

Cullum Ridgwell

The Hound From The North



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CHAPTER I

IN THE MOUNTAINS

A pallid sun, low, gleaming just over a rampart of mountain-tops. Sundogs—heralds of stormy weather—fiercely staring, like sentries, upon either hand of the mighty sphere of light. Vast glaciers shimmering jewel-like in the steely light of the semi-Arctic evening. Black belts of gloomy pinewoods on the lower slopes of the mountains; the trees snow-burdened, but black with the darkness of night in their melancholy depths. The earth white; snow to the thickness of many feet on all. Life none; not a beast of the earth, nor a fowl of the air, nor the hum of an insect. Solitude. Cold—grey, pitiless cold. Night is approaching.

The hill ranges which backbone the American continent—the northern extremity of the Rocky Mountains. The barrier which confronts the traveller as he journeys from the Yukon Valley to the Alaskan seaboard. Land where the foot of man but rarely treads. And mid-winter.

But now, in the dying light of day, a man comes slowly, painfully into the picture. What an atom in that infinity of awful grandeur. One little life in all that desert of snow and ice. And what a life. The poor wretch was swathed in furs; snow-shoes on his feet, and a long staff lent his drooping figure support. His whole attitude told its own tale of exhaustion. But a closer inspection, one glance into the fierce-burning eyes, which glowered from the depths of two cavernous sockets, would have added a sequel of starvation. The eyes had a frenzied look in them, the look of a man without hope, but with still that instinct of life burning in his brain. Every now and again he raised one mitted hand and pressed it to nose and cheeks. He knew his face was frozen, but he had no desire to stop to thaw it out. He was beyond such trifles. His upturned storm-collar had become massed with icicles about his mouth, and the fur was frozen solidly to his chin whisker, but he gave the matter no heed.

The man tottered on, still onward with the dogged persistence which the inborn love of life inspires. He longed to rest, to seat himself upon the snow just where he happened to be, to indulge that craving for sleep which was upon him. His state of exhaustion fostered these feelings, and only his brain fought for him and clung to life. He knew what that drowsy sensation meant. He was slowly freezing. To rest meant sleep—to sleep meant death.

Slowly he dragged himself up the inclining ledge he was traversing. The path was low at the base of one of the loftiest crags. It wound its way upwards in such a fashion that he could see little more than fifty yards ahead of him ere it turned away to the left as it skirted the hill. He was using his last reserve of strength, and he knew it. At the top he stood half dazed. The mountain rose sheer up to dizzy heights on one side, and a precipice was on the other. He turned his dreadful eyes this way and that. Then he scanned the prospect before him—a haze of dimly-outlined mountains. He glanced back, tracing his uneven tracks until they disappeared in the grey evening light. Then he turned back again to a contemplation of what lay before him. Suddenly his staff slipped from his hand as though he no longer had the strength to grip it. Then, raising his arms aloft, he gave vent to one despairing cry in which was expressed all the pent-up agony of his soul. It was the cry of one from whom all hope had gone.

“God! God have mercy on me! I am lost—lost!”

The despairing note echoed and re-echoed among the hills. And as each echo came back to his dulled ears it was as though some invisible being mocked him. Suddenly he braced himself, and his

mind obtained a momentary triumph over his physical weakness. He stooped to recover his staff. His limbs refused to obey his will. He stumbled. Then he crumpled and fell in a heap upon the snow.

All was silent, and he lay quite still. Death was gripping him, and he knew it. Presently he wearily raised his head. He gazed about him with eyelids more than half closed. "Is it worth the struggle?" he seemed to ask; "is there any hope?" He felt so warm, so comfortable out there in the bitter winter air. Where had been the use of his efforts? Where the use of the gold he had so laboriously collected at the new Eldorado? At the thought of his gold his spirit tried to rouse him from the sleep with which he was threatened. His eyelids opened wide, and his eyes, from which intelligence was fast disappearing, rolled in their gaunt sockets. His body heaved as though he were about to rise, but beyond that he did not move.

As he lay there a sound reached his numbed ears. Clear through the crisp night air it came with the keenness and piercing incision which is only obtained in the still air of such latitudes. It was a human cry: a long-drawn "whoop." Like his own cry, it echoed amongst the hills. It only needed such as this to support the inclinations of the sufferer's will. His head was again raised. And in his wild eyes was a look of alertness—hope. He listened. He counted the echoes as they came. Then, with an almost superhuman effort, he struggled to his feet. New life had come to him born of hope. His weakened frame answered to his great effort. His heart was throbbing wildly.

As he stood up the cry came to him again, nearer this time. He moved forward and rounded the bend in the path. Again the cry. Now just ahead of him. He answered it with joy in his tone and shambled on. Now two dark figures loomed up in the grey twilight. They were moving swiftly along the ledge towards him. They cried out something in a foreign tongue. He did not understand, but his joy was no less. They came up, and he saw before him the short, stout figures of two fur-clad Eskimos. He was saved.

Inside a small dugout a dingy oil lamp shed its murky rays upon squalid surroundings. The place was reeking with the offensive odours exhaled from the burning oil. The atmosphere was stifling.

There were four occupants of this abode, and, stretched in various attitudes on dusty blankets spread upon the ground, they presented a strange picture. Two of these were Eskimos. The broad, flat faces, sharp noses, and heavy lips were unmistakable, as were their dusky, greasy skins and squat figures. A third man was something between the white-man and the redskin. He was in the nature of a half-breed, and, though not exactly pleasant to look upon, he was certainly interesting as a study. He was lying with limbs outstretched and his head propped upon one hand, while his gaze was directed with thoughtful intensity towards a small, fierce-burning camp-stove, which, at that moment, was rendering the hut so unbearably hot.

His face was sallow, and indented with smallpox scars. He had no hair upon it, except a tuft or two of eyebrows, which the ravages of disease had condescended to leave to him. His nose, which was his best feature, was beaky, but beautifully aquiline; but his mouth was wide, with a lower lip that sagged loosely from its fellow above. His head was small, and was burdened with a crown of lank black hair which had been allowed to grow Indian-like until it hung upon his shoulders. He was of medium height, and his arms were of undue length.

The other occupant of the dugout was our traveller. He was stretched upon a blanket, on which was spread his fur coat; and he was alternating between the disposal of a bowl of steaming soup and groaning with the racking pains caused by his recently thawed-out frost-bites.

The soup warmed his starving body, and his pain increased proportionately. In spite of the latter, however, he felt very much alive. Occasionally he glanced round upon his silent companions. Whenever he did so one or the other, or both of the Eskimos were gazing stolidly at him.

He was rather a good-looking man, notwithstanding his now unkempt appearance. His eyes were large—very large in their hollow sockets. His nose and cheeks were, at present, a mass of blisters from the thawing frost-bites, and his mouth and chin were hidden behind a curtain of whisker of

about three weeks' growth. There was no mistaking him for anything but an Anglo-Saxon, and a man of considerable and very fine proportions.

When his soup was finished he set the bowl down and leaned back with a sigh. The pock-marked man glanced over at him.

"More?" he said, in a deep, not unmusical, tone.

The half-starved traveller nodded, and his eyes sparkled. One of the Eskimos rose and re-filled the bowl from a tin camp-kettle which stood on the stove. The famished man took it and at once began to sup the invigorating liquid. The agonies of his frost-bites were terrible, but the pangs of hunger were greater. By and by the bowl was set down empty.

The half-breed sat up and crossed his legs, and leant his body against two sacks which contained something that crackled slightly under his weight.

"Give you something more solid in an hour or so. Best not have it too soon," he said, speaking slowly, but with good enunciation.

"Not now?" said the traveller, in a disappointed tone.

The other shook his head.

"We're all going to have supper then. Best wait." Then, after a pause: "Where from?"

"Forty Mile Creek," said the other.

"You don't say! Alone?"

There was a curious saving of words in this man's mode of speech. Possibly he had learned this method from his Indian associates.

The traveller nodded.

"Yes."

"Where to?"

"The sea-coast."

The half-breed laughed gutturally.

"Forty Mile Creek. Sea-coast. On foot. Alone. Winter. You must be mad."

The traveller shook his head.

"Not mad. I could have done it, only I lost my way. I had all my stages thought out carefully. I tramped from the sea-coast originally. Where am I now?"

The half-breed eyed the speaker curiously. He seemed to think well before he answered. Then—"Within a few miles of the Pass. To the north."

An impressive silence followed. The half-breed continued to eye the sick man, and, to judge from the expression of his face, his thoughts were not altogether unpleasant. He watched the weary face before him until the eyes gradually closed, and, in spite of the burning pains of the frost-bites, exhaustion did its work, and the man slept. He waited for some moments listening to the heavy, regular breathing, then he turned to his companions and spoke long and earnestly in a curious tongue. One of the Eskimos rose and removed a piece of bacon from a nail in the wall. This he placed in the camp-kettle on the stove. Then he took a tin billy and dipped it full from a bucket containing beans that had been set to soak. These also went into the camp-kettle. Then the fellow threw himself down again upon his blankets, and, for some time, the three men continued to converse in low tones. They glanced frequently at the sleeper, and occasionally gurgled out a curious throaty chuckle. Their whole attitude was furtive, and the man slept on.

An hour passed—two. The third was more than half gone. The hut reeked with the smell of cooking victuals. The Eskimo, who seemed to act as cook, occasionally looked into the camp-kettle. The other two were lying on their blankets, sometimes conversing, but more often silent, gazing stolidly before them. At length the cook uttered a sharp ejaculation and lifted the steaming kettle from its place on the stove. Then he produced four deep pannikins from a sack, and four greasy-looking spoons. From another he produced a pile of biscuits. "Hard tack," well known on the northern trails.

Supper was ready, and the pock-marked man leant over and roused the traveller.

“Food,” he said laconically, as the startled sleeper rubbed his eyes.

The man sat up and gazed hungrily at the iron pot. The Indian served out the pork with ruthless hands. A knife divided the piece into four, and he placed one in each pannikin. Then he poured the beans and soup over each portion. The biscuits were placed within reach, and the supper was served.

The sick man devoured his uncouth food with great relish. The soup which had been first given him had done him much good, and now the “solid” completed the restoration so opportunely begun. He was a vigorous man, and his exhaustion had chiefly been brought about by lack of food. Now, as he sat with his empty pannikin in front of him, he looked gratefully over at his rescuers, and slowly munched some dry biscuit, and sipped occasionally from a great beaker of black coffee. Life was very sweet to him at that moment, and he thought joyfully of the belt inside his clothes laden with the golden result of his labours on Forty Mile Creek.

Now the half-breed turned to him.

“Feeling pretty good?” he observed, conversationally.

“Yes, thanks to you and your friends. You must let me pay you for this.” The suggestion was coarsely put. Returning strength was restoring the stranger to his usual condition of mind. There was little refinement about this man from the Yukon.

The other waived the suggestion.

“Sour-belly’s pretty good tack when y’ can’t get any better. Been many days on the road?”

“Three weeks.” The traveller was conscious of three pairs of eyes fixed upon his face.

“Hoofing right along?”

“Yes. I missed the trail nearly a week back. Followed the track of a dog-train. It came some distance this way. Then I lost it.”

“Ah! Food ran out, maybe.”

The half-breed had now turned away, and was gazing at the stove as though it had a great fascination for him.

“Yes, I meant to make the Pass where I could lay in a fresh store. Instead of that I wandered on till I found the empty pack got too heavy, then I left it.”

“Left it?” The half-breed raised his two little tufts of eyebrows, but his eyes remained staring at the stove.

“Oh, it was empty—clean empty. You see, I didn’t trust anything but food in my pack.”

“No. That’s so. Maybe gold isn’t safe in a pack?”

The pock-marked face remained turned towards the glowing stove. The man’s manner was quite indifferent. It suggested that he merely wished to talk.

The traveller seemed to draw back into his shell at the mention of gold. A slight pause followed.

“Maybe you ain’t been digging up there?” the half-breed went on presently.

“It’s rotten bad digging on the Creek,” the traveller said, clumsily endeavouring to evade the question.

“So I’ve heard,” said the half-breed.

He had produced a pipe, and was leisurely filling it from a pouch of antelope hide. His two companions did the same. The stranger took his pipe from his fur coat pocket and cut some tobacco from a plug. This he offered to his companions, but it was rejected in favour of their own.

“The only thing I’ve had—that and my fur coat—to keep me from freezing to death for more than four days. Haven’t so much as seen a sign of life since I lost the dog track.”

“This country’s a terror,” observed the half-breed emphatically.

All four men lit their pipes. The sick man only drew once or twice at his, then he laid it aside. The process of smoking caused the blisters on his face to smart terribly.

“Gives your face gyp,” said the half-breed, sympathetically. “Best not bother to smoke to-night.”

