

Cullum Ridgwell

The Way of the Strong



Ridgwell Cullum

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Cullum Ridgwell

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PART I

CHAPTER I

ON SIXTY-MILE CREEK

It was a grim, gray day; a day which plainly told of the passing of late fall across the border line of the fierce northern winter. Six inches of snow had fallen during the night, and the leaden overcast of the sky threatened many more inches yet to fall.

Five great sled dogs crouched in their harness, with quarters tucked under them and forelegs outspread. They were waiting the long familiar command to "mush"; an order they had not heard since the previous winter.

Their brief summer leisure had passed, lost beneath the white pall which told of weary toil awaiting them in the immediate future. Unlike the humans with whom they were associated, however, the coming winter held no terrors for them. It was the normal condition under which the sled dog performed its life's work.

The load on the sled was nearing completion. The tough-looking, keen-eyed man bestowed his chattels with a care and skill which told of long experience, and a profound knowledge of the country through which he had to travel. Silently he passed back and forth between the sled and the weather-battered shelter which had been his home for more than three years. His moccasined feet gave out no sound; his voice was silent under the purpose which occupied all his thought. He was leaving the desert heart of the Yukon to face the perils of the winter trail. He was about to embark for the storm-riven shores of the Alaskan coast.

A young woman stood silently by, watching his labors with the voiceless interest of those who live the drear life of silent places. Her interest was consuming, as her handsome brown eyes told. Her strong, young heart was full of a profound envy; and a sort of despairing longing came near to filling her eyes with unaccustomed tears. The terrors of this man's journey would have been small enough for her if only she could get out of this wilderness of desolation to which she had willingly condemned herself.

Her heart ached, and her despair grew as she watched. But she knew only too well that her limitless prison was of her own seeking, as was her sharing of the sordid lot of the man she had elected to follow. More than that she knew that the sentence she had passed upon herself carried with it the terror of coming motherhood in the midst of this desolate world, far from the reach of help, far from the companionship of her sex.

At last the man paused, surveying his work. He tested the raw-hide bonds which held his load; he glanced at the space still left clear in the sled, with measuring eye, and stood raking at his beard with powerful, unclean fingers. It was this pause that drove the woman's crowding feelings to sudden speech.

"Heavens, how I wish I were going with you, Tug!" she cried.

The man lifted his sharp eyes questioningly.

"Do you, Audie?" he said, in a metallic voice, in which there was no softening. Then he shook his head. "It'll be a hell of a trip. Guess I'd change places with you readily enough."

"You would?" the girl laughed mirthlessly. "You're going down with a big 'wad' of gold to – to a land of – plenty. Oh, God, how I hate this wilderness!"

The man called Tug surveyed her for a moment with eyes long since hardened by the merciless struggle of the cruel Yukon world. Then he shook his head.

"It sounds good when you put it that way. But there's miles to go before I reach the 'land of plenty.'" He laughed shortly. "I've got to face the winter trail, and we all know what that means. And more than that. I'm packing a sick man with me, and I've got to keep him *warm* the whole way. It's a guess, and a poor one, if he don't die by the way. That's why I'm going. Say, he's my partner, and I've got to get him through." He laughed again. "Oh, it's not sentiment. He's useful to me, and so I want to save him if I can."

Tug's manner was something like the coldly rugged view of the distant peaks which marked the horizon on every hand. The girl watching his sturdy figure, with its powerful head and hard, set face, understood something of this. She understood that he was something in the nature of a product of that harsh, snow-bound world. He was strong, and she knew it; and strength appealed to her. It was the only thing that was worth while in such a country.

"You can't save Charlie," she said decidedly. "They tell you you can't get consumption in this country – but, well, I'd say you can get everything that makes life hell. He's got it; and a chill on the way will add pneumonia to his trouble, and then – " She made a significant gesture.

"Maybe you're right," Tug admitted. Then he shrugged, and, moving over to one of the dogs, busy chewing its rawhide harness, kicked it brutally. "Anyway he's got to take his chance, same as we all have."

The girl sighed.

"Yes." She was thinking of herself. "When do you start?"

The man looked at the sky. Then he glanced down at the land sloping away to the distant banks of a creek, which in a less monstrous country would have borne the prouder denomination of "river."

"When your Leo comes up to help me pack Charlie into the sled. Say, isn't that him coming along up now?" he added, shading his eyes. "This snow's got me dazzled for a bit."

The girl peered out over the white world. It was an impressive view. Far as the eye could see a great ring of gray-crested hills spread out, their slopes massed with patches of forest, and the gleaming beds of ancient glaciers. Just now the cold of coming winter held pride of place, and the dark woodlands were crowned with the feathery whiteness of newly fallen snow. But though impressive the outlook was unyielding in its severity, and the girl shuddered and, for relief, was glad to return to speech.

"Yes; he's coming along up."

Tug watched the distant figure for some thoughtful moments.

"He's a great feller," he said at last. But there was no real appreciation in his tone. Then he laughed. "I should say he'd need to be a great feller to get a good-looker girl to come right along up to this devil's playground with him."

Audie's troubled eyes softened.

"He's a great fellow," she said simply.

Tug laughed again.

"I s'pose that's why they call him 'Leo.' Guess most fellers' nicknames have a meaning suggested by their characters. Leo-Lion. Maybe they're right. I'd sooner call him 'Bull.'"

"Why?"

Audie was interested. Yet she understood there was no sympathy, and little enough friendliness in this hard, cynical man.

"Just his way of tackling life." Tug watched the great figure as it came slowly up the slope. His eyes were keen, shrewd, speculative.

"He does tackle it," agreed Audie warmly.

"Yes. He gets right out to meet things. He's a fighter. I'd say he's a born 'kicker.' He doesn't fancy the things that come easy. He's after a big piece of money, but" – he laughed – "he don't want it easy. That's where we're different. It seems to me there's enough weakness in the world for a man to live on, and there's surely enough money for the overflow to dribble into your pockets, if you only hold them open right. That's my way; but it's not his. Say," he quizzically surveyed the girl's flushed face, "guess you'd follow him to hell – if he asked you?"

Audie shrugged her handsome shoulders, but her eyes were soft.

"I've followed him here, which is the cold edition of it. I don't guess I'd need persuading to get up against the warmer side."

"No. But it's taking life hard."

"Guess we have to take life hard sometimes. It's mostly the way of things. Life comes by degrees. And you can't help any of it. Three years ago I was acting in a New York theater, getting a hundred dollars a week salary. I wore beautiful clothes. I had heaps of friends, men and women. I lived on the best, and never knew what it was to cook a meal, or do a chore. Two years ago I was 'barnstorming' at Dawson in – well, they call it a theater. Now – now I am here."

"With a man we call 'Leo.'" Tug studied the girl's beautiful face, her superb figure, that would not be denied even under the coarse clothing she was wearing. She did not appeal to him as a woman. She was too pronounced a type. There was a decided boldness about her. Even her beauty was aggressive. But he was sufficiently observant to be interested in the woman's reason lying behind her actions.

"And why not?" demanded Audie, with a quick flash of her big eyes.

Tug smiled coldly.

"Just so. Why not?"

"Maybe I haven't given up as much as you might think." Audie's eyes were intently fixed upon the approaching figure. They were alight with the fires of passion. "Leo is bound to make good. He can't fail. That's the man. He would win out under any circumstances."

Tug nodded.

"Sure. By fair means or –"

"He'll win out," cried Audie sharply.

Tug's broad shoulders lifted indifferently.

"Sure. He'll win out."

It was not the man's tone; it was not the man's words; it was his manner that made Audie long to strike him. His cynical expression was infuriating as he moved off to meet the approaching Leo.

Audie watched him go with brooding, resentful eyes. She saw the two meet, and, in a moment, the sun broke through the clouds of her anger. How could it be otherwise when she beheld the contrast between the men, which so much favored her Leo. A wave of pride thrilled her. In face and form, as well as character, her man was something of a god to her.

They came towards her, Leo moving with an active, swinging stride, while the other moved with the almost cat-like stealth which the use of moccasins ever gives their wearer. Leo was a large man in the early stages of manhood. He was twenty-five years of age, but, from the unusual cast of his rugged features and the steady light in his keen gray eyes set beneath shaggy, tawny brows, he might well have borne the burden of another ten. It was a wonderful face. Such a face as rarely fails to appeal to a woman of Audie's type. As Tug had said, he was a fighter; and the fact was written largely in every line of his features. It was the face of a man of passionate resolve; a man who would not be denied in anything he undertook. Nor was it a harsh face. His eyes looked out with an utter fearlessness, but there was a gleam in their depths which baffled. Whether that latent fire was inspired by good or evil it would have been impossible to tell. Perhaps it was the memory of that strange light which had inspired Tug's doubt.

For the rest his physique was large and extremely powerful. He wore a close, curling fair beard which accentuated the thrust of his square chin, and from beneath his slouch hat flowed the mane of waving hair which had originally inspired his nickname.

The woman only had eyes for Leo as they came up to the sled, and for the time at least all her troubles and regrets were forgotten. She had no words to offer. She was content to be a silent witness. The affairs of life in such desperate regions must be left in men's hands, her woman's sphere extended only to the inside of their squalid home.

She watched Leo pass a critical eye over the sled. Then his deep voice expressed his approval.

"You've fixed things neat," he said, without great interest. Then his eyes settled upon the stout canvas bag lashed securely on the forepart of the sled, and his whole expression instantly changed.

The change was as curious as it was sudden. All unconcern had passed, and his eyes shone with a deep fire which told of some straining emotion stirred in the depths of his soul. He pointed at the bag. Nor was his hand quite steady.

"That's a great 'wad,'" he said. Then, half to himself, "a dandy 'wad.'"

"Yes." Tug gazed thoughtfully at the parcel of gold, which represented the result of his and his partner's years of isolation in the white wilderness of the north. "It's a goodish 'wad,'" he agreed with satisfaction.

The bigger man was lost in a profound contemplation of the gold that was his quest also. For a moment or two neither spoke. Then Leo withdrew his gaze with a sigh, and turned to the waiting woman.

"Here, catch!" he cried. He pitched a seven-pound trout, which he had just taken from the creek, across to her. "It'll make dinner," he added. "Guess we'll not get many more. The creek'll be solid ice in a week." Then he abruptly moved up towards Tug's hut. "You best get things fixed, and I'll bring Charlie out."

Leo's manner had become all unconcerned again. These two men were about to pass out of his life. The fact of their existence, their coming or going, had very little real interest for him. They did not influence his concerns one iota. But Tug left the sled and followed him.

Tug was the first to reappear from the hut. He was clad for the long trail, and bore in his arms the pile of furs with which to shut out the deadly breath of winter from the body of his sick partner. Behind him came Leo carrying the attenuated body of the sufferer as easily as he might have carried a baby.

He deposited his burden in the sled, and looked on while the other buried the sick man beneath the warmth-giving furs. At last all was in readiness and Tug stood up. His whip was in one hand, and his gee-pole in the other. He was ready to "mush" his waiting team on.

"You'll only make the head of the Shawnee Trail, tonight," Leo said in his confident way, after a narrow inspection of the overcast sky. "You're going to get snow – bad."

"We'll camp there – if we do," replied Tug cheerfully. "If we don't – we'll make Mt. Craven, and shelter in the woods."

Leo shook his head.

"You'll only make the head of the Shawnee." Leo bent over the sick man to wish him good-bye. "So long," came the weak response from amidst the furs. Tug swung out his whip and the dogs stood up alert.

"So long, folks," he cried. Then he glanced round at the woman with a grin. "Guess I'm off to that land of plenty, Audie."

The jest on his lips became a heartless challenge under which the girl perceptibly winced. But even if her wit had served her to retort, she was given no chance. It was Leo who took him up with a quickness of understanding almost surprising; and though his manner was quite without heat there was a subtle, underlying bite in his reply.

"You've got to travel more miles than one to get there," he said. "So long."

Tug laughed without any enjoyment.

"I'd say this country's a hell of a piece – from anywhere," he retorted.

He turned at once and shouted at his dogs.

"Ho, you, Husky! Demon! You, too, Pinto! Mush, you devils! Mush on!"

The dogs responded on the instant. They strained at their harness, and promptly leaped into a swift run, bearing the laden sled away in a dense flurry of soft snow.

Leo and Audie looked after the departing outfit, until the speeding sled reached the foot of the long slope and disappeared behind a snow-laden scrub of undergrowth. Then the man stirred.

"It's getting near food," he said, in a matter-of-fact tone.

But Audie gave no sign of hearing him. Her face was turned away. She was still turned in the direction of the vanished sled. Her eyes were crowded with tears, and all the old longing and terror were upon her again.

"Audie!"

The summons came without any softening. The man's only answer was a deep, choking sob. Leo turned at once; neither was there any sign of impatience in his voice as he questioned her.

"What are you crying for?"

The sound of his question broke the spell of the woman's overwrought feelings. She choked down her sobs and her tearful eyes smiled round upon him, although her cheeks were still wet.

"Because I'm a fool. Because I've always been a fool, and – always shall be."

Leo half smiled and shook his head.

"We're never fools when we think we are," he said calmly. "The truth lies in the reverse."

Audie sighed. Again the corners of her pretty mouth drooped, and her brows drew ominously together.

"I – I was thinking of – of the places where he's going to. I was thinking of the – the good time he'll have. I was – oh, I was thinking of the winter that's coming to us here and – and of what I've got to – "

The man drew a deep breath, and something like a shadow crossed his strong features. His gaze wandered away towards the creek, where for so long he had been laboring to lay the foundations of that wonderful structure of success he purposed to achieve.

"You're scared," he said deliberately, at last. "You're scared to have your baby up here – alone." Then his eyes came back to her. "Guess I can't blame you – no one could. We – didn't reckon on this." He waited for a moment. "What do you want me to do?" he asked at last.

For a brief moment the girl's big eyes brightened with hope. But the moment passed, and tears again fell upon her soft, round cheeks.

"Do? Oh, Leo, I – I want to go where there's light, and – and hope. I – I want to go where there's help for me." She shuddered. "Yes, I'm scared. I'm terrified. But it – it isn't only that. It's – oh, I don't want our baby to be born in this awful country. Think – think of its little eyes opening on – on this wilderness. Besides – "

She broke off, her tearful eyes filled with doubt.

"Besides – what?"

There was no denying the directness of this man's mind.

"It – it doesn't matter. I – "

"But it does."

Audie had stopped to pick up the fish; but she left it where it was. She understood the uselessness of further denial. She had long ago learned her lesson. This man, young as he was, was utterly different to all the men she had ever met. Sometimes she was afraid of him; sometimes she would have given worlds never to have set eyes on him. But always she knew that somehow her fate was linked with his; and above all she knew that she loved him, and under no circumstances would she have had it otherwise.

His love for her she never considered – she dared not consider it. In the remote recesses of her woman's soul, recesses hidden so well that even she, herself, rarely visited them, recesses the contemplation of which filled her with dread and trepidation, she held the hideous truth that his regard for her was incomparable with the devotion she yielded to him. But even with this subtle conviction, with this painful truth ever vibrant in her happiest moments, she was woman enough to be able to thank her God that she was permitted to live on the fringe of his life, his only companion in the rough hut which was their home. She would have him just as he was – yes, a thousand times sooner than yield up the love she bore him.

She knew now that a crisis in their lives had arrived. She knew that she had gone too far to retreat. Therefore she took her courage in both her hands.

"It's – it's the baby," she cried haltingly. "He – oh, yes, he, I am sure it will be a boy – will – will have no father, if – if he is born up here."

It was out. She could get no further; and she stood clasping her hands to steady the trembling she had no power to check.

The verdict of this man, whom she looked to as the arbiter of her fate, was slow in coming. With each passing moment her apprehension grew till she longed to cry out at the torture of the suspense. He was thinking earnestly, swiftly. He knew that she had confronted him with a problem that might well change his whole future. Therefore he considered without haste, without the least emotion.

At last his keen eyes turned upon her up-turned face, and what she beheld there warned her of the calm judgment he had brought to bear.

"Yes," he said thoughtfully. "And," he went on, after a moment, "maybe he'd have no mother either."

For a moment puzzlement was added to the woman's trouble.

"You mean – ?"

Again Audie broke off. A sudden understanding had come. His point of view was wholly in another direction from hers. He was not thinking of their moral obligations towards the little, unborn life. He was thinking of her; of what the unassisted birth in these outlands might mean for her.

She was startled. Then a rush of feeling swept over her that would not be denied.

"I – I wasn't thinking so much of – of myself," she cried eagerly. "I meant –"

"I know," he interrupted her. "You meant we are not married."

"Yes, yes. That's it." She came to him and seized one of his strong hands in both of hers, and her eyes were pleading up into his. "Oh, Leo, don't you understand what it means to him? Won't you? I never thought of it before. How should I? All I wanted in the world was to be with you. All I wanted was to be your devoted companion. That's why I – I made you bring me up here. Yes. I know. I made you bring me. You didn't want to. I knew then, as I have always known, as I know now, that – that I was merely a passing fancy to you. But I did not care. I believed I could make you love me. I blinded myself utterly, purposely, because I loved you. But now I realize something else. I realize there is another life to be considered. A life that is part of us. It is that which appalls me. Now I see the terrible consequences of my folly, to remedy which I must add to your burden, or give up forever all the happiness that has been mine since I knew you. Oh, Leo, I cannot bring a bastard into the world. Think of it. The terrible shame for the boy – for his mother. Don't you see? Give our little one a father, and never as long as I live will I cross your path, or make any claim on you. You can let the memory of my love lose itself amid all the great schemes that fill your thoughts. All I want, all I hope for is that you may go on to the success which you desire more than all things in life, and may God ever prosper you."

The man released his hand deliberately, but without roughness. The calculating brain was still undisturbed by the self-sacrifice of the girl. He had solved the problem to his own satisfaction, through the only method he understood.

"You don't need to worry yourself, Audie," he said, in his blunt way. "The boy – if he's a boy – shall have a father. And I don't guess you need to cut yourself out of my life. We'll start down this day week. You've got to face the winter trail, but that can't be helped. We'll get Si-wash's dogs. He's a good scout, and knows the trail well. He'll take us down."

The woman's face had suddenly flooded with a radiant happiness, the sight of which caused the man to turn away. In a moment her thankfulness broke out, spasmodic, disjointed, but from the depths of her simple soul.

"You mean that?" she cried. "You mean – oh, may God bless every moment of your life, Leo! Oh, thank God – thank God!"

She suddenly buried her face in her hands, and tears of joy and happiness streamed down her cheeks.

Leo waited for her emotion to pass. He stood gazing out down at the creek. His eyes shone with that peculiar fire which in unguarded moments would not be denied. Then after a few moments the sound of sobs died down, and the man turned.

There was a marked change in him. The fire in his eyes was deep and somber. Audie, glancing into his face, knew that he was deeply stirred. She knew that for the first time in her companionship with him the restraint that was always his had been relaxed. The soul of the man had risen superior to the domination of his will.

"Listen to me, Audie," he cried, in a voice grown suddenly thick with an emotion she had never before witnessed in him. "You said you knew you were merely a passing fancy to me. That's not quite true. It's true I never calculated to marry you. But I liked you. I don't suppose I loved you in the way you would have me love you. No, I liked you, because – you are a woman. Just a woman full of all the extraordinary follies of which some of your sex are capable, but – a woman. It's difficult, but I must tell you. I've always known that the time would come when we must have a straight talk. I have no real love to give to any woman. My whole mind and body are absorbed in another direction, which is utterly opposed to all sentiment. What shall I call it? Ambition? It's scarcely the word. It's more than that. It's a passion." His eyes shone with deep feeling. "A passion that's greater than any love man ever gave to woman."

"Yes, all my life I've fostered it," he went on abstractedly, "from away back in the days of early boyhood. God knows where I got it from. My father and mother were respectable, dozy, middle-class folks in New England, without a thought beyond the doings of their little town. They had no ambition. Their life drove me frantic. I must get out and do. I must take my place in the battle of life, and win my way to the forefront among the ranks of our country's millionaires. That is the passionate dream of my life which I intend to achieve. That is the wild ambition that has eaten into my very bones. It is part of me. It is me. It is a driving force which I have created in myself – and now it is beyond my control. I am the slave of my self-created passion, as surely as any drug fiend is a slave to the wiles of his torturer. I could not defy its will if I desired to. But I do not desire to. Do you understand me? Do you understand when I say I have no love to give to any woman? I am eaten up with this passion which leaves no room in mind or heart for any other.

"Maybe you think me a heartless brute," he continued after a moment's pause, "without feeling, or sympathy. Perhaps you're right. Maybe I am. I don't know. Nor do I care. I doubt if you can possibly understand me. I don't understand myself. All I know is, nothing I can remove will ever stand in the way of my achievement. I have no real scruples, and I want you to know all this now – now with our whole futures lying before us. This problem is not as difficult as you seem to think. There is no particular reason why I should not marry you. On the contrary there is every reason why I should. I have had a good year, so good that it might astonish you if you knew the amount of gold I have taken out of the creek. We shall go down to the coast with twice the amount Tug possesses. Tug never knew how well I was doing."

He smiled faintly.

"However," he hastened on, "my plan had been to leave here next spring, to avoid the winter journey, that was all. There will be no work done all the coming winter. So what does it matter if we make the journey six months earlier? It will help you, and does not hurt me. So – don't worry yourself any more about it, but just make your preparations for departure this day week."

The man's usual calm had returned by the time he finished speaking. He had settled the matter in his own way, and his manner left nothing more to be said.

Audie understood. Her eyes were alight with a rapturous joy and devotion, but she realized how little he desired the outburst of gratitude she was longing to pour into his unwilling ears. In spite of the coldness with which he had told her he could never love her, this was probably the happiest moment of her life. She held herself tightly and strove to speak in the same calm manner he had used at the last.

"Thank you, Leo," she said simply. Then she added with an emotion that would not be denied, "I pray God to bless you."

Leo nodded.

"Right ho!" he said coldly. Then he picked up the trout. "Guess we'll get food."

CHAPTER II

THE ROOF OF THE NORTHERN WORLD

Si-wash was a great scout; he was also an Indian of independence and decision, both qualities very necessary in the snow-bound country such as he lived in. But Si-wash understood men very well; particularly the curiously assorted samples of whitemen who sought the remoteness of the Yukon in those early days when the news of its wealth was only just beginning to percolate through to civilized countries. It was for this reason he was as putty in the hands of the man Leo.

