Cullum Ridgwell

In the Brooding Wild

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Cullum R.

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I.
ON THE MOUNTAINSIDE

To the spirit which broods over the stupendous solitudes of the northern Rockies, the soul of man, with all its complex impulses, is but so much plastic material which it shapes to its own inscrutable ends. For the man whose lot is cast in the heart of these wilds, the drama of life usually moves with a tremendous simplicity toward the sudden and sombre tragedy of the last act. The titanic world in which he lives closes in upon him and makes him its own. For him, among the ancient watch-towers of the earth, the innumerable interests and activities of swarming cities, the restless tides and currents of an eager civilization, take on the remoteness of a dream. The peace or war of nations is less to him than the battles of Wing and Fur. His interests are all in that world over which he seeks to rule by the law of trap and gun, and in the war of defence which he wages against the aggression of the elements. He returns insensibly to the type of the primitive man, strong, patient, and enduring.

High up on the mountainside, overlooking a valley so deep and wide as to daze the brain of the gazing human, stands a squat building. It seems to have been crushed into the slope by the driving force of the vicious mountain storms to which it is open on three sides. There is no shelter for it. It stands out bravely to sunshine and storm alike with the contemptuous indifference of familiarity. It is a dugout, and, as its name implies, is built half in the ground. Its solitary door and single parchment-covered window overlook the valley, and the white path in front where the snow is packed hard by the tramp of dogs and men, and the runners of the dog-sled. Below the slope bears away to the woodlands. Above the hut the overshadowing mountain rises to dazzling heights; and a further, but thin, belt of primeval forest extends up, up, until the eternal snows are reached and the air will no longer support life. Even to the hardy hunters, whose home this is, those upper forests are sealed chapters in Nature's story.

Below the dugout, and beyond the valley, lie countless lesser hills, set so closely that their divisions are lost in one smooth, dark expanse of forest. Blackened rifts are visible here and there, but they have little meaning, and only help to materialize what would otherwise wear an utterly ghostly appearance. The valley in front is so vast that its contemplation from the hillside sends a shudder of fear through the heart. It is dark, dreadfully dark and gloomy, although the great stretch of pine forest, which reaches to its uttermost confines, bears upon its drooping branches the white coat of winter.

The valley is split by a river, now frozen to its bed. But, from the hut door, the rift which marks its course in the dark carpet cannot be seen.

In the awesome view no life is revealed. The forests shadow the earth and every living thing upon it, and where the forest is not there lies the snow to the depth of many feet. It is a scene of solemn grandeur, over which broods silence and illimitable space.

Out of the deathly stillness comes a long-drawn sigh. It echoes down the hillside like the weary expression of patient suffering from some poor creature imprisoned where ancient glacier and everlasting snows hold place. It passes over the low-pitched roof of the dugout, it plays about the angles and under the wide reaching eaves. It sets the door creaking with a sound that startles the occupants. It passes on and forces its way through the dense, complaining forest trees. The opposition it receives intensifies its plaint, and it rushes angrily through the branches. Then, for awhile, all is still again. But the coming of that breath from the mountain top has made a difference in the outlook. Something strange has happened. One looks about and cannot tell what it is. It may be that the air is

colder; it may be that the daylight has changed its tone; it may be that the sunlit scene is changed as the air fills with sparkling, diamond frost particles. Something has happened.

Suddenly a dismal howl splits the air, and its echoes intensify the gloom. Another howl succeeds it, and then the weird cry is taken up by other voices.

And ere the echoes die out another breath comes down from the hilltop, a breath less patient; angry with a biting fierceness which speaks of patience exhausted and a spirit of retaliation.

It catches up the loose snow as it comes and hurls it defiantly at every obstruction with the viciousness of an exasperated woman. Now it shakes the dugout, and, as it passes on, shrieks invective at the world over which it rushes, and everything it touches feels the bitter lash of the whipping snow it bears upon its bosom. Again come the strange howls of the animal world, but they sound more distant and the echoes are muffled, for those who cry out have sought the woodland shelter, where the mountain breath exhausts itself against the countless legions of the pines.

Ere the shriek has died out, another blast comes, down the mountainside, and up rises the fine-powdered snow like a thin fog. From the valley a rush of wind comes up to meet it, and the two battle for supremacy. While the conflict rages fresh clouds of snow rise in other directions and rush to the scene of action. Encountering each other on the way they struggle together, each intolerant of interference, until the shrieking is heard on every hand, and the snow fog thickens, and the dull sun above grows duller, and the lurid "sun dogs" look like evil coals of fire burning in the sky.

Now, from every direction, the wind tears along in a mad fury. The forest tops sway as with the roll of some mighty sea swept by the sudden blast of a tornado. In the rage of the storm the woodland giants creak out their impotent protests. The wind battles and tears at everything, there is no cessation in its onslaught.

And as the fight waxes the fog rises and a grey darkness settles over the valley. The forest is hidden, the hills are gone, the sun is obscured, and a fierce desolation reigns. Darker and darker it becomes as the blizzard gains force. And the cries of the forest beasts add to the chaos and din of the mountain storm.

The driving cold penetrates, with the bite of invisible arrows, to the interior of the dugout. The two men who sit within pile up the fuel in the box stove which alone makes life possible for them in such weather. The roof groans and bends beneath the blast. Under the rattling door a thin carpet of snow has edged its way in, while through the crack above it a steady rain of moisture falls as the snow encounters the rising heat of the stifling atmosphere.

"I knew it 'ud come, Nick," observed one of the men, as he shut the stove, after carefully packing several cord-wood sticks within its insatiable maw.

He was of medium height but of large muscle. His appearance was that of a man in the prime of life. His hair, above a face tanned and lined by exposure to the weather, was long and grey, as was the beard which curled about his chin. He was clad in a shirt of rough-tanned buckskin and trousers of thick moleskin. His feet were shod with moccasins which were brilliantly beaded. Similar bead-work adorned the front of the weather-proof shirt.

His companion was a slightly younger and somewhat larger man. The resemblance he bore to his comrade indicated the relationship between them. They were brothers.

Ralph and Nicol Westley were born and bred in that dugout. Their father and mother were long since dead, dying in the harness of the toil they had both loved, and which they bequeathed to their children. These two men had never seen the prairie. They had never left their mountain fastnesses. They had never even gone south to where the railway bores its way through the Wild.

They had been born to the life of the trapper and knew no other. They lived and enjoyed their lives, for they were creatures of Nature who understood and listened when she spoke. They had no other education. The men lived together harmoniously, practically independent of all other human companionship.

At long intervals, when pelts had accumulated and supplies had run low, they visited the cabin of an obscure trader. Otherwise they were cut off from the world and rejoiced in their isolation.

"Yes, we've had the warnin' this week past," rejoined Nick solemnly, as he affectionately polished the butt of his rifle with a rag greased with bear's fat. "Them 'patch' winds at sunrise an' sunset ain't sent fer nothin'. I 'lows Hell's hard on the heels o' this breeze. When the wind quits there'll be snow, an' snow means us bein' banked in. Say, she's boomin'. Hark to her. You can hear her tearin' herself loose from som'eres up on the hilltops."

Nick looked round the hut as though expecting to see the storm break through the walls of their shelter. A heavy storm always affected the superstitious side of these men's natures. A blizzard to them was as the Evil Spirit of the mountains. They always possessed the feeling, somewhere deep down in their hearts, that the attack of a storm was directed against them. And the feeling was a mute acknowledgment that they were interlopers in Nature's most secret haunts.

