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The Wolf Woman

A Novel

BY ARTHUR STRINGER

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THE WOLF WOMAN

CHAPTER I

Caver studied the girl at the back of the kicker-boat. She impressed him as an incredibly outlandish figure. As she lounged against the oil-stained stern-board with her khaki-clad young legs insolently crossed, she seemed both lawless and sexless. But he felt, as he continued to watch her, that there was something equally timeless about her, that she had rootage in neither the age of steel nor the age of stone. She reminded him, as she sat there oblivious of his presence, with her gaze divided between the popping gas-engine and the channel-rocks which she skirted by a crumb-toss, of a half-tamed husky that might bristle and snap at any uncertain hand about its head.

Yet she was arresting, he decided as he overlooked her soiled and grease-marked hunting-suit and let his gaze rest on her face, to which the frowning dark brows gave a hooded look that made him think of museum statuary. The cheek-bones of that face were unduly prominent, suggestive of an ancestry that might be either Celtic or Indian, or both combined. Between them, under glowering black brows, burned midnight dark eyes with an occasional animal-like glow filtering through their thickly planted lashes. Her mouth, incontestably large, seemed petulant and slightly imperious, showing itself rich in curves only when she smiled, which was seldom. But the reluctant red lips, once parted, revealed carnivorous white teeth that contrasted sharply with the Latin duskiness of her skin, a minutely pebbled skin further darkened by sun and wind. Her crow-dark hair was clipped short, like a boy's, and combined with the high-waisted muscular figure to produce an effect of masculinity which was borne out by the flat and ample feet encased in moosehide moccasins and by the scarred brown hand clamped so sinewedly about the roughly spliced tiller-stick.

She looked like an awkward and morose-minded youth stumbling into sullen manhood. But somewhere about her, Caver decided, was her inalienable touch of womanhood. It wasn't altogether in the softer curve of the brown throat or in the betrayingly rounded line of the khaki-clad bosom, or in the clouded wistfulness that lurked about the over-petulant lips. But it was there, proclaiming her as woman. It was so unmistakably there that Caver sat startled at her sudden sulphurous oath when a drift-log thumped against their quarter and stuttered threateningly along their sideboards.

"Where did you learn language like that?" he asked as he resettled himself in his seat.

He caught the flash of resentment from the dusky-lidded eyes.

"Why'n hell should it worry you?" she demanded. Her voice was casually resonant and full-throated. But her indifference to his implied reproof flowered eloquent in the preoccupied gaze which she directed across the more open water confronting them as they throbbed their way between two conical islands crowned with pointed fir. It was the same trick, he remembered, that he himself occasionally resorted to in his office, that disparaging concentration on other things which so often put the unwelcome visitor in his place.

Caver, as a man of the world and a twentieth-century father, could afford to smile at her insolence. But the thought of his own daughter brought the old heaviness about his heart and promptly tightened his lips again. He had been deluded, as he penetrated deeper and deeper into that northern quietude of loon-haunted waterways and green-shadowed woodlands, into believing that he was striking deeper and deeper into the kingdom of peace. But that, he remembered, was an illusion of setting and nothing more. The seeds of unrest were in his own soul. And the momentary peace that had come to him from those higher and paler skies, from tranquil valleys and rippling waters and balsam-scented winds, was merely the crooning overture to his own noisier opera of perplexity. For his problem still lay before him. And he had traveled seven hundred miles to solve it. The succeeding thought that any possible solution of it might lie in the hands of a morose-minded young woman with a temper like a she-wolf did not add to his peace of mind.

"So you're the new manager of Trail-End Camp," he ruminated aloud. She essayed no answer to that, however, beyond a half-contemptuous glance from the over-elaborate duffel amidship to the strangely-clad city man in the boat's bow. "And just what," he asked with his slightly ironic smile, "am I to call you?"

She recrossed her legs before answering him.

"How'd Dynamite Mary do?" she finally demanded.

"I'm afraid it wouldn't do at all," he said with a quietness that carried the menace of patience slightly over-taxed. "Do they actually call you that?"

She obviously resented both the closeness and the whimsicality of his scrutiny.

"That's what I always got up to Elk Crossin'," she sullenly averred.

"And undoubtedly deserved it?" he queried.

"You're damn' right I did," she proclaimed.

"Well," he essayed as they throbbed on through the amber-green water, "we'll have to see if we can't do a little better than that. You understand, of course, that I'm now the owner of Trail-End Camp?"

The eyes under the glowering brows studied him with a new intentness.

"Like hell you are!" she murmured, incredulous.

It gave him an appeasing sense of power, to watch her color deepen before his quietly authoritative laugh. He was still smiling as he opened his gold-monogrammed wallet and held out to her, across the duffel-pile, the documentary evidence of his proprietorship. But the blankness of her eyes as she stared down at the fluttering sheet of paper prompted him to put a question that caused a still richer flood of color to sweep up over the brown throat and face.

"Can you read?"

"O' course I can read," was the somewhat too belligerent retort.

"Big words and all?" he exacted, smiling at the haughtily back-flung head. He noticed the grimness that came about the rich red mouth.

"I can do plain readin'," she sullenly maintained. But a little of the hauteur had ebbed from the Indian-brown face.

"Then you'll understand that we may be more or less intimately associated during the next month or two."

"But ol' Colonel Bloodgood wrote up an' said he'd——"

That protest, however, died away as the estimative dark eyes studied the impressively immaculate figure in the boat's bow. He came from the mysterious Big City, beyond the Line, the city of millionaires who traveled half a thousand miles to shoot a deer or catch a string of fish, the city of stately homes and paved streets and motor-cars and music and books and the uncomprehended splendor of life. He had the finished and unweathered look of the elect. His unrumpled tweeds and his pallid high-templed face and his thin hand, on which a seal-ring flashed, proclaimed him as of that other world where women dressed in silk and sat under lawn parasols and bathed in marble bathtubs filled from a silver-plated tap in the wall. She had seen pictures of it all in the Sunday papers they brought up to camp and so prodigally tossed aside, pictures that had been salvaged and smoothed out and assembled along the bare walls of her winter idleness.

"But it's what *I* say, from now on," John Caver was explaining. "And I am sure we'll get along nicely."

The girl's gaze, as they threaded a flotilla of rocky islands, was once more intent on her course.