When consulted Si-wash protested against Leo's contemplated journey over the winter trail to the coast, especially with the added burden of a white woman. He drew a picture of every difficulty and danger his fertile brain could imagine, and laid it before the cold eyes of the big man. Encouraged by the silence with which his stories were received he finally threw an added decision in his definite refusal to hire his dogs, and conduct the party over the perilous road.

Then Leo rose from his seat on the floor of Si-wash's hut, and invited him to visit his workings on the creek bank. Si-wash went, glad that he had been able to dissuade this man who possessed such cold eyes, and so unsmiling a face.

At the creek Leo spoke quite seriously.

"Si-wash," he said, as they stood beside the frozen, snow-laden stream, "I am disappointed in you. I have brought you here to show you your grave. There it is – under the ice. If you don't hire yourself and dogs to me, if you don't accompany us to the coast, I'll drown you in the water under that ice, where it's so cold that all the fires of hell, where your spirit will surely go, will never be able to thaw you out, though you remain there forever, as you undoubtedly will."

Si-wash both liked and feared Leo. But he hated cold water, in fact water of any sort, and feared talk of hell still more; so there was no further discussion. Si-wash accepted his money in advance; and, nearly a month later, the travelers were scaling the perilous heights of the watershed which is really the roof of the northern world.

Once foot is set on the long winter trail, all rest of mind and body is left behind. Days and nights, alike, become one long nightmare of unease. Every hour of the day carries its threat of danger. Every foot of the way is beset by shoals for the feet of the unwary. And the night – the long northern night – is a painful dream crowded with exaggerated pictures of dangers so narrowly escaped during waking, and vivid suggestions of added terrors which the morning light may reveal.

It is called the Shawnee Trail; vain enough appellation. There is no trail; there never has been a trail; nor will there ever be a trail, so long as the northern winter holds its fierce sway in due season. It is just a trackless wilderness, claiming thoroughfare by reason of the impassability of the rest of the country in that region.

There is no room for life in such a world, for there is no rest or relief. Existence is an endless struggle against the overwhelming odds of an outlaw nature. The great white land is broken and torn. It rises and falls, or plunges precipitately in the manner of a storm-swept ocean; but ever the journeyer is borne upward, ever upward, to the barren crests of the watershed which dominate the melancholy spectacle of Nature's wasted endeavor.

For the most it is a silent land; nor is there movement to break the awesome stillness, unless it be the frequent presence of storm. Otherwise the calm is like the silence of the grave, without a whisper to waken the echoes of the riven, age-worn crags, or a movement to stir the hidden valleys into a seeming of life. It is the stillness of outer darkness, lit only by a wintry sheen, like the death-cold stare of wide, unseeing eyes.

Such thoughts and feelings stirred the woman traipsing easily over the smoothly pressed snow-track left by the laden sled. She moved with the curious swing of the snowshoer, leisurely,

comfortably. The gee-pole in her hand was an unnecessary equipment, for her path was fully tested by those who understood far better than she the dangers of the road before them.

Audie's eyes were looking out ahead at the men and the dogs. She knew she had no other responsibility than to keep pace. For the rest she knew that the burden of their journey rested on shoulders more capable of bearing it. So her mind was given up to thoughts which could never enter the men's heads. And those thoughts were full of the unutterable desolation of this untamed world.

Si-wash headed the dogs. A great incline of smooth, soft snow mounted up to the crotch of a great hill, where twin peaks rose sharply, towering above, and a wide pathway was left between them. It was a beacon of the trail, marking one of the roughest stretches yet to be traveled. Beyond this, five miles further on, the scout had marked a camping ground.

Just now he was a little anxious in his silent Indian way, and the sign of it was in his furtive watchfulness, as he peered from the road to the burnished light of the desponding sun.

Leo, swinging along beside the sled, was quite unaware of his guide's unease. The monotony of progress left him free to think whithersoever his active brain listed. For the time it led him on, on into dreams of the future, a future than which he could imagine no other. His fortune, or that which stood for the foundations of it, lay strapped at the tail of the sled, and the knowledge of its presence, the sight of its canvas wrapping stirred him to a gladness which no monotony of the long trail could diminish. For him this was the moment of passing, when the foundations had been carefully laid and the first scaffold pole was about to be set in place round the structure of fortune he intended to build.

The harsh voice of Si-wash struck unpleasantly on his ears.

"Look!" he cried, pointing at the drooping sun with a mittened hand. "It the be-damn sun-dogs. Him look, an' look lak hell. Him much be-damn sun-dogs."

The man's irritability seemed quite uncalled for. The sun was shining over the still world with its usual coppery splendor; a gleaming ball of ruddy fire centering a wide halo of brilliant light, which, in its turn, was studded with four magnificent jewels of light – the fiercely burning sun-dogs which Si-wash so bitterly cursed. But Leo understood the full significance of what he beheld. He, too, felt inclined to curse those ominous wardens of the ineffective northern sun.

"Storm," he said, as he came up beside the Indian.

"We camp. Five miles," said Si-wash presently. "Five mile, long piece. Yes. Storm, him come quick."

The men moved on in silence, side by side. Audie had heard their talk. She, too, had looked across at the stormy sun, but she had no comment to add.

They were nearing the summit of the hill. The laboring dogs moved with heads low, and lean quarters tucked well beneath them. Their pace was the same as ever, only their effort was greater. With each moment the gap came down towards them, and, at last, they trod the shoulder under foot. Then Si-wash's sharp command rang out, and the five great burden bearers of the north dropped in their traces, and sought their well-earned rest on the feathery softness of untrodden snow.

The men surveyed the view from the great height at which they stood.

For long moments no word was spoken. Then the Indian held up a warning hand.

"See, hark!"

A curious sigh, almost as if the great hill were shivering under the biting cold of the atmosphere, seemed to drift out upon the sparkling air. It died away, somewhere in the distance behind them.

Then Si-wash spoke again.

"We camp quick." He pointed away out at the far side of the valley confronting them. "We mak dat valley. See dat hill? We come so. We mak round it. It bad. So. Long, deep fall. Dogs haul 'em long side hill. Very bad. So we mak 'em before storm. Good. After hill mush wood. Tall, big. It is we camp."

Without waiting for reply he turned to the dogs.

"Ho, you damn huskies. Mush!"

In a moment the dogs leaped at their traces, and the journey went on.

The end of the passage came quickly; and, as it did so, and the scout took the first step of the descent, another sigh, longer drawn out this time, sharper, a sigh that spoke of restless discontent, shuddered down the mountain side and passed on ahead of them. A moment later a tiny eddy of snow was caught up in its path and vanished amidst the sparkling air particles glistening in the sun.

Again the Indian's voice broke the silence. But this time it was to urge the dogs faster. He had said it was five miles to where they could camp in safety; and five miles, with a storm coming on, was, as he said, a "long piece."

But since the second breath had swept down the hillside a change seemed to have come over the aspect of the day. It was subtle. It was almost indescribable. Yet it was evident. It may have been that the air had warmed by a few degrees; it may have been that the sun's labored light had diminished. Certainly there was an added grayness settling upon the icy world. Yes. Something had certainly changed in the outlook, and it was a change which threatened, and told of the dread storm to come.

The dogs raced down the long hillside under the urgent commands of the Indian. A mile, one out of five to be accomplished, was devoured by scurrying feet. Then came the first real challenge of the storm. It was a swift, fierce blast which swept after them, as though enraged at the attempt to escape. In wanton riot it sent a dense flurry of snow like a fog whistling about them, and, for the moment, blotted out all view of the goal Si-wash had set for himself.

The men had no words, but their thoughts were sufficiently in common. The swift-rising storm had banished every other consideration from their minds. Audie closed up on the sled, and her action spoke for itself.

Another blast rushed at the speeding travelers. It came across them. For a moment it seemed to pause in its rush as though it had reached the object of its attack. It swung round in a fierce whirl, round and round in growing fierceness, picking up the snow and bearing it aloft in a gray fog, like fine white sand. It dashed it in the faces of the men, it beat fiercely upon the thick coats of the racing dogs, it swept it under the fur hood of the woman, and painfully whipped the soft flesh of her cheeks.

The hiss of its voice was not allowed to die out. Reinforcements rushed to its aid. They came with a long-drawn moaning howl sweeping down from the distant hill, now grown vague and shadowy behind them, and added to the rapidly growing fog.

Harshly above the howl of the storm Si-wash's voice shouted into Leo's ear.

"The gar-damn blizzard. It hell!"

But Leo made no response. He had no answer for anybody. All his mind was centered upon the goal he longed for. Just now the woodland bluff, Si-wash had spoken of, seemed the most desirable thing in the world. He was not thinking of life or death. They were considerations that never troubled him. He was thinking of what the wrecking of their transport might mean to him.

Si-wash, being only a half-civilized savage, was thinking of those things which did not trouble his white companion; and, being simply human, he thought of the woman, the burden of whose presence he had deplored.

He turned and shouted at her to come up abreast of them, fearing a stumble might mean death to her in the storm; and in the same breath, the same tone, he hurled a string of blasphemous commands at his dogs.

Almost blinded by the whipping snow, Audie staggered to the side of the Indian. So cruel was the buffeting of the storm she would have fallen, but for the timely succor of the man's outstretched hands. Already the downward rush was left behind, and the level of the valley was under their feet. Ahead of them, lost in the gray of the storm lay the incline which was to lead them to the treacherous shoulder of the hill they had yet to pass. Neither dogs nor men could see it, and their only guidance was the wonderful instinct of the savage brain of the Indian.

With unerring judgment he led the way, faltering not even for a second in his decisions; and soon, far sooner than seemed possible, the tautened traces, and crouching gait of the dogs, told that his judgment had not erred. The ascent had begun.

The steady pull went on for an hour; a grinding, weary labor in which every inch of the way was only accomplished under the cruel lashing of a merciless wind, and with eyes more than half blinded by the powdered snow. The wind seemed to attack them from every side; now from ahead; now from behind. Now it whistled down the hillside on their right; now it came up with a vicious scream from the depths of the canyon which dropped away beside them on the left of the harsh, hummocky path. The heavy wrappings of furs about their mouths were a mass of ice from the frozen moisture of their hard breathing, while the dense hoar-frost on their lashes had to be wiped away lest their lids froze together as their watering eyes blinked under the force of the wind. It was such a journey as matched the sterile land through which they were passing; such a journey as only the hardened folk of the northern world could dare to face.

At last the ascent was accomplished, and with the relaxing of effort came the first warning of the dangers with which they were surrounded.

It was the horror-stricken cry of the woman. In the blinding snow she had approached the edge of the path too nearly. Her feet shot from under her, and, for a moment, absolute destruction threatened. Again came the prompt succor of the Indian. Again he clutched her, and held her. Then he gathered his strength for an effort, and the next moment she was sprawling in safety at the feet of her lover.

"Ho, you damn-fool woman!" Si-wash cried, in a manner that merely expressed his own fears, and had no insult in it.

Leo helped Audie to her feet. A moment later his deep voice shouted above the howling of the wind.

"If she can fall, what about the sled?"

The Indian's reply was full of the philosophy of his race.

"Sure," he cried. "It easy."

The whiteman's next act spoke far more than any words could tell. He dropped back to the tail of the sled to guard his precious possessions. His first, his only consideration amidst the perils of that road was his gold. The woman bearing the burden of her devotion to him, must fight for herself.

Each passing moment brought added perils. The path up here was shorn of its loose covering of snow, swept away to the depths below by the all-mastering gale. The surface left was little better than a sheet of glare ice, hummocky and studded with roughnesses caused by broken ice frozen upon its surface. The snowshoes of the travelers left them fairly secure from slipping, but the wretched dogs had no such help. They fought for foothold till their weary feet were left torn and bleeding.

But the hill was passed and the track was no longer an ascent, and at this altitude the snow fog had lightened to gray mist which left the Indian less troubled. His silent blasphemy against the powers that ruled the storm ebbed gently. Its flood had passed. That was his way. The wall on his right was a sure guide, and at the end of it lay the haven where he hoped to eat and sleep. So long as he could see he had no fear whatsoever of the country to which he was born.

But with all this confidence the dangers were no less. The track sloped perilously towards the edge of the precipice on the left. It narrowed, too, so that there was no room for more than two people abreast. Leo understood these things, as only a man can whose mind is beset with dread for the safety of his possessions. Therefore there was something fierce and threatening in his sudden shout at the man who was leading the dogs. There was something else in it, too. There was a terrible fear, which sounded strangely in a man of his strength of purpose.

"Stop! Curse you, stop the dogs!" he cried wildly.

The shout brought the dogs to a stand, and the Indian dropped back.

"What is?" he demanded. But he needed no answer.

The tail of the sled was at the very brink of the precipice, supported only by the thrust of Leo's gee-pole, to which he clung with all the strength of his great body.

The Indian and the woman flung themselves to the rescue, and, in a few moments, the sled was resting safely at the inner side of the path. Then the Indian, as though imparting pleasant intelligence, assured his comrade.

"It more skid, bimeby," he observed confidently. "It worse – bimeby," he added, turning again to the dogs. "Mush on, you devils!" he cried. "Maybe we freeze."

There was no longer any ease of mind for the whiteman. Time and again the sled skidded, and each time he saved it from destruction only by inches. That stretch of level became a nightmare to him, and only the passionate endeavor of his labor made his nervous tension bearable. His pole was at work every foot of the way, guiding, staying, holding that incessant skid.

So they struggled on, floundering their way yard by yard, the dumb burden bearers fighting for a foothold at every step. It almost seemed as if they, too, understood their own danger from the skid, and were driven by their apprehension to unaccustomed efforts. They tore at the unyielding surface of ice with claws broken and bleeding, and, by sheer tenacity, ground out a purchase.

The drop to the woodland valley below was nearing. Si-wash called a warning to the man behind.

"We near come by end," he shouted. "Then him go down lak hell."

With this brief information the whiteman had to be content, for Si-wash promptly returned to his dogs, and finally took his place at the head of the sled. Presently the sled jolted. It tilted forward as the leading dogs of the team vanished down the slope. Then, in a moment, the run began.

The change came all too suddenly. The sled gained a furious impetus. Leo dashed forward to thrust a brake at its head. Si-wash was already there with his pole thrust deep in the snow. The two men joined forces, and, for a moment, the pace was steadied.

Then something happened. It was disaster; the worst disaster that could have befallen at such a moment. Leo's pole, strained possibly by the work it had already done, bent. It cracked; and broke off short. In a moment he was left behind sprawling in the snow. Before Si-wash could readjust his pole to the center of the nose of the sled the vehicle swung out stern first. It swept on at a great speed, and the dogs raced to keep out of its way. In another moment its impetus carried it to the brink of the precipice. It swept on, half poised in mid-air. Then, with a clatter and scrunch, it fell over the side, almost sweeping the heavy dogs from their feet.

It was a desperate situation. The straining dogs held for the moment by reason of their great weight, and in that moment the Indian and the woman were able to reach them and throw their own weight into the balance. Even then it was a desperate uncertainty. Could they hold it? Could they recover the fallen vehicle carrying such an enormous weight? But the problem solved itself in its own way. Just as the great figure of Leo loomed up on the scene of the disaster, the strain on the traces slackened, and the dogs were left standing still. There was no longer need to struggle.

Si-wash rose from the ground and released his hold.

"Wot is't?" he asked, in a stupid way.

Leo was leaning over the edge of the precipice, gazing down with eyes that strained to behold the safety of that which he most prized in all the world. He made no answer.

Si-wash came to his side. He dropped upon his stomach and peered down at the gray depths beneath. For a long while he was silent. Then, at last, as his companion stirred, he spoke in the curiously indifferent manner of his kind.

"The pack. Him haf gone. Him drop long way."

Leo was on his feet before he had finished speaking. He turned away and looked out into the gray fog. Presently he glanced down at the man beside him. Then his eyes rested on the dogs. Audie, watching him, saw a strained, dreadful expression growing in his eyes. There was a subtle fire lighting them; a fire she dreaded to look upon.

Then he began to speak. And as he spoke a wild, untamed, impotent fury swept through his head, sweeping away all thought, all reason. Words, foul, blasphemous, raving, leaped to his tongue and found expression. He cursed the Indian; he cursed the woman, the dogs, the sled. He cursed the storm and the country. He cursed furiously, impotently every form of life that came within the range of his distorted vision. He cursed his God.

CHAPTER III

THE DRIVING FORCE

Through the tattered pinewood branches the northern sun's cold rays sought to light the gloomy aisles below. It was like the furtive peeping of curious eyes into mysteries forbidden. On the ragged outskirts its staring light had power; but within the dim recesses it was swallowed up, devoured by the impenetrable gloom of ages, where the woodland depths refused to yield their secrets.

Yet these woods were the haven of many a weary traveler. Since ever the foot of man had trod the watershed, none had failed to seek shelter amid these stately shadows; and at all times they lent a sure retreat before winter's storms to the lesser animal life. No storm could search the deepening valleys; no blizzard could more than stir the mighty canopy; no roar of wind could break the grave-like silence, just as no sunlight had ever yet solved the riddle of its impenetrable heart.

Two men and a woman sat huddled over a crackling fire, at a spot where dozens of fires had burned before. It was cold, bitterly cold, even here where the fierce winds had scarcely power to stir the air. But, even so, the cold could not add one iota to the icy misery of, at least, two of those who watched the miserable effort of the fire to achieve where ages of sunlight had failed.

Beyond the rays of the firelight the meager paraphernalia of a camp loomed up in the twilight. A low tent of rough-tanned hides had been carefully pitched. It was a stout enough shelter of crude Indian workmanship, and it doubtless served its purpose well in a land of storm such as these northern heights of the world. Near by was an up-turned sled in the course of repair, and again the stout crudeness of workmanship bespoke the Indian hand. The long, rawhide traces were strung out upon the bed of pine-cones and needles which covered the ground, just where the harness had been flung from the shoulders of the weary dogs, who squatted about between their human masters, staring and blinking at the pleasant warmth of the fire with luxurious confidence.

The men were silent, and the woman watched one of them with anxious, troubled eyes. She was longing to speak, to say something that might salve the wounded heart of her lover. But there was nothing, nothing, she knew, that would ease his pain, and restore to his burning, despairing eyes their wonted look of masterful confidence. She knew that, for the time, at least, hope had been hurled from its high pedestal in his heart, and it was beyond her puny woman's strength to restore it to its setting. She yearned to comfort as only a loving woman can, but she was far too well versed in the curiosities of Leo's dominant, almost violent nature, not to realize the futility of such an effort.

So she watched him with hopeless gaze. She saw the fixed stare of his bloodshot eyes boring unseeingly into the pitiful embers of fire. She saw the thick veins standing out upon his temples, and understood the passionate regret and resentment driving him; and as she watched these things, estimating them in her own timid way, she wondered and marveled at the power of gold upon the human heart, and at the terrible effect its loss could have on a strong man's mind.

While she watched the brooding figure her mind went back to the moment of disaster when the sled had fallen. For just as long as she lived those moments would remain vividly in her memory. When Leo had discovered that half the load had torn itself from its fastenings, and had been swallowed up by yawning depths below he went suddenly demented. She knew it. Never in her life had she witnessed so dreadful a change in anybody. Even now the impotent, almost idiotic ravings and cursings of the man rang in her ears. It was terrible. She shuddered at the recollection. Then what followed was no less horrible to one who had always known her lover for a sober-minded, purposeful man. In the midst of the storm, with the wind raging about them, and the gray fog blinding their eyes, he had stood by threatening her, and refusing to raise a hand in the task of saving the wreck with its remaining half of the cargo.

The toil of those hours. The weary hopeless toil. And it had been accomplished by the Indian and herself under the shadow of this man's insane threats against them both. Once during their

struggle, just when the sled was almost within reach of safety she had been driven in self-defence, and in defence of the faithful Si-wash, to hold the maniac at bay under cover of a revolver, whilst the task was completed.

Her life had been strangely checkered, she had passed through many adventures that rarely befall a woman belonging to the life of civilized communities, but the worst moments she had ever known were incomparable with that struggle on the brink of, for all she knew, an unfathomable chasm.

The shadow of that struggle was still upon her. She could not shake it off. She was dreading every passing moment, longing to hear the calm tones of her lover she was used to, but fearing lest the insanity inspired by the loss of his gold had not yet passed.

So she waited, watching, watching for the sign that was to tell her of the easing of the straining brain, watching the dreadful stare of his eyes, as they gazed upon nothing of what they beheld, with a brain lost in a terrible contemplation of the hideous thoughts passing behind them.

Si-wash was silent, too. But that was his way, the way of his race. His impassive face yielded no indication of what was passing behind it. If he feared his companion's mood he gave no sign. Possibly he did not. Possibly he realized that here, here on the wild, chaotic trail he was master; certainly that his chances were equal with the other.

The fire burned low. Si-wash kicked the embers together with his moccasined foot. Then he rose and shuffled to the wood pile and replenished it. For a moment he watched the flicker of the flames as they licked round the dead, inflammable bark, and in desperation Audie broke the awful silence.

"When'll the sled be ready for the road again?" she demanded, without serious interest.

Si-wash's eyes drifted to the cumbersome vehicle.

"I finish him two days," he said, holding up two fingers to impress his assurance upon her.

"Most of the food was saved," Audie went on. "It was the other things that were lost."

The Indian nodded.

"Sure. We freeze but for fire. Him cook-pots go. Only one him saved. Blanket him go. So him go the – "

"Go and get wood, you red son-of-a-moose," cried Leo with sudden vehemence. "Don't stand there yapping like a yellow cur."

The man's bloodshot eyes blazed up furiously into the Indian's face. For a moment Audie feared another outbreak such as she had witnessed before. She even feared for Si-wash's wretched life. But the Indian understood his companion's mood and moved silently off to obey. He admitted to himself that the man was mad; and he had a curious dread of people who were possessed of such a devil.

Leo watched him disappear in the gloom of the woods. Then he turned back impatiently to the fire. He hunched himself up, resting his chin upon his hands, and his elbows on his knees. The mention of their losses had again driven him hard, but, curiously enough, now the eyes of the watching woman saw that his mood had changed for the better. His were less straining, and the veins of his temples no longer stood out like twisted cords. She began to hope. She felt, dangerous as it might seem, that it would be far better that he should talk, whatever pain such talk might cost her. Far better than that he should sit silently nursing his despair.