Ralph had planted himself upon an upturned bucket, and sat with his hands thrust out towards the stove. He was smoking, and his eyes were directed in a pensive survey at a place where the black iron of the stove was steadily reddening.

Presently he looked up.

"Ha' ye fed the dogs, lad?" he asked.

"Ay."

The two relapsed into silence. The creaking of the hut was like the protest of a wooden ship riding a heavy storm at sea. The men shifted their positions with every fresh burst which struck their home; it was as though they personally felt each shock, and their bones ached with the strain of battle. The smoke curled up slowly from Ralph's pipe and a thin cloud hovered just beneath the roof. The red patch on the stove widened and communicated itself to the stovepipe. Presently the trapper leaned forward, and, closing the damper, raked away the ashes with a chip of wood.

Nick looked up and laid his gun aside, and, rising, stepped over to the stove.

"Makes ye feel good to hear the fire roarin' when it's stormin' bad. Ther' ain't no tellin' when this'll let up." He jerked his head backward to imply the storm.

"It's sharp. Mighty sharp," replied his brother. "Say–"

He broke off and bent his head in an attitude of keen attention. He held his pipe poised in his right hand, whilst his eyes focused themselves on a side of bacon which hung upon the wall.

Nick had turned towards the door. His attitude was intent also; he, too, was listening acutely.

The howling elements continued to beat furiously upon the house and the din was appalling, but these two men, keen-eared, trained to the life of their mountains, had heard a sound which was not the storm, nor of the forest creatures doling their woful cries beneath the shelter of the woods.

Slowly Ralph's eyes moved from the bacon and passed over the smoke stained wooden wall of the hut. Nor did they pause again until they looked into the eyes of his brother. Here they fixed themselves and the working brains of the two men seemed to communicate one with the other. Neither of them was likely to be mistaken. To hear a sound in those wilds was to recognize it unerringly.

"A cry," said Nick.

"Some 'un out in the storm," replied Ralph.

"A neche."

Ralph shook his head.

"A neche would 'a' know'd this was comin'. He'd 'a' made camp. 'Tain't a neche. Hark!"

The beat of the storm seemed to drown all other sounds, and yet those two men listened. It is certain that what they heard would have been lost to most ears.

Ralph rose deliberately. There was no haste, nor was there any hesitation. His intention was written on his face.

"The lifeline," he said briefly.

Out into the awful storm the two men plunged a few moments later. There was no thought of their own comfort in their minds. They had heard a cry–the cry of a human being, and they were prepared to lend such aid as lay in their power. They did not pause to wonder at a voice other than their own in those regions. Some one was caught in the storm, and they knew that such a disaster meant certain death to the poor wretch if they did not go to the rescue. The terror of the blizzard was expressed in the significant words Ralph had uttered. Even these hardy men of the wild dared not venture beyond their door without the lifeline which was always kept handy.

With their furs covering every part of them but their eyes and noses they plunged into the fog of blinding snow. They could see nothing around them–they could not even see their own feet. Each gripped a long pole, and used his other hand to grasp the line.

They moved down the beaten path with certain step. Three yards from the dugout and the house was obscured. The wind buffeted them from every direction, and they were forced to bend their heads in order to keep their eyes open.

The whole attack of the wind now seemed to centre round those two struggling human creatures. It is the way of the blizzard. It blows apparently from every direction, and each obstacle in its chaotic path becomes the special object of its onslaught.

A forceful gust, too sudden to withstand, would drive them, blind, groping, from their path; and a moment later they would be hurled like shuttlecocks in the opposite direction. They staggered under the burden of the storm, and groped for the solid foothold of the track with their poles; and so they slowly gained their way.

Their strenuous life had rendered them uncomplaining, and they laboured in silence. No emergency but they were ready to meet with a promptness that was almost automatic. A slip upon the declining path and the fall was checked by the aid of the poles which both men used as skilfully as any guide upon the Alps. These contests with the elements were as much a part of their lives as were their battles with the animal world.

After awhile Ralph halted; he thrust his pole deep into the snow and held his position by its aid. Then, throwing up his head, as might any wolf, he opened his throat and uttered a prolonged cry. It rose high above the storm in a manner which only the cry of a mountain or forest bred man can. It rushed forth borne unwillingly upon the shrieking wind, and its sound almost instantly died out of the ears of the sender. But the men knew it was travelling. Nick followed his brother's example, and then Ralph gave out the mountain call again.

Then they waited, listening. A sound, faint and far off, came in answer to their cries. It was the human cry they had heard before.

Ralph moved forward with Nick hard upon his heels. The line "paid out," and the points of the poles sought the hard earth beneath the snow. They gained their way in spite of the storm, foot by foot, yard by yard. And, at short intervals, they paused and sent their cries hurtling upon the vicious wind. And to every cry came an answer, and every answer sounded nearer.

They were on the only open track in the valley, and both men knew that whoever was out in that storm must be somewhere upon it. Therefore they kept on.

"The line's gettin' heavy," said Nick presently.

"It's only a little further," replied Ralph.

"By the weight o' the line, I reckon ther' ain't more'n fifty feet more."

"Maybe it'll be 'nough."

And Ralph was right.

Ten yards further on they almost fell over a dark mass lying in the snow. It was a huddled heap, as of a creature striving to shut out the attack of the storm. It was the attitude of one whose heart quails with dread. It was the attitude of one, who, in possession of all his faculties and strength, lies down to die. Rank cowardice was in that fur-clad figure, and the cries for help were as the weeping of a fear-filled soul.

Ralph was down upon his knees in a moment, and all that the still figure conveyed was at once apparent to him. His hand fell heavily upon the man's shoulder, and he turned him over to look at his face.

The victim of the storm groaned; as yet he was unable to realize that help was at hand. Then, after several rough shakes, his head emerged from the folds of an enormous storm-collar.

As he looked up at the faces bending over him the two trappers uttered exclamations.

"It's the trader!" said Ralph.

"Victor Gagnon!" exclaimed Nick.

CHAPTER II.
WHICH TELLS OF THE WHITE SQUAW

The stormy day was followed by an equally stormy night. Inside the dugout it was possible, in a measure, to forget the terrors of the blizzard raging outside. The glowing stove threw out its comforting warmth, and even the rank yellow light of the small oil lamp, which was suspended from one of the rafters, gave a cheering suggestion of comfort to the rough interior. Besides, there were within food and shelter and human association, and the mind of man is easily soothed into a feeling of security by such surroundings.

The trappers had brought the rescued trader to the shelter of their humble abode; they had refreshed him with warmth and good food; they had given him the comfort of a share of their blankets, the use of their tobacco, all the hospitality they knew how to bestow.

The three men were ranged round the room in various attitudes of repose. All were smoking heavily. On the top of the stove stood a tin billy full to the brim of steaming coffee, the scent of which, blending with the reek of strong tobacco, came soothingly to their nostrils.

Victor Gagnon was lying full length upon a pile of outspread blankets. His face was turned towards the stove, and his head was supported upon one hand. He looked none the worse for his adventure in the storm. He was a small, dark man of the superior French half-breed class. He had a narrow, ferret face which was quite good looking in a mean small way. He was clean shaven, and wore his straight black hair rather long. His clothes, now he had discarded his furs, showed to be of orthodox type, and quite unlike those of his hosts. He was a trader who kept a store away to the northeast of the dugout. He worked in connection with one of the big fur companies of the East, as an agent for the wholesale house dealing directly with trappers and Indians.