"Then it was you that sent up them layin' hens an' that crated milch-cow that it took Indian Joe an' seven 'breeds to git over the portage?" she challenged.

"I was guilty of that innovation," acknowledged Caver. "And I regard fresh milk and eggs as worth both the initial outlay and the up-keep." His face sobered as he reached for his cigarette-case. "By the way, who does the milking?"

"I do," was the morose answer. "An' I had a hell of a time learnin' how."

"Haven't you adequate help at the camp?"

"I've Indian Joe an' ol' Kippewa Kate an' two half-time 'breed bean-eaters who ain't worth powder to blow 'em to hell. They went out on their traplines instead o' puttin' up ice for summer use, an' I had to rustle four tons o' frozen lake-slabs with me own hands."

Caver looked at the relaxed athletic figure and the sinewed brown forearms, looked at them with a quietly approving eye.

"You'd do it, all right!" And that unexpected note of commendation brought another wayward surge of color up into her face. She was, Caver concluded, much more used to opposition than praise. And in that, he felt, lay a hint for the future. Three pounds of chocolate creams, he conjectured, might even take that thunder-cloud out of her eyes for a week.

"I really don't want to call you Dynamite Mary," he explained as he lifted his feet out of the oily bilge-water that slapped about between the boat-ribs. "Couldn't we possibly improve on that?"

"How about Rorie?" asked the girl in the stern seat, frowning over an all but empty oil-cup.

"Where does the 'Rorie' come from?" inquired her puzzled passenger.

"That's short for Aurora. I was christened Aurora Mary Moyne."

"Moyne?" repeated Caver. "That has rather an Irish ring to it."

"Me father was Irish," explained the girl at the tiller, not without a touch of pride in her voice.

"Tell me about him," suggested the man from the city. And he tried to make his quiet smile a companionable one.

"What damn' good'd that do?" demanded his pilot, nosing the craft into a six-mile current that boiled between dark-shadowed walls of rock.

Caver did not speak until they were in quieter and wider waters.

"We ought to know more about each other," he reminded her. "And when we understand our families, we're a little nearer to understanding ourselves."

Her morose eyes searched his face, as though she remained in doubt as to his meaning.

"I guess the Moynes ain't got much to be proud of," she said with an upthrust of the shoulder that seemed to contradict the words of her mouth.

"That's no reason I shouldn't know about them," persisted Caver. He spoke without harshness; but his words, for some reason, brought a flare of anger into her face.

"Is it me or me ancestors you're hirin'?" she demanded. And Caver had to wait a moment or two for the fire to cool down.

"I like to know about the people who work for me," he quietly enough explained, "whether it's on Fifth Avenue or in the forest primeval."

The thunder-cloud in the boat-stern lightened, at that, for she was smiling again, though a bit grimly.

"You'll git your money's worth," she proclaimed, "when you git *my* private hist'ry."

"Is it so extensive?"

"Both extensive an' frost-bitten," was her subacid retort.

"Then let's have it," he commanded, remembering that the Malemute of the North, after all, could not invariably be faced with kindness.

She penalized him, however, by leisurely uncrossing her legs and blinking abstractedly over her engine.

"Me father was a bush-rat, if you know what that means," she finally said out of the silence that had lengthened between them. "He married a Quebec girl named Lacasse, an' when the Cobalt country was openin' up, he ran a road-house at the Gold Pan Portage."

"And he did well at that?" prompted the other.

"He sold redeye on the side, an' when an Indian called Gray Blanket came down one winter with enough gold nuggets to buy a week o' fire-water, Dad fed him through his tremers an' bought the secret o' the Big Squaw Mine for three quarts o'

hard liquor."

"You mean he bought a gold mine?"

"There was damn' little mine there when Dad struck it," retorted the khaki-clad girl. "But he mushed through there on a home-made sleigh. He came back a year later with a wild eye an' a frozen foot, an' told me mother he'd made a strike an' we'd all die millionaires. I was eight years ol' then, runnin' wild an' leadin' round a bear cub for a pet. But I could pack a gun an' crack over enough rabbit an' water-fowl to keep us goin' through a winter's tie-up. Father Dumond wanted to put me in a convent, but when Dad got outfitted a year later I was set on goin' with him. So we all went. It was forty below, most o' the time, an' me mother got sick. I helped pull her on one o' the sleighs. When she died, we had to burn three cord o' wood to thaw out enough ground to bury her. But Dad went on, even after the last dog died. It was hard goin', all right. An' we et light. But we made it."

"And the mine?" prompted Caver.

But the ruminative girl was not to be hurried.

"We built a shack on the side-hill an' fished through the ice an' shot game an' got pretty comfort'ble. But Dad couldn't begin strippin' until open weather. An' even when he got his showin' o' metal, he was so scared some prowlin' sour dough'd ferret out his strike, he used to sleep on a rifle an' shoot at every bobcat that moved a chin-whisker in the moonlight. I helped him git out the gold. I made the rawhide sacks we tied it up in. He used to sit up nights heftin' it, bag by bag, figgerin' out what it was worth in ready money. He used to tell me I'd never need to dress in moosehide no more, but would be ridin' round in me silks an' satins an' livin' on stuffed dates an' navel oranges for the rest o' me days."

"But what happened to that gold?" demanded Caver, with a movement of obvious impatience.

"It was blamed near three years before Dad had that drift picked an' shoveled out complete," she resumed in her sonorous quiet voice. "But when his mine was worked out, he seemed more worried'n ever about gittin' down with his clean-up. He was fidgety an' afraid o' thieves. He had to have a canoe, an' he wasn't clever enough to build one. But he got his birch-bark, all right. He got it when a wanderin' redskin tried to steal a calf moose I'd shot. I was fightin' for me camp-meat, an' that Indian had me up over his head, to throw me in the river, when Dad put a bullet through his heart an' threw him where he'd intended me to go. So we loaded up an' started back by waterway. Dad went with a rifle across the thwarts, watchin' both banks an' shootin' wild when even a red fox showed its nose through the underbrush. But we didn't bump into any trouble until we came to what was called the Long Portage."

The girl fell silent; the man in the boat-bow was prompted to exclaim: "Go on!"