The idea became fixed in her mind, and she cast about for an opening. Her instinct belonged to her sex; she knew, none better, the burden of dreary thoughts hugged to a silent bosom. It was difficult. Leo was at all times aloof. His armor of reserve left her still a stranger to his inmost feelings and thoughts, so that she scarcely knew how to approach the task she contemplated.

She was spared her trouble, however. It was Leo who at last broke the silence and made possible that very purpose the contemplation of which filled her with so much doubt. He stirred, and swiftly aimed a vicious kick at a log protruding from the embers of the fire. The response was a shower of sparks flying upward. Then he turned to her and began talking rapidly.

"I – I sometimes feel as if I could blame you for all – this," he began, in a low, harsh tone. "But I don't. I've still got sense enough for that. And it's lucky – lucky for you."

The woman's face paled under the beaver cap pressed low down upon her head. The threat was the more terrible for the simplicity of the manner in which he uttered it.

"How could I be responsible?" she asked, while her heart chilled within her.

"How?" Leo laughed without mirth. "I tell you I don't blame you – and yet I might. I did not intend to make this journey in winter."

Audie understood. She knew he was making this journey for her sake. Therefore she remained silent. How could she deny the blame, which, she knew in her heart, he set at her door?

"Say, I wonder if you know what this means to us – to me," he went on, in a tone of suppressed passion. "No, you don't – you can't. Guess it's not likely. You just remember we've still enough food for the journey which is to bring us where your child can be born in – in decency. You know we have no money. But that don't mean a thing to you, because you guess there's a man's hand ready to get busy in your service. You've no thought for anything else, because – because I guess you're a woman."

He caught his breath sharply as though laboring under a stab of intense bodily pain.

Then he laughed a short harsh laugh.

"If you could only look into my brain – my heart – my feelings, maybe you'd realize something of the destruction that's been done there by the loss of my gold. Oh, I'm no miser, greedily hungering after the precious stuff. It's not that." He paused and looked steadily at her. "I s'pose you can't realize what it means to have the concentrated hopes of years suddenly dashed to a thousand atoms. No, course you can't. You can't see, you can't feel these things, because you have never got up against those hills of success, which confront every man of purpose who's determined to cut himself a path which is to lead him right up to the – top of things. I've got busy that way, and the walls have fallen in and well nigh broke me up. That's what's happened. But I'm not down and out – yet. Not quite. No. I want to get right up and hurt some one in return. I want to hit out and – hurt. I want to do things by way of – retaliation. Guess there's nothing to – to retaliate on but those very walls that have so nearly crushed me.

"That's the way I'm feeling now. But I don't guess it's all. Not by a sight. Guess I've been well nigh mad. Maybe I was mad. I don't know. I don't care. Anyway I am mad no longer. How long my sanity will last I can't say. All I know is I daren't look back. If I did – well, I wouldn't gamble a heap on the result. No, I got to look forward. Maybe that'll save me."

Audie nodded. The fear of him was dying out of her.

"I think I understand – all," she said, in a low voice. "Yes, look ahead, it will be best for you. Don't let thought of our – our boy concern you now; forget everything – but that goal you spoke of."

Just for a moment the man's eyes softened. He was not insensible to the utter self-effacement in the woman's desire to help and comfort. But they hardened again almost at once.

"I'm not going to let – anything – interfere," he said almost brutally. "My plans are fixed. Now listen. To-morrow I get right back to Sixty-mile Creek. Anyway I start out for it. I'll have to go on foot. Maybe I shan't ever reach it. Anyway that don't matter. If I do I'll remain there until I have washed up as much gold as I have lost. It may take a year – two – three. It don't matter how long."

"But – " Audie broke in with wide, horrified eyes.

Leo stopped her with a swift gesture.

"It's no use shouting," he said harshly. "I tell you my mind's made up. You'll go on down to the coast with Si-wash. You'll be able to get the help you need there."

"Yes, yes, I can manage. I can get to my sister in San Sabatano."

"Good. You'll go on then. I can trust Si-wash. He's been paid. You'll have food enough, and you'll travel light. If he fails you, and I survive, if I hunt the world over I'll kill him."

Audie's eyes lit. It was the one expression of feeling Leo had displayed which she could take to herself.

"Then afterwards – God knows when – I'll come and marry you. It's the best we can do. It's all I can promise. We're plumb up against it. Whatever happens, I'm going to marry you. That goes."

Audie breathed a deep sigh of heartfelt gratitude. The ice had been broken. She knew that Leo's mental balance was restored. It mattered nothing to her at that moment that she had to face the world alone with her burden of motherhood. It mattered nothing that the shame she had so dreaded was still to be hers. The future had no longer any terrors for her. How should it? The man she had always known had once more resumed sway in the mind so recently distracted to the verge of madness. Her lover was once more the ruthless, powerful creature she had followed into the wilderness, was ready to follow into the wilderness again if he would only permit her.

"Must I – must I go on to the coast? Is there need?" she said, in a low, pleading voice, after a moment's silence. "If you are going back, cannot I go back, too? There's the sled. Why go on foot? Let me return with you, Leo."

The man shook his head, and his negative was as irrevocable as any spoken words. If he understood the devotion prompting her he gave no sign.

"Your life shan't be risked that way," he said. "The child must be born where you can get help. That's – our duty. It's my duty that you reach the coast in safety as far as the matter is humanly possible. Si-wash'll have to fix that. After that I'm helpless – I haven't a cent in the world or I would give it you. You'll have to go on to the coast, and I – I return alone."

Audie bowed her head submissively. She knew he was right under the existing circumstances. Anyway, right or wrong, she was ready to submit to his will. More than that she was glad to do so. Her big eyes stared thoughtfully into the blaze of the fire. There was no more to be said. She was content to sit there in silence, dreaming her dreams; those dreams which the silent northern world so mysteriously fosters, to cover up its own nakedness and make life possible upon its sterile bosom.

Later on the shuffling of Si-wash's moccasins scrunching upon the pine-cones made itself heard. He came with a great load of firewood upon his broad back. Leo watched him deposit it and replenish the fire. Then Audie set about preparing a meal, and the dogs were fed from the store of frozen fish, which, by a trick of Fate, had been saved in preference to their precious store of gold. After that, as the twilight woods were swallowed up in the darkness of night, Audie vanished into the tent, and was seen no more.

The solitude of the tent was preferable to the silence round the fire. She had permitted her lover to dispose of her life as he chose, but she passionately longed to return with him to the north, whatever the dangers to herself and her unborn child. All she cared for was this hard, unyielding man. So long as she had him she could think of and consider those other things which now seemed so small in her life. Without him they were utterly swallowed up by the desolation of all her thoughts and feelings. She wanted him. She wanted this love of hers. Nothing else in the wide world really mattered. He was going out of her life. She knew it. She knew more. He was going out of her life for ever. It was a haunted, despairing woman that sought the warm furs which the man had given up to her use. And the eyes that finally closed in slumber were stained with tears wrung from the very depths of her warm, foolish heart.

For long hours after the woman's eyes had closed in troubled sleep the two men hugged the warmth of the fire. They had neither blanket nor bed. All that had been saved had been given to the woman. The fire stood between them and the bitter cold of the northern night, and beside it was their couch of rotting pine-cones. But they were hardened to the deadly winter, and, so long as they could keep the frost out of their flesh, nothing much mattered.

They smoked in silence, each man busy with his own thoughts; and it was nearly midnight when Si-wash gave his friend the benefit of his profound cogitations.

He had just replenished the fire, and finally drawn up the broken sled as an added protection against the bitter breath of the night breezes. Then he returned to his place and squatted upon his

haunches, hugging his knees with his clasped hands, while he puffed at the reeking black clay pipe which, in the manner of his race, protruded from the center of his mouth.

"I mak 'em long piece way. No plenty wood. I mak 'em mile – two mile." Si-wash held up two fingers.

Leo looked up quickly at this breaking of the silence.

"Sure," he said. "Wood scarce."

Si-wash nodded.

"Plenty scarce." Then after a long pause: "Other man find him. Burn 'em all up."

Leo eyed his companion. Then he grinned unpleasantly.

"Guess there's only one damn-fool outfit on this trail – hereabouts – "

The Indian went on smoking, and nearly a minute passed before he shot a quick, sidelong glance at his white friend.

"No. Two," he said; and the inevitable two fingers were thrust up again before Leo's eyes.

It was the white man's turn to pause before replying now.

"Two?" he said, half incredulously.

The Indian nodded, and again held up two fingers.

"How d'you know?" Leo's question came sharply.

"Smoke," returned the Indian; and his one hand described a series of circles upwards.

"You mean – a camp fire? Where?"

Leo was more than interested.

"So. Back there. Big piece. One – two – three mile." Si-wash held up three fingers in deliberate succession.

Leo's interest seemed to suddenly die out. He had no further questions to ask; and, a moment later, he leaned forward and knocked the ashes from his pipe. Then he rose and moved over to the sled. Here he sat down and supported his back against an iron strut, and stretched his legs out beside the fire. In a few moments he was asleep.

Si-wash remained where he was. He made no preparations for sleep; but he slept, every now and then waking up to replenish the fire. And so the long hours crept on toward the gray dawn.

Daylight had come. Leo yawned and stretched his cramped limbs. Si-wash was still beside the fire. He had melted a pot of snow, the only pot that had been saved from wreck on the hillside. He was making tea, boiling it, as is the fashion of all Indians. The smell of it pervaded the camp and reminded Leo that he was hungry.

In half an hour breakfast was over, and Si-wash proceeded with his work on the sled. Audie waited for the commands of her lover. But none were forthcoming. For a long time Leo sat lost in thought, watching the skillful fingers of the Indian at his work, while the fierce sled dogs fought and played around in their untamed, savage way.

The man's expression was quite inscrutable. He was thinking neither of the Indian nor his work. His mind was on other matters, matters which set him puzzling and speculating.

At last he rose and picked up the rawhide rope, which was lying beside the diminished wood pile. He stood for a moment contemplating it. Then he absently stretched it out on his powerful hands, and finally coiled it up.

"Guess I'll climb around and gather wood. So long, Audie," he said briefly.

The next moment the girl's longing eyes were watching his retreating figure as the gray distance swallowed it up.

For a long time she stood thus. Then she started and looked around. It was the Indian's voice that had startled her.

"Him heap good feller. Him no come back bimeby."

The girl's eyes widened with sudden fear.

"What do you mean?" she demanded, with a clutching at her heart.

The Indian's features relaxed into something approaching a smile.
"Him crazy, sure!"

CHAPTER IV

LEO

Leo gazed about him as he left the woodland shadows behind. All sign of the recent blizzard had passed. The world was white, cold, and bathed in the gleaming sunlight of the northern winter. The air was warmer than it had been for days, an unusual phenomenon after such a storm.

For a moment his unexpressive eyes lifted to the shining sky. There was nothing to suggest anything in the nature of one of those rapid changes of weather so much a feature of winter in this region, and the prospect seemed to satisfy him. From the sky his glance drifted to the jagged horizon, and here it searched closely in every direction. For a long time he stood studying every rise and depression in the glacial ocean of hills and valleys; then, slowly, his interest began to wane.

Now a definite disappointment became apparent in the frown that depressed his strong brows. He moved out from the edge of the woods and skirted them until a fresh vista of bald, snow-clad hills presented themselves to his searching eyes. For a time his scrutiny lacked something of its original interest. Then, quite suddenly, it became fixed on one spot, a deep depression, shadowed, and definitely marked, an almost black patch in the white setting of the surrounding world.

In a moment all his interest had revived, and he concentrated all his efforts to read the meaning of that which he beheld.

"He wasn't lying, after all," he muttered at last. And his words gave a key to his recent moments of waning interest.

He knew that the black patch he was looking at was a bluff of woods lying in the narrow valley between two high hills, a bluff of woods such as those which lay behind him. Whether they were larger, or just a small, isolated cluster of trees did not concern him. He was watching a spiral of thin smoke, a faint shadow against the dark backing, as it floated upwards and drifted away, quite invisible after it broke the sky line. He knew that this was the smoke Si-wash had told him of. He knew, as Si-wash had known, that it was the smoke of a camp fire. He wondered whose, and, wondering, he moved out without any hesitation in its direction, determined to ascertain whose hand had lit the fire; a matter which had seemed all unnecessary to the Indian's mind.

Just for a moment he glanced again at the sun, and took his bearings. Si-wash had said three miles at most. Three miles; it was little enough to concern himself about. He knew that unless he encountered unlooked-for difficulties he would be able to cover the distance, and make the return journey in less than four hours.

So he set off, adopting a course much as the crow might fly. That was his way in all things. He rarely sought to spare himself by seeking the easier route in anything. His goal always assumed a definite point straight ahead of him, so why make the journey longer for the sake of a little ease? Time enough for such deviations when stress of circumstances demanded.

His way took him down a long, easy slope, where, at moments, banks of snow mounted up to many feet in height, and at others the earth lay bare, swept clear by the force of the recent storm. Then it was possible for him to travel swiftly, nor was he put to inconvenience from the fact that he was without his snowshoes.

The depression was quickly passed and terminated in the abrupt rise of a low bald hill whose base was surrounded by a low, shabby scrub. At first glance the hill had a curious resemblance to a monk's shaven crown, but a closer inspection revealed that here was one of those broken hills suggesting the ruin of a one-time magnificent mountain, which must have succumbed under the fierce blastings of one of Nature's passionate moments. The bald crown was a broken sea of torn and riven rocks, which might well have been the result of gigantic operations with dynamite.

The obstruction gave him no pause. Again deviation never entered his head. With infinite purpose he attacked the ascent which amounted to a laborious and even perilous struggle. There

was no faltering, and soon he was so far involved that any thought of yielding to the difficulties he encountered became quite out of the question. To return would have been far more difficult than to continue the advance.

The ascent occupied an hour of great physical effort, but at last he stood at the summit breathing hard from his exertions. Here he paused and surveyed the distance. Again was it characteristic of him that he had no longer interest in his immediate surroundings, or the difficulties he had already surmounted. His whole thought was for that which lay ahead, for those difficulties which still remained to be overcome.

The descent of the hill, though it appeared to be no mean accomplishment, was far shorter, and far less abrupt than the upward climb had been. Nor was he sorry for the respite, while still there was no shrinking in him from whatever hazard Nature might have chosen to offer. He had calculated that such was the case, for the whole trend of the land was upward, bearing on up to the crystal peak between which the crowding woodland ahead lay pinched. His eyes wandered on with his thoughts which carried him out in the direction of the tiny ribbon of smoke, still gently rising from the heart of the woods to vanish in the sparkling air above.

He remained for one brief moment while he made a rough estimate of the distance he had yet to go; then, without wasting a precious moment, he dropped upon the first rugged step of the descent. The work was harder than might have been expected, far harder. And the rope he had brought with him frequently stood him in good stead while making those big drops, which, from the distance, seemed so insignificant and easy. But it was never his way to consider difficulties seriously until he found himself in their midst. At all times the needs of the moment were sufficient, and he was firm in the belief that there was no difficulty in human life where an advantageous way out did not lay waiting for the seeker. His mood was the dogged persistence which urges a man on without consideration or thought for anything else in the world but his own all-mastering purpose.

It was this mood which had first driven him to the northern wilderness, where he hoped to acquire the necessary foundations for his fortune in the least possible time. It was this intensity of purpose which had blinded him to the possibilities of burdening himself with the care of a woman. It was this crude driving force which, in face of stupendous difficulties, not to say impossibilities, had decided him to return on foot to Sixty-mile Creek. These things were part of the man. He could not help them.

So it was in the case of his search for this mysterious camp. He was urged to make it, irresistibly urged, and he could have given no definite reasons for his actions.

Slowly there came a change in the man's whole attitude. It was a subtle change, and one wholly unrealized by himself. As he gained way over the broken path before him a strange eagerness became apparent in all his movements, in his expression, in the quick, searching glance of his eyes. The deliberate manner in which he had made the ascent now gave way to an impatient eagerness which frequently placed him at considerable risk, and even peril. Often, where the slower process of the rope's assistance would have been safest, he trusted to hands and feet, and even to a jump, with a considerable uncertainty as to where he was going to land. But he took the risks, urged on by this strange, unacknowledged desire to reach his destination quickly.

The broken hill was left behind him after less than an hour's hard struggle; and when, at last, he stood upon the comparatively smooth upland, with the distant fringe of woodlands high up above him, he realized that his estimate, as had been Si-wash's, of the distance, was considerably at fault. He had still full three miles to go amidst the hills and valleys made by snow banks swept up by the storm, before the mystery of that thread of smoke could be fully solved.

But the way was easy, and he hurried on. The brief day was passing rapidly. Strangely enough all thought of time had passed from him. It no longer occurred to him that he had to return to his own camp to make his preparations for his contemplated journey back to the creek. He had become solely absorbed with the quest in hand. That, and that alone, seemed to matter.

Half an hour's tramping brought him within full and intimate view of the edge of the woods; and, as he drew near, a further change crept into his manner. Once he paused, more than half hidden by a snow bank, and gazed up at the towering crests of the aged pines. He was impressed. These woods were of far greater extent than those which had served him as a shelter from the storm. They towered dizzily, and spread out an immense distance along the sides of the two mountains, between which they had seemed so pinched; and somehow their immensity depressed him with a feeling of the smallness of human life.

It was from this moment that the fresh change in him took place. He left the shelter of the snow bank with a curious crouching gait, and eyes furtively watchful. The reason of the change was quite unapparent, even to himself. He knew that he was searching for a sight of fellow-creatures; but what he did not know was that it was inspired by an active instinct to avoid contact.

He crept on from the shelter of one snow bank to the shelter of another. He moved along over the shallows of snow so that his moccasined feet gave out no sound. And his whole progress bespoke an almost frantic desire that his approach should not be witnessed from the woods.

Nearer and nearer he drew, and, as the shadows came down toward him, his pace increased almost to a run. Finally the last sheltering snow bank was left behind and a low broken scrub replaced it. He breathed a deep sigh; the sigh of a man who is relieved beyond words. The gray, familiar gloom of the forest overshadowed him, and he was content. Just for a few moments he paused for breath. Then his restless spirit urged him on, and, plunging forward, the solemn twilight of the forest swallowed him up.

For quite a while he hurried on like a flitting shadow in the midst of a world of shadows. Then, finally, he paused listening. The grave-like silence was quite unbroken by any sign of life. Nothing came to him stirring the echoes of that ages-old world. He strained hard for some familiar sound that might guide him to the spot where the mysterious camp lay. But no such sound was forthcoming.

CHAPTER V

THE SHADOW OF DEATH

A deep stillness prevailed while the man stood in profound contemplation of the figure beneath the covering of furs. The silent woods suggested the calm of a shadowed sepulcher. The shrouded figure lying at his feet completed the suggestion.

Tug's eyes, if unsympathetic, were at least anxious. The sunken features of his companion filled him with a curious feeling of superstitious awe at the stealing, subtle approach of death. Death, in the abstract, had no terrors for him. The sight of a life suddenly jolted out of earthly existence would have disturbed him not at all; but this steady march, this almost imperceptible progress, stirred those feelings of superstition which underlie all human life.

He noted the hungry shadows of an unearthly blue which surrounded the sunken eyes, and filled the hollow sockets. The greenish tinge in the pallid flesh revolted him; the lips, so drawn, with all their ruddy ripeness gone, left him with a feeling of positive nausea; while the utter helplessness in the way the trunk collapsed beyond the rough pillow supporting the lolling head, left him shrinking at the thought of the speeding life whose ebb he was powerless to check.

Well enough he knew that death was hovering well within sight. Poor Charlie, the companion of his fortunes, was rapidly passing away. There was no help he could bestow, no real help. All he could do was to minister to each whim expressed in the thin, struggling voice; for the rest the march of Death must go on. For many days the end had been steadily approaching, and now the icy breath in the shadow of Death's hovering wings seemed to add a chill to the wintry air, and freeze up the heart in his own robust body.

Tug's expression was one of hopeless incompetence. He wondered, as he had wondered for days, what he could do to help the sufferer. He knew that pneumonia had laid its clutch upon the poor wretch's lungs, and all treatment for it was a riddle to which he found no answer.

His eyes lifted from the dying man, and he stared about him vaguely. They took in the squatting dogs, reveling in the comfort of the flickering firelight, well sheltered from the breath of winter by the canvas screen he had erected to shelter his sick companion. The sight of these luxuriating beasts annoyed him; and, with a vicious kick at the nearest, he sent them scuttling into the background.

Then he glanced at his diminished store of wood. Here lay the only service his helplessness permitted his thought to rise to. Yes, he could still strive to keep the cold, that stealing cold which Charlie had cried out against so bitterly, that cold which he had declared had eaten into his very bones, from his dying friend. So he moved over to the pile and replenished the fire with liberal hand, till the last stick in his store had found its way to the hungry flames. Then, with a curious patience, almost gentleness, he once more tried to administer the fragrant, but less savory soup, which was always kept simmering in the boiler on the fire.

It was curious to watch this powerful specimen of virile, unsympathetic manhood endeavoring to assume the indescribable gentleness of the nurse. It fitted him as ill as anything well could, yet he did his best. And no one knew better than he that his patient was beyond such clumsy, well-meaning efforts. The lips remained closed, as did the sunken eyes, and no words of rough encouragement seemed to penetrate to the dull brain behind them.

At last Tug put the pannikin aside, and dropped the tin spoon with a clatter. He could do no more. Again he rose to his feet and stood helplessly by.

"Poor devil," he muttered. "His number's plumb up."

At the sound of his voice there came a slight movement of the lolling head. Then the great eyes opened slowly, and stared up at the muttering man in an uncanny, unseeing fashion.

"Sure."

The one word, spoken in the faintest of whispers, told Tug that the dying man's intellect remained unimpaired, and the knowledge left him annoyed with himself that he had spoken aloud.

"I'm kind of sorry, Charlie," he blundered. "I didn't just guess you could hear."

"I've – known it – days." The other struggled painfully with his words.

Tug had no answer for him, and Charlie went on in his halting fashion.

"It – don't – matter. I was thinking of my – folks."

"Sure. I know." Tug sighed in a relief he could not have explained.