This was the man with whom the Westleys traded, and they were truly glad that chance had put it in their power to befriend him. Their associations with him, although chiefly of a business nature, were decidedly friendly.

Now they were listening to his slow, quiet, thoughtful talk. He was a man who liked talking, but he always contrived that his audience should be those who gave information. These two backwoodsmen, simple as the virgin forests to which they belonged, were not keen enough to observe this. Victor Gagnon understood such men well. His life had been made up of dealings with the mountain world and those who peopled it.

Nick, large and picturesque, sat tailor-fashion on his blankets, facing the glowing stove with the unblinking, thoughtful stare of a large dog. Ralph was less luxurious. He was propped upon his upturned bucket, near enough to the fire to dispense the coffee without rising from his seat.

“Yup. It’s a long trail for a man to make travellin’ light an’ on his lone,” Victor was saying, while his black eyes flashed swiftly upon his companions. “It’s not a summer picnic, I guess. Maybe you’re wonderin’ what I come for.”

He ceased speaking as a heavy blast shook the roof, and set the lamp swinging dangerously.

“We’re good an’ pleased to see you–” began Ralph, in his deliberate way; but Victor broke in upon him at once.

“O’ course you are. It’s like you an’ Nick there to feel that way. But human natur’s human natur’, an’ maybe som’eres you are jest wonderin’ what brought me along. Anyway, I come with a red-hot purpose. Gee! but it’s blowin’. I ain’t like to forget this storm.” Gagnon shuddered as he thought of his narrow escape.

“Say,” he went on, with an effort at playfulness. “You two boys are pretty deep–pretty deep.” He repeated himself reflectively. “An’ you seem so easy and free, too. I do allow I’d never ’a’ thought it. Ha, ha!”

He turned a smiling face upon his two friends and looked quizzically from one to the other. His look was open, but behind it shone something else. There was a hungriness in his sharp, black eyes which would have been observed by any one other than these two backwoodsmen.

"You allus was a bit fancy in your way o' speakin', Victor," observed Nick, responding to the man's grin. "Hit the main trail, man. We ain't good at guessin'."

Ralph had looked steadily at the trader while he was speaking; now he turned slowly and poured out three pannikins of coffee. During the operation he turned his visitor's words over in his mind and something of their meaning came to him. He passed a tin to each of the others and sipped meditatively from his own, while his eyes became fixed upon the face of the half-breed.

"Ther' was some fine pelts in that last parcel o' furs you brought along," continued Victor. "Three black foxes. But your skins is always the best I get."

Ralph nodded over his coffee, whilst he added his other hand to the support of the tin. Nick watched his brother a little anxiously. He, too, felt uneasy.

"It's cur'us that you git more o' them black pelts around here than anybody else higher up north. You're a sight better hunters than any durned neche on the Peace River. An' them hides is worth more'n five times their weight in gold. You're makin' a pile o' bills. Say, you keep them black pelts snug away wi' other stuff o' value."

Gagnon paused and took a deep draught at his coffee.

"Say," he went on, with a knowing smile. "I guess them black foxes lived in a gold mine–"

He broke off and watched the effect of his words. The others kept silence, only their eyes betrayed them. The smoke curled slowly up from their pipes and hung in a cloud about the creaking roof. The fire burned fiercely in the stove, and with every rush of wind outside there came a corresponding roar of flame up the stovepipe.

"Maybe you take my meanin'," said the Breed, assured that his words had struck home. "Them black furs was chock full o' grit–an' that grit was gold-dust. Guess that dust didn't grow in them furs; an' I 'lows foxes don't fancy a bed o' such stuff. Say, boys, you've struck gold in this layout o' yours. That's what's brought me out in this all-fired storm."

The two brothers exchanged rapid glances and then Ralph spoke for them both.

"You're smart, Victor. That's so. We've been workin' a patch o' pay-dirt for nigh on to twelve month. But it's worked out; clear out to the bedrock. It wa'n't jest a great find, though I 'lows, while it lasted, we took a tidy wage out o' it–"

"An' what might you call a 'tidy wage'?" asked the Breed, in a tone of disappointment. He knew these men so well that he did not doubt their statement; but he was loth to relinquish his dream. He had come there to make an arrangement with them. If they had a gold working he considered that, provided he could be of use to them, there would be ample room for him in it. This had been the object of his hazardous journey. And now he was told that it had worked out. He loved gold, and the news came as a great blow to him.

He watched Ralph keenly while he awaited his reply, sitting up in his eagerness.

"Seventy-fi' dollars a day," Ralph spoke without enthusiasm.

Victor's eyes sparkled.

"Each?" he asked.

"No, on shares."

There was another long silence while the voice of the storm was loud without. Victor Gagnon was thinking hard, but his face was calm, his expression almost indifferent. More coffee was drunk, and the smoke continued to rise.

"I 'lows you should know if it's worked out, sure."

The sharp eyes seemed to go through Ralph.

"Dead sure. We ain't drawn a cent's worth o' colour out o' it fer nine months solid."

"'Tain't worth prospectin' fer the reef?"

"Can't say. I ain't much when it comes to prospectin' gold. I knows the colour when I sees it."

Nick joined in the conversation at this point.

"Guess you'd a notion you fancied bein' in it," he said, smiling over at the Breed.

Victor laughed a little harshly.

"That's jest what."

The two brothers nodded. This they had understood.

"I'd have found all the plant fer big work," went on the trader eagerly. "I'd have found the cash to do everything. I'd have found the labour. An' us three 'ud have made a great syndicate. We'd 'a' run it dead secret. Wi' me in it we could 'a' sent our gold down to the bank by the dogs, an', bein' as my shack's so far from here, no one 'ud ever 'a' found whar the yeller come from. It 'ud 'a' been a real fine game–a jo-dandy game. An' it's worked clear out?" he asked again, as though to make certain that he had heard aright.

"Bottomed right down to the bedrock. Maybe ye'd like to see fer yourself?"

"Guess I ken take your word, boys; ye ain't the sort to lie to a pal. I'm real sorry." He paused and shifted his position. Then he went on with a slightly cunning look. "I 'lows you're like to take a run down to Edmonton one o' these days. A feller mostly likes to make things hum when he's got a good wad." Gagnon's tone was purely conversational. But his object must have been plain to any one else. He was bitterly resentful at the working out of the placer mine, and his anger always sent his thoughts into crooked channels. His nature was a curious one; he was honest enough, although avaricious, while his own ends were served. It was different when he was balked.

"We don't notion a city any," said Nick, simply.

"Things is confusin' to judge by the yarns folks tell," added Ralph, with a shake of his shaggy head.

"Them fellers as comes up to your shack, Victor, mostly talks o' drink, an' shootin', an'–an' women," Nick went on. "Guess the hills'll do us. Maybe when we've done wi' graft an' feel that it 'ud be good to laze, likely we'll go down an' buy a homestead on the prairie. Maybe, I sez."

Nick spoke dubiously, like a man who does not convince himself.

"Hah, that's 'cause you've never been to a city," said the Breed sharply.

"Jest so," observed Ralph quietly, between the puffs at his pipe.

Gagnon laughed silently. His eyes were very bright and he looked from one brother to the other with appreciation. An idea had occurred to him and he was mentally probing the possibilities of carrying it out. What he saw pleased him, for he continued to smile.