He pulled vigorously at his own pipe, and the two Indians followed suit. And gradually a pleasant odour, not of tobacco but some strange perfume, disguised the reek of the atmosphere. It was pungent but delightful, and the stranger remarked upon it.

“What’s that you are smoking?” he asked.

For one instant the half-breed’s eyes were turned upon him with a curious look. Then he turned back to the contemplation of the stove.

“Kind o’ weed that grows around these wilds,” he answered. “Only stuff we get hereabouts. It’s good when you’re used to it.” He laughed quietly.

The stranger looked from one to the other of his three companions. He was struck by a sudden thought.

“What do you do here? I mean for a living?”

“Trap,” replied the Breed shortly.

“Many furs about?”

“Fair.”

“Slow work,” said the stranger, indifferently.

Then a silence fell. The wayfarer was getting very drowsy. The pungent odour from his companions’ pipes seemed to have a strangely soothing effect upon him. Before he was aware of it he caught himself nodding, and, try as he would, he could not keep his heavy eyelids open. The men smoked on in silence. Three pairs of eyes watched the stranger’s efforts to keep awake, and a malicious gleam was in the look with which they surveyed him. He was too sleepy to observe. Besides, had he been in condition to do so, the expression of their eyes would probably have been different. Slowly his head drooped forward. He was dreaming pleasantly already, although, as yet, he was not quite asleep. Now he no longer attempted to keep his eyes open. Further his head drooped forward. The three men were still as mice. Then suddenly he rolled over on one side, and his stertorous breathing indicated a deep, unnatural slumber.

The hut was in darkness but for a beam of light which made its way in through a narrow slit over the door. The sunlight shone down upon the huddled figure of the traveller, who still slept in the attitude in which he had rolled over on his fur coat when sleep had first overcome him. Otherwise the hut was empty. The half-breed and his companions had disappeared. The fire was out. The lamp had burned itself out. The place was intensely cold.

Suddenly the sleeper stirred. He straightened himself out and turned over. Then, without further warning, he sat up and found himself staring up at the dazzling streak of light.

“Daylight,” he murmured; “and they’ve let the stove go out. Gee! but I feel queer about the head.”

Moving his head so that his eyes should miss the glare of light, he gazed about him. He was alone, and as he realized this he scrambled to his feet, and, for the moment, the room—everything about him—seemed to be turning topsy-turvy. He placed his hand against the post which supported the roof and steadied himself.

“I wonder where they are?” he muttered. “Ah! of course,” as an afterthought, “they are out at their traps. They might have stoked the fire. It’s perishing in here. I feel beastly queer; must be the effects of starvation.”

Then he moved a step forward. He brought up suddenly to a standstill. His two hands went to his waist. They moved, groping round it spasmodically. Undoing his clothes he passed his hand into his shirt. Then one word escaped him. One word—almost a whisper—but conveying such a world of fierce, horror-stricken intensity—

“Robbed!”

And the look which accompanied his exclamation was the look of a man whose mind is distracted.

So he stood for some seconds. His lips moved, but no words escaped them. His hand remained within his shirt, and his fingers continued to grope about mechanically. And all the time the dazed, strained look burned in his great, roving eyes.

It was gone. That broad belt, weighted down with the result of one year's toil, gold dust and nuggets, was gone. Presently he seated himself on the cold iron of the stove. Thus he sat for an hour, looking straight before him with eyes that seemed to draw closer together, so intense was their gaze. And who shall say what thoughts he thought; what wild schemes of revenge he planned? There was no outward sign. Just those silent moving lips.

CHAPTER II

MR. ZACHARY SMITH

“Rot, man, rot! I’ve been up here long enough to know my way about this devil’s country. No confounded neche can teach me. The trail forked at that bush we passed three days back. We’re all right. I wish I felt as sure about the weather.”

Leslie Grey broke off abruptly. His tone was resentful, as well as dictatorial. He was never what one might call an easy man. He was always headstrong, and never failed to resent interference on the smallest provocation. Perhaps these things were in the nature of his calling. He was one of the head Customs officials on the Canadian side of the Alaskan boundary. His companion was a subordinate.

The latter was a man of medium height, and from the little that could be seen of his face between the high folds of the storm-collar of his buffalo coat, he possessed a long nose and a pair of dark, keen, yet merry eyes. His name was Robb Chillingwood. The two men were tramping along on snow-shoes in the rear of a dog-train. An Indian was keeping pace with the dogs in front; the latter, five in number, harnessed in the usual tandem fashion to a heavily-laden sled.

“It’s no use anticipating bad weather,” replied Chillingwood, quietly. “But as to the question of the trail—”

“There’s no question,” interrupted Grey, sharply.

“Ah, the map shows two clumps of bush. The trail turns off at one of them. My chart says the second. I studied it carefully. The ‘confounded neche,’ as you call him, says ‘not yet.’ Which means that he considers it to be the second bush. You say no.”

“The neche only knows the trail by repute. You have never been over it before. I have travelled it six times. You make me tired. Give it a rest. Perhaps you can make something of those nasty, sharp puffs of wind which keep lifting the ground snow at intervals.”

Robb shrugged his fur-coated shoulders, and glanced up at the sun. It seemed to be struggling hard to pierce a grey haze which hung over the mountains. The sundogs, too, could be seen, but, like the sun itself, they were dim and glowed rather than shone. That patchy wind, so well known in the west of Canada, was very evident just then. It seemed to hit the snow-bound earth, slither viciously along the surface, sweep up a thin cloud of loose surface snow, then drop in an instant, but only to operate in the same manner at some other spot. This was going on spasmodically in many directions, the snow brushing up in hissing eddies at each attack. And slowly the grey mist on the hills was obscuring the sun.

Robb Chillingwood was a man of some experience on the prairie, although, as his companion had said, he was new to this particular mountain trail. To his trained eye the outlook was not encouraging.

“Storm,” he observed shortly.

“That’s my opinion,” said Grey definitely.

“According to calculations, if we have not got off the trail,” Chillingwood went on, with a sly look at his superior, “we should reach Dougal’s roadside hostelry in the Pass by eight o’clock—well before dark. We ought to escape the storm.”

“You mean we shall,” said Grey pointedly.

“If—”

“Bunkum!”

The two men relapsed into silence. They were very good friends these two. Both were used to the strenuous northern winter. Both understood the dangers of a blizzard. Their argument about the trail they were on was quite a friendly one. It was only the dictatorial manner of Leslie Grey which gave it the appearance of a quarrel. Chillingwood understood him, and took no notice of his somewhat

irascible remarks, whilst, for himself, he remained of opinion that he had read his Ordnance chart aright.

They tramped on. Each man, with a common thought, was watching the weather indications. As the time passed the wind “patches” grew in size, in force, and in frequency of recurrence. The haze upon the surrounding hills rapidly deepened, and the air was full of frost particles. A storm was coming on apace. Nor was Dougal’s wayside hostelry within sight.

“It’s a rotten life on the boundary,” said Robb, as though continuing a thought aloud.

“It’s not so much the life,” replied Grey vindictively, “it’s the d-d red tape that demands the half-yearly journey down country. That’s the dog’s part of our business. Why can’t they establish a branch bank up here for the bullion and send all ‘returns’ by mail? There is a postal service—of a kind. It’s a one-horsed lay out—Government work. There’ll come a rush to the Yukon valley this year, and when there’s a chance of doing something for ourselves—having done all we can for the Government—I suppose they’ll shift us. It’s the way of Governments. I’m sick of it. I draw four thousand dollars a year, and I earn every cent of it. You—”

“Draw one thousand, and think myself lucky if I taste fresh vegetables once a week during the summer. Say, Leslie, do you think it’s possible to assimilate the humble but useful hog by means of a steady diet of ‘sour-belly’?”

Grey laughed.

“If that were possible I guess we ought to make the primeest bacon. Hallo, here comes the d-d neche. What’s up now, I wonder? Well, Rainy-Moon, what is it?”

The Indian had stopped his dogs and now turned back to speak to the two men. His face was expressionless. He was a tall specimen of the Cree Indian.

“Ugh,” he grunted, as he came to a standstill. Then he stretched out his arm with a wide sweep in the direction of the mountains. “No good, white-men—coyote, yes. So,” and he pointed to the south and made a motion of running, “yes. Plenty beef, plenty fire-water. White-man store.” His face slowly expanded into a smile. Then the smile died out suddenly and he turned to the north and made a long ‘soo-o-o-sh’ with rising intonation, signifying the rising wind. “Him very bad. White-man sleep—sleep. Wake—no.” And he finished up with a shake of the head.

Then his arm dropped to his side, and he waited for Grey to speak. For a moment the Customs officer remained silent. Chillingwood waited anxiously. Both men understood the Indian’s meaning. Chillingwood believed the man to be right about the trail. As to the coming storm, and the probable consequences if they were caught in it, that was patent to all three.

But Grey, with characteristic pig-headedness, gave no heed to the superior intelligence of the Indian where matters of direction in a wild country were concerned. He *knew* he was on the right trail. That was sufficient for him. But he surveyed the surrounding mountains well before he spoke. They had halted in a sort of cup-like hollow, with towering sides surmounted by huge glaciers down which the wind was now whistling with vicious force. There were only two exits from this vast arena. The one by which the travellers had entered it, and the other directly ahead of them; the latter was only to be approached by a wide ledge which skirted one of the mountains and inclined sharply upwards. Higher up the mountain slope was a belt of pinewoods, close to which was a stubby growth of low bush. This was curiously black in contrast with the white surroundings, for no snow was upon its weedy branches and shrivelled, discoloured leaves. Suddenly, while Grey was looking out beyond the dog-train, he observed the impress of snow-shoes in the snow. He pointed to them and drew his companion’s attention.

“You see,” he said triumphantly, “there has been some one passing this way just ahead of us. Look here, neche, you just get right on and don’t let me have any more nonsense about the trail.”

The Indian shook his head.

“Ow,” he grunted. “This little—just little.” Then he pointed ahead. “Big, white—all white. No, no; white-man no come dis way. Bimeby neche so,” and Rainy-Moon made a motion of lying down and sleeping. He meant that they would get lost and die in the snow.

Grey became angry.

“Get on,” he shouted. And Rainy-Moon reluctantly turned and started his dogs afresh.

The little party ascended the sloping path. The whipping snow lashed their faces as the wind rushed it up from the ground in rapidly thickening clouds. The fierce gusts were concentrating into a steady shrieking blast. A grey cloud of snow, thin as yet, but plainly perceptible, was in the air. The threat it conveyed was no idle one. The terror of the blizzard was well known to those people. And they knew that in a short space they would have to seek what shelter they might chance to find upon these almost barren mountains.

The white-men tightened the woollen scarves about the storm-collars of their coats, and occasionally beat their mitts against their sides. The gathering wind was intensifying the cold.

“If this goes on we shall have to make that belt of pinewoods for shelter,” observed Robb Chillingwood practically. “It won’t do to take chances of losing the dogs—and their load—in the storm. What say?”

They had rounded a bend and Grey was watchfully gazing ahead. He did not seem to hear his companion’s question. Suddenly he pointed directly along the path towards a point where it seemed to vanish between two vast crags.

“Smoke,” he said. And his tone conveyed that he wished his companion to understand that he, Grey, had been right about the trail, and that Robb had been wrong. “That’s Dougal’s store,” he went on, after a slight pause.

Chillingwood looked as directed. He saw the rush of smoke which, in the rising storm, was ruthlessly swept from the mouth of a piece of upright stove-pipe, which in the now grey surroundings could just be distinguished.

“But I thought there was a broad, open trail at Dougal’s,” he said, at last, after gazing for some moments at the tiny smoke-stack.

“Maybe the road opens out here,” answered Grey weakly.

But it didn’t. Instead it narrowed. And as they ascended the slope it became more and more precipitous. The storm was now beating up, seemingly from every direction, and it was with difficulty that the five great huskies hauled their burden in the face of it. However, Rainy-Moon urged them to their task with no light hand, and just as the storm settled down to its work in right good earnest they drew up abreast of a small dugout. The path had narrowed down to barely six feet in width, bordered on the left hand by a sharp slope upwards towards the pinewood belt above, and on the right by a sheer precipice; whilst fifty feet further on there was no more path—just space. As this became apparent to him, Robb Chillingwood could not help wondering what their fate might have been had the storm overtaken them earlier, and they had not come upon the dugout. However, he had no time for much speculation on the subject, for, as the dogs came to a stand, the door of the dugout was thrown back and a tall, cadaverous-looking man stood framed in the opening.

“Kind o’ struck it lucky,” he observed, without any great show of enthusiasm. “Come right in. The neche can take the dogs round the side there,” pointing to the left of the dugout. “There’s a weatherproof shack there where I keep my kindling. Guess he can fix up in that till this d-d breeze has blown itself out. You’ve missed the trail, I take it. Come right in.”

