumb, and then shut the gun – like this!"

"Then all you have to do is to pull the trigger?"

"Not with this type of gun. You see, the hammers have rebounded half way, but you must pull them farther back before it will go off."

"Suppose you miss and want to shoot again?"

"You push the lever sideways, the barrels swing down, and the empty shells jump out. That's all!"

"It looks easy," Carrie remarked. "I've sometimes wondered how one used a gun. There's nothing more to shooting than there is to making bread."

"Maybe not," Jake agreed with a grin. "I reckon a bad cook is as dangerous as a bad shot. If you miss with a gun, you have done no harm, but I've eaten bannocks that get you every time."

When he had finished he hung the gun to the tent pole and went off, but Carrie took it down, and carefully opened and shut the breech. After doing so once or twice, she was satisfied and put back the gun. Then she went to a little bark store where their food was kept, and picking up a bag of flour that had been opened, weighed it in her hand. It was lighter than it ought to be, and this had happened before. Next she examined a piece of salt pork and imagined that some had gone, while when she carefully looked about she noted a few tea leaves on the floor.

Carrie did not think she had spilt the tea, and knitted her brows. Somebody had been stealing food, but the man had not taken much and had tried to do so in a way that would prevent its being missed. For example, he had gone to the flour bag twice and had cut the pork from both sides of the slab. Carrie thought this significant, but resolved to say nothing.

CHAPTER VIII

JIM KEEPS WATCH

The night was not cold and Jim had some trouble to keep awake as he sat with his back against a tree a short distance above the mended line. He had dug out a track and built a new wall to hold up the stones, and in the morning the camp would be moved. Now he was very tired, but he meant to watch for another night.

There was a half moon and puzzling lights and shadows checkered the hill. In some places the trees rose like scattered spires; in others they rolled down the slope in blurred dark masses. Behind the woods snowy mountains cut against the sky. The dim landscape was desolate and savagely grand. It had the strange half-finished look one notes in Canada.

In order to banish his drowsiness, Jim gave himself up to wandering memories. He knew the North, where he had risked and endured much. He had seen the tangled pines snap under their load of snow and go down in rows before the Arctic gales; he had watched the ice break up and the liberated floods hurl the floes into the forest. He had crossed the barren tundra where only moss can live and the shallow bog that steams in summer rests on frozen soil.

Raging blizzards, snowslides, crevassed glaciers and rotten ice were things he knew; there were scars on his body he had got in stubborn fights. So far he had conquered; but he owned that he had had enough, and tried to picture the Old Country his father talked about. Its woods were not primitive jungles, wrecked by gales and scorched by fires; men planted and tended them and the trees had room to grow. White farmsteads with gardens and orchards dotted the valleys; the narrow fields were rich with grass and corn. Then there were wonderful old houses, stored with treasures of art.

Well, he meant to see England some day and he began to think about the girl he had met at Montreal. She seemed to stand for all that was best in the Old Country; its refinement, its serenity, and ancient charm. One did not find girls like that in Canada; they were the product of long cultivation and sprang from a stock whose roots went deep into the past. Jim wondered with a strange longing whether he would see her again.

Perhaps it was the contrast that presently fixed his thoughts on Carrie. Carrie was a type that thrived in virgin soil; she was virile, frank, and unafraid. Her emotions were not hid by inherited reserve. One could imagine her fighting like a wildcat for the man she loved. Yet she had a fresh beauty and a vein of tenderness. Jim was fond of Carrie but not in love with her. He wondered whether he might have loved her had he not met the English girl, but pulled himself up. This kind of speculation led to nothing, and he began to look about.

The shadows of the pines had got shorter and blacker as the moon rose; the hill was checkered by their dark bars. He could not see far down the valley, because it was full of mist. The great hollow looked like a caldron in which the river boiled. Its hoarse roar echoed among the rocks and made a harmonious background for smaller and sharper notes. A faint breeze sighed in the pine-tops and now and then there was a tinkle of falling stones.

Jim saw some stones roll down and stop at the wall he had built. This ran in a gentle curve across the slope and shone like silver in the moonlight. In places, it was broken by shadows that seemed to tremble and melt. Jim knew he was getting sleepy and tried to rouse himself. It was something of an effort, because he had not slept much for a week, but by and by the strain slackened and he got suddenly alert.

An indistinct object moved where a shadow fell across the wall, and Jim knew it was a man. He was conscious of a grim satisfaction; he had watched for the fellow when brain and body needed rest, and now he had come. Moreover, his object was plain. The wall was underpinned, supported by timbers, and if a log that bore much weight were cut, the stones would fall and bring down the rest. One could not hear an ax at the camp, the falling wall would sweep away the chips, and the fellow,

stealing back, would join the men the noise brought out. Jim thought he could get near him by using the rocks and trees to cover his advance, but the other could hide among them if he were alarmed, and it might be prudent to let him get to work. The stealthy figure avoided the moonlight.

The thud of the ax echoed across the woods, and Jim, taking care that he had a dark background, went cautiously down hill. He did not carry a pistol. On the whole, he thought one was safer without a gun, but he had brought a thick wooden bar with an iron point that they used for rolling logs. Getting behind a tree, he stopped near the wall. The regular strokes of the ax indicated that the other was not disturbed, and Jim, looking down from higher ground, could see the upper part of his body as he swung the tool. The sharp blows implied that he was chopping hard.