"Well, well, maybe you're right," he said indulgently. Then silence fell.

Each man was rapt in his own thoughts, and talk without a definite object was foreign to at least two of the three. The brothers were waiting in their stolid Indian fashion for sleep to come. The trader was thinking hard behind his lowered eyelids, which were almost hidden by the thick smoke which rose from his pipe.

The fire burned down and was replenished. Ralph rose and gathered the pannikins and threw them into a biscuit-box. Then he laid out his blankets while Nick went over and bolted the door. Still the trader did not look up. When the two men had settled themselves comfortably in their blankets the other at last put his pipe away.

"No," he said, as he too negotiated his blankets, "guess we want good sound men in these hills, anyway. I reckon you've no call to get visitin' the prairie, boys; you're the finest hunters I've ever known. D'ye know the name your shack here goes by among the down-landers? They call it the 'Westley Injun Reserve.'"

"White Injuns," said Nick, with a grin followed by a yawn.

"That's what," observed Victor, curling himself up in his blankets. "I've frequent heard tell of the White Squaw, but White Injuns sounds like as it wa'n't jest possible. Howsum, they call you real white buck neches, an' I 'lows ther' ain't no redskin in the world to stan' beside you on the trail o' a fur."

The two men laughed at their friend's rough tribute to their attainments. Ralph was the quieter of the two, but his appreciation was none the less. He was simple-hearted, but he knew his own worth when dealing with furs. Nick laughed loudly. It tickled him to be considered a White Indian at the calling which was his, for his whole pride was in his work.

Nick was not without a romantic side to his nature. The life of the mountains had imbued him with a half-savage superstition which revelled in the uncanny lore of such places. This was not the first time he had heard of a White Squaw, and, although he did not believe such a phenomenon possible, it appealed seductively to his love of the marvellous. Victor had turned over to sleep, but Nick was very wide awake and interested. He could not let such an opportunity slip. Victor was good at a yarn. And, besides, Victor knew more of the mountain-lore than any one else. So he roused the Breed again.

"You was sayin' about a White Squaw, Victor," he said, in a shamefaced manner. His bronzed cheeks were deeply flushed and he glanced over at his brother to see if he were laughing at him. Ralph was lying full length upon his blankets and his eyes were closed, so he went on. "Guess *I've* heerd tell of a White Squaw. Say, ain't it that they reckon as she ain't jest a human crittur?"

Victor opened his eyes and rolled over on his back. If there was one weakness he had it was the native half-breed love of romancing. He was ever ready to yarn. He revelled in it when he had a good audience. Nick was the very man for him, simple, honest, superstitious. So he sat up and answered readily enough.

"That's jest how, pard. An' it ain't a yarn neither. It's gospel truth. I know."

"Hah!" ejaculated Nick, while a strange feeling passed down his spine. Ralph's eyes had slowly opened, but the others did not notice him.

"I've seen her!" went on the trader emphatically.

"You've seen her!" said Nick, in an awed whisper.

An extra loud burst of the storming wind held the men silent a moment, then, as it died away, Victor went on.

"Yes, I see her with my own two eyes, an' I ain't like to ferget it neither. Say, ye've seen them Bible 'lustrations in my shanty? Them pictur's o' lovesome critturs wi' feathery wings an' sech?"

"I guess."

"Wal, clip them wings sheer off, an' you've got her dead right."

"Mush! But she must be a dandy sight," exclaimed Nick, with conviction. "How come ye to–"

"Guess it's a long yarn, an' maybe ye're wantin' to sleep."

"Say, I 'lows I'd like that yarn, Victor. I ain't worried for sleep, any."

Nick deliberately refilled his pipe and lit it, and passed his tobacco to the trader. Victor took the pouch. Ralph's eyes had closed again.

"You allus was a great one fer a yarn, Nick," began the half-breed, with a laugh. "Guess you most allus gets me gassin'; but say, this ain't no yarn, in a way. It's the most cur'us bit o' truth, as maybe you'll presently allow. But I ain't goin' to tell it you if ye ain't believin', 'cause it's the truth." The trader's face had become quite serious and he spoke with unusual earnestness. Nick was impressed, and Ralph's eyes had opened again.

"Git goin', pard; guess your word's good fer me," Nick said eagerly. "You was sayin'–"

"Ye've heard tell o' the Moosefoot Injuns?" began the trader slowly. Nick nodded. "They're a queer lot o' neches. I used to do a deal o' trade wi' them on the Peace River, 'fore they was located on a reserve. They were the last o' the old-time redskin hunters. Dessay they were the last to hunt the buffalo into the drives. They're pretty fine men now, I guess, as neches go, but they ain't nothin' to what they was. I guess that don't figger anyway, but they're different from most Injuns, which is what I was coming to. Their chief ain't a 'brave,' same as most, which, I 'lows, is unusual. Maybe that's how it come they ain't allus on the war-path, an' maybe that's how it come their river's called Peace River. Their chief is a Med'cine Man; has been ever since they was drove across the mountains from

British Columbia. They was pretty nigh wiped out when that happened, so they did away wi' havin' a 'brave' fer a chief, an' took on a 'Med'cine Man.'

"Wal, it ain't quite clear how it come about, but the story, which is most gener'ly believed, says that the first Med'cine Man was pertic'ler cunnin', an' took real thick with the white folks' way o' doin' things. Say, he learned his folk a deal o' farmin' an' sech, an' they took to trappin' same as you understand it. There wa'n't no scrappin', nor war-path yowlin'; they jest come an' settled right down an' took on to the land. Wal, this feller, 'fore he died, got the Mission'ry on his trail, an' got religion; but he couldn't git dead clear o' his med'cine, an' he got to prophesyin'. He called all his folk together an' took out his youngest squaw. She was a pretty crittur, sleek as an antelope fawn; I 'lows her pelt was nigh as smooth an' soft. Her eyes were as black an' big as a moose calf's, an' her hair was as fine as black fox fur. Wal, he up an' spoke to them folk, an' said as ther' was a White Squaw comin' amongst 'em who was goin' to make 'em a great people; who was goin' to lead 'em to victory agin their old enemies in British Columbia, where they'd go back to an' live in peace. An' he told 'em as this squaw was goin' to be the instrument by which the comin' of the White Squaw was to happen. Then they danced a Med'cine Dance about her, an' he made med'cine for three days wi'out stoppin'. Then they built her a lodge o' teepees in the heart o' the forest, where she was to live by herself.

"Wal, time went on an' the squaw give birth to a daughter, but she wa'n't jest white, so the men took and killed her, I guess. Then came another; she was whiter than the first, but she didn't jest please the folk, an' they killed her too. Then came another, an' another, each child whiter than the last, an' they were all killed, 'cause I guess they wa'n't jest white. Till the seventh come along. The seventh was the White Squaw. Say, fair as a pictur, wi' black hair that shone in the sun, an' wi' eyes that blue as 'ud shame the summer sky."

The half-breed paused, and sat staring with introspective gaze at the iron side of the stove. Nick was gazing at him all eyes and ears for the story. Ralph, too, was sitting up now.

"Wal, she was taken care of an' treated like the queen she was. On'y the headman was allowed to look at her. She grew an' grew, an' all the tribe was thinkin' of war, an' gettin' ready. They made 'braves' nigh every week, an' their Sun Dances was the greatest ever known. They danced Ghost Dances, too, to keep away Evil Spirits, I guess, an' things was goin' real good. Then sudden comes the white folk, an' after a bit they was all herded on to a Reserve an' kep' there. But that White Squaw never left her home in the forest, 'cause no one but the headman knew where she was. She was on'y a young girl then; I guess she's grown now. Wal, fer years them pore critturs reckoned on her comin' along an' leadin' them out on the war-path. But she didn't come; she jest stayed right along with her mother in that forest, an' didn't budge.