Half-an-hour later the two Customs officers were seated with their host round the camp-stove which stood hissing and spluttering in the centre of the hut. The dogs and Rainy-Moon were housed in the woodshed.

Now that the travellers were divested of their heavy furs, their appearance was less picturesque but more presentable. Robb Chillingwood was about twenty-five; his whole countenance indexed a sturdy honesty of thought and a merry disposition. There was considerable strength too about brow

and jaw. Leslie Grey was shorter than his companion. A man of dapper, sturdy figure, and with a face good-looking, obstinate, and displaying as much sense of humour as a barbed-wire fence post. He was fully thirty years of age.

Their host possessed a long, attenuated, but powerful figure, and a face chiefly remarkable for its cadaverous hollows and a pair of hungry eyes and a dark chin-whisker.

"Yes, sir," this individual was saying, "she's goin' to howl good and hard for the next forty-eight hours, or I don't know these parts. Maybe you're from the valley?"

Chillingwood shook his head.

"No. Fort Cudahy way," he said. "My name's Chillingwood—Robb Chillingwood. This is Mr. Leslie Grey, Customs officer. I am his assistant."

The long man glanced slowly at his guests. His great eyes seemed to take in the details of each man's appearance with solemn curiosity. Then he twisted slowly upon the upturned box on which he was seated and crossed his legs.

"I'm pleased to meet you, gentlemen. It's lonely in these parts—lonely." He shuddered as though with cold. "I've been trapping in these latitudes for a considerable period, and it's—lonely. My name is Zachary Smith."

As the trapper pronounced his name he glanced keenly from one to the other of the two men beside him. His look was suggestive of doubt. He seemed to be trying to re-assure himself that he had never before crossed the paths of these chance guests of his. After a moment of apprehensive silence he went on slowly, like one groping in darkness. His confidence was not fully established.

"You can make up your minds to a couple of days in this shanty—anyhow. I mostly live on 'sour-belly' and 'hard tack.' Don't sound inviting, eh?"

Chillingwood laughed pleasantly.

"We're Government officials," he said with meaning.

"Yes," put in Grey. "But we've got plenty of canned truck in our baggage. I'm thinking you may find our supplies a pleasant change."

"No doubt—no doubt whatever. Cat's meat would be a delicacy after—months of tallowy pork."

This slow-spoken trapper surveyed his guests thoughtfully. The travellers were enjoying the comforting shelter and warmth. Neither of them seemed particularly talkative.

Presently Grey roused himself. Extreme heat after extreme cold always has a somnolent effect on those who experience it.

"We'd best get the—stuff off the sleigh, Chillingwood," said he. "Rainy-Moon's above the average Indian for honesty, but, nevertheless, we don't need to take chances. And," as the younger man rose and stretched himself, "food is good on occasions. What does Mr. Zachary Smith say?"

"Ay, let's sample some white-man's grub. Gentlemen, this is a fortunate meeting—all round."

Chillingwood passed out of the hut. As he opened the door a vindictive blast of wind swept a cloud of snow in, and the frozen particles fell crackling and hissing upon the glowing stove.

"And they call this a white-man's country," observed Mr. Smith pensively, as the door closed again. He opened the stove and proceeded to knock the embers together preparatory to stoking up afresh.

"Guess you were making for the Pass," he said conversationally.

"Yes," replied Grey.

"Missed the trail," the other said, pitching a cord-wood stick accurately into the centre of the glowing embers.

Grey made no answer.

"Tisn't in the way of Governments to show consideration to their servants," Mr. Smith went on, filling the stove with fuel to the limit of its holding capacity. "It's a deadly season to be forced to travel about in."

“Consideration,” said Grey bitterly. “I’m forced to undertake this journey twice a year. Which means I am on the road the best part of my time. And merely because there is no bank or authorized place for depositing—”

“Ah, gold,” put in Mr. Zachary Smith quietly.

“And reams of ‘returns.’”

“They reckon that the ‘rush’ to the Yukon’ll come next year. Maybe things will alter then.”

Smith straightened himself up from his occupation. His face displayed but the most ordinary interest in the conversation.

At that moment Chillingwood returned bearing two small brass-bound chests. The Indian followed him bringing a number of packages of tinned food. Smith glanced from the chests—which were as much as Chillingwood could carry—to the angular proportions of the Indian’s burden, then back again to the chests. He watched furtively as the officer deposited the latter; then he turned back to the stove and opened the damper.

Then followed a meal of which all three partook with that heartiness which comes of an appetite induced by a hardy open-air life. They talked but little while they ate, and that little was of the prospects of the new Eldorado. Leslie Grey spoke with the bitterness of a disappointed man. In reality he had been successful in the business he had adopted. But some men are born grumblers, and he was one. It is probable that had he been born a prince he would have loudly lamented the fact that he was not a king. Chillingwood was different; he accepted the situation and enjoyed his life. He was unambitious whilst faithfully doing that which he regarded as his duty, first to himself, then to his employers. His method of life was something like that of the sailor. He fully appreciated the motto of the seafaring gentry—one hand for himself and one for his employers. When in doubt both hands for self. He meant to break away from his present employment when the Yukon “rush” came. In the meantime he was on the spot. Mr. Zachary Smith chiefly listened. He could eat and watch his guests. He could study them. And he seemed in no way inclined to waste his time on words when he could do the other two things. He said little about himself, and was mainly contented with comprehensive nods and grunts, whilst he devoured huge portions of tinned tongue and swallowed bumpers of scalding tea.

After dinner the travellers produced their pipes. Grey offered his tobacco to their host. Mr. Zachary Smith shook his head.

“Given up tobacco—mostly,” he said, glancing in the direction of the door, which groaned under a sudden attack from the storm which was now howling with terrible force outside. “It isn’t that I don’t like it. But when a man gets cooped up in these hills he’s like to run out of it, and then it’s uncomfortable. I’ve taken on a native weed which does me for smoking when I need it—which isn’t often. It grows hereabouts and isn’t likely to give out. Guess I won’t smoke now.”

Grey shrugged and lit his pipe. If any man could be fool enough to reject tobacco, Leslie Grey was not the sort of man to press him. He was intolerant of ideas in any one but himself. Chillingwood sucked luxuriously at his pipe and thought big things.

The blue smoke clouds curled insinuatingly about the heads of the smokers, and rose heavily upon the dense atmosphere of the hut. The two men stretched themselves indolently upon the ground, sometimes speaking, but, for the most part, silent. These wayfarers thought little of time. They had a certain task to perform which, the elements permitting, they would carry out in due course. In the meantime it was storming, and they had been fortunate in finding shelter in these wastes of snow and ice; they were glad to accept what comfort came their way. This enforced delay would find a simple record in Leslie Grey’s report to his superiors. “Owing to a heavy storm, etc.” They were Government servants. The routine of these men’s lives was all very monotonous, but they were used to it, and use is a wonderful thing. It so closely borders on content.

Cards were produced later on. Mr. Zachary Smith resisted the blandishments of “cut-throat” euchre. He had no money to spare for gambling, he informed his guests; he would look on. He sat

over the stove whilst the others played. Later on the cards were put away, and the travellers, curling themselves into their blankets, composed themselves to sleep.

The lean figure sat silently blinking at the red sides of the fire-box. His legs were crossed, and he nursed his knee in a restful embrace. For nearly an hour he sat thus, and only the slow movement of his great rolling eyes, and an occasional inclination of his head told of the active thought which was passing behind his mask-like features.

As he sat there he looked older by half a score of years than either of his companions, but, in reality, he was a young man. The furrows and hollows upon his face were the marks of privation and exposure, not of age. His bowed figure was not the result of weakness or senility, it was chiefly the result of great height and the slouching gait of one who has done much slow tramping. Mr. Zachary Smith made an interesting study as he sat silently beside his stove.

His face was the face of an honest man—when his eyes were concealed beneath their heavy lids. It was a good face, and refined; tough, vigorous, honest, until the eyelids were raised. Then the expression was utterly changed. A something looked out from those great rolling eyeballs which was furtive, watchful, doubtful. They were eyes one sometimes sees in a madman or a great criminal. And now, as he sat absorbed in his own reflections, their gaze alternated between the two brass-bound chests and the recumbent figure of Leslie Grey.

So he sat, this self-styled Zachary Smith, trapper.

CHAPTER III

MR. ZACHARY SMITH SMOKES

It was the third morning of the travellers' sojourn in Mr. Smith's dugout. Two long idle days had been spent in the foetid atmosphere of the trapper's half-buried house. During their enforced stay neither Grey nor his subordinates had learnt much of their reticent host. It is doubtful if they had troubled themselves much about him. He had greeted them with a sort of indifferent hospitality, and they were satisfied. It was not in the nature of their work to question the characters of those whom they encountered upon their journey. To all that he had Mr. Zachary Smith had made them welcome; they could expect no more, they needed no more. Now the day had arrived for their departure, for the storm had subsided and the sun was shining with all its wintry splendour.

The three men leisurely devoured an early morning breakfast.

Mr. Smith was quite cheerful. He seemed to be labouring under some strange excitement. He looked better, too, since the advent of his guests. Perhaps it was the result of the ample supplies of canned provisions which the two men had lavished unsparingly upon him. His face was less cadaverous; the deep searing furrows were less pronounced. Altogether there was a marked improvement in this solitary dweller in the wild. Now he was discussing the prospects of the weather, whilst he partook liberally of the food set before him.

"These things aren't like most storms," he said. "They blow themselves out and have done with it. They don't come back on you with a change of wind. That isn't the way of the blizzard. We've got a clear spell of a fortnight and more before us—with luck. Now, which way may you be taking, gentlemen? Are you going to head through the mountains for the main trail, or are you going to double on your tracks?"

"We are going back," said Grey, with unpleasant emphasis. Any allusion to his mistake of the road annoyed him.

Chillingwood turned his head away and hid a smile.

"I think you will do well," replied the trapper largely. "I know these hills, and I should be inclined to hark back to where you missed the trail. I hope to cover twenty miles myself to-day."

"Your traps will be buried, I should say," suggested Robb.

"I'm used to that," replied the tall man quietly. "Guess I shan't have much difficulty with 'em." He permitted himself the suspicion of a smile.

Grey drew out his pipe and leisurely loaded it. Robb followed suit. Mr. Zachary Smith pushed his tin pannikin away from before him and leaned back.

"Going to smoke?" he asked. "Guess I'll join you. No, not your plug, thanks. I'm feeling pretty good. My weed'll do me. You don't fancy to try it?"

"T. and B.'s good enough for me," said Grey, with a smile. "No, I won't experiment."

Smith held his pouch towards Chillingwood.

"Can I?"

Robb shook his head with a doubtful smile.

"Guess not, thanks. What's good enough for my chief is good enough for me."

The trapper slowly unfolded an antelope hide pouch of native workmanship. He emptied out a little pile of greenish-brown flakes into the palm of his hand. It was curious, dusty-looking stuff, suggestive of discoloured bran. This he poured into the bowl of a well-worn briar, the mouthpiece of which he carefully and with accuracy adjusted into the corner of his mouth.

"If you ever chance to have the experience I have had in these mountains, gentlemen," he then went on slowly, as gathering into the palm of his hand a red-hot cinder from the stove he tossed it to and fro until it lodged on the bowl of his pipe, "I think you'll find the use of the weed which grows on

this hillside,” with a jerk of his head upwards to indicate the bush which flourished in that direction, “has its advantages.”

“Maybe,” said Grey contemptuously.

“I doubt it,” said Robb, with a pleasant smile.

The lean man knocked the cinder from his pipe and emitted a cloud of pungent smoke from between his lips. The others had lit up. But the odour of the trapper’s weed quickly dominated the atmosphere. He talked rapidly now.

“You folks who travel the main trails don’t see much of what is going on in the mountains—the real life of the mountains,” he said. “You have no conception of the real dangers which these hills contain. Yes, sir, they’re hidden from the public eye, and only get to be known outside by reason of the chance experience of the traveller who happens to lose his way, but is lucky enough to escape the pitfalls with which he finds himself surrounded. I could tell you some queer yarns of these hills.”

“Travellers’ tales,” suggested Grey, with a yawn and a disparaging smile. “I have heard some.”

“Yes,” said Robb, “there are queer tales afloat of adventures encountered by travellers journeying from the valley to the coast. But they’re chiefly confined to wayside robbery, and are of a very sordid, everyday kind. No doubt your experiences are less matter-of-fact and more romantic. By Jove, I feel jolly comfy. Not much like turning out.”

“That’s how it takes me,” said Smith quietly, but with a quick glance at the speaker. “But idleness won’t boil my pot. It’s a remarkable thing that I’ve felt wonderfully energetic these last few days, and now that I have to turn out I should prefer to stop where I am. I s’pose it’s human nature.”