He waited.

For some time the sick man made no answer. It almost seemed as if his straining intellect had been overtaxed, for the glazing eyes remained immovable, and, to the waiting man, he might have been already dead.

He bent over him, his anxiety driving him to reassure himself. It was his movement that again broke the deathly spell. Slowly a gleam of intelligence struggled into the staring eyes, and the man's lips moved.

"It's my share – my – share – of the gold." He gave a short quick gasp. "I want them – to – have – it. It – was – for them."

Tug nodded.

"I know. You always said you wanted it for your folks. I'll – see they get it. Is – there anything else?"

"No. Say – "

Tug waited. As the silence remained he urged the dying man.

"Yes?"

"It's no good. They – they – won't – get – it."

"What d'you mean – they won't get it?" Tug's face flushed. He felt that his promise was doubted. A promise given in all good faith, and under the spell of that dreadful thrill, which never fails to make itself felt in a promise to the dying. "I've given my word. Isn't that sufficient?"

"Sure. But – " The man broke off gasping.

After a while the struggle eased and his whispering voice became querulous.

"It's – it's – cold. The – the fire's going – out."

Tug glanced quickly at the fire. It was burning brightly. Then he remembered he had used up the last of the fuel.

From the fire he turned to the dying man again. He understood. It was the march of Death, that cold he complained of. His hard face struggled painfully for an expression of sympathy.

"Yes," he said. "I'll go and collect more wood. I – I didn't notice the fire going down. We must keep the cold out of you."

The lolling head made a negative movement.

"You – can't. It's – it's – all – over me. I'll – " Another shuddering sigh, half shiver, half gasping for breath, passed through the man's body. Then the thin eyelids closed, and no effort on Tug's part could produce any further sign of life.

For a long time he endeavored, striving by words of encouragement to persuade the weary eyes to open. But they remained obstinately shut. The man's breathing was of the faintest, too; a sign which Tug felt was full of omen. He hated his own helplessness; and he cursed under his breath the madness of his attempt to save his companion by making this wild journey. Back there on Sixty-mile Creek he felt that though the man had been doomed, this sudden collapse into pneumonia might have been averted. He had been foolish, criminally foolish to make this mad attempt; and yet —

He moved away. No, he could do nothing else, so he might just as well go and gather wood. He had half the day in front of him. It would be better to do something useful than to remain there watching and talking to a man practically dead. Anyway it would be more wholesome. He knew that the dread of Charlie's death was growing on him. For some unaccountable reason it was attacking

his nerves. The woods seemed to be haunted with strange shadows he had never felt the presence of before. He must certainly get to work.

From the far side of the fire he glanced back at the ominous pile of blankets and furs. He saw the man's head move. It lolled over to the other side. It was the only sign of life he gave. The eyes remained closed, and the ashen lips were tightly shut.

The movement, the vision of that deathly figure suddenly set the strong man's skin creeping. He hurried away, almost precipitately.

CHAPTER VI

ALL-MASTERING PASSION

Not a movement disturbed the tomb-like peace of the aged woods; no sound broke the profound silence. It was as if even Nature herself were held in supreme awe of the presence of Death.

In the absence of all restraint Tug's dogs crept toward the fire, and crouched within the radius of its pleasant warmth, their great muzzles resting between outstretched paws, their fierce eyes staring steadily at the ruddy flicker of the leaping flames. Maybe they were dreaming of those savage ancestors from whom they sprang; maybe memories of fierce battles, of gluttonous orgies, of desperate labors, were crowding pleasantly under the charm of the moment's ease. But twitching ears bespoke that curious canine alertness which is never relaxed.

The moments passed rapidly; moments of delight which rarely fall to the lot of the wolfish trail dog. It was an oasis of leisure in lives spent betwixt the labor of the trail and the settling of fierce quarrels, which, to the human mind, possess no apparent cause.

Then again, in the briefest of seconds, the whole scene was changed. It came as one of the dogs lifted its head gazing intently at the pile of furs under which the sick man lay.

It was a tense moment. Every muscle in the creature's powerful body was set quivering, and a strange, half pathetic, half savage whimper escaped its twitching nostrils. Every head about the fire was abruptly lifted, every ear was set pricked alertly, and each pair of fierce eyes stared hard in a similar direction.

There was no sign of movement among the furs, no change of any sort, nothing whatsoever to arouse such tense ferocity, even alarm. But those things were there in every eye, in the pose of each savage creature, in the slow rising of harsh manes until they bristled high upon every shoulder.

One dog rose to its feet.

Each dog rose slowly in turn; slowly and watchfully. And now a further change became apparent in their attitudes. All ferocity suddenly died out, leaving only alarm, a desperate, curish terror. Manes still bristled like the teeth of fine combs, but ears were flattened to lowered heads, and great whipping tails curled under, between crouching hind legs, while lifted lips left gleaming fangs displayed in curish snarls.

Yet the sick man's bed at which they stared still remained undisturbed. The man beneath the blankets had not stirred. He was still, so still. It was as if these brutish eyes beheld something invisible to the human eye; something which crushed their hearts under an overwhelming burden of fear.

For nearly a minute the statue-like tenseness of attitude remained. Then the spell was broken. One dog, the largest of all, the leader of the team, the oldest in the craft of the trail, oldest in years, and, possibly, far the oldest in canine wisdom, squatted upon its haunches and licked its lips. One by one the rest followed its example, and, finally, with sighs as of relief, they returned again to their luxurious basking in the firelight.

But the leader did not attempt to return to the charmed circle of the fire. It seemed as if he realized a sense of responsibility. Presently he rose, and, with gingerly tiptoeing, moved away from his companions. He edged warily toward the sick man's bed. He drew near, snuffing at the air, ready to draw back instantly should his wisdom so prompt him. Nearer and nearer he drew, and with lowered muzzle he snuffed at the edge of the bed. With stealthy, creeping gait he made his way toward the pillow, snuffing as he went. Then, as his greenish eyes rested upon the man's lolling head, he again squatted upon his haunches and licked his lips. The next moment a low whimper broke the silence. It grew louder. Finally the dog's great head was lifted, its muzzle was thrown high into the air, and the whimper was changed into a long-drawn-out howl of amazing piteousness. It was doling the death warning of its race.

A chorus of whimpered acknowledgment came from the fire. The other dogs stirred restlessly, but that was all. The fire was too pleasant, such moments as were just now theirs were all too few in their laborious lives for them to emulate the mourning of their leader. So they resettled themselves and went on with their dreaming.

Then the mourner gave up his office. This tacit refusal to join him had rendered his position untenable. So, not without resentment in his heart, he, too, returned to the fire, and, with a sense of duty duly performed, once more buried his nose between his paws, and gave himself up to profound meditation.

But it was not for long. Within five minutes every dog was on his feet again thrilling with a wild feeling of passionate resentment. There was no mistaking their mood at this fresh disturbance. There was no craven slinking, there were no curish snarls. Each dog was on his toes ready to battle with a tangible foe, such as they now anticipated.

For some moments the reason of the disturbance was not apparent. Their supersensitive hearing reached beyond the range of that of their human masters. But at last the sound of muffled footsteps awoke dimly the echoes of the woods. A man was approaching. He was walking swiftly, moving along with the soft crunch of hurrying, moccasined feet.

His shadowy figure loomed up out of the gray twilight of the woods; and, just beyond the camp, he halted and hurled a string of deep-voiced curses at the growling dogs. Instantly the chorus of canine displeasure ceased, and the creatures backed away from the forbidden pleasures of the fire. These animals acknowledged no definite master, but they obeyed man. For such was their teaching upon the trail.

Now the man came on fearlessly, searching the camp with quick, furtive eyes that had no scruples. It seemed deserted, except for the dogs, the memory of whose presence about the fire further convinced him that it must be so. Without hesitation he began a closer examination; and the first thing to interest him was the sled, with its rough harness spread out just where the dogs had been freed from their traces. Instant recognition leaped into his eyes.

"Tug's!" he murmured. Then, after a pause, he added, "I wonder."

His interest rose swiftly, and his quick-moving eyes passed on to the bed, with its pile of furs. Just for a moment he hesitated. It was almost as if some premonition of what lay beneath them gave him pause. Then, with a movement almost of defiance, he stepped toward it and dropped on one knee beside the pillow. Again there came a pause, but his turned ear explained it. He was listening. Listening for the sound of breathing. But no sound came to him; and, at last, with no great gentleness, he turned back the cover.

An ashen face with staring sightless eyes looked up into his; and for long moments he remained bent over it, lost in a profound study of what he beheld. Then slowly he raised one powerful hand, and, with something like shrinking, pressed an outstretched finger against the dropped jaw. It yielded to his touch, and the mouth shut, but the moment the pressure was relaxed it slowly reopened, and resumed its deathly gape.

"Dead!" he muttered; and the meaning of the camp puzzled him no longer.

He raised his head and glanced from the empty sled, empty of all but the store of dog food, to the tent, and a wild passionate light shone in his eyes. His whole expression had changed, merged into one of desperate desire. The dead man was instantly forgotten. All speculations were forgotten for the moment, absorbed in the thought of the possibility of the return of the living Tug. His busy brain was full of excitement which set his pulses hammering, and the blood rushing through his veins. But he had not stirred from his place beside the dead.

He turned his head much in the manner of a man hunted, and dreading his own shadow. His eyes peered out into the gray twilight of the forest. He was listening, too. Listening for that sound which was to tell him of the return of the owner of the camp. But no sound reached him. He saw

that the dogs had crawled back to the fire, and their attitude further told him that they were still unaware of any approach.

His eyes came back to the tent and a torrent of thought poured its flood through channels which seemed bursting under the sudden pressure; and through it all passed a vague wonder as to what God or devil had inspired him to seek out the mystery of this camp.

But he sought no answer. He desired no answer. He knew that an irresistible passion was driving him, a passion he had no desire to thwart, a passion he hugged to himself and whose influence warmed him to an almost insane joy. And under its strange driving he became active. A hundred thoughts swept through his brain, each finding expression in his swiftly moving eyes.

Again he surveyed the camp. The dogs still hugged the now low-burning fire. From the fire he turned to the spot where the fuel store had evidently been kept. There was no more wood, and the axe was gone, and thus he accounted for Tug's absence. Furthermore he understood that he might return at any moment. Therefore if he were to act at all it must be at once.

He rose to his feet and moved swiftly across to the tent, and as he went the memory of all he had lost upon the trail swept over him. He told himself he had been robbed, robbed just as surely as if human hands had wrested from him the prize he had toiled so desperately to win. This came in answer to the voice of conscience; but conscience had no power against the driving force which was the whole substance of his life. Some strange fate had driven him toward an opportunity that he was not the man to miss. Charlie, that mild, harmless partner of Tug was dead; and Tug – well, Tug was probably living, but he had never been a friend of his. He had always felt subtly antagonistic toward him. What mattered if – if he robbed him? Yes, that was what he intended. He would rob him, and —

He raised the flap of the tent and passed within, letting the curtain fall behind him.

Not a sound broke the stillness outside. The dogs stirred without sound. Their ease was passing. It was almost as if they knew that the law of club and trace was soon to claim them again.

In a few moments Leo reappeared. A fresh change had come over him. His work was in full progress, and now the light in his eyes was less straining, less passionate. Now he was once more the man of purpose, keen, swift-thinking, ready. The passionate obsession that was his was once more under control, its desire having been satisfied in the acquisition of the bag of gold he now hugged in his arms. The keenest essence of his thought was at work. Possibility after possibility opened out in a series of pictures before his mind's eye, and, with swift slashes, like the progress of the surgeon's knife, his brain cut them about, extracting every detail of importance, assimilating the living, the vital points.

Though powerless to resist the temptation held out to him, he knew full well its meaning. He knew what possible consequences hovered on the horizon of his future. The morality of his act concerned him not at all, but those other considerations demanded his closest attention. All his plans must be reorganized. Now there was no need to return for laborious years on Sixty-mile Creek, and a great joy flooded his heart at the thought. He could take up his plans where they had been broken by the disaster in the storm. But there must be a difference. There must be considerable modification. He thought of Audie, and at once the necessary modifications unrolled before the keen pressure of thought he was laboring under.

Audie and the Indian could still go on, he thought, as his eyes surveyed the five great husky dogs with satisfaction. All that had been arranged for her could remain – for the present. She was still to remain a part of his life. He had given his promise, and he was more than satisfied to fulfill it when the time in his affairs came for such fulfillment. Then there was Tug. Tug must be provided for; and as the thought came to him a grim, half smile twisted the corners of his compressed lips. Yes, he would leave him written instructions, which, if he knew the man, would not be ignored.

These thoughts passed swiftly through his mind in the midst of action. He saw the whole situation as plainly and simply as though Providence itself had ordained the whole scheme. There was

only one thing that could upset it – Tug's premature return. But he set the thought aside. He would not contemplate it. That must take care of itself. He would deal with it when it occurred.

Reluctantly enough he bestowed Tug's store of gold upon the sled, lashing it doubly secure after his disastrous experiences. Then he stored bedding and food upon the vehicle. He provided a sufficient but light enough load, for he knew he must travel fast and reach the coast long before those others. Si-wash was behind him, and Si-wash knew every inch of the trail, whereas he only had a vague knowledge which might fail him at any moment.

Within half an hour the pack on the sled was complete, and the great dogs stood in their harness ready to do the behests of their new master as willingly as those of the old. But the last item of his program still remained to be attended to. Leo searched his pockets and found the stub of a pencil, but no paper rewarded his efforts. For a moment he was at a loss. Then he bethought him of the tent, and passed beneath the flap. In a few moments he returned with a sheet of waterproof paper, such as is used to line biscuit boxes, and he sat down on his pack and began to write. And all the time he was writing the grim twist of his lips remained. He seemed to find some sort of warped humor in what he was doing.

His writing finished he secured the paper on the front of the tent where it must easily be seen. Then he stood off to read it.

"My Dear Tug;

"I find it necessary to commandeer your gold. Mine is at the bottom of a precipice ten miles back, if you care to make the exchange. Si-wash will tell you where. I suggest you either wait here till they come along, or go back to my camp in the woods, beyond the broken hill, and join Si-wash there. Anyway you can travel down with him. They have dogs and camp outfit, and I have left here sufficient food, etc., for your needs. I have found you a better friend than I ever hoped to. So long. Good luck.

"Leo."

Leo read his note over with evident satisfaction. He had no scruples whatever. He saw in one direction only. Straight ahead of him, his eyes turning neither to the right nor to the left of the path of life he had marked out for himself. He believed that the battle must always go to the strong; sentimentality, pity, were feelings he did not acknowledge. He knew of their existence, and deplored them as the undermining germ responsible for the disease of decadence which has wrought the destruction of more than half the great empires in the world's history. And what the world's history had not taught him he had gleaned from the lives of great men, as he saw greatness. Greatness to him meant conquest, and the world's conquerors had been men utterly devoid of all the tenderer feelings of humanity. They had embarked upon their careers thrilling with the lust of the ancient savage, or the ruthless courage of the animal kingdom, qualities which he regarded as the essence of life, as Nature had intended it. So he gave himself up to a similar course. He would rather be a king by savage conquest, than the hereditary monarch of a race whose vitality is slowly being sapped by the vampire of sentimentality.

He picked up Tug's gee-pole, and gave one swift final glance over the camp. Then, stooping, he covered the staring face of the dead man with a blanket and turned to the dogs.

A sharp command and the traces were drawn taut. Another, and the journey had begun. The dogs, fresh from their week of idleness, strained at their breast harness, and the sled moved slowly, heavily over the dry bed of the forest. But it soon gained impetus, and the twilit shadows of the primordial forest quickly swallowed it up.

As the scrunch of the pine-cones under the steel runners died away the calm of ages once more settled upon the woods. The dying fire burned lower and lower, and the deathly stillness was unbroken even by a crackle of sputtering flame. The solitude was profound and full of melancholy.

The minutes crept on. They lengthened into an hour. Then far in the distance, it seemed, came the soft pad as of some prowling forest beast. But the pad quickly changed to the soft scrunch of

moccasined feet, and, presently, a man, bearing a great load of wood upon his broad back, came on through the dusky aisles of the forest.

CHAPTER VII

DEAD FIRES

Tug did most things with a smile; but it was never the happy smile of a pleasant nature. Nor was it even a mask. It was an expression of his attitude toward the world, toward all mankind. His eyes conveyed insolent contempt; and his smile was one of the irritating irony and cynicism which permeated all his thoughts and feelings.

But his smile was for those looking on. There were times when another man looked out of the same eyes; a man whose cold heart loomed up ugly and threatening out of those deeper recesses of feeling which the shrewd might guess at, but were rarely admitted to.

Tug was a man whose selfish desire was above and before all things. He was of that temper which saw injustice and wrong in every condition of life obtaining, in every established institution of man, even in the very edicts of Nature. It was impossible for him to see anything but through the jaundiced light of his own utter selfishness. Every condition over which he had no control contained a threat, which, in his view of things, was directed against the fulfillment of his desires. He wanted the world and all its possibilities for comfort, pleasure, profit, for his own, without the effort of making it so; and had he obtained it he would undoubtedly have grumbled that there was no fence set up as a bar to all trespassers upon his property.

He detested the thought that others held possessions which he had not. But it was not his way to air his grievance from a personal point of view. He adopted a subtler course, and a common enough course among men of his class. He cloaked his own selfishness under a passionate plea for those others similarly debarred, railing at the injustice of the distribution of the world's benefits, and storming against class distinctions and all the lesser injustices which went to make up the dividing line between capacity and incapacity. In short he was, though as yet unprofessed, a perfect example of the modern socialist whose utter selfishness prompts methods and teachings which are the profoundest outrage against the doctrines of the Divine Master, who demanded that man should love his neighbor as himself.

Tug had not the moral courage for an open fight, and here he was far inferior to the greater adventurer, Leo. Leo would drive roughshod over everybody and everything; the whole wide world if necessary. He would gain his end by the frank courage of the fighter, which must always command a certain admiration, even if condemnation goes with it. But Tug had no such qualities. It was for him to wriggle and twist, using anybody and anything, by subtle underhand workings, to achieve a similar purpose. But again, even in his purpose he was Leo's inferior. Leo's desire was for victory, victory in the great struggle of modern life, and not for the fleshpots which that victory would entitle him to. Tug desired victory, too, but it was that he might taste the sweetest morsels which those fleshpots contained. Whichever way the struggle went there could be little doubt as to who would claim the applause from the balconies at the fall of the curtain.

When Tug reached his camping ground he found himself in a land of dead fires. The cold, gray ashes were everywhere about him. Life had gone; hope had fled. And the charred embers of the camp-fire in the center of it were the symbol of the ruin.

His quick eyes took in the picture, while his cold heart read something of the meaning of what he beheld. The absence of his dogs first drew his attention, and this was swiftly followed by the realization that his sled was nowhere to be seen. Then his eyes caught the notice which was written on biscuit paper and secured to the front of his tent. He threw down his burden of dead wood, which had still remained upon his back, and stood in front of the message Leo had left him.

For long minutes he stood while the words, the bitter, ironical sentences, sank deep into his selfish heart. Here he was treated to the very attitude he loved to assume himself, and it lashed him to a cold, deadly fury. Again and again he read the message and each time he read it he found fresh

fuel with which to build the icy fire of his rage. The theft itself was maddening, but strangely enough the tone of impudent triumph in which Leo addressed him drove him hardest. All that was worst in him was stirred, and the worst of this man was something so malignant and unsavory that the absent Leo might well have shrunk before its pursuing shadow.

No word passed his lips; no expression changed his features, except for the sudden cold pallor which had spread itself over them. Words rarely expressed his deeper feelings; he was not the man to storm in his despair. His whole mind and body were concentrated in a deadly desire to find a means of coming up with the man who had injured him. With each passing moment the words of the message gravened themselves deeper and deeper upon his mind, until they filled his whole thought, and left him panting for revenge. As long as he lived that message would float before his mind's eye, that message which told him of the dead fires about him, that message staring out at him upon the wreck of all his hopes. Yes, as long as he lived that moment would stay with him. As long as he lived he would wait for the ruin, even the life of the man who had wronged him.

Suddenly he made a movement with his moccasined heel. It was his only expression. The pinecones crushed under it; and to him it was the life of the man, Leo, he was crushing out.

With a steady hand he reached out and removed the paper from its fastenings. He folded it deliberately, carefully, and bestowed it in an inner pocket. Somehow its possession had suddenly become precious to him, and a certain contentment was his as he turned away and seated himself on an upturned box.

It might have seemed curious that he made no attempt to search his camp. It would have been natural enough. But that was the man. In his mind there was no need for search. The message, he knew, told the truth, and the blow had fallen upon a nature that would not uselessly rack its feelings by vain hopes such as a search might inspire. Besides, he knew this man Leo. He knew him, and hated him; and in his hatred he believed that the thought of his vain, searching would give his despoiler malicious pleasure.

For long he sat there before the dead fire. His comrade remained unheeded. He was thinking, thinking desperately in his cold fashion. And curiously enough the possession of that paper helped to inspire him. Already he contemplated it as a sort of token that, in the end, he would return an hundredfold the injury done him. Yes, it should be his mascot through life, it should be a guiding star to his whole career. It should be his inspiration when the moment came. No thought of any law entered his mind. He knew that the crimes of this bitter northern world were beyond the reach of the laws of civilized man. No, the only law that could serve him was the law that each made for himself. He would make his own law – when the time came. There would be no mercy. Mercy? He smiled. And it was a smile so cruel and cold that it might well have damped the courage of the great Leo himself.

Night closed down before Tug stirred from his seat; and when the movement came it was inspired by the bitter cold which had eaten into his stiffening joints, and the gnawings of hunger to which he had been so long oblivious.

He rose abruptly. The present was with him again, the dread present of the bitter northern trail; and he set to work with all the deliberation of a man who understands the needs of the moment, and has no thought beyond them. He rekindled the fire, and boiled the water for his tea. He prepared the dried fish and cooked it. Then he sat down and devoured his meal with all the relish of a hungry man without a care in the world.

But he did not seek his blankets afterwards. The fire had warmed his bones, and the food had satisfied his craving stomach. So he remained where he was, smoking and thinking; dreaming the ugly dreams of a mind devoid of any of the tenderer thoughts of humanity.