"It was the Long Portage, all right," she solemnly resumed. "Dad didn't like that crossin'. He was so afraid o' that wood-trail that he sat with his gold an' sent me scoutin' in through the bush, to see if ev'rything was clear. It was mighty quiet there b'tween the pine an' tamarack. I c'd hear me own heart thumpin'. But I was used to the woods, an' I was in sight o' water again b'fore I heard a rifle-shot, an' then another. An' then I heard a whole spatter o' shots. So I went back. It wasn't much over a half-mile, I guess, but it seemed like a good ten miles to me. I went back, cryin' b'cause I didn't have a rifle of me own. But there was nothin' to go back to. Dad was gone. An' his gold was gone. All that was left was the ol' birch-bark, pretty well tore to pieces with rifle-bullets an' one side of it red with blood."

Caver's eyes widened. He moved restlessly.

"But it doesn't sound credible, stuff like that in the twentieth century. D'you mean to say your father was robbed and murdered there?"

The girl's face remained impassive.

"I thought they'd put him in the river," she continued in her almost monotonously full-throated voice. "So I stripped, an' swam an' dived around the portage landin' until me legs got numb. Then I tried to patch up the canoe, but I couldn't make it float. So I headed southwest on foot, livin' on berries an' roots an' tryin' to make bark-fiber twitch-ups that'd catch a rabbit. But they didn't work. An' when ol' Kippewa Carson picked me up along the shore o' the Little Winiska, I was mostly bone an' rags. They used to say around Elk Crossin' that ol' Kippewa found me growlin' in a wolf den. But that's a damn' lie. I was eatin' bulrush-roots an' thinkin' about makin' a raft to float down the Little Winiska."

"How old were you then?" Caver asked out of the second silence that had fallen between them.

"Somewhere b'tween twelve an' thirteen."

"And you're sure all this happened, that things didn't get twisted up a bit in your child's mind?"

"I damn' well know it happened," was the listless-noted reply.

"Then what occurred after this Kippewa person found you?"

"The La Tourettes took me in fr a winter, but I ran away, an' a 'breed's wife taught me how to make ax-handles an' weave baskets. Then the Post priest tried to put me into some kind o' mission-school down to Mattawa an' I ran away again. Then I worked for the factor's wife an' got fired fr goin' deer-huntin' instead o' washin' dishes, an' then fr two winters I was second grub-rustler in a mill-camp."

"Mostly men, I suppose?"

"*All* men—an' with the bark on! It took mighty plain talk to make 'em keep their distance. But they learned to do it."

He smiled at her solemnity, and sobered again as he studied the intent brown face.

"They'd plague you quite a bit, I imagine."

She was prompt to resent that suggestion.

"Like hell they would! I'd cut the heart out o' any bohunk who got flip with me. An' they knew what would be comin' their way if I wasn't treated respectful."

He knew better than to smile, this time, but he wondered how a figure so rough and vital could hold about it some thin persistent aura of pathos.

"Then when did you first come to Trail-End Camp?" he asked with what casualness he could command.

"I used to sell 'em baskets o' wild strawberries an' Chippewa archery sets. Then ol' Colonel Bloodgood found out I could paddle a canoe an' put his city pie-faces over the proper fishin' holes, so he gave me a job that was half guide an' half under-cook. That was three years ago. Last year when they fired Lem Haines for stealin' most o' the camp outfit, they put me in charge. They put me over Indian Joe an' ol' Mike Faubert an' gave me Number Four Cabin to winter in."

She was, obviously, proud of her position. But to Caver it presented certain equally obvious perplexities.

"And you stay up here winter and summer?"

He could see the cloud that crept over the dusky face.

"I'm savin' up to go down to the city," she said with her first show of embarrassment.

He breathed deep of the balsam-scented air that seemed to be bringing peace to his harried soul.

"Why down to the city?" he finally inquired.

Still again he detected the vague abashment of a spirit not used to hesitation.

"I was hopin' to better myself," she said with a wistfulness that made him think of her, not as a woman, but as an uncouth and groping girl. She reminded him, in fact, of something wild, something that would be always foolishly averse to the bars and chains of communal life.

"I think you're superb, just as you are," he found it easy enough to proclaim. And he was rewarded, once she had assured herself of his sincerity, by the answering surge of color that once more flowed up the butternut-brown neck and crept over the sun-darkened cheeks.

"I want to learn things," she averred, disconcertingly earnest.

"What things?" he parried.

"The other things," she said gropingly. "The things you don't learn in lumber-camps."

He stopped short at that, absorbing the shock of a transforming new thought. He had not the courage to articulate that thought, even to himself. But he felt, with a fresh surge of hope, that this lawless and loose-limbed woman of the woods might yet be made to fit into his own personal designs.

"I suppose," he quietly ventured, "you'd make a pretty big sacrifice to get down to some civilized town and learn to live and dress and talk the way city people do?"

Her sonorous laugh was slightly bitter. "You're damned well right I would," she asserted, promptly solemn again.

"I think it could be done," he murmured aloud as that absurd new hope once more tugged at his heart.

She sat up, at that, and fixed him with her disconcertingly direct gaze. "How?" she demanded.

He could not answer that question, as yet, but he felt the expediency of keeping open any promised avenue of escape.

"We can talk that over in a couple of days when my daughter Joan comes up," he said with a purely achieved casualness of voice.

"You bringin' a girl o' yours up here?" asked the woman in the boat-stern.

"Yes," he said, looking studiously ahead, "for several months."

The woman at the tiller sat thoughtful a moment.

"Why's she comin' to a camp like this?"

Caver was quick to resent that question. But he could not afford, all things considered, to show his resentment.

"She has a spot on her lungs," he said, ill at ease under the appraising cool glance of the other.

"Does that mean she's sick?"

"Yes, in a way," acknowledged the unhappy Caver. "But she's able to be around all right. She's not bedridden. And we thought a few months in this northern air would fix her up."

"Was she ever up to Trail-End b'fore?"

"Yes, for three weeks, as a girl of fourteen."

"That," asserted Aurora Mary, "must've been before my time."

"Considerably," acknowledged Caver.

"How old is she now?"

The father of the girl in question had to give this some thought.

"She'll be twenty, I believe, on her next birthday."

"Jeeze! She's a woman!"

"In some ways, yes," was the slightly acrimonious acknowledgment.

Caver was conscious of the perplexity in the slumberously intent eyes.