"That's the yarn as it stan's," Victor went on, after another pause, "but this is how I come to see her. It was winter, an' I was tradin' on the Reserve there. It was a fine, cold day, an' the snow was good an' hard, an' I set out to hunt an old bull moose that was runnin' with its mates in the location. I took two neches with me, an' we had a slap-up time fer nigh on to a week. We hunted them moose hard the whole time, but never came up wi' 'em. Then it came on to storm, an' we pitched camp in a thick pine forest. We was there fer nigh on three days while it stormed a'mighty hard. Then it cleared an' we set out, an', wi'in fifty yards o' our camp, we struck the trail o' the moose. We went red-hot after them beasts, I'm figgerin', an' they took us into the thick o' the forest. Then we got a couple o' shots in; my slugs got home, but, fer awhiles, we lost them critturs. Next day we set out again, an' at noon we was startled by hearin' a shot fired by som'un else. We kep' right on, an' bimeby we came to a clearin'. There we saw four teepees an' a shack o' pine logs all smeared wi' colour; but what came nigh to par'lyzin' me was the sight o' my moose lyin' all o' a heap on the ground, an', standin' beside its carcass, leanin' on a long muzzle-loader, was a white woman. She was wearin' the blanket right enough, but she was as white as you are. Say, she had six great huskies wi' her, an' four women. An' when they see us they put hard into the woods. I was fer goin' to have a look at the teepees, but my

neches wouldn't let me. They told me the lodge was sacred to the White Squaw, who we'd jest seen. An' I 'lows, they neches wa'n't jest easy till we cleared them woods."

"An' she was beautiful, an'–an' fine?" asked Nick, as the trader ceased speaking. "Was she that beautiful as you'd heerd tell of?"

His voice was eager with suppressed excitement. His pipe had gone out, and he had forgotten everything but the story the Breed had told.

"Ay, that she was; her skin was as clear as the snow she trod on, an' her eyes–gee! but I've never seen the like. Man, she was wonderful."

Victor threw up his hands in a sort of ecstasy and looked up at the creaking roof.

"An' her hair?" asked Nick, wonderingly.

"A black fox pelt was white aside it."

"An' didn't ye foller her?"

The question came abruptly from Ralph, whom the others had forgotten.

"I didn't jest know you was awake," said Victor. "Wal, no, to own the truth, I 'lows I was scart to death wi' what them neches said. Maybe I wa'n't sorry to light out o' them woods."

They talked on for a few moments longer, then Ralph's stertorous breathing told of sleep. Victor was not long in following his example. Nick sat smoking thoughtfully for some time; presently he rose and put out the lamp and stoked up the fire. Then he, too, rolled over in his blankets, and, thinking of the beautiful White Squaw, dropped off to sleep to continue his meditations in dreamland.

CHAPTER III.
THE QUEST OF THE WHITE SQUAW

Christmas had gone by and the new year was nearing the end of its first month. It was many weeks since Victor Gagnon had come to the Westley's dugout on that stormy evening. But his visit had not been forgotten. The story of the White Squaw had made an impression upon Nick such as the half-breed could never have anticipated. Ralph had thought much of it too, but, left to himself, he would probably have forgotten it, or, at most, have merely remembered it as a good yarn.

But this he was not allowed to do. Nick was enthusiastic. The romance of the mountains was in his blood, and that blood was glowing with the primest life of man. The fire of youth had never been stirred within him, but it was there, as surely as it is in every human creature. Both men were nearing forty years of age, and, beyond the associations of the trader's place, they had never mixed with their fellows.

The dream of this beautiful White Squaw had come to Nick; and, in the solitude of the forest, in the snow-bound wild, it remained with him, a vision of such joy as he had never before dreamed. The name of "woman" held for him suggestions of unknown delights, and the weird surroundings with which Victor had enveloped the lovely creature made the White Squaw a vision so alluring that his uncultured brain was incapable of shutting it out.

And thus it was, as he glided, ghost-like, through the forests or scaled the snowy crags in the course of his daily work, the memory of the mysterious creature remained with him. He thought of her as he set his traps; he thought of her, as, hard on the trail of moose, or deer, or wolf, or bear, he scoured the valleys and hills; in the shadow of the trees at twilight, in fancy he saw her lurking; even amidst the black, barren tree-trunks down by the river banks. His eyes and ears were ever alert with the half-dread expectation of seeing her or hearing her voice. The scene Victor had described of the white huntress leaning upon her rifle was the most vivid in his imagination, and he told himself that some day, in the chances of the chase, she might visit his valleys, his hills.

At night he would talk of her to his brother, and together they would chum the matter over, and slowly, in the more phlegmatic Ralph, Nick kindled the flame with which he himself was consumed.

And so the days wore on; a fresh zest was added to their toil. Each morning Ralph would set out with a vague but pleasurable anticipation of adventure. And as his mind succumbed to the strange influence of the White Squaw, it coloured for him what had been the commonplace events of his daily life. If a buck was started and rushed crashing through the forest growths, he would pause ere he raised his rifle to assure himself that it was not a woman, garbed in the parti-coloured blanket of the Moosefoot Indians, and with a face radiant as an angel's. His slow-moving imagination was deeply stirred.

From the Beginning Nature has spoken in no uncertain language. "Man shall not live alone," she says. Victor Gagnon had roused these two simple creatures. There was a woman in the world, other than the mother they had known, and they began to wonder why the mountains should be peopled only by the forest beasts and solitary man.

As February came the time dragged more heavily than these men had ever known it to drag before. They no longer sat and talked of the White Squaw, and speculated as to her identity, and the phenomenon of her birth, and her mission with regard to her tribe. Somehow the outspoken enthusiasm of Nick had subsided into silent brooding; and Ralph needed no longer the encouragement of his younger brother to urge him to think of the strange white creature. Each had taken the subject to himself, and nursed and fostered it in his own way.

The time was approaching for their visit to Gagnon's store. This was the reason of the dragging days. Both men were eager for the visit, and the cause of their eagerness was not far to seek. They

wished to see the half-breed and feed their passion on fresh words of the lovely creature who had so strangely possessed their imaginations.

They did not neglect the methodical routine of their duties. When night closed in Nick saw to the dogs. The great huskies obeyed only one master who fed them, who cared for them, who flogged them on the trail with club and whip; and that was Nick. Ralph they knew not. He cooked. He was the domestic of the abode, for he was of a slow nature which could deal with the small details of such work. Nick was too large and heavy in his mode of life to season a stew. But in the trapper's craft it is probable that he was the better man.

The brothers' nights were passed in long, Indian-like silence which ended in sleep. Tobacco scented the atmosphere of the hut with a heaviness that was depressing. Each man sat upon his blankets alternating between his pannikin of coffee and his pipe, with eyes lowered in deep thought, or turned upon the glowing stove in earnest, unseeing contemplation.

The night before the appointed day for starting came round. To-morrow they would be swinging along over the snowy earth with their dogs hauling their laden sled. The morrow would see them on their way to Little Choyeuse Creek, on the bank of which stood Victor Gagnon's store.