Hours passed, and the long sleepless night dragged on toward a gray, hopeless dawn; and, by the time the black woods began to change their hue, and the gray to creep almost imperceptibly down the aged aisles, his last plans were complete.

Then he arose and stretched himself. He put his pipe away, and replenished the fire with the last of the wood, finally setting water thereon to boil. Then, picking up his axe, he moved off into the deeps of the wood.

In half an hour he returned with a burden of rough-hewn stakes which he flung down beside the fire, while he prepared his breakfast. He devoured his meal hurriedly, and within another half hour was at work upon his final tasks.

He stored all his property inside the tent, removing the furs and blankets from his dead comrade. It almost seemed like desecration. Yet Tug knew what he was at. It would not do to leave the body encased in warm furs. The man would have to be buried – later. In the meantime the cold would freeze the body, and preserve it until such time.

Now the purpose of his stakes became evident. Even Tug, selfish and callous as he was, acknowledged his duties to the dead. He knew the prowling scavengers of the forests too well to leave his comrade without sufficient protection. So he proceeded to secure the body under a cage of timber which would defy the attacks of marauding carnivora.

With Charlie left secure his work was complete. Broad daylight was shining among the rugged crowns of towering pines. The moment had come for his departure. He would obey the letter of Leo's instructions. He would follow the path he had marked out for him. Afterwards he would choose his own path; a path which he knew, somewhere in the future, near or far, would eventually bring him within striking distance of the quarry he intended to hunt down.

CHAPTER VIII

SI-WASH CHUCKLES

It was Si-wash who first witnessed the approach of the newcomer; and he at once realized that it was not the return of his friend, Leo, the man whom he still liked, in spite of the madness which he believed now possessed him.

So he watched thoughtfully from the shadow of the fringe of the forest. He peered out over the white plain upon which an ineffective sun poured its steely rays, while he studied the details of figure and gait, which, in a country where contact with his fellows was limited, were not likely to leave him in doubt for long.

Presently he vanished within the woods. He went to convey his news to the waiting woman, the woman whose heart was full of a dread she could not shake off, whose love was silently calling, calling for the return of the man who was her whole world.

But his news must be told in his own way, a way which, perhaps, only an Indian, and those whose lives are spent among Indians, can understand.

He came to the fire and sat down, squatting upon his haunches, and remained silent for some minutes. Then he picked up a red-hot cinder and lit his black clay pipe, which he produced from somewhere amidst the furs which encased his squat body.

"We go bimeby," he said, after a long pause. "No storm – no snow. Him very fine. Good."

Audie's brooding eyes lifted from the fire to the Indian's broad face. All her fear, all her trouble was shining in their depths. The man saw and understood. But he did not comment.

"We can't go – yet," she said. "We must wait. Leo will come back. Oh, I'm sure he'll come back."

The Indian puffed at his pipe, and finally spat a hissing stream into the fire.

"Maybe," he said.

The woman's face flushed.

"Maybe? Of course he'll come back," she cried with heat. "He – he has gone to collect wood."

The Indian nodded and went on smoking.

"Him fetch wood. Sure," he said presently. "Him go day – night – morning. Si-wash fetch wood. One hour – two – three. Then Si-wash come back. Si-wash not crazy."

Suddenly Audie sprang to her feet. Her eyes flashed, and a fierce anger swept through her whole body.

"Leo is not crazy. Don't dare to say he is," she cried vehemently. "I – I could kill you for saying it."

The Indian gave no sign before the woman's furious threat. He smoked on, and when she had once more dropped to her seat, and the hopeless light in her eyes had once more returned, he removed his pipe from his mouth.

"Si-wash – you kill 'em. It no matter. Leo, him crazy still. You stop here – an' freeze. So. It much no good."

The man's good humor was quite unruffled, and Audie, in spite of her brave defence of her lover, despairingly buried her face in her hands.

"But he will come back, Si-wash!" she cried haltingly. "Say he will. You know him. You understand him. He must come back. Say he must. He can never travel this country on foot, without food or shelter. Oh, say he must come back!"

But Si-wash was not to be cajoled from his conviction. He saw the woman's misery, but it meant nothing to his unsentimental nature. Leo had gone. Well, why should she worry? There were other men in the world. This is what he felt, but he would not have expressed it so. Instead of that he merely shook his head, and spoke between the puffs of his reeking pipe.

"Leo no come. But the other, him come. Tug, him come quick. Maybe him speak of Leo."

In a flash the girl's beautiful eyes shot a gleaming inquiry into the man's coppery face.

"Tug? Tug coming here? It's – it's you who're crazy. Tug is miles away. He must be getting near the coast by now. He must be safe by now, safe with his precious gold."

"Maybe him not safe. Maybe him lose him gold, too."

"You mean – ?"

Audie caught her breath as she left her inquiry unfinished.

"Nothing. All same Tug him come here. I see him. Hark? Sho! That him – he mak noise."

The Indian turned slowly round and stared out into the twilit woods. Audie followed the direction of his gaze and sat spellbound, listening to the sound of hurrying feet as they crushed the brittle underlay of the woods. The Indian's dogs, too, had become alert. They were on their toes, with bristling manes and deep-throated grumbling at the intrusion.

As Tug came up Si-wash rose and clubbed the dogs cordially. In a moment they had resumed their places beyond the fire circle, and, squatting on their haunches, licked their lips and yawned indifferently.

"Tug!"

Audie was on her feet staring at the apparition of the man she had believed was even now nearing the coast.

Nor did the man's usual ironical smile fail him.

"Sure. Didn't you guess I'd get around after – what has happened?"

Audie eyed him blankly as he waited for her to speak. The Indian, with his eyes fixed upon the fire, had not stirred from his seat. For the moment he was forgotten by these white people. He moved now. It was a slight movement. Very slight. He merely thrust one of his lean hands inside his furcoat.

His movement was quite unnoticed by the others, and as Audie stared, quite at a loss for words, the man went on —

"Well? He's got away with it. Maybe you're – satisfied."

Tug's smile was unequal to the task. The cold rage under it made its way into his eyes. And as she listened a curious change crept into Audie's eyes, too. Si-wash, with his attention apparently on the fire, was yet quite aware of the change in both, and his hand remained buried in the bosom of his furcoat.

Audie had suddenly become very cool. She pointed at the box which had been Leo's seat.

"You'd better sit down," she said coldly. "You seem to have something to tell me."

"Tell you?" Tug laughed. "Do you need telling?" he asked, as he dropped upon the seat.

Audie resumed her place at the opposite side of the fire.

The Indian smoked on.

"You'd best tell us all you've got to tell," Audie said, with cold severity. "At the present moment you appear to be quite mad or – foolish."

Her manner had the effect of banishing the man's hateful smile. He stared at her incredulously, and, from her icy face, his eyes wandered to the motionless figure of the silent Indian.

"What the hell!" he cried suddenly. "Do you want to tell me that you don't know what Leo's done? Do you want to tell me the whole lousy game isn't a plant, put up by the three of you? Do you want to tell me – ?"

"I want to tell you, you're talking like a skunk. If you've got anything to tell us tell it in as few words as possible, or – get out back to your camp."

It was a different woman talking now; a very different woman to the forlorn creature who had appealed to Si-wash a few minutes ago. Just for a second the Indian's eyes flashed a look in her direction, and it was one of cordial approval.

But neither of the others saw it, and if they had it is doubtful if either would have understood. For the mind of Si-wash was one of those deep, silent pools, far more given to reflection than revealing their own secrets.

Tug stared brutally into the woman's face. Audie was displaying a side to her character he had never witnessed before. She was alone with him – the Indian didn't count in his reckoning – she had no hesitation in dictating to him, even, as he chose to regard it, insulting him. His astonishment gave him pause, and he pulled himself together. Then he found himself obeying her in a way he had never thought of doing.

Suddenly he thrust his hand into the bosom of his clothing and withdrew it swiftly. His whole action was the impulsive result of a rush of passionate feeling. Nor did it require his words to tell of the condition of mind he was laboring under.

"Read that," he cried furiously, "if you are as ignorant of his doings as you make out. Read it, and – and be damned."

He flung out his arm across the fire, his hand grasping the biscuit paper on which the fateful message was written. Quite undisturbed by his brutality Audie took the paper and unfolded it.

"It was left fastened on the front of my tent while I was away fetching wood," Tug went on bitterly. "I came back to find my dogs gone, my sled, half my stores, Charlie dead, he had been dying for a week, and – and that paper. Read it – curse it, read for yourself."

The Indian never once lifted his eyes from the fire, the warmth of which was an endless source of comfort to him. He was thinking, thinking of many things in the deep, silent way of his race.

Tug waited impatiently while the woman devoured the contents of the message. She read it once – twice – even a third time through; and while she read, though her expression remained the same, all her emotions were stirred to fever heat. She was thinking swiftly, eagerly, her brain quickened to a pitch it had never realized before. Her love for Leo was urging her the more fully to grasp the position in which his latest act had placed him.

This outrage against the man, Tug, in no way lessened her concern for her lover, for his welfare. The primitive woman was always uppermost in her. She cared not a jot that Tug had been despoiled. Leo was well, Leo was alive and safe. But was he safe – now?

A sudden alarm along fresh lines startled her. The meaning of what she read took a fresh complexion. Leo had robbed – robbed this man. What must follow if it were known?

For a moment this alarm shuddered through her body. Then she steadied herself. Her mind suddenly became very clear and decided. She suddenly saw her course clear before her, and her voice broke the tense silence round the crackling fire. She read the message for the fourth time. Read it aloud slowly.

As she proceeded the impassive face of the Indian remained unchanged. He was listening – listening acutely, but so still, so indifferent was his attitude that the chafing Tug scarcely realized his presence.

Audie's voice ceased, and for a moment no one spoke. Then with a muttered imprecation Tug held out his hand.

"Give me the – paper," he cried roughly.

Audie did not appear to hear him.

"Pass it over!" he demanded, still more roughly.

The woman looked up at him. Then she held the paper out, as though to pass it across to his outstretched hand. The next moment it dropped from her fingers and fluttered into the heart of the fire.

With a wild ejaculation Tug sprang to rescue it, but even as he rose to his feet he stood transfixed. The muzzle of a revolver was covering him, and behind the muzzle was the copper-hued visage of the forgotten Si-wash.

"Let 'em burn," he said, in his low guttural tones. "Him writing heap bad med'cine."

The paper curled up and burst into flame. Tug, furious but helpless, watched the hungry flames devour it. Then, as it crumbled away into the red heart of the fire, Si-wash returned to his seat. But his revolver remained upon his knee, and his thin, tenacious fingers gripped the butt of it firmly.

"Si-wash is right," said Audie coldly. She had not risen from her seat. "Leo was foolish to write that. Still, I am glad – now – that he did. It has told me what to do. You see, he said nothing when he went from here, and I thought I should never see him again. Now I know that I shall. Now I know that he is well and safe – yes, safe, since that paper is destroyed. Well" – she looked her visitor squarely in the eyes – "what are you going to do? You are welcome to avail yourself of our transport, as Leo suggests – under conditions."

Tug's fury held him silent. His busy brain was searching for a means to escape from the dictation of this woman, for a means by which to assume domination of the position for himself. As yet he could see none.

So Audie went on with the tacit approval of her faithful comrade.

"You can travel with us, but you will carry no firearms. You see, I don't anticipate that your feelings are particularly kindly toward us. Anyway we'll take no chances. You can go home to your camp now. To-morrow morning, if the weather holds, you can join us. We'll meet you in the open, somewhere near your camp. Mind, in the open, and you'll come to us with your hands up. We shall then search you for weapons. After that, if things are satisfactory, we'll take your outfit on our sled, and you can travel with us. Remember, Leo's welfare is my one care. Well?"

Tug rose. In a moment the Indian's gun was covering him.

"Look 'im over for gun – now," Si-wash said, addressing Audie in his brief guttural fashion.

Audie nodded.

"You'd best put up your hands, Tug," she said, with a smile, as she rose from her seat. "Si-wash is a dead shot."

Tug obeyed. His hands went slowly up, and Audie passed round the fire, and undid his fur coat. As she did so her eyes sparkled.

"You've got them both on," she said, unstrapping the ammunition belt supporting two revolvers about his waist, "That'll simplify matters. You see, I know them. One is Charlie's, and the other yours. They are the only guns you possess. Good. Now you best go."

But the compelling gun of the Indian could no longer keep Tug silent, and his pent anger broke out in harsh abuse.

"You – !" he shouted. "You think I can't get back on you, but I can. I will. I'll get your man, Leo, if I wait years. I'll break him – I'll break the life out of him. I'll – "

"Maybe." There was a hard glitter in Audie's eyes as she interrupted him. "One thing, you've got no evidence against him. Charlie is dead, and – that paper is burnt. It is your word against his. When you meet it will be man to man, and I don't guess there's a doubt who's the best man. You best go home now."

Tug made no attempt to obey. He was about to speak again – to hurl some filthy epithet at the woman, who had outwitted him for her love's sake, but the Indian gave him no chance. In a second the threatening gun was raised again.

"Go 'm quick! Dam quick!" Si-wash cried savagely.

Tug's eyes caught the threatening ring of metal. For a moment he hesitated. Then he turned and strode off.

The steady eyes of the Indian watched him until the woods had swallowed him up. Then he turned, and followed silently in his wake, while Audie remained to dream fresh and more pleasant dreams before the fire.

Half an hour later she looked up as her comrade and champion returned.

"Gone?" she asked, with upraised brows.

"Sho'! Him go." Si-wash crouched down over the fire and spread his hands out to the warmth. Presently he looked up with eyes twinkling with subtle amusement.

"Him big feller, Leo. Good. Him much gold – now. So. Tug him no good. When him find Leo, Leo kill him. Leo big feller."

As he finished speaking a curious sound came from somewhere deep in his throat. And though his impassive face remained unmoved, though not a ghost of a smile was apparent, Audie knew that the man was chuckling with suppressed glee. She, too, felt like laughing, and it was the first time she had so felt since the hideous nightmare of the storm, and its accompanying disaster.

CHAPTER IX

IN SAN SABATANO

San Sabatano was not a big city, but it was a very busy one. At least its citizens thought so, and their four-sheeted two-cent local news-sheet fostered their belief. No doubt a New Yorker would have spoken of San Sabatano as a "Rube" town, an expression which implied extreme provincialism in the smallest possible way. It also implied that its citizens had never turned their eyes upon those things which lay beyond the town-limits, within which they had been "raised." In short, that they knew nothing of the life of the great world about them, except what their paper told them in one single column. Naturally enough one column of the world's news against twenty or more columns of local interest gave readers a false perspective, especially when every citizen of any local standing usually found a paragraph devoted to his own social or municipal doings.

But then the editor was a shrewd journalist of very wide experience. No, he had not been "raised" in San Sabatano. He had served his apprenticeship on the live journals of the East. He understood men, and the times in which he lived. More than all, he understood making money, and the factor which his women readers were in that process. So the world's news was packed into obscure corners, and San Sabatano was the hub around which his imagination revolved.

So it came about that this individual had for months darkly hinted that the *San Sabatano Daily Citizen* had something up its editorial sleeve with which it intended to stagger humanity, and startle its readers into a belief that an echo of the San Francisco earthquake, or something of that nature, had reached them. He told them that the mighty combination of brain that controlled the *Daily Citizen* and guided San Sabatano public opinion had given birth to an epoch-making thought; a thought which, before long, when the rest of a sluggish world read of it, would lift San Sabatano as a center of enterprise, of learning, of culture, to the highest pinnacle of fame known to the world.

San Sabatano stood agog with breathless expectancy for weeks.

Then came the humanity staggerer.

It occupied a whole page of the *Daily Citizen*. The type was enormous, and had been borrowed for the occasion. Fortunately it came in a slack time. The citizens of San Sabatano had been so long held agog that nothing much else had been doing to afford the editor local copy. Therefore the epoch-making brain wave had full scope, and the use of a prodigal supply of black and red ink.

It was a competition. Yes, a mere competition.

That was the first disappointing thought of everybody. It almost seemed as if the staggering business had fizzled.

Then digestion set in, and hope dawned. Yes, it was not so bad. By Jove! As a competition it was rather good. Good? why, it was splendid! It was magnificent! Wonderful! What was this? A competition for women clerks. Speed and accuracy in stenography and typing. Twelve prizes of equal value. Five hundred dollars each, or a month's trip to Europe, including Paris, Vienna, Berlin, Rome, London. And the final plum of all. The winning twelve to compete among themselves for a special prize in addition. A clerkship in the office of the *Daily Citizen* at two hundred dollars a month, an office to herself, and a year's contract!

Yes, if he hadn't staggered humanity, the editor had certainly set excitement blazing in hundreds of young feminine hearts, and upset the even tenor of as many homes.

For weeks, pending the trial of skill, that astute individual nursed his scheme and trebled his circulation. Nor was it to be wondered at that many times during the preliminary stages of organization, as he watched the increasing daily returns of his precious paper, he sat back in his creaking office chair and blessed the day he married the wife, whose sister had just won a similar competition somewhere at the other side of the continent.

At the closing of the entries it was found there were just two thousand competitors. Success for the scheme was assured, and quarts of ink told the gaping multitude that this was so.

Then came the day of the competition. It was to be held in the Town Hall. So well was the interest and excitement worked up that, all unpremeditated, half the smaller business houses were closed for the day; a fact duly commented upon in the later issues of the paper.

The competition lasted all day, and it was late at night when the last weary, palpitating competitors finally reached homes, which were still in a state of anxious turmoil.

There was no news of the winners that night. There was none the next morning. Nor the next. The editor knew his business and talked columns in his own praise, and in praise of the manner in which the women of San Sabatano had responded to his invitation.

A week passed, and then a special edition brought the long-awaited announcement which dashed the hopes of one thousand nine hundred and eighty-eight bursting feminine hearts. It was a simple sheet, with a simple heading. No splashes of colored ink. It gave the list of the twelve winners of the competition in dignified type, and invited them to meet at the editor's office at noon next day, to compete for the coveted special prize.

Among the names of the winners was that of Monica Hanson.

The following day Monica attended the final competition. She did her utmost, spurred on by the driving necessity which had just been thrust upon her brave young shoulders. Now she was sitting in the San Sabatano Horticultural Gardens waiting for the evening issue of the paper which was to tell her, in cold, hard type, the news which was either to crush her eager young soul in despair, or uplift her to realms of ecstatic hope and delight.

Oh, the teeming thought of those straining moments. It flew through her brain with lightning-like velocity, spasmodic, broken. One moment she had visions of pleasures hitherto denied her in a solitary career, eked out on a wholly inadequate pittance doled out to her monthly by her dead mother's solicitors in far-off New York. At another she was obsessed by the haunting conviction that such good fortune was impossible. Yet she felt she had done well in the examination, and, anyway, she would certainly take that five hundred dollars she had already won in preference to the European tour. It would mean so much to her, especially now – now that this fresh call on her resources had been made.

After long disquieting moments she finally sprang up from her seat. Her nerves were getting the better of her. She thought she heard the raucous call of the newsboy. She listened; her pretty brows drawn together in plaintive doubt. Yes, no – her heart was thumping under the white lawn shirtwaist she was wearing, in spite of the fact that it was still winter. But winter in San Sabatano was as pleasant as many another town's summer. In all the history of that beautiful southern Californian town the thermometer had never been known to register freezing point.

She made a pretty picture standing there amid a setting of fantastic tropical vegetation. The cacti, great and small, with their wonder-hued blooms and strange vegetation, were a fitting background to the girl's golden beauty. She was quite southern in her coloring, that wonderful tone of rich gold underlying a fair almost transparent skin. Her waving, fair hair shone with a rich, ruddy burnish, crowning a face of perfect oval, lit with eyes of the deepest blue, which shone with pronounced intelligence and strength.

No, her nerves had not played tricks with her. It was the newsboy. She could see him now, just beyond the park gates. He was selling his papers all too fast. So, with tumultuous feeling's, and a heart hammering violently against her young bosom, she darted off to catch him.

She reached the gates and slackened her pace to a decorous walk. The boy had just handed an elderly man his paper, and was searching for the odd cents of change waited for. Having paid his customer off he looked admiringly up into Monica's pale face.

His shrewd eyes grinned impishly, and he winked abundantly, so that the whole of one side of his face became painfully distorted.

"Say, ain't you Miss Hanson, Miss?" he inquired, with the effrontery of his kind.

Monica's heart beat harder. But she replied with an icy calmness.

"Yes. That's my name. But – "

The boy's eyes sparkled.

"Then I guess the paper is sho' worth 'two bits' to you," he cried, thrusting the folded sheet at her. Then his feelings and covetousness getting the better of him, he added, "Gee, five hundred dollars, an' two hundred a month! Say, how do it feel gettin' all that piled suddenly on to yer, Miss?"

In a flash Monica's dignity had vanished.

"What – what do you mean?" she cried, almost hysterically. "I – " Her fingers trembled so violently that she tore the paper nearly to ribbons struggling to open it in the breeze.

The boy grinned.

"Gar'n. You ain't smart any. Guess you best hand me that 'quarter' an' I'll show you wher' to look."

He was as good as his word, and handed her another paper folded at the right spot, nor, to his credit, did he wait for the money in advance.

"You won it sho'," he said, and waited while in a daze Monica read the wonderful news —

"We have much pleasure in announcing that the winner of our Special Prize of a position on our staff at \$200 per month is Miss Monica Hanson, whose wonderful speed, etc., etc."

Monica waited for no more. Snatching at her satchel she opened it and drew out a single one-dollar bill, and pushed it into the willing hand of the expectant boy.

"Keep the change," he heard her say, as she almost flew down the sidewalk of the tree-shaded main street.

The boy looked after her. Then he looked at his dollar bill.

"Wal, guess she ain't got all the luck goin'," he murmured philosophically, as he pocketed the well-worn note.

Monica hurried on at a pace, though nearly a run, far too slow to suit her mood. Never, never in her life had she felt as she felt now. Never, never. It almost seemed as if the whole world were before her with loving, outstretched arms and smiling face, waiting to yield her all that her young heart most desired. In a vision every face that passed her by in her rush home seemed to be wearing a happy smile. Even the trees overhead rustled whispered messages of delight and hope to her in the evening breeze. This was certainly the one moment of moments in her brief seventeen years of life.