"Is she married?" asked the girl at the tiller.

Her passenger, she could see, resented that question. He shrank back like a turtle in its shell, as city folks had the habit of doing when you tried to handle them too freely.

"And what if she is?" he countered almost testily.

"It's nothin' in my young life," announced Aurora Mary with her smoldering frontier frankness. And she gave emphasis to her words by hitching, sailorwise, at her oil-stained khaki trousers.

Caver could afford to smile at her. She was merely the big toad of her own particularly small puddle.

"My Joe liked it very much up here," he proceeded to explain with an achieved note of patience. "And it will make everything considerably easier for her, having a woman of about her own age around."

"Y' mean me?" was the quick demand.

"Of course!"

"She may think I'm too much of a mossback f'r a millionaire's daughter!"

"She's not in a position to be unduly toplofty," averred Joan's gray-cheeked father. And again some latent bitterness broke through his voice.

The girl at the tiller swung her boat about a pine-clad point and into a windless bay where a group of glinting log huts clustered about a bigger lodge, like snowy chicks about a mother-hen. "It's a damned good thing I got them shacks all whitewashed an' fixed up proper! How'd you like 'em?"

Caver, as he sat staring at the sepulchral-white log walls that stood out so startlingly from the cool blue shadows of the towering pines, felt that they would have been infinitely more pleasing to the eye if they had been left in the sober hues of the natural wood. They made him think of a frontier police-barracks, and, a moment later, of isolation-huts in a hospital zone. They almost made his eyes ache, with the afternoon sun shining against their blank and albified surfaces. They even suggested, as he continued to stare at them, irregular white teeth set in a sardonically grinning mouth. But he could see the look of pride on Aurora Mary's face; and he had no intention of hurting her feelings.

"They look very neat and clean," he acknowledged.

That seemed to please her. But her reluctant wide smile was lost, a moment later, in one of her habitual quick frowns.

"They're clean, all right," she asserted in her unpleasantly booming voice. "An' everything round here is goin' to stay that way while I'm runnin' this camp!"

"Oh!" said Caver. He made that monosyllable non-committal, for as the boat circled up to the bone-white timbers of the boat-landing and the unspotted pale sand of the beach, he harvested the impression that everything about him was altogether too uncomfortably ordered and clean. There was a sense of cleanness in the water under their keel, in the recurring ridges of blue-green pinelands overhung by their austere northern sky, in the very air that he was breathing. He even wished, as they nosed up to the wharf, that he was coming to it with a heart as clean as it deserved.

But he forgot that regret, a moment later, as he watched a square-shouldered old husky-dog come tumbling down between the white-walled cabins, croaking a welcome to his mistress as he came.

The girl, who had clambered up on the bleached timbers, held the wolf-like black nose between her two brown hands and gazed affectionately down into the dog's uplifted face.

"Pancake," she cried with throaty rapture, "you pie-eyed ol' son of a biscuit-box, you're sure glad to see me, ain't you?"

And Pancake answered that question by licking the outstretched brown hand and the broken-beaded moccasins stained with bilge-water. But Caver stood surprised to find any such possibilities of emotion in a figure so wolfish.

CHAPTER II

John Caver, for all his weariness, found his spirits rising as he made ready for supper that night. He detected some shadow of meaning, for the first time, in the name which had been given to that camp of his. It marked the end, he tried to tell himself, of a long trail of unrest. It carried an aspect of retreat, of escape from a more intricate and unmanageable world.

He noticed that, for the first time in a week, he was anxious to eat; he also noticed, as he seated himself in the cedar-beamed dining-room with its smoke-stained stone fireplace and its glowering mounted mooseheads, that his meal was to be an ample one. But it was not served, as he had hoped, by Aurora Mary. His sole attendant was Indian Joe, a wide-faced *métis* who looked unnaturally swarthy and sheepish in an enveloping white apron of butcher's linen. From the kitchen door covered with buffed buckskin, however, he could hear the girl's booming voice as she rattled range-lids and gave orders and shot oaths over her shoulder at the none too facile Indian Joe.

But Caver, as he dined on white-meated black bass and green peas and hot biscuits and wild strawberries stewed in maple syrup, topped off with clotted cream and surprisingly good coffee, was tempted to condone those flights of profanity. For the girl could cook as efficiently as she could curse. And for the second time that day, as he lighted a cigarette and strolled out to the rough-timbered veranda that overlooked the paling bay-waters and the lengthening shadows of the pine-fringed Point, a semblance of peace descended upon him. He found consolation in the faintly ruffling water touched into orange and opal by the lowering sun, in the brooding high sky that bent over the blue-misted valleys, in the quietening call of water-fowl along the reed-fringed shore-lines. That, after all, was Nature's way, so much more ordered and reasonable than man's. And it was good to go into retreat. Even those anchorites of the Middle Ages, who turned their backs on the world, must in their time have caught at that secret. For there was something healing in quietude. And men, in the end, could be enriched by solitude, could forget the fever and tumult of the ant-hill life that left their hearts arid and their emotions worn thin.

But there were doors, he remembered as he noticed the camp cat carrying a limp kitten across the veranda-end, that could never be quite closed. And his mind went back to the scene that he had tried so assiduously to shut out from his thoughts, to that unspeakable family conference of a week ago, that awful hour in the mulberry-curtained library where he had met his defeat as a father and a man of the world.

The memory of that scene was burned in his brain, as indelible as a brand that is burned on a writhing range-steer. It would always be with him, as vivid as a nightmare etched deep with unformulated agonies. Joan herself had not been there, at first. But his own sister Agatha had been there, stunned and all in black, as though it were a funeral. She had sat red-eyed in her high-backed red *fauteuil*, looking hopelessly Edwardian with her smelling-salts and her bewilderment before a natural enough law of biology. And his married daughter Gail had motored over to Westbrook, white and hard and indignant, with three small daughters to think of and an inexpressibly irritating way of interrupting the talk with faint and throaty groans. And their Uncle Ellis Norcross had been there, scowling and ill at ease and only too anxious to escape to his golf. But he had added to every one's misery, as usual, by repeated and mournful clucks of his tongue against his mouth-roof and by proclaiming that it seemed only yesterday he was thinking of poor Joe as a prim and starchy little girl in a pink sash. And then *this* had to happen.