There was an atmosphere of suppressed excitement in the doings of that night. There was much to be done, and the unusual activity almost seemed a bustle in so quiet an abode. Outside the door the sled stood piled with the furs which represented their winter's catch. The dog harness was spread out, and all was in readiness. Inside the hut the two men were packing away the stuff they must leave behind. Although there was no fear of their home being invaded it was their custom to take certain precautions. In that hut were all their savings, to lose which would mean to lose the fruits of their life's labours.

Nick had just moved a chest from the depths of the patchwork cupboard in which they kept their food. It was a small receptacle hewn out of a solid pine log. The lid was attached with heavy rawhide hinges, and was secured by an iron hasp held by a clumsy-looking padlock. He set it down upon his blankets.

"Wer'll we put this?" he asked abruptly.

Ralph looked at it with his thoughtful eyes.

"It needs considerin'," he observed. And he leant himself against a heavy table which stood by the wall.

"We ain't opened it since last fall," said Nick presently, after a long and steady survey of the object of their solicitude.

"No."

"Ther's a deal in it."

Ralph groped at the neck of his shirt. Nick watched his brother's movements.

"Maybe we'll figure it up agin."

Ralph fell in with his brother's suggestion and drew out the key which was secured round his neck. He unlocked the rusty padlock and threw open the lid. The chest contained six small bags filled to bursting point and securely tied with rawhide; one bag, half-full and open; and a thick packet of Bank of Montreal bills.

Nick knelt down and took out the bills and set them on one side.

"Ther's fi' thousand dollars ther," he said. "I 'lows they've been reckoned careful." Then he picked up one of the bags and held it up for his brother's inspection. "We tied them seven bags up all weighin' equal, but we ain't jest sure how much dust they hold. Seven," he went on reflectively, "ther's on'y six an' a haf now, since them woodbugs got at 'em, 'fore we made this chest. I 'lows Victor's 'cute to locate the dust in them furs. It wa'n't a good layout wrappin' the bags in black fox pelts. Howsum, I'd like to know the value o' them bags. Weighs nigh on to three poun', I'm guessin'."

Ralph took the bag and weighed it in his hand.

"More," he said. "Ther's fi' poun' o' weight ther'."

"Guess them bags together means fifteen to twenty thousan' dollars, sure," said Nick, his eyes shining at the thought.

"I don't rightly know," said Ralph. "It's a goodish wad, I 'lows."

Nick returned the store to the chest which Ralph relocked.

"Where?" asked Nick, glancing round the hut in search of a secure hiding-place.

"We'll dig a hole in the floor under my blankets," said Ralph after a pause. "Maybe it'll be tol'ble safe there."

And for greater security the chest was so disposed. The work was quickly done, and the clay floor, with the aid of water, was smeared into its usual smooth appearance again. Then the brothers sought their rest.

At daybreak came the start. Nick harnessed the dogs, five great huskies who lived in the shelter of a rough shed outside the hut when it stormed, and curled themselves up in the snow, or prowled, baying the moon, when the night was fine. Fierce-looking brutes these with their long, keen muzzles, their high shoulders and deep chests, their drooping quarters which were massed with muscle right down to the higher sinews of their great feet. Their ferocity was chiefly the animal antagonism for their kind; with Nick they were easy enough to handle, for all had been well broken beneath the heavy lash which the man knew better than to spare.

While the dogs were being hitched into their places Ralph secured the door of the dugout. There were no half measures here. The door was nailed up securely, and a barrier of logs set before it. Then, when all was ready, the men took their poles and Nick broke out the frost-bound runners of the sled. At the magic word "Mush!" the dogs sprang at their breast-draws, and the sled glided away down the slope with Nick running beside it, and Ralph following close behind.

Down they dropped into the depths of the silent valley, Nick guiding his dogs by word of mouth alone. The lead dog, an especially vile-tempered husky, needed nothing but the oft-repeated "Gee" and "Haw" where no packed path was, and when anything approaching a trail was struck Nick issued no commands. These creatures of the wild knew their work, loved it, lived for it, as all who have seen them labouring over snow and ice must understand.

By the route they must take it was one hundred miles to Little Choyeuse Creek. One hundred miles of mountain and forest; one hundred miles of gloomy silence; one hundred miles of virgin snow, soft to the feet of the labouring dogs, giving them no foothold but the sheer anchorage of half-buried legs. It was a temper-trying journey for man and beast. The dogs snapped at each other's heels, but the men remained silent, hugging their own thoughts and toiling amidst the pleasure of anticipation.

Skirting the forests wherever possible, and following the break of the mammoth pine-trees when no bald opening was to hand they sped along. The dogs hauled at the easy running sled, while, with long, gliding strides, the two men kept pace with them. The hills were faced by the sturdy dogs with the calm persistence of creatures who know their own indomitable powers of endurance, while the descents were made with a speed which was governed by the incessant use of Nick's pole.

The evening camp was pitched in the shelter of the forest. The dogs fed voraciously and well on their raw fish, for the journey was short and provisions plentiful. The two men fared in their usual plain way. They slept in their fur-lined bags while the wolfish burden-bearers of the North first prowled, argued out their private quarrels, sang in chorus as the northern lights moved fantastically in the sky, and finally curled themselves in their several snow-burrows.

The camp was struck at daylight next morning and the journey resumed. The dogs raced fresh and strong after their rest, and the miles were devoured with greedy haste. The white valleys wound in a mazy tangle round the foot of tremendous hills, but never a mistake in direction was made by the driver, Nick. To him the trail was as plain as though every foot of it were marked by well-packed snow; every landmark was anticipated, every inch of that chaotic land was an open book. A "Gee," or a sudden "Haw" and a fresh basin of magnificent primeval forest would open before the travellers. And so the unending ocean of mountain rollers and forest troughs continued. No variation, save from

the dead white of the open snowfields to the heavy shadows of the forest. Always the strange, mystic grey twilight; the dazzling sparkle of glinting snow; the biting air which stung the flesh like the sear of a red-hot iron; the steady run of dogs and men. On, on, with no thought of time to harass the mind, only the destination to think of.

And when they came to Little Choyeuse Creek they were welcomed in person by Victor Gagnon. He awaited them at his threshold. The clumsy stockade of lateral pine logs, a relic of the old Indian days when it was necessary for every fur store to be a fortress, was now a wreck. A few upright posts were standing, but the rest had long since been used to bank the stoves with.

The afternoon was spent in barter, and the time was one of beaming good nature, for Victor was a shrewd dealer, and the two brothers had little real estimate of the value of money. They sold their pelts in sets, regardless of quality. And when the last was traded, and Victor had parted the value in stores and cash, there came a strong feeling of relief to the trappers. Now for their brief holiday.

It was the custom on the occasion of these visits to make merry in a temperate way. Victor was never averse to such doings for there was French blood in his veins. He could sing a song, and most of his ditties were either of the old days of the Red River Valley, or dealt with the early settlers round the Citadel of Quebec. Amongst the accomplishments which he possessed was that of scraping out woful strains upon an ancient fiddle. In this land, where life was always serious, he was a right jovial companion for such men as Nick and Ralph, and the merry evenings in his company at the store were well thought of.