She had hoped, she had dared to hope; but never in her wildest thoughts had she really expected to win this wonderful good fortune. Two hundred dollars a month for a year! Five hundred dollars capital to work upon! And all this added to the pittance which thus far she had lived on while she studied stenography. It was too, too wonderful.

She thought of all she could do with it; and at once there grew on her joyous horizon the first threatening cloud. There was her sister, the dearly loved, erring, actress sister who had come back to her out of those terrible wilds in the far north of Canada.

Thank God this good fortune had come in time to help her. Poor, poor Elsie, or Audrey, as she called herself on the stage. What terrible troubles had been hers. Deserted by the man she loved, left alone with an Indian, and another unfortunate white man, to make her way back to civilization. The thought of her sister's sufferings smote her tender young heart even in the midst of her own rejoicings. She had always disliked and feared Indians hitherto, but now, since she had listened to her sister's pitiful story of her husband's leaving her, and of the wonderful loyalty and generosity of the Indian, Si – what was his name? Ah, yes, Si-wash – somehow she warmed towards them. It seemed wonderful to think of an Indian having such generosity as to give poor Elsie the money to get to San Sabatano from Juneau out of the payment he had received in advance from the journey from Sixty-mile Creek. Why, it must have taken nearly all he had.

Monica in her impulsive way felt that she would like to repay him, to shake hands with him, and thank him. But her sister had told her that he had gone back into the northern wilderness, which nothing could ever induce him to leave for long.

It was a strange life and they were strange people. Even her sister had acquired something of the reticence and somberness of the world she had left behind her. Poor Elsie. She seemed to have made such a mess of her life. She had been doing so well, too, in New York. Why had she thrown it all up to marry this man, Leo, and wander off to the Yukon? What a funny name, Leo. It seemed to be his surname, too. Leo; it was all right for a first name, but – Elsie had insisted that it was his name, and the one she liked to call him by.

And now, here she was fretting her poor heart out for him. Oh, it was a shame. Men were perfect brutes. And to leave her under such conditions, and at such a time. She blushed as she thought what she would feel if her husband had left her when she was going to have her first baby. The thought left her anxious. But even her anxiety for her sister was lessened by the knowledge of her own good fortune. She remembered the nurse, who was even now up in the small apartments she occupied, and the doctor she had engaged. A week ago she had trembled at the thought of how she was to pay these people, and provide her sister with even the bare necessities of a confinement. Now, now it was different, and a fresh wave of thankfulness for her good fortune flooded her simple heart.

Yes, her sister should have every care. Everything she could do to make her happy and comfortable should be done. And then, when the baby came, wouldn't it be delightful? She would be its fairy god-mother. She hoped he would be a boy. Fancy Elsie with a son. Wasn't it wonderful? And she – she would give him every moment of her spare time from the office. Ah, that wonderful thought – the office.

So her thoughts ran on, keeping pace with her feet. The wonders of the new world opening out before her eyes were inexhaustible, and long before she was aware of the distance she had covered she found herself at the door of the cheap little apartment house where she lived on the top floor.

There was no elevator, and she ran at the stairs, taking them two at a time. Her good news would not wait. She must tell her poor sister. She was dying to pour all the happy story into her ears, and watch the wistful smile grow upon Elsie's troubled, handsome face.

On the sixth landing she stood breathlessly fumbling in her satchel for her key, when the door opened and the nurse appeared holding up a warning finger.

"Come quietly," she whispered. "The doctor is with her now. It came on quite suddenly. I hope things will be all right, but – she's in a bad way."

In a moment all the joy and hope died out of Monica's tender heart. All the castles, all her dreams, fell into a tumbled ruin. Her sister, her beautiful, brave sister was in danger. She knew it. She knew that the nurse's words covered far more than they expressed. Oh, it was cruel, cruel.

CHAPTER X

A PROMISE

Three hopeless days since the coming of that brief moment of overwhelming joy. The reaction had been all too terribly sudden for a young girl on the threshold of life. Monica sat at her dying sister's bedside crushed under a great grief.

Those terrible three days. The demands made upon her by the reporters of the *Daily Citizen*. The interviews she had had to endure with the editor. The letters she received. Some from strangers; some from acquaintances. Letters of congratulation; letters full of burning spite from some of the unsuccessful competitors; vampire letters demanding sympathy and practical help, pouring out stories of misery, sorrow and suffering. All these, in her simplicity, she felt it her duty to answer; and she must answer them with smiling words of hope and comfort. She must at all times keep a smiling face.

To the reporter she had to talk and laugh while her heart was breaking. To the editor she must offer her most engaging smile that his personal goodwill be assured at the outset of her career. Nor, for one moment, did she permit a sign of the aching heart underneath it all.

At the end of those three days she was an older woman by far than twice her seventeen years. She was learning from the book of life in a manner that left her almost despairing. How much she learned. That smiling world she had gazed upon as she ran home with her wonderful news was no longer smiling, its face had resumed its wonted expression which was careworn, lined with suffering, and sorrow, and regret; and was terribly, terribly old. She had learned something of what her success meant. She knew now that her success meant failure to hundreds of others. She knew that so it must always be. The successful path must be lined with a tangle of weeds of suffering and hope abandoned. For every success there must be, not one but hundreds of failures; for such was the law of Life.

Thus she was robbed of her joy and thrown back upon the grief which lay across her own threshold.

The verdict had been given that morning by the doctor; and corroboration of it was in the steady eyes of the nurse. Her sister, her well-loved, admired elder sister was dying. She was dying not as the happy mother of a beautiful son, but as the deserted wife left to starve for all her husband cared. She was dying a broken-hearted creature whose wonderful, generous nature had been made the plaything of a cold, unscrupulous villain. All this Monica told herself over and over again as she sat beside the silent, uncomplaining woman during those long hours of waiting for the end.

Her beautiful eyes were red with weeping, her pale cheeks looked so wan with the long hours of silent watching. The nurse was still there to do her work, but most of her work was now the care of the little life in the bed that had been put up at the other side of the room, rather than with the woman who had given up her life that her love might yield her absent man this one last pledge.

Poor little Monica was alone, utterly alone with her grief. There were no warm words of kindly comfort to soften her troubles. There was no loving mother's gentle hand to soothe her aching head. The world was there before her, hard, unsympathetic. She must face it alone, face it with what courage she might, doing the best she knew amid a grief which seemed everywhere about her.

An infantile cry from the other bed startled her. She rose and passed across the room. The child seemed to be asleep, for its breathing was regular, and the cry was not repeated. She gazed down upon its tiny, crumpled face, and her young heart melted with a curious yearning and love for the little life that was robbing her of a sister. It was so small. It was so tender – and – and it had cost so much. She longed to take it in her arms and press it to her girlish bosom. She loved it. Loved it because it was her sister's and soon would be all she had in the world to remind her of the generous heart from which life was so swiftly ebbing.

"Monica!"

The girl started and looked round. The dying woman's eyes were wide open.

"Come here." The voice was low, but the words were quite distinct. It was the first time she had spoken for more than twelve hours.

Monica passed swiftly back to her place at the bedside.

"Oh, Elsie, Elsie," she cried, "I'm so glad you have spoken. So, so glad."

A faint smile flickered gently over the sick woman's emaciated features.

"Are you?"

"Yes, yes. Oh, Elsie, you feel better, stronger, don't you? Say you feel better. I – I know you do."

Monica's last words came hesitatingly, for even while she was speaking a negative movement from the sick woman told her how vain were her hopes.

"It is no use, Mon. But I'm perfectly easy – now. That's why I called you. I want to talk about – him. You – you – love my little son, don't you?" There was pleading in the voice as the woman asked the question. "I saw you bending over him just now, and – and I thought – hoped you did."

"Oh, Elsie, he is yours. How could I help but love him?"

The words came impulsively, and Monica dropped a warm hand upon the transparent flesh of her sister's. Her action was promptly rewarded by a feeble pressure of acknowledgment.

"I – I knew you would."

After that neither spoke for some moments. Tears were softly falling down Monica's pretty cheeks. But her sister's eyes were closed again. It was almost as if she were gathering her strength and thoughts for a final effort.

Presently Monica grew alarmed. She dashed the tears from her eyes, and bent over the bed.

"Shall I fetch nurse? Is there anything I can do?" she asked eagerly.

The big eyes opened at once, and the light in them was a calm smile. The dying woman looked almost happy. To Monica's growing understanding of such things her happiness might have been the inspiration of one who sees beyond the narrow focus of human life; whose swiftly approaching end had revealed to her tired eyes a glimpse of the wonderful world she was approaching, that golden life awaiting all, be they saint or sinner.

"I don't want any one but you, dear – now." The voice was tired, but a sense of peace was conveyed in the gentle pressure of her thin fingers upon the soft warm flesh of her sister's hand. "I – I want to tell you of – things. And – and I want you to promise me something. Oh, Mon, as you love me, as you love my boy, I want you to give me your promise."

Monica seated herself on the edge of the bed and tearfully gave her promise with all the impulsiveness which her love inspired.

"You only have to tell me what it is. I could promise you anything, Elsie. I have only one desire in the world now; it is to – to help you."

Her sister's eyes closed for a moment. Then they opened again.

"Raise me up a little, dear. Put a pillow behind my shoulders. I want to – to – see the bed over there. I want to see my little son, his – his boy. That's better." She sighed contentedly as Monica raised her up, and her big eyes at once fixed themselves upon the other bed. There was nothing to be seen but the carefully arranged bed clothes, but, for the time at least, it was sufficient.

"I want to tell you the things I never told you before. I want to tell you about Leo; and I want to talk about my – my boy. Leo and I were not married."

A little gasp of horrified dismay escaped the young girl. She was so young that as yet her ideals of life were still intact. The thought of such a thing as her sister now spoke of had never entered her innocent head.

"Ah, that – that hurts you," the other went on. "I knew it would. I – I – that's why I lied to you before. I lied when I said Leo was my husband. Oh, Mon, don't let it make any difference to us now. The time is getting so short."

"Nothing could ever make any difference between us," Monica said, in a low voice. "I was startled. You see –"

"I know. Ah, my dear, my dear, you don't know what it is to love as I love. I met Leo a long time ago, when I was an actress. He knew me as Audrey Thorne, an actress, and I – I wanted to marry him. But – you see he had nothing on which to keep a wife – an extravagant woman as I was then. So, he went away, and – and I followed him. You must think me utterly, terribly bad – but I loved him. I followed him right up into the wilds of the Yukon, and – and I lived with him."

"Poor, poor Elsie." Monica's dismay had passed, and she gently squeezed the hand she was still holding. The pressure seemed to give the other courage to proceed.

"You mustn't pity me too much. I – I was very happy. I was very happy until I knew about – my little son. It was then that I realized the awful sin I had committed. It was then I knew the cruel wrong I had done to that unborn life. I – I think I was nearly distracted when it all came upon me." Her voice had risen. It was almost strident with emotion. "For weeks I thought and thought what I could do to remedy my wrong, and at last I took my courage in both hands. I told Leo, and – and asked him to marry me – for the child's sake."

"For the child's sake?"

The admission which the words implied filled the simple Monica with something like panic.

"You see, Leo never loved me as I loved him."

"Oh, Elsie, Elsie!"

"Yes, dear, I forced myself upon him."

The tragedy of her sister's life had almost overwhelmed the girl. The whole pitiful story wrung her heart with its pathos, its shame. Her sister. Her beautiful, clever sister. Oh, it was too, too dreadful.

After a while Elsie roused herself again. There was a lot yet to be said, and she knew her time was short.

"I am all to blame. You mustn't blame Leo," she said earnestly. "He was a good man to me. I know you think he has deserted me. But he hasn't. That is not him. He promised to marry me, and, had I lived, he would have kept that promise. We were coming down country for that purpose." She paused. "Then something happened which made it necessary for him to go on ahead. That's how I came to make the journey with the Indian. It – it couldn't be helped. You – you mustn't blame Leo. He will be looking for me. Is very likely looking for me now. But it is too late. That is why I want you to promise me something."

Monica waited. She could find nothing to say. She was learning another of the bitter lessons which life has to teach when the book is once opened. Presently the other went on —

"You see, neither of us can now remedy the wrong I have done my little son. As I said, it is too late. I shall be gone before Leo can marry me." The big eyes became eager. They looked up with piteous straining into the gentle face before them. "Do you see? Oh, Mon, do you understand? My boy – our boy has no father; and very, very soon will have no mother. Oh, Mon, what can I do, what can I say? Can – can you help me?"

But Monica was gazing helplessly before her. The warmth of her love for her erring sister was no less. But she was thinking, thinking, striving with all her might to seek a solution to the painful tangle of her poor sister's life.

"I – I – can't – Tell me, Elsie – tell me anything I can do for him. I don't seem able to think for myself," she cried hopelessly at last.

Something of Monica's difficulty seemed to communicate itself to the other. Her brows drew together in perplexity.

"It is so hard," she said suddenly. "I have thought and thought, and I can only see one possible hope – only one. That hope is – you."

"How? Oh, Elsie, tell me how. What can I do?"

With a sudden effort the mother propped herself up with her elbows behind her. Her dying eyes were burning bright with feverish light. All the hope of her poor dying soul looked up into her sister's face as her final appeal rushed to her lips.

"How? Why, why, by taking him as your own son. How? Oh, Mon, his own mother is taken from him. Then give him another. Make him your own child – whose father is dead. It would be easy for you. You married young, and your – your husband died – died at sea. He will never know differently. No one will question it. Oh, my dear, don't you see? Bring him up as your own child, born in wedlock, and never let him know his mother's shame. Promise me, your sacred promise to a dying woman, that he shall never know, through you, his mother's shame, and his own disgrace. Promise it to me, Mon, it is the only thing that can give me peace now. Forget everything I have told you. Forget the disgrace I have brought on you. Forget everything except – except only your promise. Promise! Promise!"

Her fingers tightened almost painfully upon Monica's hand. She was laboring under a fierce emotion, almost sufficient to bring on a collapse. The feverish eyes were bloodshot, and a hectic flush burned on her thin cheeks.

The impulse of the moment was upon Monica, and she leaned forward. Her other hand was tenderly raised to the woman's moist brow, in a loving, soothing manner.

"I promise, dear; I promise on my sacred word that what you ask me shall be done. Henceforth he shall be my son. Nor shall he ever know through me the cruel wrong the world has done to you. I promise you, Elsie, dear, freely, freely. And all my life I will strive to keep the real truth of his birth from him."

"Thank God!"

The reaction was terrible. The dying woman fell back on her pillows, and her features suddenly became so ghastly that Monica sprang from her seat in wild alarm. She ran to the door to summon the nurse. But the voice from the bed stayed her.

"No, Mon, not yet." Then the dying woman added with an irresistible appeal, "Give me my boy, for – for a few minutes. After that – "

Monica ran to obey with an only too thankful heart. But her instinct warned her that the end was not far off. She laid the sleeping child tenderly by its mother's side, and placed her thin arm gently under its shoulders. She felt maybe she was doing wrong, but – poor Elsie.

Elsie's eyes thanked her, but her voice remained silent. And for a long while there was an unbroken quiet in the room.

Monica moved to the window and stood with her back turned to the bed. Somehow she felt that these moments were too sacred for another's eyes to witness. Slowly fresh tears gathered in her eyes, tears of sympathy and love, and one by one they rolled unheeded, slowly down her cheeks. And as they fell the last moments of her sister's life ebbed peacefully away.

CHAPTER XI

TWO STRANGERS IN SAN SABATANO

Monica's life suddenly became filled to overflowing. She was no longer a child, but a woman of a maturity that was almost absurd in one so young. The happy, irresponsible girlhood she had so long enjoyed in her mother's modest uptown apartment had quite gone. Whatever the future might hold of happiness for her, certainly freedom from the more serious cares of life would never again be hers.

Five years ago she and her mother had bade Elsie good-bye in the same humble apartment, when the elder girl had left San Sabatano to go on the stage in New York. Monica was twelve then. Twelve; and her young eyes and younger mind were filled with a boundless envy and admiration for the beautiful sister who was to bask in the wonderful limelight of the stage, and wear clothes far beyond the beauty of all dreams; and jewels – jewels, whose splendor was incomparable to the beauty of her lovely, lovely Elsie. Had she only known it she was very near the truth when she thought of the jewels her sister would wear.

Her mother was one of those quietly good women who contrive to inspire their children with something of their own qualities by example rather than precept. Neither Elsie nor Monica ever knew what it was to receive one of those harsh reprimands so common among mothers of less understanding, of less ability. Her children must grow up guided rather than driven. All their lives this had been her method. Therefore it came as a terrible shock to her when the more wayward of the two, perhaps, in a sense, the bolder spirit of the two, suddenly announced her intention of leaving the sheltering dovecote, where money was never very plentiful, to earn her living in the flamboyant world of the stage.

True to her methods, and with, perhaps, a deeper understanding of her child, and the uselessness of refusal, the mother's permission was not long withheld. It was a reluctant enough permission, but given without any outward sign of the disapproval she really felt. Moreover, she was convinced of the rightness of her attitude. The girl, she knew, would live her life as she understood it. Her only duty remaining, therefore, was to equip her with all the knowledge of the world that lay within her simple range of understanding. For the rest the child's fate was in the lap of the gods.

But she never seemed to quite get over the parting. For a long time she bore up with great fortitude, and her devotion to Monica became a wonderful thing. It was almost as if she feared that she, too, her one remaining child, might be taken from her, and swallowed up by the hungry maw of the outside world.

She heard regularly from Elsie for some time. Elsie was getting on quite well. Then letters became less frequent. And, finally, about the time that Elsie met Leo, they ceased altogether. It was then that the signs of break-up began to show in the patient woman at home.

She had died quietly and quickly of heart failure just a year ago. Monica's grief was profound. But she was too young for any lasting effect to remain with her. She lived on in the apartment without any thought of leaving it. The whole thing seemed the most natural in the world to her. Her mother's solicitor wrote her, and offered her a home with his family, but, with prompt decision, she refused it. She told him that if her mother's affairs permitted it, she would rather remain in San Sabatano, where she had all her girlhood's friends, than break new ground among strangers. Her mother's affairs yielded her the barest living, so she remained, determined to make a way for herself in the world, her own world, as other girls of her acquaintance had done.

Now she had reached the second, and, in many ways, the greater change in her life. Where, before, only her childish affections had been bruised and crushed at her mother's death, now she realized that she had all too suddenly passed from the sunlit paths of innocent childhood, to the harsher road down which all the world was journeying; struggling, jostling, each striving to seize for themselves the easier, the pleasanter paths along which to make the journey of life.

But the change in her was subtle. There was no outward effect, there was no disturbing of the wholesome, happy nature that was the very essence of her being. The change was in an added knowledge, a quickening of naturally alert faculties. She realized that some strange force had suddenly plunged her into the midst of a life which demanded quick thought and swift action, so that her pulses might be kept beating in perfect time to the pace at which life sped on about her.

She realized that she had suddenly become one of life's workers, and that grave responsibility was already knocking at her door. From the very beginning she accepted the new conditions gladly. She felt an added zest to the fact of living. The old days of dreaming were gone. Every moment of her waking hours was filled with thought, keen, practical thought; and the demand thus made on her found her ready and able. There was no fluster, no confusion of any sort. Her healthy brain was quick and incisive, characteristics quite unsuspected even by herself. Not only was this so, but, with the added pressure, there came a quiet desire to test her newly discovered powers to the uttermost.

There were other changes, too, changes of almost equal importance. She found herself witnessing the progress of affairs about her with an entirely new understanding of them. All her understanding of the precepts of her youth received revision; a revision which was inspired by the story her sister had told her on her deathbed. The shock at first had been a little overwhelming, but, young as she was, her ready brain quickly assimilated the facts, and set itself to the task of readjusting its focus.

There was no bitterness, no horror at her discoveries. She simply realized that here was a small slice of life cut out by the same ruthless knife which no doubt served hundreds of similar purposes among the rest of mankind. Who was she to criticize, who was she to condemn? Her knowledge was all to come, and maybe, as she went on, she would discover that such tragedies were part of the real life which up to now had been entirely hidden from her.

She had no blame for her dead sister. Her memory was as sacred to her as if she had lived the most perfect life of purity under the social laws governing man's relationship to woman. Her love once given was not a thing to be promptly rescinded by the failure of its idol. The idol might fall, and become besmirched in the unsuspected mire, but her frank, kindly hands were ready to set it up again and again, and perhaps in time her broader knowledge would teach her how to secure it from further disaster.

Perhaps the first real warning of the change in her came at the moment she considered her sister's funeral. Here undoubtedly a shock was awaiting her, and, in a moment, there leaped into her focus a teeming picture of almost endless complications. Just for an instant all her nerves were set jangling, and an utter helplessness left her painfully distressed. Then the feeling as abruptly passed, her mind cleared, and, one by one, she found herself reviewing each detail of the situation, and marking out the course she must adopt.

First and foremost her sacred promise to the dying woman stood out in all its nakedness, entirely robbed of its cloak of impulse and affection, in which it had been clad at the time of its making. And from that promise, radiating in every direction, she saw boundless possibilities for more than unpleasant consequences.

She knew she must make up her mind swiftly, and she did so in an astonishing manner. A sleepless night found her in the morning ready with her plans all clear in her mind. She still had nearly three weeks before taking up her new position in the office of the *Daily Citizen*. This would be ample time to put everything in order. It was necessary to take the doctor into her confidence. He had been their doctor for as long as she could remember. He had attended her mother in her last illness, and knew their whole family history as well as she knew it herself. Therefore she did not anticipate any difficulty with him.

So the third morning after her sister's death she visited him at his house, and confided sufficient of her sister's story to him to enlist his sympathy, without any breach of the confidence reposed in her. She pointed out her own position, and begged his help in hushing the whole matter up.

Dr. Bernard Strong was a man of wide sympathy and understanding, and in giving his promise of help, pointed out the gravity of the position which her quixotic promise had placed her in.

"My dear," he said, "this is almost a terrible business for you. Here you are, bound to this town for at least a year, with a newly born infant in your care, which you cannot explain away, without breaking your promise to poor Elsie. You are known. You have many friends. What in the world are you going to do?"

It was then that Monica displayed the quick, incisive working of her suddenly aroused mental faculties. She told him in brief, pointed words the plans she had made during the long, wakeful night.