After measuring the distance, Jim sank down and crawled to the top of the wall. Since the other had an ax, surprise would be a useful, and perhaps necessary, advantage in the attack. Jim meant to attack; there was no use in talking before the fellow was in his power. As he crept forward a few stones rolled down the hill. He wondered what had disturbed them, but thought it imprudent to turn round, and lay quiet for a few moments, when the chopping stopped. He could not see the man now, because he was hidden by the top of the wall.

The chopping began again, and Jim, crawling a few feet, seized the stones on the edge and threw himself over just after the ax came down. He fell upon the man and tried to seize him, but although both were shaken by the collision, the other avoided his grasp and staggered back. Jim followed and, swinging his bar, struck with all his strength. The other caught the blow on the curved shaft of the ax, and Jim's hands were badly jarred. The vibration of the hard wood numbed his muscles, his fingers lost their grip. It looked as if he had been clumsy and rash, for the advantage was now with his antagonist, because the ax was longer than the bar. Moreover, the Canadian bushman is highly skilled in the use of the dangerous tool. For all that, Jim had begun the fight and meant to win. The fellow had taken a bribe to ruin him.

He lifted the bar, struck hard, and missed as his antagonist stepped back. Then the latter swung his ax and Jim bent from the waist as the shining blade swept past. They were now in the moonlight and he saw the other's face; it was the man who had gone fishing with Davies, and he gave way to a fury that banished caution. The fellow had a longer reach and looked cool; indeed, he seemed to be studying Jim with ironical humor. While the latter, breathing hard, watched for an opening, he lowered his ax.

"Suppose we quit fooling and talk about the thing?" he said.

"I'm not fooling," Jim rejoined.

"Anyhow, you'd better quit. I could get you with the ax, if I wanted, but I've not much use for that. I'd sooner you stopped here while I light out."

"You'd starve before you made the settlement."

"I guess not. There's enough flour and pork in a cache to see me through."

"The trouble is, you can't make the cache," said Jim. "I've watched for you since the first wall broke and you earned the money Davies promised. Put down the ax and start for camp."

"Davies?" said the other. "Do you mean the guy who came along with the Indian packers?"

"Are you pretending you don't know the man?"

"It doesn't matter, anyhow," the other rejoined. "I'm not going back to camp, and there's something coming to you if you try to take me."

Jim meant to take him and wondered how far he could trust to bluff. If he could get near enough, he might knock out the fellow with the bar and yet not do him a serious injury. The ax was dangerous, but it was possible the other would hesitate about using it. In Canada, crimes of violence are generally punished, and even in the wilds offenders seldom long escape the Northwest Police. Yet there was a risk.

"You are coming with me," he said, and advanced with lifted bar.

The other cut at him and he narrowly missed the blow. He tried to run in before the fellow could recover from his swing, but was not quick enough. The ax went up and he met the blade with the bar. The keen steel beat down the wood and went through when it met the ground, and Jim was left with a foot or two of the handle. Stepping back, he hurled it at his antagonist and heard it strike with a heavy thud. The fellow staggered, but did not fall and, getting his balance, advanced on Jim. The blow had roused him to fury and he saw that caution was useless. They must fight until one was disabled.

Jim gave ground, breathing hard and watching for a chance to grapple while he kept out of reach. The sweat ran down his face, he was savage but cool. The worst was, he must move backwards and could not see the holes in the uneven slope. When he had gone a few yards he heard a shout and his antagonist looked round.

"Stop right there!" said somebody, and Jim saw Carrie standing above them on the wall. She was in the moonlight and balanced a gun. Her face was white but resolute.

"Put down your ax. I mean to shoot!" she said.

Jim thought quickly. The distance was short, but he had not seen Carrie use a gun. She might miss and have some trouble to re-load. Besides, he must save her the need for shooting, and the other's hesitation was his opportunity. Pulling himself together, he leaped upon the fellow, who stumbled and dropped his ax. Jim seized him round the waist and a savage grapple began. They swayed to and fro, kicking the ax that neither durst stoop to reach. The chopper's face was bleeding; Jim labored for breath, but he was moved by anger that gave him extra strength. The chopper felt his resolve in his tightening grip and knew it would go hard with him if he were beaten. It was plain that the boss meant to exact stern justice and he fought with instinctive fury for self-preservation.

The primitive passions of both were unloosed. They strained and grappled like savage animals, and for a time their strength and stubbornness seemed evenly balanced. Then luck gave Jim an advantage, for as the other trod upon the ax the long handle tilted up and got between his legs. He stumbled, and Jim, with a tense effort, lifted him from the ground. Then, gathering all his strength, he tried to throw him backwards, but lost his balance, and both plunged down the slope.

The pitch was steep and they rolled for some distance until they struck a rocky ledge. The chopper let go, slipped across the ledge, and vanished. Jim, jarred by the shock, lay still for some moments, and when he got up awkwardly saw nothing among the rocks and trees below. A rattle of gravel came out of the gloom, but it sounded some distance off. Then he heard a step and saw Carrie. She held the gun and was breathless. Her look was strained and her face white.

"Are you hurt, Jim?" she asked.

"No; not much, anyhow. Go back to the track. Give me the gun."

"Why do you want the gun?"

Jim made an impatient gesture. He had forgotten that Carrie had come to his help, and although he noted, mechanically, that she was highly strung and bearing some strain, he did not dwell on this. His antagonist had got away. He wanted to go after him, not to talk.

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