"This is what comes," attested Agatha, "of cigarettes and sitting on one's shoulders in speed-roadsters."

"I'd rather she were *dead*," sobbed Gail over her incongruously opulent pearls.

"There was a time," Agatha Abbott thickly observed, "when situations like this were restricted to the lower orders."

Old Ellis Norcross sniffed aloud.

"It's the whole damned generation that's gone wrong," he proclaimed as he crossed to the sherry decanter. "And now, instead o' being turned out of home in a snowstorm, they blame their forebears for passing a Freud complex on to them."

But Caver's lost pride, at that endless and useless pother, had turned over in its freshly mounded grave.

"All this self-pity isn't getting us anywhere," he had abruptly broken in. "We're not here to feel sorry for ourselves, but to decide on some plan of action. Just what are we going to do?"

"It seems to me," quavered Gail, "that Joan herself ought to decide that. She flatly refuses to go to Europe."

"Naturally," snorted Uncle Ellis Norcross, "in her condition!"

"But surely some one can convince her——"

"It's no use," interposed Gail. "Joe won't even talk about it. She doesn't even look sorry. All she does is blink at me as though she had a secret her own sister couldn't be trusted with." And that sister rose in her tearful indignation and crossed to the mullioned window overlooking the Italian garden. "I could forgive her being a fool, but I don't see why we should all suffer this way because of her selfishness."

"Will somebody," intoned her Aunt Agatha, "kindly make sure there are no servants outside those doors."

"Then," Caver had cried, "we'll make the man marry the girl."

"Joe," reported Gail, "says that stuff went out with crinolines. She says she couldn't morally live with a man she doesn't love."

"You mean she doesn't care for him?"

"No," affirmed Gail, "she doesn't. I think she almost hates him."

"I must say," asserted her Aunt Agatha over a black-bordered handkerchief, "that she chose a particularly peculiar way of demonstrating her hatred."

"She still regards herself," explained Gail, "as engaged to Allan Somer."

"Where is Allan now?"

"Somer's down in Costa Rica," announced Uncle Ellis, "studying the banana-blight. And he might be doing more service to his country if he stayed home and studied the woman-blight."

"But how and why," demanded Caver, "did a thing like this ever happen?"

"She said," explained the tremulous-voiced Gail, "that it was the moonlight."

"Moonlight?"

"Yes—moonlight and a mood."

"They're like that, nowadays," averred her Aunt Agatha, with a melancholy shake of the head. "Going about half naked and doing negro dances and racing round three-quarters of the night in their own cars."

"Cars, my eye!" corrected Uncle Ellis. "They're not satisfied with *cars*. They get their kick out of dodging thunder-clouds in plane cockpits, the sky-flying fools!"

It was Gail who waived this wearily aside as irrelevant.

"But the Cavers," she was protesting to her father, "were never that kind."

"Well, they seem to be getting up-to-date!" averred the rubicund old man in tweeds.

"Shut up," cried the harried Caver as he pounded the bell to call a servant. And when a maroon-clad footman had appeared in the doorway, that impassive-faced servitor was commanded to find Joan Caver and fetch her to the library.

Joan had refused to come, at first, but she responded, in the end, to her father's repeated and more summary message. She walked slowly into the shadowy and silent room with an empty and long-stemmed cigarette-holder of jade held between her slightly tremulous fingers, and a look of antagonism in her opal-green eyes. The girl's face, Caver had noticed, was white as paper, with blue shadows under her faintly luminous eyes and the Caver lines of sullenness about rebellious lips slightly pinched with worry and perhaps something more than worry. But there was audacity, and something more than audacity, in the cool glance with which she inspected the unhappy family quartet so silently awaiting her.

Caver, even in that untimely moment, had been acutely conscious of her beauty. She impressed him as wordlessly fragile and finished, as complete and self-contained as the softly tinted amphora on his mantel-shelf beyond the dark-wooded reading-table. She reminded him of porcelain, of something smooth and brilliant but quite impenetrable. It was the hardness, he remembered, of the newer generation, the deflecting shell of sophistication that left her inaccessible to even the more intimate hand he was at that very moment longing to reach out to her. For, with all that shadowy wisdom about her eyes, she seemed singularly untried and intense and at war with herself. But what most wrung his heart was her sense of isolation, of standing alone in a world which she was so foolishly trying to flout.

"Well, what is it?" she had asked with her quietly challenging smile. "What're you going to do with me?"

Caver, as he studied her, found his mind going back to its earlier thought of porcelain. She impressed him as a precariously thin crucible, glazed and indurated and seething with acids which would have to fight out their own eternal battle of force. He tried to tell himself that such things might leave her untouched, that her very hardness might save her from the blue flame of tragedy under which less tenacious spirits once snapped. She was at least sustaining her latter-day rôle of indifference, for about her he could detect no shrinking betrayal of wrong-doing, no timorous acknowledgment of shame. Yet his heart none the less ached for her. He wanted to pity her. But he knew only too well she would refuse to accept his pity.

It was Gail who, after getting up and once more walking to the window, swung half angrily about on her younger sister.

"The more important question," she cried, "is what you're going to do with yourself."

"I thought I'd done about enough," was her curtly restless retort. And it brought a cruel enough counter-retort from the indignant Gail, whose breast was heaving under her absurdly opulent pearls.

But Caver, at the moment, wasn't listening to their talk. He was recalling a scene in the same room, several years before, where Joan had been called to account for a telltale cigarette-end which her Aunt Agatha had found on the girl's dressing-room table. That, at the time, had been disturbing enough to them all. But one got used to such things. His daughter smoked now in public and private, in the family limousine and her own car, on horseback and on bathing beaches, in restaurants and theater lobbies. She smoked openly and shamelessly, like all her leggy generation, just as her own father did. But this was something different.

"Somebody ought to shoot the dirty dog!" her Uncle Ellis was muttering, obviously following his own floundering line of thought. And that brought Joan's glacial green eyes about to her uncle's plump and purplish-brown face.

"Applesauce!" she ejaculated with quiet scorn. "That stuff, old dear, went out with ankle-length skirts. His family might as well talk about shooting me."

"You mean you knew what you were doing?"

"Why shouldn't I?" she demanded.