When night closed down, and supper was finished, and the untidy living-room which backed the store was cleared by the half-breed, the business of the evening's entertainment began. The first thing in Victor's idea of hospitality was a "brew" of hot drink. He would have called it "punch," but the name was impossible. It was a decoction of vanilla essence, spiced up, and flavoured in a manner which, he claimed, only he understood. The result was stimulating, slightly nauseating, but sufficiently unusual to be enticing to those who lived the sober life of the mountain wild. He would have bestowed good rum or whiskey upon these comrades of his, only his store of those seductive beverages had long since given out, and was not likely to be replenished until the breaking of spring. The variety of strong drink which falls to the lot of such men as he is extensive. His days of "painkiller," which he stocked for trade, had not yet come round. The essences were not yet finished. Painkiller would come next; after that, if need be, would come libations of red ink. He had even, in his time, been reduced to boiling down plug tobacco and distilling the liquor. But these last two were only used *in extremis*.

The three men sat round and sipped the steaming liquor, the two brothers vying with each other in their praises of Victor's skill in the "brew."

The first glass was drunk with much appreciation. Over the second came a dallying. Nick, experiencing the influence of the spirit, asked for a tune on the fiddle. Victor responded with alacrity and wailed out an old half-breed melody, a series of repetitions of a morbid refrain. It produced, nevertheless, an enlivening effect upon Ralph, who asked for another. Then Victor sang, in a thin tenor voice, the twenty and odd verses of a song called "The Red River Valley;" the last lines of the refrain were always the same and wailed out mournfully upon the dense atmosphere of the room.

"So remember the Red River Valley
And the half-breed that loved you so true."

But, even so, there was something perfectly in keeping between the recreation of these men and the wild, uncouth life they led. The long, grey winter and the brief, fleeting summer, the desolate wastes and dreary isolation.

After awhile the sum of Victor's entertainment was worked out and they fell back on mere talk. But as the potent spirit worked, the conversation became louder than usual, and Victor did not monopolize it. The two brothers did their share, and each, unknown to the other, was seeking

an opportunity of turning Victor's thoughts into the channel where dwelt his recollections of the wonderful White Squaw.

Nick was the one who broke the ice. The more slow-going Ralph had not taken so much spirit as his brother. Nick's eyes were bright, almost burning, as he turned his flushed, rugged face upon the half-breed. He leant forward in his eagerness and his words came rapidly, almost fiercely.

"Say, Victor," he jerked out, as though he had screwed himself up for the necessary courage to speak on the subject. "I was thinkin' o' that white crittur you got yarnin' about when you come around our shanty. Jest whar's that Moosefoot Reserve, an'–an' the bit o' forest whar her lodge is located? Maybe I'd fancy to know. I 'lows I was kind o' struck on that yarn."

The trader saw the eager face, and the excitement in the eyes which looked into his, and, in a moment, his merry mood died out. His dark face became serious, and his keen black eyes looked sharply back into Nick's expressive countenance. He answered at once in characteristic fashion.

"The Reserve's nigh on to a hund'ed an' fifty miles from here, I guess. Lies away ther' to the nor'east, down in the Foothills. The bluff lies beyond." Then he paused and a flash of thought shot through his active brain. There was a strange something looking out of Nick's eyes which he interpreted aright. Inspiration leapt, and he gripped it, and held it.

"Say," he went on, "you ain't thinkin' o' makin' the Reserve, Nick?" Then he turned swiftly and looked at Ralph. The quieter man was gazing heavily at his brother. And as Victor turned back again to Nick his heart beat faster.

Nick lowered his eyes when he found himself the object of the double scrutiny. He felt as though he would like to have withdrawn his questions, and he shifted uneasily. But Victor waited for his answer and he was forced to go on.

"Oh," he said, with a shamefaced laugh, "I was on'y jest thinkin'. I 'lows that yarn was a real good one."

There was a brief silence while swift thought was passing behind Victor's dark face. Then slowly, and even solemnly, came words which gripped the hearts of his two guests.

"It wa'n't no yarn. I see that White Squaw wi' my own two eyes."

Nick started to his feet. The "punch" had fired him almost beyond control. His face worked with nervous twitchings. He raised one hand up and swung it forcefully down as though delivering a blow.

"By Gar!" he cried, "then I go an' find her; I go an' see for myself."

And as he spoke a strange expression looked out of Victor's eyes.

Ralph removed his pipe from his lips.

"Good, Nick," he said emphatically. "The dogs are fresh. Guess a long trail'll do 'em a deal o' good. When'll we start?"

Nick looked across at his brother. He was doubtful if he had heard aright. He had expected strong opposition from the quiet, steady-going Ralph. But, instead, the elder man gave unhesitating approval. Just for one instant there came a strange feeling in his heart; a slight doubt, a sensation of disappointment, something foreign to his nature and unaccountable, something which took all pleasure from the thought of his brother's company. It was quite a fleeting sensation, however, for the next moment it was gone; his honest nature rose superior to any such jealousy and he strode across the room and gripped Ralph's hand.

"Say, we'll start at daylight, brother. Jest you an' me," he blurted out, in the fulness of his large heart. "We'll hunt that white crittur out, we'll smell her out like Injun med'cine-men, an' we'll bring her back wi' us. Say, Ralph, we'll treat her like an angel, this dandy, queer thing. By Gar! We'll find her, sure. Shake again, brother." They wrung each other forcefully by the hand. "Shake, Victor." And Nick turned and caught the trader's slim hand in his overwhelming grasp.

His enthusiasm was at boiling point. The brew of essences had done its work. Victor's swift-moving eyes saw what was passing in the thoughts of both his guests. And, like the others, his

enthusiasm rose. But there was none of the simple honesty of these men in Victor. The half-breed cunning was working within him; and the half-breed cunning is rarely clean.

And so the night ended to everybody's satisfaction. Ralph was even more quiet than usual. Victor Gagnon felt that the stars were working in his best interests; and he blessed the lucky and innocent thought that had suggested to him the yarn of the White Squaw. As for Nick, his delight was boisterous and unrestrained. He revelled openly in the prospect of the morrow's journey.

Nor had broad daylight power to shake the purpose of the night. Too long had the trappers brooded upon the story of the White Squaw. Victor knew his men so well too; while they breakfasted he used every effort to encourage them. He literally herded them on by dint of added detail and well-timed praise of the woman's beauty.

And after the meal the sled was prepared. Victor was chief adviser. He made them take a supply of essences and "trade." He told them of the disposition of Man-of-the-Snow-Hill, the Moosefoot chief, assuring them he would sell his soul for strong drink. No encouragement was left ungiven, and, well before noon, the dogs stood ready in the traces.

A hearty farewell; then out upon the white trail Nick strung the willing beasts, and the flurry of loose surface-snow that flew in their wake hid the sled as the train glided away to the far northeast.

Victor stood watching the receding figures till the hiss of the runners died down in the distance, and the driving voice of Nick became lost in the grey solitude. The northern trail held them and he felt safe. He moved out upon the trampled snow, and, passing round to the back of the store, disappeared within the pine wood which backed away up the slope of the valley.

Later he came to where three huts were hidden away amongst the vast tree-trunks. They were so placed, and so disguised, as to be almost hidden until the wanderer chanced right upon them. These habitations were a part of Victor's secret life. There was a strange mushroom look about them; low walls of muck-daubed logs supported wide-stretching roofs of reeds, which, in their turn, supported a thick covering of soot-begrimed snow. He paused near by and uttered a low call, and presently a tall girl emerged from one of the doors. She walked slowly toward him with proud, erect carriage, while at her heels followed two fierce husky dogs, moving with all the large dignity of honoured guards. The woman was taller than the trader, and her beauty of figure was in no wise hidden by the blanket clothing she wore. They talked earnestly together for some time, and then, in answer to a further summons from Victor, they were joined by a tall, gaunt man, with the solemn cast of face of an Indian, and a pair of eyes as darkly brooding as those of a moose. Although he was very dark-skinned he was plainly of the bastard race of his companions, and a certain resemblance between himself and the woman spoke of relationship.