He gazed upon his audience with a broad smile.

At that moment the loud yelping of the dogs penetrated the thick sides of the dugout. Rainy-Moon was preparing for the start. Doubtless the brilliant change in the weather had inspired the savage burden-bearers of the north.

“That’s curious-smelling stuff you’re smoking,” said Grey, rousing himself with an effort after a moment’s dead silence. “What do you call it?”

“Can’t say—a weed,” said Zachary Smith, glancing down his nose towards the bowl of his pipe. “Not bad, is it? Smells of almonds—tastes like nutty sherry.”

Grey stifled a yawn.

“I feel sleepy, d-d sleepy. Wonder if Rainy-Moon has got the sleigh loaded.”

Smith emitted another dense cloud of smoke from between his pursed lips; he seemed wrapt in the luxurious enjoyment of his smoke. Robb Chillingwood’s eyelids were drooping, and his pipe had gone out. Quite suddenly the trapper’s eyes were turned on the face of Grey, and the smoke from his pipe was chiefly directed towards him.

“There’s time enough yet,” he said quietly. “Half-an-hour more or less won’t make much difference to you on the road. You were talking of travellers’ tales, and I reckon you were thinking of fairy yarns that some folks think it smart to spin. Well, maybe those same stories have some foundation in fact, and ain’t all works of imagination. Anyhow, my experience has taught me never to disbelieve until I’ve some good sound grounds for doing so.”

He paused and gazed with a far-off look at the opposite wall. Then a shadowy smile stole over his face, and he went on. His companions’ heads had drooped slowly forward, and their eyes were heavy with sleep. Grey was fighting against the drowsiness by jerking his head sharply upwards, but his eyes would close in spite of his efforts.

“Well, I never thought that I’d get caught napping,” continued Smith, with a chuckle. “I thought I knew these regions well enough, but I didn’t. I lost my way, too, and came near to losing my life—”

He broke off abruptly as Robb Chillingwood slowly rolled over on his side and began to snore loudly. Then Smith turned back to Leslie Grey, and leaning forward, so that his face was close to that of the officer, blew clouds of the pungent smoke right across the half-stupefied man’s mouth and nostrils.

"I lost other things," he then went on meditatively, "but not my life. I lost that which was more precious to me. I lost gold—gold! I lost the result of many weary months of toil. I had hoarded it up that I might go down to the east and buy a nice little ranch, and settle down into a comfortable, respectable man of property. I didn't even wait until the spring opened so that I could take the river route. No, that wasn't my way, because I knew it would cost a lot of money and I wasn't overburdened with wealth. I had just enough—"

He puffed vigorously at his pipe. Grey's head was now hanging forward and his chin rested on his chest.

There came the sound of Rainy-Moon's voice adjuring the dogs outside the door of the dugout. The trapper's eyes flashed evilly in the direction of the unconscious Indian.

"—to do what I wanted," he resumed. "No more—no less; and I set out on foot." He was anxiously watching for Grey's collapse. "Yes, I was going to tramp to the sea-coast through these mountains. I hit the wrong trail, decoyed by a false track carefully made by those who waited for me in these hills."—Grey was swaying heavily and his breathing was stertorous.—"I met my fate and was robbed of my gold. I was drugged—as you poor fools are being drugged now. When it was too late I discovered how it was done, and determined to do the same thing by the first victim that fell into my clutches. I tried the weed and soon got used to its fumes. Then I waited—waited. I had set my decoy at the cross-roads, and you—you—came."

As the trapper ceased speaking Grey slowly rolled over, insensible.

In a moment the watching man was upon his feet. His whole face was transfigured. Alertness was in every movement, in every flash of his great eyes. He moved quickly across the floor of the hut and took two shallow pannikins from the sack which lay upon the floor, dropped some of the flaky weed into the bottom of each one, and then from the stove he scraped some coals of fire into them. The fire set the dry weed smouldering, and the thick smoke rose heavily from the two tins. These he placed upon the ground in such a position that his hard-breathing victims should thoroughly inhale the fumes. Thus he would make doubly sure of them.

This done he stood erect and gazed for some seconds at the result of his handiwork; he was satisfied, but there was no look of pleasure on his face. He did not look like a man of naturally criminal instincts. There was nothing savage about his expression, or even callous. His look merely seemed to say that he had set himself this task, and, so far, what he had done was satisfactory in view of his object. He turned from the heavy-slumbering men and his eyes fell upon the two small gold chests. Instantly his whole expression changed. Here was the keynote to the man's disposition. Gold! It was the gold he coveted. At all costs that gold was to be his. His eyes shone with greed. He moved towards the boxes as though he were about to handle them; but he paused abruptly before he reached them. The barking of the dogs and the strident tones of the Indian's voice outside arrested him. He suddenly remembered that he had not yet completed his work.

Now he moved with unnecessarily stealthy steps over to the darkest corner of the hut, to where a pile of rough skins stood. The steady nerve which had hitherto served him seemed in a measure to have weakened. It was a phase which a man of his disposition must inevitably pass through in the perpetration of a first crime. He was assailed by a sensation of watching eyes following his every movement; with a feeling that another presence than those two slumbering forms moved with him in the dim light of the dugout. He was haunted by his other self; the moral self.

From beneath the pile of furs he drew a heavy revolver which he carefully examined. The chambers were loaded.

Again came the sound of the dogs outside. And he even fancied he heard the shuffling of Rainy-Moon's moccasins over the beaten snow just outside the door. He turned his face in the direction. The expression of his great hungry eyes was malevolent. Whatever moral fear might have been his, there could be no doubt that he would carry his purpose out. He gripped his pistol firmly and moved towards the door.

As his hand rested on the latch he paused. Just for one instant he hesitated. It seemed as though all that was honest in him was making one final appeal to the evil passions which swayed him. His eyelids lowered suddenly, as though he could not even face the dim light of that gloomy interior. It was the attitude of one who fully realizes the nature of his actions, of one who shrinks from the light of honest purpose and prefers the obscure recesses of his own moral darkness. Then with an effort he pulled himself together; he gripped his nerve. The next moment he flung wide the door.

A flood of wintry sunshine suffused the interior of the dugout. The glare of the crystal white earth was dazzling to a degree, and the hungry-looking trapper stood blinking in the light. His pistol was concealed behind him. The sleigh was before the door. Rainy-Moon stood on the far side of the path in the act of hitching the dogs up. One of the animals, the largest of them all, was already harnessed, the others were standing or squatting around, held in leash by the Indian.

When he heard the door open Rainy-Moon looked up from his work. He was standing with his back to the precipice which bordered the narrow ledge. His great stolid face expressed nothing but solemn gravity. He grunted and turned again to his work.

Like a flash the trapper's pistol darted from behind him, and its report rang out echoing and re-echoing amongst the surrounding hills. There was an answering cry of pain from the harnessed dog, and Rainy-Moon with a yell stood erect to find himself gazing into the muzzle of the revolver. The expression of the trapper's face was relentless now. His first shot had been fired under the influence of excitement, and he had missed his object and only wounded the dog. Now it was different.

Again the pistol rang out. Rainy-Moon gave one sharp cry of pain and sprang backwards—into space. In one hand he still gripped the leashes of the dogs. The other clutched wildly at the air. For one instant his fall was broken by his hold upon the four dogs, then the suddenness of his precipitation and his weight told, and the poor beasts were dragged over the side of the chasm after him.

The whole dastardly act was but the work of a moment.

The next all was silence save for the yelping of the wounded dog lying upon the snow.

The trapper stood for a moment framed in the doorway. The horror of his crime was upon him. He waited for a sound to come up to him from below. He longed to, but he dared not, look over the side of the yawning chasm. He feared what awful sight his eyes might encounter. His imagination conjured up pictures that turned him sick in the stomach, and a great dread came over him. Suddenly he turned back into the hut and slammed the door.

The wounded dog had not changed its attitude. The moments sped by. Suddenly the poor beast began to struggle violently. It was a huge specimen of the husky breed, exceptionally powerful and wolfish in its appearance. The wretched brute moaned incessantly, but its pain only made it struggle the harder to free itself from its harness. At length it succeeded in wriggling out of the primitive "breast-draw" which held it. Then the suffering beast limped painfully away down the path. Fifty yards from the hut it squatted upon its haunches and began to lick its wounded foot. And every now and then it would cease its healing operation to throw up its long muzzle and emit one of those drawn-out howls, so dismal and dispiriting, in which dogs are able to express their melancholy feelings.

At length the hut door opened again and the trapper came out; he was equipped for a long journey. Thick blanket chaps covered his legs, and a great fur coat reached to his knees. His head was buried beneath a beaver cap, which, pressed low down over his ears, was overlapped by the collar of his coat. He carried a roll of blankets over his shoulder and a pack on his back. As he came out into the sunshine he looked fearfully about him. There stood the loaded sleigh quite undisturbed. The harness alone was tumbled about by reason of the wounded dog's struggles. And there was a pool of canine blood upon the snow, and a faint trail of sanguinary hue leading from it. The man eyed this and followed its direction until he saw the dog crouching down further along the path. But he was not thinking of the dog. He turned back to the sleigh, and his eyes wandered across, beyond it, to the brink of the precipice. The only marks that had disturbed the smooth white edge of the path

were those which had tumbled the snow where the dogs had been dragged to their fate. Otherwise there was no sign.

The man stepped forward as though to look down to the depths below, but, as he neared the edge, he halted shudderingly. Nor did his eyes turn downwards, he looked around him, above him—but not down. He gazed long and earnestly at the hard, cold, cloudless sky. His brow frowned with unpleasant thought. Then his lips moved, and he muttered words that sounded as though he were endeavouring to justify his acts to himself.

“The gold was mine—honestly mine. It was wrested from me. It may be Christian to submit without retaliation. It is not human. What is a neche’s life—nothing. Pooh! An Indian life is of no value in this country. Come on, let’s go.”

He spoke as though he were not alone. Perhaps he was addressing that moral self of his which kept reminding him of his misdeeds. Anyhow, he was uncomfortable, and his words told of it.

He stooped and adjusted his snow-shoes, after which he gripped his long staff and slowly began his journey down the hill.

He quickly got into his stride, that forward, leaning attitude of the snow-shoer; nor did he glance to the left or right.

Straight ahead of him he stared, over the jagged rampart of mountains to the clear steely hue of the sky above. He was leaving the scene of his crime; he wished also to leave its memory. He gave no heed to the trail of blood that stained the whiteness of the snow beneath his feet; his thoughts were not of the present—his present; his mind was travelling swiftly beyond. The whining of the dog as he passed him fell upon ears that were deaf to all entreaty.

The crystal-covered earth glided by him; the long, reaching stride of the expert snow-shoer bore him rapidly along.

He paused in the valley below and took fresh bearings. He intended to strike through the heart of the mountains. The Pass was his goal, for he knew that there lay the main trail he sought.

He cast about for the landmarks which he had located during his long tenancy of the dugout. Not a branch of a tree rustled. Not a breath of air fanned the steaming breath which poured from his lips. His mind was centred on his object, but the nervous realization of loneliness was upon him.

Suddenly the awful stillness was broken. The man bent his head in a listening attitude. The sound came from behind and he turned sharply. His movement was hurried and anxious. His nerves were not steady. A long-drawn-out wail rose upon the air. Fifty yards behind stood the wounded hound gazing after him as if he, too, were endeavouring to ascertain the right direction. The creature was standing upon three legs, the fourth was hanging useless, and the blood was dripping from the footless limb.

The man turned away with an impatient shrug and stepped out briskly. He knew his direction now, and resolutely centred his thoughts upon his journey. Past experience told him that this would tax all his energy and endurance, and that he must keep a clear head, for he was not a native of the country, nor had he the instinct of one whose life had been passed in a mountainous world. Once he turned at the sound of a plaintive whining, and, to his annoyance, he saw that the dog was following him. A half-nervous laugh escaped him, but he did not pause. He had hitherto forgotten the creature, and this was an unpleasant reminder.

An hour passed. The exhilarating exercise had cleansed the atmosphere of the murderer’s thoughts. Once only he looked back over his shoulder as some memory of the dog flashed across his brain. He could see nothing but the immaculate gleam of snow. Something of the purity of his surroundings seemed to communicate itself to his thoughts. He found himself looking forward to a life, the honest, respectable life, which the burden he carried in his pack would purchase for him. He saw himself the owner of vast tracts of pasture, with stock grazing upon it, a small but comfortable house, and a wife. He pictured to himself the joys of a pastoral life, a community in which his opinions

and influence would be matters of importance. He would be looked up to, and gradually, as his wealth grew, he would become interested in the world of politics, and he would—

He was dragged back to the present by a memory of the scene at the dugout, and quite suddenly he broke into a cold perspiration. He increased his pace, nor did those pleasant visions again return to him. It was well past noon when at last he halted for food and rest.