Her Aunt Agatha was crying openly, by this time, and lugubriously protesting through her sobs that the poor thing ought to be taken as far away as possible. And Caver was almost glad when the shrill of the telephone on the dark-wooded table interrupted their foolish and futile bickering.

"Answer that," he said to Gail, who was seated next to the table-end.

Gail, having wiped her eyes, took up the receiver. Her voice, as she spoke into the instrument, was quiet but a trifle thick and her jeweled fingers toyed with a gold-handled paper-knife as she sat with her unfocused gaze fixed on a Clytie in gold clasping a conch ink-well to her rounded shoulder. But Gail's eyes, as she sat there, had widened perceptibly and the color had slowly ebbed from her face. And her hand was shaking as she gropingly restored the receiver to its hook.

"It's—it's too awful!" she gasped as she rose to her feet, one hand resting on the table-edge.

"What's wrong?" demanded Caver, half-way out of his chair.

But his older daughter disregarded that question. She turned slowly about until she faced the moodily impassive Joan.

"It's about Ronny," she said, trying to control her voice.

"What's happened to the dog?" barked out her Uncle Ellis, tugging at his collar.

"Everything—*everything's too late now!*" she cried in a voice oddly thinned with desperation.

"What are you talking about?" demanded Caver, stopping half-way with his hand out for the phone.

"*Ronny's dead,*" she answered, her eyes, now quite dry, still fixed on the girl with the jade tube in her hand. "He crashed in his plane, between here and Princeton. He—he was burned to a crisp."

Joan Caver put the jade-green tube down.

"I thought something like that would happen," she said with a quietness that brought their startled glances up to her face.

"Do you mean he killed himself?" came in a bellow from the older man in the golf suit.

"I didn't say that," protested the unnaturally cool-eyed girl. "But he was worried and reckless and ready enough to take a chance when he saw it."

Caver was compelled to turn away from her, to turn away with something dangerously close to a shudder.

"How did it happen?" he quaveringly demanded of his older daughter, who had subsided white and weak into a wing-chair.

"Nobody seems to know, except that he went up from the Princeton field right after luncheon," answered Gail, getting better control of herself as she went on. "He was flying alone, Colton said, and intended to make Mitchell Field. But his engine failed, just before he got to Burrowton, and people there said he seemed to be trying to make a forced landing on the golf-course. But he came down in a nose-dive, not twenty yards from the club-house, and—and the fire started before any one could get out to him."

It was Joan's voice that broke the silence.

"So now nobody will need to shoot him," she observed with ice-cold bitterness.

"That's ghastly—to say a thing like that," cried the quiveringly indignant Gail.

"But you've just implied that he did everything at a most inconsiderate time," contended the white-faced Joan. It was then that she turned to her Uncle Ellis, who was pacing back and forth muttering, "Sky-flying fools!" She seemed the one person in the room who was able to keep her head.

"Please stop that patrolling," she protested. "You see, it makes me rather nervous."

"But what in God's name can we do now?" demanded Gail, shaken by a small chill. "How can we keep people from knowing what's happened to us?"

"To *us!*" scoffed the slender-bodied girl beside the bridge-lamp. Her laugh was still crisp and mirthless as she turned her back on them and confronted her harried father. "I guess, Dad, you'd better get me away from here. For I certainly don't intend to nest much longer in this roundhouse of whiners. There's not much for me to do now but swallow my medicine. So I'd like you to take me up to Trail-End Camp until—until everything's over."

She was able to smile at the surprise that showed on their faces. She even looked about for a chair, and half wearily seated herself, as though a trifle tired of it all.

"Why, you'd die up there," blurted out her Uncle Ellis, "alone in the backwoods!"

"But the Caver name would remain unsullied in the Social Register," proclaimed the pallid-cheeked girl in the over-ornate Italian chair.

"You positively make me hate you," cried Gail, "when you——"

But Caver cut her short.

"And after that?" he asked, achieving a shadow of his own daughter's quietness.

"That, I think, must remain entirely my own affair."

"But there's Allan Somer to remember," he reminded her, recalling a disturbing enough picture of the intensity with which this girl, for all her youth, had attached herself to the one man who had seemed able to save her from herself.

"I haven't forgotten him," was Joan's quietly spoken reply. And Caver, for a moment, was able to catch a recurring wave of intensity in the morose girlish eyes that met his. It impressed him, even as he remembered how it was an instinct for every man to protect and fight for his own flesh and blood, that the ways of Destiny were inscrutably dark and tangled. She was his own daughter, but she had always remained slightly incomprehensible to him. She may have gone her own way, as was the newfangled habit of women, but she had the habit of getting what she wanted.

"You've certainly broken a good man's heart," her Aunt Agatha was inconsequentially sobbing into the inadequate handkerchief with the black border.

"Bunk!" Joan murmured with cool-noted insolence. And her face, even though colorless, was quiet enough as she turned back to her father. "The sooner we can decide on what I'll need and be on our way the better it'll suit me." She spoke with a matter-of-factness that was not without its shadow of fortitude.

"You're willing to go up there?" he asked, startled by this unexpected valor.

"I haven't much choice, have I?"

"But you understand what it means," persisted her father, "five or six hundred miles away from what you have here, from everything you're used to?"

"I wish it were five or six thousand miles away from what I have here," was her listlessly hostile answer.

Caver, as a man of the world, had always favored quick decisions. And he had no intention, in this case, of prolonging the agony.

"All right," he abruptly announced. "We'll get out of here before the week-end. You can wait over a day or two at Duck Landing until I get those camp quarters fitted for a woman. Will you want to take your own maid?"

"Most certainly not."

"Then a trained nurse?"

Her thin and wintry smile did not escape him.

"I'd prefer nobody until they're actually needed."

"It will be a bit lonely up there," he reminded her.

"Like doing time," she rather grimly suggested. Her hard little laugh grated on him. Yet he was sorry for her, with all her selfishness. He remained oppressed by a sense of inadequacy as he sat staring at the embattled small figure in chiffon. He even nursed an impulse to throw all the others out of the room and take her in his arms and comfort her, or try to comfort her. But he knew that she would be averse to any such advances, that she would whip him back with one of her hard little wise-cracking speeches. She was a woman now, and there were reservations that had to be respected, even by a father.

It was only for a moment, when they were alone half an hour later, that the veil was lifted.