The three talked long and seriously, and finally Victor returned alone to the store. Again he took up his stand in the doorway and remained gazing out upon the valley of the Little Choyeuse Creek, and the more distant crags of the foothills beyond.

His face was serious; serious even for the wild, where all levity seems out of place, and laughter jars upon the solemnity of the life and death struggle for existence which is for ever being fought out there. On his brow was a pucker of deep thought, whilst his eyes shone with a look which seemed to have gathered from his surroundings much of the cunning which belongs to the creatures of the forest. His usual expression of good-fellowship had passed; and in its place appeared a hungry, avaricious look which, although always there, was generally hidden behind a superficial geniality. Victor had hitherto lived fairly honestly because there was little or no temptation to do otherwise where his trading-post was stationed. But it was not his nature to do so. And as he stood gazing out upon the rugged picture before him he knew he was quite unobserved; and so the rough soul within him was laid bare to the grey light of the world.

CHAPTER IV.
THE HOODED MAN

The mere suggestion of the possibility of a woman's presence had rudely broken up the even calm of Ralph and Nick Westley's lives. To turn back to the peace of their mountain home without an effort to discover so fair and strange a creature as this White Squaw would have been impossible.

These men had known no real youth. They had fought the battle of life from the earliest childhood, they had lived lives as dispassionate and cold as the glaciers of their mountain home. Recreation was almost unknown to them. Toil, unremitting, arduous, had been their lot. Thus Nature had been defied; and now she was coming back on them as inevitably as the sun rises and sets, and the seasons come and go. They failed to realize their danger; they had no understanding of the passions that moved them, and so they hurried headlong upon the trail that was to lead them they knew not whither, but which was shadowed by disaster every foot of the way. To them temptation was irresistible for they had never known the teaching of restraint; it was the passionate rending of the bonds which had all too long stifled their youth.

Even the dogs realized the change in their masters. Nick's lash fell heavily and frequently, and the hardy brutes, who loved the toil of the trace, and the incessant song of the trailing sled, fell to wondering at the change, and the pace they were called upon to make. It was not their nature to complain; their pride was the stubborn, unbending pride of savage power, and their reply to the wealing thong was always the reply their driver sought. Faster and faster they journeyed as the uncooling ardour of their master's spirits rose.

The snow lay thick and heavy, and every inch of the wild, unmeasured trail had to be broken. The Northland giants thronged about them, glistening in their impenetrable armour and crested by the silvery burnish of their glacial headpieces. They frowned vastly, yet with a sublime contempt, at the puny intrusion of their solitude. But the fiery spirit impelling the brothers was a power which defied the overwhelming grandeur of the mountain world, and rendered insignificant the trials they encountered. The cry was "On!" and the dogs laboured as only these burden-bearers of the North can labour.

The dark day ripened; and, as the dull sun crept out from behind the greyness, and revealed the frost in the air, the temperature dropped lower and lower. And the animal world peeped furtively out upon the strange sight of creatures like themselves toiling at the command of beings whose voices had not even the power to smite the mountainsides with boastful defiance as theirs were wont to do.

Then the daylight waned. The sky returned to its greyness as the night shades rose, and a bitter breeze shuddered through the woods and along the valleys. The sounds of the forest rose in mournful cadence, and, as the profundity of the mountain night settled heavily upon the world, the timber-wolf, the outlaw of the region, moved abroad, lifting his voice in a cry half-mournful, half-exultant.

Camp was pitched well clear of the forest and a large fire kindled; and the savage night-prowlers drew forth from the woodland shadows. The men proceeded silently with their various tasks. Ralph prepared their own food, and soon a savoury odour tickled the nostrils of those beyond the circle of the firelight. Nick thawed out the dogs' evening meal and distributed it impartially, standing over the hungry beasts with a club to see that each got the full benefit of his portion. It was a strange sight for the furtive eyes that looked on, and a tantalizing one, but they dared not draw near, for the fire threatened them, and, besides, they possessed a keen instinct of caution.

After supper the men rested in spells, one always sitting up by the fire whilst the other slept in the comfort of his fur-lined "Arctic bag." And presently the blackness about lightened, and the dark shadows prowling became visible to the eyes of the sentry. The moon had risen, but was still hidden somewhere behind the great mountains. Its light had effect, that was all. And as the night wore on

the shadows grew bolder and their presence kept the sentry ever on the alert. For the most part he sat still, swathed to the eyes in his furs; he huddled down over the fire smoking, every now and then pausing to thaw the nicotine in the stem of his pipe. But his eyes seemed to be watching in every direction at once. Nor was the vaguest shadow lost to their quick flashing glances.

The dogs, sleeping in their snow-burrows, rested their muscles, dreaming peacefully of happy hunting-grounds. Their safety was assured under the watchful eyes of their masters; the forest world had no terrors for them.

Towards dawn Nick was on the watch. The aspect of the night had quite changed. The moon, large, full, brilliant, was directly overhead, and the stars, like magnificent dewdrops, hung richly in the sky. Away to the north, just clear of a stretch of heaven-high peaks, the scintillating shafts of the northern lights shuddered convulsively, like skeleton arms outstretched to grasp the rich gems which hung just beyond their reach. The moving shadows had changed to material forms. Lank, gaunt, hungry-looking beasts crowded just beyond the fire-lit circle; shaggy-coated creatures, with manes a-bristle and baleful eyes which gazed angrily upon the camp.

Nick saw all these; could have counted them, so watchful was he. The wolves were of small account, but there were other creatures which needed his most vigilant attention. Twice in the night he had seen two green-glowing eyes staring down upon him from among the branches of one of the trees on the edge of the forest. He knew those eyes, as who of his calling would not; a puma was crouching along the wide-spreading bough.

He stealthily drew his gun towards him. He was in the act of raising it to his shoulder when the eyes were abruptly withdrawn. The time passed on. He knew that the puma had not departed, and he waited, ready. The eyes reappeared. Up leapt the rifle, but ere his hand had compressed the trigger a sound from behind arrested him. His head turned instantly, and, gazing through the light, drifting fire smoke, he beheld the outline of a monstrous figure bearing down upon the camp in an almost human manner. In size the newcomer dwarfed the trapper; it came slowly with a shuffling gait. Suddenly it dropped to all-fours and came on quicker. Nick hesitated only for a second. His mouth set firmly and his brows contracted. He knew that at all hazards he must settle the puma first. He glanced at the sleeping Ralph. He was about to rouse him; then he changed his mind and swung round upon the puma, leaving the fire between himself and the other. He took a long and deadly aim. The glowing eyes offered a splendid target and he knew he must not miss. A report rang out, followed almost instantaneously by a piteous, half-human shriek of pain; then came the sound of a body falling, and the eyes had vanished. After firing Nick swung round to the figure beyond the fire. It loomed vast in the yellow light and was reared to its full height not ten yards away. A low, snarling growl came from it, and the sound was dreadful in its suppressed ferocity. Ralph was now sitting up gazing at the oncoming brute,–a magnificent grizzly. Nick stooped, seized a blazing log from the fire, and dashed out to meet the intruder.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.