He devoured his simple fare ravenously, but he gained no enjoyment therefrom. He was moody. At that moment he hated life; he hated himself for his weak yielding to the pricks of conscience; he hated the snow and ice about him for their deadening effect upon the world through which he was passing; he hated the dreadful solitude with which he was surrounded.

Presently he drew out a pipe. He looked at it for one instant, then raised it to his nose. He smelt it, and, with a motion of disgust and a bitter curse, he threw it from him. It reeked of the weed he had found at the dugout.

Now he was seized with a feverish restlessness and was about to rise to his feet. Suddenly, out on the still, biting air wailed the familiar long-drawn note of misery. To his disturbed fancy it came like a dreadful signal of some awful doom. It echoed in undulating waves of sound, dying away hardly, as though it were loth to leave its mournful surroundings. He turned in the direction whence it proceeded, and slowly into view limped the wounded husky, yelping piteously at every step.

At that moment the man was scarcely responsible for what he did. He was beside himself with dread. The solitude was on his nerves, this haunting dog, his own reflections, all had combined to reduce him to the verge of nervous prostration. With the last dying sound his heavy revolver was levelled in the direction of the oncoming hound. There was a moment's pause, then a shot rang out and the dog stood quite still. The bullet fell short and only kicked up the snow some yards in front of the animal, nor did the beast display the least sign of fear. The man prepared to take another shot, but, as he was about to fire, his arm dropped to his side, and, with a mirthless laugh, he put the pistol away.

"The d-d cur seems to know the range of a gun," he muttered, with an uneasy look at the motionless creature. His words were an apology to himself, although perhaps he would not have admitted it.

The dog remained in its rigid attitude. Its head was slightly lowered, and its wicked grey eyes glared ferociously. Its thick mane bristled, and it looked like a gaunt, hungry wolf following upon the trail of some unconscious traveller. So long as the man stood, so long did the dog remain still and silent. But as the former returned to his seat, and began to pack up, the dog began to whine and furtively draw nearer.

Although he did not look up the man knew that the animal was coming towards him. When he had finished packing he straightened himself; the dog was within a few paces of him. He called gently, and the animal responded with a whimper, but remained where it was. Its canine mind was evidently dubious, and the man was forced to take the initiative. Whatever may have been his intention in the first place, he now exhibited a curious display of feeling for one who could plan and perpetrate so dastardly a crime as that which he had committed at the dugout. Human nature is a strange blending of good and evil passions. Two minutes ago the man would, without the least remorse, have shot the dog. Now as he reached him, and he listened to the beast's plaintive cries, he stretched out his arm and stroked its trembling sides, and then stooped to examine the wounded limb. And, stranger still, he tore off a portion of the woollen scarf that circled his waist and proceeded to bandage up the shattered member. The dog submitted to the operation with languid resignation. The foot of one hind leg had been entirely torn away by a revolver shot, and only the stump of the leg was left. The poor beast would go on three legs for the rest of his life.

When the man had finished he rose to his feet, and a bitter laugh shocked the silence of the snow-bound world.

“There, you miserable cur. It’s better like that than to get the cold into it. I’ve had some; besides, I didn’t intend to damage you. If you’re going to travel with me you’d best come along, and be d–d to you.”

And he walked back to where his pack and blankets lay, and the dog limped at his heels.

CHAPTER IV

‘YELLOW BOOMING–SLUMP IN GREY’

The days are long since gone when the name of the midland territory of the great Canadian world, Manitoba, suggested to the uninitiated nothing but Red Indians, buffalo and desperadoes of every sort and condition. Now-a-days it is well known, even in remote parts of the world, as one of the earth's greatest granaries; a land of rolling pastures, golden cornfields and prosperous, simple farm folk. In a short space of time, little more than a quarter of a century, this section of the country has been elevated from the profound obscurity of a lawless wilderness to one of the most thriving provinces of a great dominion. The old Fort Garry, one of the oldest factories of the Hudson's Bay Company, has given place to the magnificent city of Winnipeg, with its own University, its own governing assembly, its own clubs, hotels, its own world-wide commercial interests, besides being the great centre of railway traffic in the country. All these things, and many other indications of splendid prosperity too numerous to mention, have grown up in a little over twenty-five years. And with this growth the buffalo has gone, the red-man has been herded on to a limited reservation, and the “Bad-man” is almost an unknown quantity. Such is the Manitoba of to-day.

But during the stages of Manitoba's transition its history is interesting. The fight between law and lawlessness was long and arduous, the pitched battles many and frequent. Buffalo could be killed off quickly, the red-man was but a poor thing after the collapse of the Riel rebellion, but the “Bad-man” died hard.

This is the period in the history of Manitoba which at present interests us. When Winnipeg was building with a rapidity almost rivalling that of the second Chicago, and the army of older farmers in the land was being hastily augmented by recruits from the mother country. When the military police had withdrawn their forces to the North-West Territories, leaving only detachments to hold the American border against the desperadoes which both countries were equally anxious to be rid of.

In the remote south-eastern corner of the province, forty-five miles from the nearest town—which happened to be the village of Ainsley—dumped down on the crest of a far-reaching ocean-like swell of rolling prairie, bare to the blast of the four winds except for the insignificant shelter of a small bluff on its northeastern side, stood a large farm-house surrounded by a small village of barns and outbuildings. It was a typical Canadian farm of the older, western type. One of those places which had grown by degrees from the one central hut of logs, clay and thatch to the more pretentious proportions of the modern frame building of red pine weather-boarding, with shingled roofing to match, and the whole coloured with paint of a deep, port-wine hue, the points and angles being picked out with a dazzling white. It was a farm, let there be no mistake, and not merely a homestead.

There were abundant signs of prosperity in the trim, well-groomed appearance of the place. The unmistakable hall-mark was to be found in the presence of a steam-thresher, buried beneath a covering of tarpaulin and snow, in the array of farming machinery, and in the maze of pastures enclosed by top-railed, barbed-wire fencing. All these things, and the extent of the buildings, told of years of ceaseless industry and thrift, of able management and a proper pride in the vocation of its owner.

Nor were these outward signs in any way misleading. Silas Malling in his lifetime had been one of those sound-minded men, unimaginative and practical, the dominant note of whose creed had always been to do his duty in that state of life in which he found himself. The son of an early pioneer he had been born to the life of a farmer, and, having the good fortune to follow in the footsteps of a thrifty father, he had lived long enough to see his farm grow to an extent many times larger and more prosperous than that of any neighbour within a radius of a hundred miles. But at the time of our story he had been gathered to his forefathers for nearly three years, and his worthy spouse,

Hephzibah Malling, reigned in his stead. She ruled with an equally practical hand, and fortune had continued to smile upon her. Her bank balance had grown by leaps and bounds, and she was known to be one of the richest women in Southern Manitoba, and her only daughter, Prudence, to be heiress to no inconsiderable fortune. There was a son in the family, but he had eschewed the farm life, and passing out of the home circle, as some sons will, had gone into the world to seek his own way—his own experiences of life.

In spite of the wealth of the owners of Loon Dyke Farm they were very simple, unpretentious folk. They lived the life they had always known, abiding by the customs of childhood and the country to which they belonged with the whole-hearted regard which is now becoming so regrettably rare. Their world was a wholesome one which provided them with all they needed for thought, labour and recreation. To journey to Winnipeg, a distance of a hundred and twenty-six miles, was an event which required two days' preparation and as many weeks of consideration. Ainsley, one of those little border villages which dot the international boundary dividing Canada from the United States, was a place rarely visited by them, and when undertaken the trip was regarded as a notable jaunt.

Just now Mrs. Malling was a prey to the wildest excitement. An event was about to happen which disturbed her to a degree. It is doubtful as to what feeling was uppermost in her motherly bosom. She was torn between many conflicting emotions—joy, grief, pleasurable excitement. Her daughter, her only child, as she was wont to confide to her matronly friends—for her boy, whom she loved as only a mother can love a son, she believed she would never see again—was about to be married.

No visit to town, not even a sea voyage across the ocean could possibly compare with this. It was a more significant event in her life even than when she went into Winnipeg to choose the monument which was to be erected over the grave of her departed Silas. That she had always had in her mind's eye, not because she looked forward to his demise, but because she hoped some day to share with him its sheltering canopy. But somehow this forthcoming marriage of her daughter was in the nature of a shock to her. She was not mercenary, far from it, she was above any such motive as that, but she had hoped, when the time came for such matters to be considered, that Prudence would have married a certain rancher who lived out by the Lake of the Woods, a man of great wealth, and a man whom Mrs. Malling considered desirable in every way. Instead of that Prudence had chosen for herself amongst her many suitors, and worst of all she had chosen an insignificant official in the Customs department. That to Hephzibah Malling was the worst blow of all. With proper motherly pride she had hoped that "her girl" would have married a "some one" in her own world.

The winter evening shadows—it was the middle of January and winter still held sway upon the prairie—were falling, and the parlour at the farm was enveloped in a grey dusk. The room was large, low-ceiled, and of irregular shape.

It was furnished to serve many purposes, principally with a view to solid comfort. There was no blatant display of wealth, and every article of furniture bore signs of long though careful use. The spotless boarded floor was bare of carpet, but was strewn with rough-cured skins, timber-wolf, antelope, coyote and bear, and here and there rugs of undoubted home make; these latter of the patchwork order. The centre table was of wide proportions and of solid mahogany, and told of the many services of the apartment; the small chairs were old-fashioned mahogany pieces with horse-hair seats, while the easy-chairs—and there were several of these—were capacious and of divers descriptions. A well-worn sofa was stowed away in an obscure angle, and a piano with a rose-silk front and fretwork occupied another of the many dark corners which the room possessed.

The whole atmosphere of the place was of extreme comfort. The bare description of furniture conveys nothing, but the comfort was there and showed out in the odds and ends of family possessions which were in evidence everywhere—the grandfather's clock, the sewing-machine, the quaint old oil-lamps upon the mantel-board over the place where the fire should have been but was not; the soft hangings and curious old family pictures and discoloured engravings; the perfect femininity of the room. In all respects it was a Canadian farm "best parlour."

There were four occupants of the room. Two old ladies, rotund, and garbed in modest raiment of some sort of dark, clinging material, were gathered about the monster self-feeding stove, seated in arm-chairs in keeping with their ample proportions. One was the widow of the late Silas Malling, and the other was the school-ma'am from the Leonville school-house. This good lady rejoiced in the name of Gurrige, and Mrs. Gurrige was the oldest friend of Hephzibah Malling, a fact which spoke highly for the former good dame's many excellent qualities. Hephzibah was not a woman to set her affections on her sex without good reason. Her moral standard was high, and though she was ever ready to show kindness to her fellow-creatures, she was far too practical and honest herself to take to her motherly bosom any one who was not worthy of regard.

As was natural, they were talking of the forthcoming marriage, and the tone of their lowered voices indicated that their remarks were in the nature of confidences. Mrs. Malling was sitting bolt upright, and her plump, rather rough hands were folded in her broad lap. Mrs. Gurrige was leaning towards the stove, gazing into the fire through the mica sides of the fire-box.

"I trust they will be happy," said Mrs. Gurrige, with a sigh. Then as an afterthought: "He seems all right."

"Yes," Mrs. Malling said, with a responsive exhalation, "I think so. He has few faults. But he is not the man to follow my Silas on this farm. I truly believe, Sarah, that he couldn't tell the difference between a cabbage-field and a potato-patch. These what-d'you-call-'ems, Civil servants, are only fit to tot up figures and play around with a woman's wardrobe every time she crosses the border. Thank goodness I'm not of the travelling kind; I'm sure I should hide my face for very shame every time I saw a Customs officer."

The round, rosy face of the farm-wife assumed a deeper hue, and her still comely lips were pursed into an indignant *moue*. Her smooth grey head, adorned by a black lace cap trimmed with pearl beads, was turned in the direction of the two other occupants of the room, who were more or less buried in the obscurity of a distant corner.

For a moment she gazed at the dimly-outlined figure of a man who was seated on one of the horse-hair chairs, leaning towards the sofa on which reclined the form of her daughter, Prudence. His elbows were resting on his knees and his chin was supported upon his two clenched fists. He was talking earnestly. Mrs. Malling watched him for some moments, then her eyes drifted to the girl, the object of her solicitude.

Although the latter was in the shadow her features were, even at this distance, plainly discernible. There was a strong resemblance between mother and daughter. They were both of medium dark complexion, with strong colouring. Both were possessed of delightfully sweet brown eyes, and mouths and chins firm but shapely. The one remarkable difference between them was in the nasal organ. While the mother's was short, well-rounded, and what one would call pretty though ordinary, the girl's was prominent and aquiline with a decided bridge. This feature gave the younger woman a remarkable amount of character to her face. Altogether hers was a face which, wherever she went, would inevitably attract admiring attention. Just now she was evidently teasing the man before her, and the mother turned back to the stove with a merry twinkle in her eyes.