"I don't want Allan to know," she had said with altogether unlooked-for intensity.

"Good God, girl, *nobody* must know!" he had blurted out before he could give much thought to that speech of hers.

Caver moved restlessly in his none too comfortable chair of willow boughs, as though to shake from his shoulders the last of those accumulated memories. He even sighed as he gazed out on the slowly paling pinelands. But his wandering gaze focused itself, a moment later, on a dark figure that moved between him and the opalescent bay-water. This figure, he saw, was Aurora Mary, making her leisured way down to the boat-landing with her black-faced husky at her heels. There she seated herself on a nail-keg, with her back against a neatly piled stack of stove-wood. She was carrying what

appeared to be a battered old bellows-accordion, and having settled herself comfortably, she balanced that strange instrument between her parted knees and proceeded to wring music from its reeds.

Caver, as he listened, was prompted to agree with the husky-dog as to the nature of that music. For Pancake, as the blithely solemn chords rolled forth, raised a protesting nose to the evening stars and gave utterance to a series of dismal howls. But there were others, apparently, who liked it, others besides the rapt and rhythmically swaying Aurora Mary. He could see red-sashed Mike Faubert moving irresolutely out toward the water-front, followed by Indian Joe and a stumbling *métis* stripling, who was followed in turn by a rotund old squaw with a yellow and scarlet blanket over her shoulders. They dispersed themselves about the landing, sitting silent and motionless as the swaying figure on the nail-keg rhapsodically but none too adeptly poured out to them the strains of *Sweet Adeline* and *Old Black Joe* and *The Bells of St. Mary*.

It impressed the man from the city as simple and unschooled to the verge of barbarism. It seemed aboriginal in its crudity. But, in the lonely northern twilight, it took on a wistfulness of its own, a salvaging dignity that could not be altogether laughed down. And the dusky girl on the nail-keg could not be regarded as altogether ridiculous. She seemed to acquire, in that mellowing light, the glamour of far-off things, uncouth and untamed and slightly incomprehensible. And when Caver went to bed in the chintz-hung room so familiarly aromatic with its dried pine-needle pillows, he could still hear the old bellows-accordion sounding through the darkness. It was too foolish and childish to be annoyed at it. But he couldn't help wondering, as he fell asleep, what that young backwoods musician would do with the seldom-awakened pipe-organ in his town house on Fifth Avenue.

CHAPTER III

The next morning Caver awoke with such an unexpected sense of well-being that he nursed a not unnatural hunger to see his armistice-period, his interregnum of peace, slightly prolonged. He demanded an hour or two of pineland quietness before going back for Joan. He would go fishing. He deserved it.

It was not until he had told Rorie of his decision and was selecting his gear that he realized how values could change under the hand of Time. That same over-ample camp-outfit through which he was so impatiently rummaging for his fishing-tackle had seemed, two days before, a mockery and a deception, a hateful smoke-screen behind which he was escaping from his floundering pride. But the clock of misery couldn't always strike twelve. The morning was crystal clear; there was a smell of balsam in the air, and the pools between the silky river rapids shone sky-blue in the early sunlight. There was no reason, after all, why he couldn't snatch an hour or two of release from the darker enterprises of life.

"Take me where I can get fish," he commanded Aurora Mary.

But the girl, as she swung the canoe about and paddled into open water, remained singularly quiet and abstracted. Silence was a habit with her in her guide-work. So remote did she seem, in her oil-stained khaki and her battered old Stetson hat, that Caver twisted about in the canoe-bow and inspected her with a more studious glance.

It was then that he noticed for the first time the worn leather belt about her waist, from which depended on one side a huge hunting-knife with a polished horn handle and on the other side an equally ponderous six-shooter, protruding from an abraded cowhide holster that hung flat against her hip.

He smiled at that outfit, in spite of himself. It gave her a touch of wildness which did not go well with the momentary quietness of her eyes.

"Why all the hardware?" he curtly inquired.

"I usually wear 'em when I'm bushwhackin'," she answered, without pausing in her paddling.

"For ornament?" he demanded.

"F'r use," she quietly retorted.

"You didn't honor me with them yesterday," he reminded her.

"The provincial police ain't exactly crazy about gun-totin' down in a settlement like Duck Landin'," she casually explained.

"But up here, you can do as you like?"

"Up here I carry this gun when I damn' please," she averred, swinging forward with a stronger stroke.

"Any notches in your gun-handle?" he asked with his faintly ironic smile.

"Not yet," she retorted. "But I'm still purty young."

He laughed at that, in his morning lightness of mood, and noticed the firm brown line of her neck where it merged into the muscular square shoulder.

"Honest, now," he exacted, "could you hit the side of a barn?"

She did not answer him and he was on the point of concluding that she intended to let his taunt go disregarded, when she rested her wet paddle-blade across the canoe-thwart.

"Y' see them three, yellow, water-lily buds over there in the shallows, side by side under them bulrushes?" she asked.

"Yes, I see them," he acknowledged. They were three or four times farther than he could cast with a trout-fly.

Before he quite knew what she intended doing, she swung her right hand across her left hip and then revolved it in an

airy S-shaped double circle. Three reports rang out on the quiet morning air; and Caver, catching at the canoe-side, saw the girl thrusting the blue-metaled revolver-barrel down in its holster again.

"See 'em now?" she quietly inquired.

He looked, slightly incredulous; but the three tiny bulbs of yellow were gone. Then he laughed, thinly but appreciatively.

"I fancy we'd better treat you with a trifle more respect," he said as Rorie took up her paddle again.

It was her trivial little frontier efficiencies, he assumed, that gave the girl her quiet and slumbering sense of fortitude, a fortitude not unlike that of wild-life creatures armed with fang and claw. But such things would be useless, and more than useless, in that tamed and crowded world which he had so recently left behind him. Battles there, he remembered, were fought with more complicated weapons. And Caver remained thoughtful as, in the prolific waters to which she piloted him, he experienced the electric thrill of repeated strike after strike, fought his miniature Waterloos, and landed or lost his fish.

Yet the strikes, he began to see, were coming too continuously. The sport thinned and lost its zest. He even failed to react to the tug of a three-pound black bass on his rod. And that, he told himself as he realized his hour had been squeezed dry, was like the younger generation that stood personified in his daughter Joan. Their reach exceeded their grasp. They got things too easily, and tired of them too quickly, and over-promptly craved new hazards and went off in search of new sensations. They considered themselves untrammelled and audacious, but they generally proved themselves to be, in actuality, a page or two late in learning the real lesson of life.