"It does not seem so – so very difficult," she said.

Then she plunged into the details of her schemes. She pointed out that her tenement was a weekly one, which she could get rid of as soon as Elsie was buried. This she would do. Then she would take rooms far out on the outskirts of the town. She would first find a house for the baby in the country, a few miles out, where he was not likely to be brought into contact with the townsfolk. That would be a start. After that she would meet any emergency as it arose. The help she wanted from him was to arrange the funeral, with all the secrecy possible, and see that the law was complied with in regard to the baby. His registration, etc.

The quick practical manner in which she detailed all the minor details to this man of experience filled him with a profound admiration, and he told her so.

"It is astounding to me, Monica," he said kindly, "that you, a girl of seventeen, can handle such a matter in the calm manner you are doing. Perfectly astounding. You certainly ought to do well in this business career you are about to begin. Really you have made things seem less – er – formidable. But, my dear child, I feel I must warn you. You see, I am so much older," he went on, with a smile. "I have seen so much of the world – the sadder side of the world, that I cannot let this moment pass without telling you of the rocks I can see ahead, waiting to break up your little boat. Your tale of an early marriage and all that, if the boy becomes associated with you in the minds of people in the town, will never do. At once they will think the worst, and then – what of your position on the *Daily Citizen*? Then when the time comes for you to marry? What then?"

"I shall never marry – now," was Monica's prompt and decided reply.

The doctor shook his head.

"It is so easy to say that. Believe me, my dear, you have tied a millstone about your neck that will take your utmost strength to bear. I even doubt if you will be able to bear it for long. You are about to embark on a career of falsehood which will find you out at almost every turn. It is quite terrible to think of. Poor Elsie did you the greatest wrong, the greatest injury, when she extracted that promise from you. And," he added, with a wry smile, "I fear, from my knowledge of you, you will carry it out to the bitter end – until it utterly overwhelms you."

Monica stepped off the veranda of the doctor's house with none of the lightness of gait with which she had mounted it. She realized the gravity of her position to the full now, and knew that, without breaking her sacred word to a dying woman, there was no means of remedying it. But she was quite determined, and walked away with her pretty lips tightly compressed, her blue eyes gazing out unflinchingly before her. Nothing should turn her from her purpose. It was Elsie's trust to her. It was the cross she had to bear. Come what might she would bear it to the end, even if at the last its weight were to crush the very life out of her.

The next three weeks passed rapidly. Monica had no time to look back upon the trouble which had so involved her, she had little enough time to gaze ahead into the wide vista of troublous rocks the doctor had promised her. In fact she had no time at all for anything but the crowding emergencies of the moment, and keeping the well-meaning friends and curious neighbors as far from the secrets of her inner life as possible.

Nor was it easy; and without Dr. Strong's help many of her difficulties would have been well-nigh insurmountable. But he was as good, and even better, than his word. The whole of the funeral

was achieved without any unnecessary publicity, and Monica and the doctor were the only mourners. Then the latter found a home for the boy on a farm, three miles out of the town, where a newly born babe had just died, and so, in the end, everything was accomplished just as Monica had planned, without one unnecessary question being asked. Thus, by the time the winner of the special prize took up her duties in the office of the *Daily Citizen*, of all San Sabatano, Dr. Strong alone shared Monica Hanson's secret. A secret, it was her future object in life to keep entirely hidden from the world.

Monica entered upon her duties with a lighter heart than she had known for weeks. Everything was as she could wish it. All traces of her sister's shame had been carefully covered. Practically no sign was left to delight the prying eyes of the curious scandalmongers. Her future lay before her, wide, and, to her, illimitable.

Her aims and ambitions were fixed plainly in her mind. She must succeed; she must rise in the commercial world; she must make money. These things were not for herself. No, she required so little. They were for him, for the little life so cruelly wronged at its very outset. Henceforth her own life would be devoted to his. Her whole thought would be for him and his welfare, not only for the child's sake, but in memory of the love she had borne her dead sister.

How well the editor of the *Daily Citizen* had judged the competitors for the special prize was quickly demonstrated. Monica's zeal was backed by the suddenly aroused acuteness of an unusually clever brain, and, before a month had passed, the complacent individual in the editorial chair had excellent reason for again congratulating himself. He had intended from the outset that the winner of the princely prize and unusual salary should earn every cent of it, but he found in his new clerk an insatiable hunger for work, and a capacity for simple organization quite astounding, and far beyond any demand he could make on it.

In this beginner he quickly detected a highly developed germ of commercial instinct; that germ so coveted, so rare. He tried her in many ways, seeking in a more or less fumbling way for the direction in which her abilities most surely pointed. Stenography and typing, he quickly saw, were mere incidents to her. She had other and larger abilities. Frequently in dictating letters he found himself discussing matters pertaining to them with her, and she never failed to center her mental eye upon the point at issue, driving straight to the heart of the matter in hand. The man was frankly delighted with her, and, in the shortest possible time, she became a sort of confidential secretary, whose views on the organization of his paper were often more than useful to him.

It was about this time that the editor's sanctum was invaded by a stranger; a big stranger of quite uncommon appearance. The man was simply dressed in good store clothes, which covered a powerful, burly figure. But the chief interest lay in the man's face and head. It was a strong face. To use Mr. Meakin's own description of him to his young clerk some time later, he possessed a "tough head and a face like emery cloth."

He gave no name, in fact he refused his name. He came to insert an advertisement in the paper, and to consult the editor upon the matter.

His objects were so definite that, in spite of the refusal to give his name, Mr. Meakin decided to see him. Monica was away at dinner, or he would probably have turned him over to her. However, when the man finally appeared the editorial mind was pleased at the study his unusual personality offered him.

The stranger very nearly filled up the doorway as he entered the inner office.

"Guess you're the editor?" he began at once, dropping into the chair Mr. Meakin kicked towards him.

"Sure," Mr. Meakin was always sparing of words to strangers.

"Ah."

Then, so long did the man remain silent that the editor found it necessary to spur him on by a method he usually adopted in such cases. He pressed the button of his dummy telephone with his foot. The bell rang out, and he lifted the receiver to his ear.

"Hullo! Who is it? Oh, that you, Allards? Oh, is it important? Well, I'm engaged just now. I shan't be three minutes. Yes, I'll come right along then. Goo'-bye!"

He looked across at his visitor as he put the receiver up.

"Sorry to interrupt you. I didn't just get what you said."

A flicker of a smile passed across the visitor's serious face.

"It's of no consequence," he said. "Guess I must have been thinking aloud. You see it's kind of a fool trick having the button of that dummy 'phone in sight under the table. Guess the feller who fixed it was a 'mutt.'"

"Eh?" Mr. Meakin's face went suddenly scarlet. He was about to make a hasty reply, but changed his mind, and laughed with a belated sense of humor.

"It's served its purpose anyhow," he said genially. "What can I do for you?"

The stranger responded to his humor at once.

"Don't guess you can do much. Maybe you can tell me a deal. I'm looking for some one who's lately come to this city. A lady. Maybe you get a list of visitors to this city in your paper."

"At the hotels – yes."

"Ah, I don't guess she's stopping at an hotel. Came to visit her sister. Her name's Audrey Thorne."

"Audrey Thorne," Mr. Meakin searched the back cells of memory. He seemed to have heard the name at some time or other, but for the life of him he could not recall where.

"Guess I'm not wise," he said at last, with a thoughtful shake of his head, while he eyed his visitor shrewdly. "Anyway, if I knew of the lady, tain't up to me to hand information to a stranger – without a name."

The stranger promptly rose from his seat.

"Just so," he said, with a sharp clip of his powerful jaws. "I'll ask you to read this over," he went on, producing a sheet of paper from his pocket, "and say what it'll cost to have it in your news-sheet for a week."

He handed the paper across the desk, and Mr. Meakin admired the bold handwriting in which the advertisement was set out.

"Will Audie send her address to Box 4926 P. O. Winnipeg? Sign letter in full name. – Leo."

Mr. Meakin read it over twice. Then he looked up keenly.

"Guess it'll cost you ten dollars," he said. "Sunday edition two dollars extra. In advance."

The stranger paid out the money without comment and moved towards the door. Then he looked back.

"There'll be no mistake. It's particular," he said deliberately.

"There'll be no mistake."

"Thanks." The stranger pocketed the receipt for the money with some care.

The door closed behind the man who signed himself as "Leo," and Mr. Meakin heard him pass down the passage to the outer office. Then he turned to the stack of local copy at his elbow.

He was quite used to strange visits from stranger people, so he thought no more of the matter until nearly an hour later when Monica returned from her dinner.

As she entered the wholesome, airy apartment, with its soft carpet and comfortable furniture, he looked up quickly.

"Say, Miss Hanson," he said, holding out a pile of proofed copy. "This needs classifying. It goes in tomorrow's issue. Get it through before four. Say, and you might hand this in to the advertisement department. A guy with a tow-head, and a face like emery cloth handed me twelve dollars for a week – and Sunday. Reckon he's chasin' up his lady friend, and she's guessin' to lie low."

He passed her Leo's advertisement, and went on with his work.

Monica waited for any further instructions to come, and, as she stood, glanced down at the sheet of paper containing the advertisement. In a moment her attention was riveted upon it, and a sickening

feeling stole through her whole body. Then her pulses were set hammering with a nervousness she could not control, and she felt faint.

At that moment Mr. Meakin happened to look up.

"Well?" he inquired.

Then he became aware of the pallor of the pretty face he was accustomed to admire, when Mrs. Meakin was safely within the walls of their home on the outskirts of the city.

"Say, you're not well," he exclaimed kindly.

Monica promptly pulled herself together.

"It's – it's just the heat," she stammered. "I'll – go and see to these. Anything else?"

"Nothin' else just now. Say, don't worry too much if the heat – "

But Monica had fled before he finished his well-intentioned admonition. Once in her own office she flung herself into the chair at her desk, and sat staring at the ominous sheet of paper.

"Leo!" she muttered. "Whatever am I to do? Whatever am I to do?"

For a long time the pile of copy remained untouched while she struggled with the problem confronting her. She viewed it from every aspect. And with each fresh view it troubled her the more. What was her duty? What was the right course to pursue? This man was Leo. Elsie's Leo. She had no doubt of it. Leo, the father of Elsie's boy. If Elsie had lived she would have welcomed him. But Elsie was dead. Elsie was dead and carried with her her promise never to let the child know his mother's shame. Ought she to tell the father of this child? Ought she to give him up? It would be an easy way out of all her difficulties. Yet she had promised to bring him up as her own.

No, she would not give the boy up. It was plainly her duty to keep him, and – yes, she knew it – her desire. But equally she had a duty of some sort to fulfil by this man. He must not be left in ignorance of Elsie's death. He must be told that or he would haunt this town, and become an everlasting source of disquiet to her. Yes, there was a duty to herself as well. She must safeguard herself; safeguard the child. And with this conclusion came an inspiration. She would write to him on her typewriter, and leave the letter unsigned.

So she passed the advertisement on to its department, and, on a plain sheet of paper, sent the briefest possible message to the post office, Winnipeg.

"Audie died in child birth."

There was neither heading nor signature, and she determined to have it mailed from another town. The more she considered it the more her message pleased her. She was keeping her promise to her sister, and fulfilling what she believed to be her duty to the man. He had asked for news of Elsie; well, here was news which was the exact truth.

Her work was duly completed by four o'clock, and she awaited a call from Mr. Meakin. There would be a number of letters to take down, she knew, when his editorial work was finished for the day. In the meantime she had leisure to reflect upon the visit of the man, Leo.

It was curious. Almost a coincidence that he should call when she was out. Had she been in it would have fallen to her duty to have interviewed him first. As it was she had missed seeing him. It was a pity. She ought to have seen him. Yes, she would have given half a month's salary to have seen him —

A bell rang; but it was not Mr. Meakin's bell. It was from the outer office. She took up the 'phone at once. Could it be – ?

"Hello! Oh! Some one to see Mr. Meakin? Who is it? What's that? Austin Leyburn? What's that? He's dressed funny? All right, send him in to me. Right."

Monica put up the receiver and waited. It was not Leo, and she was disappointed. Austin Leyburn. She didn't know the name.

There was a knock at the door, and, in answer to the girl's summons, it was thrown open by the small boy who piloted visitors.

"Mr. Austin Leyburn, Miss!"

Monica indicated a chair as the door closed behind her visitor. He took it without hesitation, and she found herself gazing upon a most extraordinary object. He was obviously a powerfully built man with a keen, alert face and narrow eyes. He was smiling at her with a curiously ironical smile which rather annoyed her. But his general appearance was deplorable. His clothes were so unclean and ragged that, even among tramps, she never remembered seeing anything quite like them. They were patched and torn again in a dozen different places, and it would have been impossible to have described their original color with any accuracy. Yes, there could be no doubt he was a tramp of some sort. Yet when he spoke his manner was not that of a tramp. However, as a precaution, Monica kept her foot over a push button which did not belong to a dummy 'phone.

"If you'll state your business, I'll inquire if Mr. Meakin will see you," she said, in her most business-like way. "He's very busy. You see, the paper will be going to press soon."

"I don't guess I need to worry the boss if you happen to know about things." The man's manner was sharp, but his smile remained. Monica became interested. There was nothing of the usual whine of the tramp here.

"I deal with all inquiries," she said simply.

"Confidential?"

"That depends on the nature of the confidence."

"Ah. Maybe what I'm after won't be reckoned confidential."

"If you'll –"

"Just so, Miss. Well, see here, maybe it isn't a heap except to me. I'm after a feller who calls himself Leo," he said distinctly. Monica started. The man's quick, smiling eyes saw the start and drew his conclusions. "I see you know him. I knew he'd been here. Came this morning. You see he's after a woman belonging to this city. I guessed he'd get around. I'm on his trail and want him bad. Maybe you can put me wise where he's stopping?"

Monica shook her head with a calmness she was by no means feeling.

"I shouldn't tell you if I knew. You're quite right, I know the man – by name, but that's all. You see, we know many people by name – but there our information to strangers ends."

"So." Mr. Leyburn eyed her coldly. "Maybe Mr. Meakin, as you call him, will –"

"Mr. Meakin will tell you no more. In fact, if this is your business Mr. Meakin will not see you."

Monica pressed the bell under her foot.

The man laughed harshly.

"Well, it don't matter. Guess I'll come up with him sooner or later. Maybe he'll look into this office again another day." He rose, and his hard eyes shone with a metallic gleam. "If he does – you can just tell him that Tug is on his heels. He's looking for him bad. So he best get busy. Good-day."

The small boy threw open the door, and stood aside to allow the visitor to pass out. Nor, in spite of the curious threat in the man's words, could Monica help a smile at the impish manner in which the boy held his nose as the man passed by him.

The stranger's visit left an unsavory flavor behind him. Monica was disturbed, and sat thinking hard. She was striving hard to raise the curtain which shut out her view of the life lying behind all these people. She was striving to visualize something of that life with which poor Elsie had so long been associated. A number of vague pictures hovered before her mind's eye, but they were indistinct, unreal. She could not see with eyes of knowledge. How could she? Was not this life belonging to another world? A world she had never beheld, never been brought into contact with? No, it was useless to try to penetrate those dark secrets which she felt lay hidden behind the curtain she was powerless to draw aside.

Yet she knew these things had not come to her to be set aside and forgotten. They had come to her for a purpose. What was that purpose? She tried to see with her sister's eyes. What would Elsie have done, with Leo – threatened? Ah, that was it; that was the purpose. Her sister's responsibility had devolved upon her. Elsie would have taken some action to help – Leo. What would she have done?

She thought and puzzled for a long time. Then she pressed the bell under her desk once more. An inspiration had come.

When the boy appeared she demanded the proofs of the day's advertisements.

She waited impatiently until the boy returned, and then kept him waiting while she hastily extracted the one she required from the pile. She read it over carefully. Leo had worded it to suit her purpose well. Suddenly she took up her blue pencil. She dashed out the word "Winnipeg" and substituted "Toronto" in its place. And without another glance at it handed the papers back to the boy.

"That's all," she said briefly.

But the boy was full of the impertinence of his kind.

"Toronto?" he read. "Say, Miss, ain't that the place they have ice palaces an' things?" he demanded, with a grin.

Monica was in no mood to answer his questions.

"Take them back," she said sharply.

As the boy slouched off she leaned back in her chair with a sigh of relief. She had done her best to put the man calling himself Tug off the track of his quarry.

PART II

CHAPTER I AFTER EIGHTEEN YEARS

Monica Hanson stood in front of the full-length mirror in her bedroom. For a long time she stood viewing her fair reflection with a smile at once half humorous, half tearful.

Thirty-five!

It sounded terrible as she muttered the age she knew herself to be. Thirty-five! Yet the perfect blue eyes were not a day older, as they looked back at her out of the glass. There was no hardening in their depths; there were no gathering lines about their fringed lids. Perhaps there was a deeper, wiser look in them; a look suggesting a wider knowledge, a more perfect sympathy with the life into which they had peeped during her years of struggling. But there was no aging in them. The rich, ripe mouth, too, so wonderfully firm, yet gentle, the broad, intelligent forehead with its fair, even brows. There was not one single unsightly line to disfigure these features which displayed so much of the strong character which lay behind them. Her wealth of fair, wavy hair, which since her earliest days had been her one little conceit, her constant joy and pride, was faultlessly dressed, nor had she ever yet found in its midst one of those silver threads whose discovery never fails to strike terror into the heart of an aging woman.

No, she beheld nothing in her reflection to cause her a single pang, a single heartache. Yet her heart was aching; and the pain of it was in the smile which came back to her from her reflection.

Had Monica only known it, the years had been more than kind to her. With a little more womanly vanity she would have understood that her girlish attractions had been increased a hundredfold. Not only had the years matured her figure to perfections which can never belong to early youth, but they had endowed her with a beauty of soul and mind, far more rarely found in one of such unusual physical attraction.

But such ponderings before her glass were useless, perhaps harmful. It was all so impossible. So she turned away with a little impatient gesture, and, picking up the letter lying on her bed, she passed through the folding doors into her sitting-room beyond.

The winter sun was shining in through frosty windows; that wonderful winter sun which brightens and makes joyous the Canadian dead season, without shedding sufficient warmth to disturb the thermometer from its despairing depths of cold.

She crossed to the window, and stood beside the heat radiator while she read her letter for perhaps the twentieth time. It was quite short, and intensely characteristic of the writer. Monica understood this. The lack of effusion in no way blinded her to the stormy passion which had inspired it.

"Dear Monica:

"I am going to call on you at 4 o'clock this afternoon, if you have no objection. If you have, 'phone me. I simply cannot rest until the subject of our talk the other night is settled.

"Yours,

"Alexander Hendrie."

There was a wistful longing in her eyes as the woman looked up from the brief note. The subject of their talk. He could not rest. Had she rested, or known peace of mind since that evening? She knew she had not. She knew that come what might that calm which belongs to a heart untouched by love could never again be hers. She knew that love, at last, had come knocking at the door of her soul; nor had it knocked in vain, in spite of the impossibility of it all. She had not 'phoned. Instead she had spent two hours over her toilet to receive the man who was her employer, and had now become her lover.

No one knew better than she the happiness that might have been hers in her newly found regard for this great wheat grower of Alberta, had things only been different. She loved him; she had admired him ever since she came into his employ, but now she loved him with all the long-pent passion of a woman who has for years deliberately shut the gates of her soul to all such feelings.

She knew her love must be denied. There was no hope for it.

The trials she had gone through for the sake of her pledge to her dying sister were far too vividly in her mind to leave her with any hope for this love of hers. She must crush it out. She must once more steel herself, that her faith with the dead might be kept.

She dropped upon the ottoman beside the window, and, gazing out on Winnipeg's busy main street, gave herself up to profound thought. Her incisive brain swiftly became busy, reviewing the career which had been hers since – since young Frank, her beloved boy, the child who had cost her a sister's life, had become her one object and care.

Her deep eyes grew introspective, and her pretty lips closed firmly.

She had not traveled an easy road during those years. Far from it. The rocks prophesied by the kindly doctor had been quickly realized. They had come well-nigh to wrecking her craft at the outset. Only that its ribs were so stout, and the heart that guided it so strong, it must inevitably have been doomed.

So much for her youthful conceit; so much for the boundless optimism of her years. She was caught among the very first shoals that presented themselves in the ebb tide of her fortunes six months before the completion of her contract on the *Daily Citizen*. Would she ever forget the – yes, tragedy of that moment? She thought not.

Everything had gone along so smoothly. Her fears had been lulled. There was no sign to point the coming of the disaster. Yes, that was it. There had been overconfidence. The complications at her sister's death had been forgotten. There had been no unpleasant developments to remind her of the pitfalls with which she was surrounded. So she had grown careless in her confidence. In the warmth of her girl's heart, her rapidly growing love for the little life in her charge, she found herself spending every moment of her spare time with the child she intended to teach to call her "mother."

They were happy days. The joy of them still remained. Nor, for all the trouble they had caused her, did she regret a single one of them. But her indiscretion grew, and so the blow fell.

It was on a Sunday. In the afternoon. She remembered it well; a glorious sunny day in early summer. She was pushing the baby coach along the sidewalk of the broad country road toward the city. She had paused to readjust the sunshade over the child's head. When she looked up it was to discover a light, top buggy, drawn by a fast trotter, rapidly approaching. Mr. Meakin was driving it, and beside him sat his little, chapel-going wife.

They saw her and promptly pulled up; and instantly Monica knew that trouble was knocking at her door. Mrs. Meakin did not like her. She did not approve of her husband's secretary; and Mrs. Meakin was one of those narrow, straight-laced puritans, who never cease to thank Providence that they are so pure.

"Why, it's Miss Hanson," she promptly exclaimed. "And – oh, the lovely baby. Why – " She looked at Monica's scarlet face and broke off.

Mr. Meakin took up the greeting in the cordial fashion of a man who is well disposed.

"Say, Miss Hanson, it's a hot day for you to be pushing that coach. You surely ought to be around an ice cream parlor with one of your beaus. Not out airing some friend's kid."

But Monica's confusion only increased under the sharp eyes of Mrs. Meakin, which never left her face.

"A baby can't have too much of this beautiful air," she said helplessly.

"Why doesn't its mother look after it?" demanded Mrs. Meakin.

"She's – she's busy."