"I think Prudence will teach him a few lessons," she murmured to her friend.

"What-about the farm?"

"Well, I wasn't just thinking of the farm."

The two ladies smiled into each other's faces.

"She is a good child," observed Mrs. Gurrige affectionately, after awhile.

"Or she wouldn't be her father's child."

"Or your daughter, Hephzibah," said Sarah Gurrige sincerely.

The two relapsed into silence. The glowing coals in the stove shook lower and received augmentation from the supply above. Darkness was drawing on.

Prudence was holding the *Free Press* out towards the dying light and the man was protesting. The latter is already known to us. His name was Leslie Grey, now an under-official of the Customs department at the border village of Ainsley.

"Don't strain your eyes in this light, dear," he was saying. "Besides, I want to talk to you." He laid his hand upon the paper to take it from her. But the girl quickly withdrew it out of his reach.

"You must let me look at the personal column, Leslie," she said teasingly, "I just love it. What do you call it? The 'Agony' column, isn't it?"

"Yes," the man answered, with some show of irritation. "But I want—"

"Of course you do," the girl interrupted. "You want to talk to me—very right and proper. But listen to this."

Grey bit his lip. Prudence bent her face close to the paper and read in a solemn whisper—

"'Yellow booming—slump in Grey'! Now I wonder what that means? Do you think it's a disguised love message to some forlorn damsel in the east, or does it conceal the heartrending cry of a lost soul to some fond but angry parent?" Then, as the man did not immediately answer, she went on with a pucker of thought upon her brow. "'Yellow'—that might mean gold. 'Booming'—ah, yes, the Kootenai mines, or the Yukon. There is going to be a rush there this year, isn't there? Oh, I forgot," with real contrition, "I mustn't mention the Yukon, must I? That is where your disaster occurred that caused you to be banished to the one-horsed station of Ainsley."

"Not forgetting the reduction of my salary to the princely sum of two thousand dollars per annum," Grey added bitterly.

"Never mind, old boy, it brought us together, and dollars aren't likely to trouble us any. But let me get on with my puzzle. 'Slump in Grey.' That's funny, isn't it? 'Slump' certainly has to do with business. I've seen 'Slump' in the finance columns of the *Toronto Globe*. And then 'Grey.' That's your name."

"I believe so."

"Um. Guess I can't make much of it. Seems to me it must be some business message. I call it real disappointing."

"Perhaps not so disappointing as you think, sweetheart," Grey said thoughtfully.

"What, do you understand it?" The girl at once became all interest.

"Yes," slowly, "I understand it, but I don't know that I ought to tell you."

"Of course you must. I'm just dying of curiosity. Besides," she went on coaxingly, "we are going to be married, and it wouldn't be right to have any secrets from me. Dear old Gurrige never lost an opportunity of firing sage maxims at us when I used to go to her school. I think the one to suit this occasion ran something like this—

'Secrets withheld 'twixt man and wife,
Infallibly end in connubial strife.'

"She always made her rhymes up as she went along. She's a sweet old dear, but so funny."

But Grey was not heeding the girl's chatter. His face was serious and his obstinate mouth was tight-shut. He was gazing with introspective eyes at the paper which was now lying in the girl's lap. Suddenly he leaned further forward and spoke almost in a whisper.

"Look here, Prue, I want you to listen seriously to what I have to say. I'm not a man given to undue hopefulness. I generally take my own way in things and see it through, whether that way is right or wrong. So far I've had some successes and more failures. If I were given to dreaming or repining I should say Fate was dead against me. That last smasher I came in the mountains, when I lost the Government bullion, nearly settled me altogether, but, in spite of it all, I haven't given up hope yet, and what is more, I anticipate making a big coup shortly which will reinstate me in favour

with the heads of my department. My coup is in connection with the notice you have just read out from the 'Agony' column."

The girl nodded. She was quite serious now. Grey paused, and the ticking of the grandfather's clock on the other side of the room pounded heavily in the twilight. The murmur of the old ladies' voices occasionally reached the lovers, but it did not interrupt them or divert their attention from their own affairs.

"That notice," Grey went on, "has appeared at regular intervals in the paper, and is a message to certain agents from a certain man, to say that certain illicit work has been carried out. I have discovered who this man is and the nature of his work. It does not matter who he is or what the work; in fact, it would be dangerous to mention either, even here; the point is that I have discovered the secret, and I, alone, am going to benefit by my discovery. I am not going to let any one share the reward with me. I want to reinstate myself with the authorities, and so regain my lost position, then no one will be able to say things about my marriage with you."

"No one had better say anything against you in my hearing, anyway, Leslie," the girl put in quickly. "Because I happen to be rich—or shall be—is nothing to do with any one but myself. As far as I can see it will be a blessing. Go on."

"No doubt it is as you say, dear," the man pursued; "but there are plenty of people unkind enough to believe that I am marrying you for your money. However, I am going to get this man red-handed, and, I tell you, it will be the greatest coup of my life."

"I hope you will succeed, Leslie," the girl said, her brown eyes fixed in admiration upon her lover. "Do you know, I never thought you were such a determined fellow," she added impulsively. "Why, I can almost believe that you'd learn to farm if you took the notion."

Grey's sense of humour was not equal to the occasion, and he took her remark quite seriously.

"A man must be a fool if he can't run a farm," he said roughly.

"Many folks labour under that mistake," the girl replied. Then: "Say, when are you going to do this thing?"

"Strangely enough, the critical moment will come two days after our marriage. Let's see. This is Monday. We are to be married to-morrow week. That will make it Thursday week."

The girl sat herself up on the sofa, and her young face expressed dismay.

"Right in the middle of our honeymoon. Oh, Leslie!"

"It can't be helped, dearest. I shall only be away from you for that afternoon and the night. Think of what it means to me. Everything."

"Ah, yes." She sank back again upon the sofa. There was the faintest glimmer of a smile in the depths of her dark eyes. "I forgot what it meant to you."

The unconscious irony of her words fell upon stony ground.

Prudence Mallings was deeply in love with Leslie Grey. How few men fully appreciate the priceless treasure of a good woman's regard.

"If I bring this off it means immediate promotion," Grey went on, in his blindly selfish way. "I must succeed. I hate failure."

"They will take you off the border, then," said the girl musingly. "That will mean—leaving here."

"Which also means a big step up."

"Of course—it will mean a big step up."

The girl sighed. She loved the farm; that home which she had always known. She changed the subject suddenly.

"It must be nearly tea-time. We are going to have tea early, Leslie, so that we can get through with it comfortably before the people come."

"Oh yes, I forgot you are having a 'Progressive Euchre' party to-night. What time does it begin? I mean the party."

"Seven o'clock. But you are going to stay to tea?"

Grey glanced up at the yellow face of the grandfather's clock and shook his head.

"Afraid not, little girl. I've got some work to do in connection with Thursday week. I will drop in about nine o'clock. Who're coming?"

"Is it really necessary, this work?" There was a touch of bitterness in Prudence's voice. But the next moment she went on cheerfully. She would not allow herself to stand in her lover's way. "The usual people are coming. It will be just our monthly gathering of neighbouring-moss-backs," with a laugh. "The Turners, the Furrers—Peter Furrers, of course; he still hopes to cut you out—and the girls; old Gleichen and his two sons, Harry and Tim. And the Ganthorns from Rosebank and their cousins the Covills of Lakeville. And—I almost forgot him—mother's flame, George Iredale of Lonely Ranch."

"Is Iredale coming? It's too bad of you to have him here, Prue. Your mother's flame—um, I like that. Why, he's been after you for over three years. It's not right to ask him when I am here, besides—" Grey broke off abruptly. Darkness hid the angry flush which had spread over his face. The girl knew he was angry. His tone was raised, and there was no mistaking Leslie Grey's anger. He was very nearly a gentleman, but not quite.

"I think I have a perfect right to ask him, Leslie," she answered seriously. "His coming can make no possible difference to you. Frankly, I like him, but that makes no difference to my love for you. Why, you dear, silly thing, if he asked me from now till Doomsday I wouldn't marry him. He's just a real good friend. But still, if it will please you, I don't mind admitting that mother insisted on his coming, and that I had nothing to do with it. That is why I call him mother's flame. Now, then, take that ugly frown off your face and say you're sorry."

Grey showed no sign of obedience; he was very angry. It was believed and put about by the busy-bodies of the district, that George Iredale had sought Prudence Malling in marriage ever since she had grown up. He was a bachelor of close upon forty. One of those quiet, determined men, slow of speech, even clumsy, but quick to make up their minds, and endowed with a great tenacity of purpose. A man who rarely said he was going to do a thing, but generally did it. These known features in a man who, up to the time of the announcement of Prudence's engagement to Grey, had been a frequent visitor to the farm, and who was also well known to be wealthy and more than approved of by Mrs. Malling, no doubt, gave a certain amount of colour to the belief of those who chose to pry into their neighbours' affairs.

"Anyway I don't think there is room for both Iredale and myself in the house," Grey went on heatedly. "If you didn't want him you should have put your foot down on your mother's suggestion. I don't think I shall come to-night."

For one moment the girl looked squarely into her lover's face and her pretty lips drew sharply together. Then she spoke quite coldly.

"You will—or I'll never speak to you again. You are very foolish to make such a fuss."

There was along silence between the lovers. Then Grey drew out his watch, opened it, glanced at the time, and snapped it closed again.

"I must go," he said shortly.

Prudence had risen from the sofa. She no longer seemed to heed her lover. She was looking across the darkened room at the homely picture round the glowing stove.

"Very well," she said. And she moved away from the man's side.

The two old ladies pausing in their conversation heard Grey's announcement and the answer Prudence made. Sarah Gurrige leaned towards her companion with a confidential movement of the head. The two grey heads came close together.

The school-ma'am whispered impressively—

"Maid who angers faithful swain
Will shed more tears and know mere pain
Than she who loves and loves in vain."

Hephzibah laughed tolerantly. Sarah's earnestness never failed to amuse her.

"My dear," the girl's mother murmured back, when her comfortable laugh had gurgled itself out, "young folks must skit-skate and bicker, or where would be the making up? La, I'm sure when I was a girl I used to tweak my poor Silas's nose for the love of making him angry—Silas had a long nose, my dear, as you may remember. Men hate to be tweaked, especially on their weak points. My Silas was always silly about his nose. And we never had less than half-an-hour's making up. I wonder how Prudence has tweaked Mr. Grey—I can't bring myself to call him Leslie, my dear."

Prudence had reached her mother's side. The two old heads parted with guilty suddenness.

"Oh, my dear," exclaimed Mrs. Mallings, "how you did startle me."

"I'm sorry, mother," the girl said, "but I wanted to tell you that Leslie is not coming to-night." Prudence turned a mischievous face towards her lover.

Mrs. Mallings wrinkled up her smooth forehead. She assumed an air of surprise.

"Why not, my child?"

"Oh, because you have asked Mr. Iredale. Leslie says it isn't right."

Prudence was still looking in her lover's direction. He had his back turned. He was more angry than ever now.

"My dears," said her mother with an indulgent smile, "you are a pair of silly noodles. But Mr. Grey—I mean Leslie—must please himself. George Iredale is coming because I have asked him. This house is yours to come and go as you like—er—Leslie. George Iredale has promised to come to the cards to-night. Did I hear you say you were going now? I should have taken it homely if you would have stayed to tea. The party begins at seven, don't forget."

Three pairs of quizzical eyes were fixed upon Grey's good-looking but angry face. His anger was against Prudence entirely now. She had made him look foolish before these two ladies, and that was not easily to be forgiven. Grey's lack of humour made him view things in a ponderous light. He felt most uncomfortable under the laughing gaze of those three ladies.

However, he would not give way an inch.

"Yes, I must go now," he said ungraciously. "But not on account of George Iredale," he added blunderingly. "I have some important work to do—"

He was interrupted by a suppressed laugh from Prudence. He turned upon her suddenly, glared, then walked abruptly to the door.

"Good-bye," he exclaimed shortly, and the door closed sharply behind him.

"Why, Prudence," said Mrs. Mallings, turning her round laughing face to her daughter and indicating the door. "Aren't you—"

"No, I'm not, mother dear," the girl answered with a forced laugh.

Sarah Gurridge patted her late pupil's shoulder affectionately. But her head shook gravely as though a weight of worldly wisdom was hers.

"I don't think he'll stay away," said the mother, with a tender glance in the girl's direction.

"He hasn't chin enough," said Sarah, who prided herself upon her understanding of physiognomy.

"Indeed he has," retorted Prudence, who heard the remark.

Mrs. Mallings was right, Leslie Grey was not going to stay away. He had no intention of doing so. But his reasons were quite apart from those Hephzibah Mallings attributed to him. He wished to see George Iredale, and because of the man's coming Grey would forego his angry desire to retaliate upon Prudence. He quite ignored what he was pleased to call his own pride in the matter. He would come because he had what he considered excellent reasons for so doing.

Prudence lit the lamps and laid the table for tea. Her mother ambled off to the great kitchen as fast as her bulk would allow her. There were many things in that wonderful place to see to for the supper, and on these occasions Mrs. Mallings would not trust their supervision even to Prudence,

much less to the hired girl, Mary. Sarah Gurrige remained in her seat by the stove watching the glowing coals dreamily, her mind galloping ahead through fanciful scenes of her own imagination. Had she been asked she would probably have stated that she was looking forward into the future of the pair who were so soon to be married.

Prudence went on quietly and nimbly with her work. Presently Sarah turned, and after a moment's intent gaze at the trim, rounded figure, said in her profoundest tone—

“Harvest your wheat ere the August frost;
One breath of cold and the crop is lost.”

“Oh, bother—there, I’ve set a place for Leslie,” exclaimed Prudence in a tone of vexation. “What is that about ‘frost’ and ‘lost’?”

“Nothing, dear, I was only thinking aloud.” And Sarah Gurrige relapsed into silence, and continued to bask in the warm glow of the stove.

CHAPTER V

THE RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL

Grey strode away from the house in no very amiable frame of mind. A fenced-in patch, planted with blue-gums and a mass of low-growing shrubs, formed a sort of garden in front of the farm.

This enclosure was devoid of all artistic effect, but in summer-time it served as a screen to break the rigour of the wooden farm-buildings. It was a practical but incongruous piece of man's handiwork, divided down the centre by a pathway bordered with overlapped hoopings of bent red willow switches, which, even in winter, protruded hideously above the beaten snow. The path led to a front gate of primitive and bald manufacture, but stout and serviceable, as was everything else about the farm. And this was the main approach to the house.

It was necessary for Grey, having taken his departure by the front door, to pass out through this gate in order to reach the barn where he had left his saddle-horse. He might have saved himself this trouble by leaving the house by the back door, which opened out directly opposite the entrance to the great barn. But he was in no mood for back doors; the condition of his mind demanded nothing less than a dignified exit, and a dignified exit is never compatible with a back door. Had he left Loon Dyke Farm in an amiable frame of mind, much that was to happen in his immediate future might have been different.

But the writing had been set forth, and there was no altering it.

He walked with a great show of unnecessary energy. It was his nature to do so. His energy was almost painful to behold. Too much vigour and energy is almost worse than chronic indolence; sooner or later people so afflicted find themselves in difficulties.

It was more than a year since his misadventure in the mountains. He had suffered for his own wrong-headedness over that matter, but he had not profited by his experience; he was incapable of doing so. His length of service and reputation for hard work had saved him from dismissal, but Chillingwood was less fortunate; subordinates in Government service generally are less fortunate when their superiors blunder.

However, Grey had outlived that unpleasantness. He was not the man to brood over disaster. Soon after he had been transferred to Ainsley the Town Clerkship fell vacant. He did what he could for Chillingwood, with the result that the younger man eventually secured the post, and thus found himself enjoying a bare existence on an income of \$500 per annum.

Halfway down the path Grey became aware of a horseman approaching the farm. The figure was moving along slowly over the trail from Ainsley. In the dusk the horse appeared to be jaded; its head hung down, and its gait was ambling. The stranger was tall, but beyond that Grey could see nothing, for the face was almost entirely hidden in the depths of the storm-collar of his coat. The officer looked hard at the new-comer. It was part of his work to know, at least by sight, every inhabitant of his district. This man was quite a stranger to him. The horse was unknown to him, and the fur coat was unfamiliar. In winter these things usually mark a man out to his acquaintances. The horse shows up against the snow, and the prairie man does not usually possess two fur coats.

On the stranger's first appearance Grey's thoughts had at once flown to George Iredale, but now, as he realized that the man was unknown to him, his interest relaxed. However, he walked slowly on to the gate so that he might obtain a closer inspection. Horse and rider were about twenty-five yards off when Grey reached the gate, and he saw that they were followed at some distance by a great wolfish-looking hound.

The evening shadows had grown rapidly. The grey vault of snow-clouds above made the twilight much darker than usual. Grey waited. The traveller silently drew up his horse, and for a moment sat

gazing at the figure by the gate. All that was visible of his face was the suggestion of a nose and a pair of large dark eyes.

Grey opened the gate and passed out.

“Evening,” said the horseman, in a voice muffled by the fur of his coat-collar.

“Good-evening,” replied Grey shortly.

“Loon Dyke Farm,” said the stranger, in a tone less of inquiry than of making a statement.

Grey nodded, and turned to move away. Then he seemed to hesitate, and turned again to the stranger. Those eyes! Where had he seen just such a pair of eyes before? He tried to think, but somehow his memory failed him. The horseman had turned his face towards the house and so the great roving eyes were hidden. But Grey was too intent upon the business he had in hand to devote much thought to anything else.

There was no further reason for remaining; he had satisfied his curiosity. He would learn all about the stranger later on.

He hurried round to the stables. When he had gone the stranger dismounted; for a moment or two he stood with one hand on the gate and the other holding the horse’s reins, gazing after the retreating form of the Customs officer. He waited until the other had disappeared, then leisurely hitched his horse’s reins on to the fence of the enclosure, and, passing in through the gate, approached the house. Presently he saw Grey ride away, and a close observer might have detected the sound of a heavy sigh escaping from between the embracing folds of the fur collar as the man walked up the path and rapped loudly upon the front door with his mitted fist. The three-footed hound had closed up on his master, and now stood beside him.

Prudence opened the door. Tea was just ready; and she answered the summons, half expecting to find that her lover had thought better of his ill-humour and had returned to share the evening meal. She drew back well within the house when she realized her mistake. The stranger stood for one second as though in doubt; then his voice reached the waiting girl.

“Prudence, isn’t it?”

The girl started. Then a smile broke over her pretty, dark face.

“Why, it’s Hervey—brother Hervey. Here, mother,” she called back into the house. “Quick, here’s Hervey. Why, you dear boy, I didn’t expect you for at least a week—and then I wasn’t sure you would come. You got my letter safely then, and you must have started off almost at once—you’re a real good brother to come so soon. Yes, in here; tea is just ready. Take off your coat. Come along, mother,” she called out again joyously. “Hurry; come as fast as you can; Hervey is here.” And she ran away towards the kitchen. Her mother’s movements were far too slow to suit her.

The man removed his coat, and voices reached him from the direction of the kitchen.

“Dearie me, but, child, you do rush one about so. Where is he? There, you’ve left the door open; and whose is that hideous brute of a dog? Why, it looks like a timber-wolf. Send him out.”

Mrs. Malling talked far more rapidly than she walked, or rather trotted, under the force of her daughter’s bustling excitement. Hervey went out into the hall to meet her. Standing framed in the doorway he saw his dog.

“Get out, you brute,” he shouted, and stepping quickly up to the animal he launched a cruel kick at it which caught it squarely on the chest. The beast turned solemnly away without a sound, and Hervey closed the door.

The mother was the first to meet him. Her stout arms were outstretched, while her face beamed with pride, and her eyes were filled with tears of joy.

“My dear, dear boy,” she exclaimed, smiling happily. Hervey made no reciprocal movement. He merely bent his head down to her level and allowed her to kiss his cheek. She hugged him forcefully to her ample bosom, an embrace from which he quickly released himself. Her words then poured forth in a swift, incoherent flow. “And to think I believed that I should never see you again. And how you have grown and filled out. Just like your father. And where have you been all this time, and have

you kept well? Look at the tan on his face, Prudence, and the beard too. Why, I should hardly have known you, boy, if I hadn't 'a known who it was. Why, you must be inches taller than your father for sure—and he was a tall man. But you must tell me all about yourself when the folks are all gone to-night. We are having a party, you know. And isn't it nice?—you will be here for Prudence's wedding—

“Don't you think we'd better go into the parlour instead of standing out here?” the girl interrupted practically. Her mother's rambling remarks had shown no sign of cessation, and the tea was waiting. “Hervey must be tired and hungry.”

“Well, I must confess I am utterly worn out,” the man replied with a laugh. “Yes, mother, if tea is ready let's come along. We can talk during the meal.”

They passed into the parlour. As they seated themselves at the table, Sarah Gurrige joined them from her place beside the stove. Hervey had not noticed her presence when he first entered the room, and the good school-ma'am, quietly day-dreaming, had barely awakened to the fact of his coming. Now she, too, joined in the enthusiasm of the moment.

“Ah, Hervey,” she said, with that complacent air of proprietorship which our early preceptors invariably assume, “you haven't forgotten me, I know.

‘Though the tempest of life will oft shut out the past,
The thoughts of our school-days remain to the last.’”

“Glad to see you, Mrs. Gurrige. No, I haven't forgotten you,” the man replied.

A slight pause followed. The women-folk had so much to say that they hardly knew where to begin. That trifling hesitation might have been accounted for by this fact. Or it might have been that Hervey was less overjoyed at his home-coming than were his mother and sister.

Prudence was the first to speak.

“Funny that I should have set a place more than I intended at the tea-table,” she said, “and funnier still that when I found out what I'd done I didn't remove the plate and things. And now you turn up.” She laughed joyously.

Sarah Gurrige looked over in the girl's direction and shook an admonitory forefinger at her.

“Mr. Grey, my dear—you were thinking of Mr. Grey, in spite of your lover's tiff.”

“Who did you say?” asked Hervey, with a quick glance at Prudence.

“Leslie Grey,” said his mother, before the old school-ma'am could reply. “Didn't our Prudence tell you when she wrote? He's the man she's going to marry. I must say he's not the man I should have set on for her; but she's got her own ploughing to seed, and I'm not the one to say her 'nay' when she chooses her man.”

Hervey busied himself with his food, nor did he look up when he spoke.

“That was Grey, I s'pose, I saw riding away as I came up? Good, square-set chunk of a man.”

“Yes, he left just before you came,” said Prudence. “But never mind about him, brother. Tell us about yourself. Have you made a fortune?”

“For sure, he must,” said their mother, gazing with round, proud eyes upon her boy, “for how else came he to travel from California to here, just to set his eyes on us and see a slip of a girl take to herself a husband? My, but it's a great journey for a boy to take.”

“Nothing to what I've done in my time,” replied Hervey. “Besides, mother, I've got further to go yet. And as for sister Prudence's marriage, I'm afraid I can't stay for that.”

“Not stay?” exclaimed his mother.

“Do you mean it?” asked his sister incredulously.

Sarah Gurrige contented herself with looking her dismay.

“You see, it's like this,” said Hervey. He had an uncomfortable habit of keeping his eyes fixed upon the table, only just permitting himself occasional swift upward glances over the other folk's

heads. "When I got your letter, Prudence, I was just preparing to come up from Los Mares to go and see a big fruit-grower at Niagara. The truth is that my fruit farm is a failure and I am trying to sell it."

"My poor boy!" exclaimed his mother; "and you never told me. But there, you were always as proud as proud, and never would let me help you. Your poor father was just the same; when things went wrong he wouldn't own up to any one. I remember how we lost sixty acres of forty-bushel, No. 1 wheat with an August frost. I never learned it till we'd taken in the finest crop in the district at the next harvesting. But you didn't put all your savings into fruit?"

"I'm afraid I did, mother, worse luck."

"All you made up at the Yukon goldfields?" asked Prudence, alarm in her voice.

"Every cent."

There followed a dead silence.

"Then—" Mrs. Malling could get no further.

"I'm broke—dead broke. And I'm going East to sell my land to pay off my debts. I've had an offer for it, and I'm going to clinch the deal quick. Say, I just came along here to see you, and I'm going on at once. I only got into Winnipeg yesterday. I rode out without delay, but struck the Ainsley trail, or I should have been here sooner. Now, see here, mother," Hervey went on, as a woe-begone expression closely verging on tears came into the old dame's eyes, "it's no use crying over this business. What's done is done. I'm going to get clear of my farm first, and maybe afterwards I'll come here again and we'll talk things over a bit."

Prudence sat staring at her brother, but Hervey avoided her gaze. Mrs. Malling was too heartbroken to speak yet. Her weather-tanned face had blanched as much as it was possible for it to do. Her boy had gone out upon the world to seek his fortune, and he had succeeded in establishing himself, he had written and told her. He had found gold in quantities in the Yukon valley, and now—now, at last, he had failed. The shock had for the moment crushed her; her boy, her proud independent boy, as she had been wont to consider him, had failed. She did not ask herself, or him, the reason of his failure. Such failure, she felt, must be through no fault of his, but the result of adverse circumstances.