Monica's attempts at evasion were so feeble, she had so little love for subterfuge, that, to a mind as prone to suspicion as Mrs. Meakin's, the word "mystery" quickly presented itself.

"Whose is it?"

The inevitable question seemed to thunder into the wretched girl's ears.

Whose is it? Whose is it? It was useless to lie to this woman, whom she knew had no love for her. So on the spur of the moment she did the only thing that seemed possible, seeing Mr. Meakin was her employer. But she did it so badly that, even while she spoke, she knew her doom was sealed.

"She belongs back there." Monica pointed at the distant farm house.

"That house?" cried Mrs. Meakin sharply. "Why, that's Mrs. Gadly's. I – " She turned abruptly to her husband. "We'd better drive on, or we'll be late back for supper, and that will make us late for chapel."

With a flourish of his whip, and a cheery good-bye, Mr. Meakin set his "three-minute" trotter going again, and Monica was left to her dismay.

She knew. She needed no instinct to tell her. It had all been written in Mrs. Meakin's icy face. The woman would find out all about the baby she had seen her husband's secretary with. She would smell out the whole trail with that nose which was ever sharp for an evil scent.

She continued her walk thinking hard all the while, and finally took the child back to its nurse at the usual time.

Mrs. Gadly met her at the front door, and Monica put a sharp question.

"Has Mrs. Meakin been here?"

"She surely has, mam," replied the woman, smiling. "And a God-fearin' woman she is. I've known her years an' years. I didn't jest know you was her good man's secretary. She's a lady, she is; a real, elegant lady. An' she was all took up with the baby, an' the way I'd looked after him. She said as it was a great thing for a woman who 's lost her baby to have the care of another woman's child, kind o' softens the pain. An' when I told her as you paid me so liberal for it – Why, mam, you ain't faint? Ah, it's the sun; you best come right inside and set down."

It had been a terrible moment for Monica. She knew that her career in San Sabatano had suddenly terminated. The God-fearing Mrs. Meakin would have no mercy on her, particularly as she was her husband's secretary.

She returned to her apartments that evening with her mind made up to a definite course; and, on the Monday morning following, before she went to her office, she looked up her contract with the *Daily Citizen*. She took it with her. She knew that the thing she was about to do was a tacit admission of the child's parentage. But she intended it so to be, since truthful explanation was denied her.

Mr. Meakin was amiability itself. But there was evident relief in the sigh with which he accepted the return of the girl's contract.

"I'm real sorry, Miss Hanson, real sorry," he said sincerely. "But I guess you're right, seeing things are as they are. You see, Mrs. Mea – you see, San Sabatano has notions. I'd just like to say right here, though, I'm the loser by your going. I'm the loser by a heap. An' whenever you're wanting a reference I'll hand you a bully one. Just you write me when you need it. Meanwhile the cashier'll hand you a check for salary, right away."

Yes, whatever his wife's attitude toward her, Mr. Meakin stood her good friend, for, on her departure, the cashier handed her a check for three months' salary – which she had not earned!

After she left San Sabatano her fortunes, for a while, became more than checkered. Her "ups" were few, and her "downs" were considerably in the ascendant. For a long time her youth prevented her obtaining work in which there was any scope for her abilities and ambitions, consequently the salaries were equally limited in their possibilities. Often she had to accept "free lance" stenography and typing, and not infrequently auxiliary clerk work of a humdrum and narrowing order. But to none of these things would she definitely commit herself, nor would she permit them to shut out the sun

of her ambitions. She would keep on working, and watching, and waiting, for that opportunity which she felt was bound to come in the end.

Thus, with each reverse in the stern battle she was fighting, she grew wider in her knowledge of life as it was. Her upbringing had blinded her, and her own simple honesty and faith had further narrowed her focus. But these things were passing, and her view widened as the months lengthened into years.

But her trials were many. Not the least of them was when, as Miss Hanson, it was discovered she was always accompanied by a boy with blue eyes and fair hair, practically the color of her own. Nor was there any chance of quieting the voice of scandal, when it was known that the particular child always called her "mother."

Twice this occurred in boarding houses of an ultra-respectable tone, which, on the whole, was not so damaging as it was annoying. But when her supposed offence attacked her livelihood, as, on more than one occasion, it very soon did, it was with heartache and grief that Monica realized that a drastic change must be brought about.

She knew that, for his own sake, she must temporarily part with the boy. It was imperative that she earn the money necessary for his education, and, with this scandal attaching to her, that would very soon be made impossible. Furthermore, she realized that he was rapidly growing to years of childish understanding when it would be hopeless, and even dangerous, to attempt to answer the multiplicity of questions regarding his supposed father which flowed from his lips, without giving a damaging impression to his young mind. Later, when he grew up, she would tell him the false story which she had hardened her heart to, and trust to Providence that it might satisfy, and have no evil consequences.

It was a terrible blow to part from him. She loved the boy, whom she had had christened Frank Burton, with all the profound affection of her ardent nature. He was possibly more precious to her than her own son might have been, if only for the fact of the pains she was at to keep him, and the trials which his upbringing brought her.

Then, too, she was never quite without a haunting fear that at any time some unforeseen circumstance might arise and snatch him from her care. Besides these things, the boy inherited all his mother's generous nature; all her loyalty; and, in a hundred other ways, reminded her of the sister she had loved. To Monica he was the sweetest creature in the world, and the parting with him came well-nigh to breaking her heart.

But it proved itself for the best. It almost seemed as if Frank's going were in some way responsible for the change of fortune which so quickly followed. Within a month, Monica secured an excellent position in a Chicago wheat broker's office at the biggest salary she had ever earned. Furthermore, she remained in this place for a year, with unqualified success. Thence she went to another wheat operator's office. Then on, from post to post, always advancing her interests, and always in the wheat world. Truly the boy's going away to school seemed like the first stepping-stone to the successful career she so ardently desired.

So Frank's education was completed in the manner Monica most desired. Her experience in the world of wheat inspired her with definite ideas as to his future; ideas in which, fortunately, he readily concurred.

No one knew better than Monica the fortunes to be won from the soil, and she was at pains to impress on his young mind that such fortunes were far more honestly and easily earned than in the commercial world to which she belonged.

Therefore at the age of fifteen Frank repaired to an agricultural institution to learn in theory that which, later, he was to test in practice.

It was during his career at the agricultural college that Monica first became the secretary of Alexander Hendrie, the greatest wheat grower and operator in the west of Canada. He was a man she had known by reputation for several years, ever since she first stepped within the portals of the wheat

world. She had never come into actual contact with him before, but his name was a household word wherever wheat was dealt in. Besides being a big operator on the Winnipeg and Chicago markets, he owned something like thirty square miles of prairie land in Alberta under wheat cultivation, and was notorious for his scrupulous honesty and hard dealing. It was a saying in the world of which he was the uncrowned king that it was always safe to follow where he led, but only to follow. Of course he was a millionaire several times over, but there was no ostentation, no vulgar display with him. He lived a sparing, hard-working life, and in such an employ Monica felt that she had reached the goal of her career.

The manner of her meeting with him was curious, and almost like the work of Fate. But the manner of her engagement as his secretary was still more curious, yet characteristic of the man.

It happened on the railroad. She was returning from the west coast with her then employer, Henry Louth, one of the most daring of the Chicago wheat men. Perhaps a better description of him would have been "reckless," but the newspapers reported him as daring – until after his death.

Like many another speculator in the past, this man had become disastrously involved in a wild endeavor to corner wheat. But he found, as others had found before him, instead of completing the corner he hoped to make, he had only created a Frankenstein which threatened him with destruction. So far did he suddenly find himself involved that only financial assistance on an enormous scale could have saved him from ruin. His thoughts turned at once to Alexander Hendrie, who was then in Vancouver. He was the only man who could afford him adequate help. There was nothing for it but a desperate rush across the continent on his forlorn hope, and he undertook the journey at once, accompanied by Monica.

But like the majority of forlorn hopes inspired by ill fortune, the journey ended in dire disaster. When Louth put his proposition to the millionaire he learned to his horror that this man was actually the head of the syndicate who had been his undoing. It was an absurd blending of comedy and tragedy, yet the situation was wholly characteristic of the methods of Alexander Hendrie. The work had been carried out with all the subtlety of the astute mind which had lifted the man to his present position. It had been carried out by secret agents, and never for one moment had his name been allowed to figure in the affair. But it was Hendrie who was responsible for the shattering of the edifice of monopoly Louth had so recklessly attempted to set up; and the latter set out on his return journey a broken and beaten man.

Monica would never forget that journey, and all it meant to her. While the train was held up by a heavy snowfall at a place called Glacier, in the Rocky Mountains, Henry Louth, in his private car, took the opportunity of shooting himself. The sensation, the hubbub, the excitement the affair caused was intense; and Monica attended him during his dying moments, afterwards watching at his bedside until his body was removed by the authorities.

It was during this latter period, when the excitement had died down, and all was quiet again, that a large man entered the car from another part of the train. He came straight to the bedside and looked gravely at the dead man. Then he turned to the beautiful woman beside the bed, and looked at her with unsmiling eyes.

She knew him at once, and returned his look unflinchingly. It was Alexander Hendrie. She recognized the strong, rugged face of the man, and his abundant fair hair.

In a moment a cold resentment at the intrusion rose up in her, and, for the life of her, she could not restrain the impulse to give it expression.

"Well?" she inquired. "Are you satisfied?"

"How?"

The man displayed no emotion. His ejaculation was the expression of a mind preoccupied.

"You – you are responsible for this."

Monica's challenge came with biting coldness. But Hendrie only shook his head.

"Wrong. Guess you don't understand. Maybe most folks – who don't understand – will say that. But I'm not responsible for – that." He indicated the dead man with a contemptuous nod. "I was on a legitimate proposition to prevent the consumers of wheat being plundered. I'm losing money by what I've done. Guess he hadn't the grit to stand the racket of his dirty game. Men like him are well out of it."

Monica dropped her eyes from the steady gaze of the iron man before her. Somehow she felt ashamed of her impulsive accusation. In his concise fashion he had given her a new understanding of what had happened.

"I hadn't seen it that way before," she said, almost humbly.

Hendrie nodded.

"You were his secretary," he said, with a subtle emphasis.

"Yes."

Again the man nodded.

"I've heard of you."

Then he turned as if about to go. But he did not go. He paused, and again his steady eyes sought hers.

"Guess he's dead. I need another secretary. You can have the job."

This was Monica's first encounter with a personality which had a strange and powerful attraction for her.

Two weeks later she found herself in her new position, established in the millionaire's palatial offices in Winnipeg at, what was for her, a princely salary.

At the end of nearly two years she was still with him, a privileged, confidential secretary; and at last the woman in her was crying out against the head which had for so long governed her affairs. The woman in her had been too strenuously subjected in her eighteen years of a commercial career. She had shut her ears to every cry of rebellion for the sake of her quixotic pledge. But now they were too loud, too strong to be any longer ignored, and their incessant pleading found an almost ready ear.

Alexander Hendrie had offered her marriage. He had done more. This apparently cold commercial machine had shown her a side of his nature which the eye of his world was never permitted to witness. He had thrown open the furnace doors of his masterful soul, and she had witnessed such a fire of passionate love that left her dazed and powerless before its fierce intensity.

And she – she had needed little urging. The wonderful attraction of this personality had ripened during her two years of service. She no longer worked with every faculty straining for the handsome salary he gave her; she worked for the man. Her whole heart was wrapped up in his achievement. Yes, she knew that he stood before even her love for the boy whom she had taught to call her "mother."

That was her trouble now. That was the one all-pervading drop of gall in her cup of happiness. Dr. Strong had warned her, and now she was torn by the hardness of her lot as she gazed upon the frowning crags which loomed up on her horizon.

She rose and crossed the room to her bureau. She picked a letter up that was lying on the top of it. It was the last letter she had received from young Frank, from the farm he was on, not far from Calford, just outside the little township of Gleber. She read it through again. One paragraph particularly held her attention and she read it a second time.

"I've met such a bully girl. Her name's Phyllis Raysun. She's just about my own age. It was at a dance, at a farm twenty miles away. We danced ten dances together. Oh, mother, you will like her. She's fine. Pretty as anything, with dark eyes and dark hair – "

Monica went back to her seat at the window. There was a smile in her eyes, but there was trouble in them, too. She understood that Frank was grown up. He was grown up, and like all the rest of young people his thoughts were turning toward girls and matrimony.

Frank was still in ignorance of the facts of his birth. She, Monica, was his "mother," so far as he knew, and he understood that his father was dead. This was the belief she had brought him up to.

This was the belief she hoped to keep him in. But now, all too late, she was realizing through such letters as these that a time must soon come when he would want to know more; when the preliminary lies her sister had forced her into must be augmented by a whole tissue of falsehood to keep the secret of his mother's shame from him.

Her determination to shield her sister was still her principal thought.

At all costs her promise to the dying woman must be kept. There should be no weakening. She would carefully prepare her story. Lies – it would all be lies. But she could not help it. She felt they were lies for which there was a certain justification, lies which possessed no base object, but rather the reverse.

But now had come this fresh complication in the person of Alexander Hendrie. Here was something she had never even dreamed of. He became something more than a complication. He was a threat. She could not marry him. She must definitely refuse him. And then —

Despair took hold of her and wrung her heart. Marriage she knew was forever denied her. She had known it while she dressed herself and prepared to receive the man she loved that afternoon. She had known it even while she rejoiced in her own attractiveness, and the thoughts of the love she had inspired.

She turned to the window with a deep sigh and stared hopelessly out of it at the keen winter sunshine.

To contemplate marriage with a man as passionately in love as Alexander Hendrie, a man as strong, as masterful as he, with the existence of her boy to be explained away, would be rank madness. It was hopeless, impossible. It could not be.

No, she knew. She needed no prompting. Her course lay clear before her. She dared not sacrifice the hard struggles of those eighteen years for this love which had at last come into her life. She knew now how she had sacrificed herself on the altar of affection when she pledged herself to the care of her sister's child. That sacrifice must go on to the end, come what might. It was hard, hard, but she resolutely faced the destiny which she had marked out for herself.

That was why she had not telephoned to her employer to put him off. That was why she had specially prepared her toilet to receive him. She would definitely refuse to marry him. But she would rather lacerate her already wounded heart by the painful delight of an interview, than shut out of her life this one passionate memory under the cold seal of an envelope.

It was her woman's way, but it was none the less sincere, none the less strong.

CHAPTER II

ALEXANDER HENDRIE

Had Monica only known it her weakness lay in the very strength of that loyalty which held her to her promise to her dead sister. She was far too honest to deal successfully in affairs which demanded the smallest shadow of subterfuge. At the best she could only hope to lie blunderingly, and to blunder in falsehood leads to sure disaster.

So she had no real understanding of that which lay before her, the endless troubles she was preparing for herself and those belonging to her. The pity of it. One could almost imagine the Angel of Truth wringing his hands, and weeping for the mistaken honesty which clung to a quixotic promise given eighteen years ago to a dying woman.

It was a nervous, troubled woman who started at the clang of the bell at her outer door. She turned with terrified eyes to the silver clock which stood on her bureau. It was four o'clock. Four o'clock to the minute; and instinctively her hands went up to her hair, and nimble fingers lightly patted it.

For a moment she stood irresolutely staring before her. She seemed in desperate doubt, as though laboring under desire to greet her visitor, while instinctively fearing the outcome of his visit. The next moment her silken skirts rustled as she hurriedly passed out to her front door.

Alexander Hendrie followed her into the sitting-room, and promptly its femininity gave way to the atmosphere which his personality seemed to shed upon all that encountered it.

It was not an essentially refined personality, it was too rugged, too grimly natural, too suggestive of Nature in her harsher moments to possess any of the softer refinements of life. A bald, broken crag set in the midst of a flower garden of perfect order would rob its surroundings of its delicate charm and trifling beauties. So it was with the man, Hendrie, in the essentially feminine room which was Monica's care. He dwarfed the refinements of it with a magnetic claim for his own rugged picturesqueness.

He was a man of something over six feet in height. There was not an ounce of superfluous flesh upon his muscular, erect form, which was clad in the simple fashion of a well-tailored man who takes but little interest in his clothes. But these things were almost lost sight of in the absorbing interest of his rather plain face.

An artist painting the picture of a Viking of old would have reveled in such a face, and such a wealth of waving fair hair. He would have caught the look of confidence, the atmosphere of victory which lay in every detail of the strong mold in which his features were cast.

It was a face full of faults, yet it was such a combination of strength and mentality that no eye trained to the study of physiognomy could have resisted it. The lines in it were pronounced. Yet every line was a definite indication of the power behind it. There was a contemplative light shining in the keen gray eyes which told of perfect control of all emotions; there was a definite indentation between the fair, ample brows, which suggested a power of concentration. The nose was broad and pronounced, with curiously sensitive nostrils. The cheekbones were lean and broad. The mouth was broad, too, but firmly closed, and quite free from the least suggestion of animal sensuality. Yet it was a hard face; not hard in the sense of cruelty, it was hard in its definite, almost relentless purpose.

Monica realized something of all this as she brought a large rocker forward for his use; and her heart failed her as she remembered the mission that had brought him to her apartment.

"You're pretty comfortable here, Monica," he said, glancing round with a faintly approving smile, as he dropped into the rocker.

The woman followed his glance with a responsive smile.

"Thanks to you," she said readily, without noting one detail of the tastefully arranged furnishings which had brought forth his comment.

The man's brows went up in swift inquiry.

"How?"

Monica sat down. She was glad of the support, but her manner was perfectly easy.

"The generous salary you pay me – of course."

Hendrie shook his head.

"I never pay generous salaries. Those who receive my salaries earn them."

Monica laughed. Slowly confidence was returning.

"That's so like you," she said. "I wonder if I earn \$5000 a year. I have often worked twice as hard for half the sum."

"Quite so. But what was the work? From my point of view you earn the money, and perhaps more, by carrying the confidence I always know I can place in you. But, say, don't let's discuss the economy of commerce. Guess I came here on a different errand."

Monica averted her gaze. She looked out of the window she was facing.

"Yes," she said, with a sudden return of all her old apprehensions.

The man leaned forward in his chair. His hands were clasped together, and his forearms pressed heavily on his knees. There was a faint flush on his cheeks, and the usual contemplative light had passed from his eyes, leaving them alight with a growing fire of passion.

"Tell me," he cried suddenly, a deep note in his voice. "Have you anything to say to me? Anything about our talk the other night?"

Monica kept her eyes averted. She was summoning all her courage, that she might the more successfully bruise and beat down her own love for this man.

She shook her head without daring to face him. She knew, she felt the heat of passion shining in his gray eyes.

"It – it – can't be," she said, stumbling fatally.

She waited, hardly knowing what to expect. As the man remained silent the beatings of her heart seemed to have suddenly become so loud that she thought he must surely hear them; and hearing them, would understand the cowardice she was laboring under.

Had she dared to look at him she must have seen the marked change her refusal had brought about. The same passionate fire was in his eyes, there was the same flush upon his cheeks. But there was an added something that was quite different from these things, something which she might have recognized, for she had witnessed it many times before in her intercourse with him. It was the fighting spirit of the man slowly rising, the light of battle gathering.

He smiled, and his smile was strangely tender in a man of his known character.

"Is that all?" he asked at last. "Is that your – final word?"

"Yes," she almost gasped, and desperately faced him.

Then she abruptly rose from her seat and moved toward the window. She had seen more in his eyes than she could face, and still remain true to her decision.

"But's – it's insufficient, Mon."

The man rose from his chair and followed her. He came near, and stood close behind her. She could feel his warm breath on the soft flesh which was left bare by the low neck of her costume. She trembled, and stood helplessly dreading lest he should recognize the trembling. Then she heard his low voice speaking, and her whole soul responded to the fire that lay behind his words.

"I love you, Mon. I love you so that I cannot, will not give you up. I love you so that all else in my life goes for nothing. All my life I've reveled in the constant joy of anticipation of the success I have achieved. All my life I have centered my whole soul on these things, and trained brain and body for a titanic struggle to the top of the financial ladder. And now, what is it, if – if I can't win you, too? Mon, it's simply nothing. Can't you understand what I feel when I say that? More than all the wealth and position I've dreamed of all my life I want you – you. What is it? Why? Tell me why it – can't be."

But Monica could not tell him. She knew she could not; and she knew that she could not go on listening to the strong man's pleadings without yielding.

Suddenly, in something like desperation, she turned and faced him.

"I tried to make it plain to you the other night," she cried, with a complaint that made her voice almost harsh. "I tried to tell you then that I could not marry you. But you wouldn't listen to me. You laughed my refusal aside. You told me you would not give me up. I can only reiterate what I tried to tell you then. Why – why urge me when I say I – I cannot marry you?"

"Cannot?"

"Yes – cannot, cannot!"

In desperation Monica added emphasis to her negative.

"There can only be one reason for 'cannot,'" said Hendrie, with an abrupt return to calmness. "Are you married? Have you a husband living?"

The woman's denial flashed out without thought.

"I am not married. I never have been married."

In a moment she realized the danger of so precipitate a denial. The man's face lit more ardently than ever, and he drew closer.

"Then you must take that word back, and say you – 'will not.' But you can't say that," he smiled gently. "Why should you? Yes, I know you don't dislike me. You've always seen me as I am. I'm no different. Say, Mon, I'm not here to bully you into marrying me. I'm here to plead with you. I who have never in my life pleaded to man or woman. I want you to give me that which I know no money can ever buy, no position can ever claim. I want your love. I want it because I love you, and without you nothing is worth while."

He was very near her now. He was so near that Monica dared not move. She could only stand helplessly gazing out of the window. As she remained silent he urged her again, placing one powerful hand gently upon her shoulder.

"Tell me, do you dislike the hard, unscrupulous financier that men are only too ready to villify?" he asked, with a gentle smile of confidence. "Do you?" His hand moved till it dropped to the woman's soft, rounded upper arm.

"Mon," he continued, "I want you so much. Tell me you don't – dislike me."

Monica's courage was swiftly ebbing. The task she had set herself was too hard for her. She was too simply human to withstand the approach of this great love. The touch of the man's hand, so gentle, so almost reverent, had sent the blood coursing through her veins in a hot, passionate tide. All her love for him surged uppermost, and drove her headlong to a reckless denial.

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