She never thought of the gambling-table. She never thought of reckless living. Such things could not enter her simple mind and be in any way associated with her boy. Hephzibah Malling loved her son; to her he was the king who could do no wrong. She continued to gaze blankly in the man's direction.

Sarah Gurridge alone of the trio allowed herself sidelong, speculative glances at the man's face. She had seen the furtive overhead glances; the steady avoidance of the loving observation of his womankind. She had known Hervey as well, and perhaps just a shade better than his mother and sister had; and long since, in his childish school-days, she had detected a lurking weakness in an otherwise good character. She wondered now if he had lived to outgrow that juvenile trait, or had it grown with him, gaining strength as the greater passions of manhood developed?

After the first shock of Hervey's announcement had passed, Mrs. Malling sought refuge in the consolation of her own ability to help her son. He must never know want, or suffer the least privation. She could and would give him everything he needed. Besides, after all, she argued with womanly feeling, now perhaps she could persuade him to look after the farm for her; to stay by her side. He should be in no way dependent. She would install him as manager at a comfortable salary. The idea pleased her beyond measure, and it was with difficulty she could keep herself from at once putting her proposal into words. However, by a great effort, she checked her enthusiasm.

"Then when do you think of going East?" she asked, with some trepidation. "You won't go at once, sure."

"Yes, I must go at once," Hervey replied promptly. "That is, to-morrow morning."

"Then you will stay to-night," said Prudence.

"Yes; but only to get a good long sleep and rest my horse. I'm thoroughly worn out. I've been in saddle since early this morning."

“Have you sent your horse round to the barn?” asked Sarah Gurrige.

“Well, no. He’s hitched to the fence.” The observing Sarah had been sure of it.

Prudence rose from her seat and called out to the hired girl—

“Mary, send out and tell Andy to take the horse round to the barn. He’s hitched to the fence.” Then she came back. “You’ll join our party to-night, of course.”

“Hoity, girl, of course not,” said their mother. “How’s the lad going to get rest gallivanting with a lot of clowns who can only talk of ‘bowers’ and ‘jokers’? You think of nothing but ‘how-de-doin’ with your neighbours since you’re going to be married. Things were different in my day. I’ll look after Hervey,” she continued, turning to her son. “You shall have a good night, lad, or my name’s not Hephzibah Malling. Maybe you’ll tell me by and by what you’d like to do.”

“That’s right, mother,” replied Hervey, with an air of relief. “You understand what it is for a man to need rest. I’ll just hang around till the folks come, and then sneak off to bed. You don’t mind, Prue, do you? I’m dead beat, and I want to leave at daybreak.”

“Mind?” answered Prudence; “certainly not, Hervey. I should have liked you to meet Mr. Grey, but you must get your rest.”

“Sure,” added her mother, “and as for meeting Mr. Grey—well, your brother won’t sicken for want of seeing him, I’ll wager. Come along, Hervey, we’ll go to the kitchen; Prudence has to get her best parlour ready for these chattering noodles. And, miss,” turning to her daughter with an expression of pretended severity, “don’t forget that I’ve got a batch o’ layer cakes in the ice-box, and you’ve not told me what you want in the way of drinks. La, young folks never think of the comforts. I’m sure I don’t know what you’ll do without your mother, girl. Some o’ these times your carelessness will get your parties made a laughing-stock of. Come along, Hervey.”

The old lady bustled out, bearing her son off in triumph to the kitchen. She was quite happy again now. Her scheme for her son’s welfare had shut out all thought of his bad news. Most women are like this; the joy of giving to their own is perhaps the greatest joy in the life of a mother.

In the hall they met the flying, agitated figure of the hired girl, Mary.

“Oh, please, ’m, there’s such a racket going on by the barn. There’s Andy an’ the two dogs fighting with a great, strange, three-legged dog wot looks like a wolf. They’re that mussed up that I don’t know, I’m sure.”

“It’s that brute Neche of mine,” said Hervey, with an imprecation. “It’s all right, girl; I’ll go.”

Hervey rushed out to the barn. The great three-legged savage was in the midst of a fierce scrimmage. Two farm dogs were attacking him. They were both half-bred sheep-dogs. One was making futile attempts to get a hold upon the stranger, and Neche was shaking the other as a terrier would shake a rat. And Andy, the choreman, was lambasting the intruder with the business end of a two-tine hay-fork, and shouting frightful curses at him in a strong American accent.

As Hervey came upon the scene, Neche hurled his victim from him, either dead or dying, for the dog lay quite still where it fell upon the snow. Then, impervious to the onslaught of the choreman, he seized the other dog.

“Come out of it, Andy,” cried Hervey.

The hired man ceased his efforts at once, glad to be done with the savage. Hervey then ran up to the infuriated husky, and dealt him two or three terrible kicks.

The dog turned round instantly. His fangs were dripping with blood, and he snarled fiercely, his baleful eyes glowing with ferocity. But he slunk off when he recognized his assailant, allowing the second dog to run for its life, howling with canine fear.

Andy went over to the dog that was stretched upon the snow.

“Guess ’e’s done, boss,” he said, looking up at Hervey as the latter came over to his side. “Say, that’s about the slickest scrapper round these parts. Gee-whizz, ’e went fur me like the tail end o’ a cyclone when I took your plug to the barn. It was they curs that kind o’ distracted his attention. Mebbe thar’s more wolf nor dog in him. Mebbe, I sez.”

“Yes, he’s a devil-tempered husky,” said Hervey. “I’ll have to shoot him one of these days.”

“Wa’al, I do ’lows that it’s a mercy ’e ain’t got no more’n three shanks. Mackinaw! but he’s handy.”

The four women had watched the scene from the kitchen door. Hervey came over to where they were standing.

“I’m sorry, mother,” he said. “Neché has killed one of your dogs. He’s a fiend for fighting. I’ve a good mind to shoot him now.”

“No, don’t go for to do that,” said his mother. “We oughtn’t to have sent Andy to take your horse. I expect the beast thought he was doing right.”

“He’s a brute. Curse him!”

Prudence said nothing. Now she moved a little away from the house and talked to the dog. He was placidly, and with no show of penitence, lying down and licking a laceration on one of his front legs. He occasionally shook his great head, and stained the snow with the blood which dripped from his fierce-looking ears. He paused in his operation at the sound of the girl’s voice, and looked up. Her tone was gentle and caressing. Hervey suddenly called to her.

“Don’t go near him. He’s as treacherous as a dogone Indian.”

“Come back,” called out her mother.

The girl paid no attention. She called again, and patted her blue apron encouragingly. The animal rose slowly to his feet, looked dubiously in her direction, then, without any display of enthusiasm, came slowly towards her. His limp added to his wicked aspect, but he came, nor did he stop until his head was resting against her dress, and her hand was caressing his great back. The huge creature seemed to appreciate the girl’s attitude, for he made no attempt to move away. It is probable that this was the first caress the dog had ever known in all his savage life.

Hervey looked on and scratched his beard thoughtfully, but he said nothing more. Mrs. Malling went back to the kitchen. Sarah Gurrige alone had anything to say.

“Poor creature,” she observed, in tones of deep pity. “I wonder how he lost his foot. Is he always fighting? A poor companion, I should say.”

Hervey laughed unpleasantly.

“Oh, he’s not so bad. He’s savage, and all that But he’s a good friend.”

“Ah, and a deadly enemy. I suppose he’s very fond of you. He lets you kick him,” she added significantly.

“I hardly know—and I must say I don’t much care—what his feelings are towards me. Yes, he lets me kick him.” Then, after a pause, “But I think he really hates me.”

And Hervey turned abruptly and went back into the kitchen. He preferred the more pleasant atmosphere of his mother’s adulation to the serious reflections of Sarah Gurrige.

CHAPTER VI

THE PROGRESSIVE EUCHRE PARTY

The Mallings always had a good gathering at their card parties. Such form of entertainment and dances were the chief winter amusement of these prairie-bred folks. A twenty-mile drive in a box-sleigh, clad in furs, buried beneath heavy fur robes, and reclining on a deep bedding of sweet-smelling hay, in lieu of seats, made the journey as comfortable to such people as would the more luxurious brougham to the wealthy citizen of civilization. There was little thought of display amongst the farmers of Manitoba. When they went to a party their primary object was enjoyment, and they generally contrived to obtain their desire at these gatherings. Journeys were chiefly taken in parties; and the amount of snugness obtained in the bottom of a box-sleigh would be surprising to those without such experience. There was nothing *blasé* about the simple country folk. A hard day's work was nothing to them. They would follow it up by an evening's enjoyment with the keenest appreciation; and they knew how to revel with the best.

The first to arrive at Loon Dyke Farm were the Furrers. Daisy, Fortune, and Rachel, three girls of round proportions, all dressed alike, and of age ranging in the region of twenty. They spoke well and frequently; and their dancing eyes and ready laugh indicated spirits at concert pitch. These three were great friends of Prudence, and were loud in their admiration of her. Peter Furrer, their brother, was with them; he was a red-faced boy of about seventeen, a giant of flesh, and a pigmy of intellect—outside of farming operations. Mrs. Furrer accompanied the party as chaperon—for even in the West chaperons are recognized as useful adjuncts, and, besides, enjoyment is not always a question of age.

Following closely on the heels of the Furrers came old Gleichen and his two sons, Tim and Harry. Gleichen was a well-to-do “mixed” farmer—a widower who was looking out for a partner as staid and robust as himself. His two sons were less of the prairie than their father, by reason of an education at St. John's University in Winnipeg. Harry was an aspirant to Holy Orders, and already had charge of a mission in the small neighbouring settlement of Lakeville. Tim acted as foreman to his father's farm; a boy of enterprising ideas, and who never hesitated to advocate to his steady-going parent the advantage of devoting himself to stock-raising.

Others arrived in quick succession; a truly agricultural gathering. Amongst the latest of the early arrivals were the Ganthorns; mother, son, and daughter, pretentious folk of considerable means, and recently imported from the Old Country.

By half-past seven everybody had arrived with the exception of George Iredale and Leslie Grey. The fun began from the very first.

The dining-table had disappeared from the parlour, as had the rugs from the floor, and somehow a layer of white wax, like an incipient fall of snow, lay invitingly on the bare white pine boarding. And, too, it seemed only natural that the moment she came into the room ready for the fray, Daisy Furrer should make a rush for the ancient piano, and tinkle out with fair execution the strains of an old waltz. Her efforts broke up any sign of constraint; everybody knew everybody else, so they danced. This was the beginning; cards would come later.

They could all dance, and right well, too. Faces devoid of the absorbing properties of powder quickly shone with the exercise; complexions innocent of all trace of pigments and the toilet arts glowed with a healthy hue and beamed with perfect happiness. There could be no doubt that Prudence and her mother knew their world as well as any hostess could wish. And it was all so easy; no formality, few punctilios to observe—just free-and-easy good-fellowship.

Mrs. Mallings emerged from the region of the kitchen. She was a little heated with her exertions, and a stray wisp or two of grey hair escaping from beneath her quaint lace cap testified to her culinary exertions. She had been stooping at her ovens regardless of her appearance. She found her

daughter standing beside the door of the parlour engaged in a desultory conversation with Peter Furrer. Prudence hailed her mother with an air of relief, and the monumental Peter moved heavily away.

“Oh, mother dear, it’s too bad of you,” exclaimed the girl, gazing at her critically. “And after all the trouble I took with your cap! Look at it now. It’s all on one side, and your hair is sticking out like—like—Timothy grass. Stand still while I fix it.”

The girl’s deft fingers soon arranged her mother afresh, the old lady protesting all the while, but submitting patiently to the operation.

“There, there; you children think of nothing but pushing and patting and tittivating. La, but one ’ud think I was going to sit down at table with a King or a Minister of the Church. Nobody’s going to look at me, child—until the victuals come on. Besides, what does it matter with neighbours? Look at old Gleichen over there, bowing and scraping to Mrs. Ganthorn; one would think it wasn’t his way to do nothing else. He’s less elaborate when he’s trailing after his plough. My, but I can’t abide such pretending. Guess some folks think women are blind. And where’s George Iredale? I don’t see him. Now there’d be some excuse for his doing the grand. He’s a gentleman born and bred.”

“Ah, yes, mother, we all know your weakness for Mr. Iredale,” replied Prudence, with an affectionate finishing pat to the grey old head. “But then he just wouldn’t ‘bow and scrape,’ as you call it, to Mrs. Ganthorn or anybody else. He’s not the sort for that kind of thing. He hasn’t come yet. I’ll bring him to you at once, dear, when he arrives,” she finished up with a laugh.

“You’re a saucy hussy,” her mother returned, with a chuckle. Then: “But I’d have taken to him as a son. Girls never learn anything now-a-days until they’re married to the man they fancy.”

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