"I want you to be good to that girl of mine," he said out of a clear sky.

The young woman in the khaki hunting-suit looked up at him, perplexed by some new note of humility in his voice.

"Folks git what they fish for, as a rule," was her none too promising reply.

"Couldn't you make it a little more generous than that?" he asked, resenting his own abashment before a figure so rough. "You see, she hasn't been as lucky as you have."

"What've I got that she hasn't?" demanded the daughter of the wilderness. He could see the morosely dark eyes studying his face.

"You've got strength," he found himself saying, "and a superb young body, and the ability to take care of yourself. And life is just opening up for you, in a way, while Joan has pretty well swung through the whole circle."

Flattering as it sounded, it made little impression on her.

"I've mushed over a trail or two she mightn't know about," announced the girl with the paddle.

"I know," he acknowledged. "And it makes me feel that if the two of you could trade places for a while, it might be considerably better for both."

He waited for her reaction to that. Whatever it happened to be, however, she kept it to herself. And since petitioning was new to him, his disappointment flowered into sudden acerbity.

"Let's land and have lunch," he commanded. For she was, after all, merely the chore-girl of a bush-camp.

"Where?" she sullenly inquired.

"There, on that flat rock," he ordered, with a hand-wave toward the quiet-shadowed shore-line.

She frowned, as though in doubt as to the propriety of that particular landing-point, but proceeded to paddle dutifully shoreward.

"We're over deep water here," she cautioned him as he reached a hand out to the rounded lip of the rock-shelf.

That warning, apparently, touched him into a new impatience, for he rose abruptly and proceeded to step resentfully ashore. But the canoe, dipping under the unexpected weight on its side, veered off and slid from under him. The rounded

rock-shoulder gave him nothing to cling to. He went floundering down into the amber-green depths, his world obliterated in a sudden singing rush of water. His head, as he struggled upward, struck the canoe-bottom, and he went down for the second time. He seemed destined to remain there, denied the fundamental right of breathing, for a calamitously long time. He was concluding, in fact, that the privilege of filling his lungs with God's cool air would never again be his, when he felt himself in the clutch of strong young fingers and a strong young arm holding him up.

"It's all right," cried Rorie, swimming easily as she towed him about the rock-shoulder into shallow water and as coolly helped him ashore.

He sat on the warm rock, coughing and spitting, as the girl reentered the water and retrieved the drifting canoe. Having pulled it up on the shore-gravel, she looked about for her discarded hat and belt, picked them up, and pushed the wet black hair back from her brown forehead. Her figure, under its sodden khaki, looked singularly statuesque. But what most impressed Caver, as he sat grateful for the sun that warmed his dripping body, was the casualness with which she was accepting it all.

"I suppose you know you saved my life," he said, frowning over the shake in his hands as he bent to unlace his shoes. She merely laughed at that.

"You'd have scrambled out, all right," she said as she took off her soggy moccasins. "About all I did was to save time."

But he showed no sympathy for that stand.

"I couldn't have made it," he proclaimed, blinking down at the rough woolen socks, much-darned and obviously made for male wear, which covered her feet. Deliberately and solemnly, he noticed, she was pulling them off and wringing them out. "I was—was getting groggy."

She stood silent a moment as she buckled on her belt and its pendent weapons.

"You weren't ten feet from shore," she reminded him as she pulled the battered old felt hat down on her wet forehead.

"You most assuredly saved my life," he persisted. "And when the occasion arises," he added with deliberated solemnity, "I intend to see that you do not lose by it."

But that proclamation produced no promise of the desired effect.

"I guess we'd better git back to camp," she merely suggested. She moved toward him, as though to help him to his feet, but he waved her testily aside.

"You seem to set a pretty low figure on me and my future," he said as he scrambled up.

"How d'you mean?" she demanded, preceding him to the canoe.

"Saving a life like mine doesn't seem to loom very large on your horizon."

"But I didn't save it," she protested. "An' if I'd landed right, you wouldn't even have got wet."

"Well, I insist on proclaiming that you did," said Caver as he climbed into the canoe. "And that's something you're going to hear about later."

It seemed neither to interest nor elate her. She remained silent as she took up the paddle and headed for home. The habitual small frown hovered between her brows as they followed the course of the winding waterway, the damp khaki on her body steaming a little in the noonday sun. That frown even deepened as she rounded the Point and swung into the home waters of Trail-End Camp, for entering the same waters, from the opposite direction, she caught side of a Peterboro canoe laden down with two wardrobe trunks and a litter of hand-bags. The canoe, she saw, was paddled by two "breeds from Duck Landing, and between them sat a thin-faced young woman in a vivid orange-colored traveling-coat of camel's hair and an aggressively tilted pastel *cloche*. Her attitude was that of a voyageur tired and bored and slightly indignant. And the glance which she directed toward the second canoe was in no wise a conciliatory one.

When Caver, a moment later, caught sight of the second craft, an exclamation of surprise touched with impatience broke from his lips.

"How'd *you* get here?" he demanded as the drifting canoe came closer. The girl under the tip-tilted *cloche* took her own time in replying to that question.

"I roosted in that slab-sided wooden hotel until I simply couldn't stand it any longer," she announced as she inspected his fishing-tackle with a deliberately hostile eye.

"I told you to wait for me."

"Well, I did wait, until I got sick of it. So while you were amusing yourself in the great open spaces I hired these stalwart heroes and repacked my hope-chest and came up on my own hook. And I trust it isn't in any way interfering with your morning's outing!"

He resented the derisive note in her voice, but he compelled himself to ignore it. He was acutely conscious of the still hostile stare with which that rebellious daughter of his was inspecting the khaki-clad figure in the birch-bark canoe. And he wished, as an accumulating sense of climax took possession of him, that the meeting between those strangely diverse young women could have been more propitious. He saw Rorie's discerning dark eyes bent on the vivid-colored figure confronting her. Yet in those dark eyes, oddly enough, he detected no trace of antagonism. It was more a childlike and silent curiosity touched with bewilderment.

"Who is this?" was Joan's curt inquiry. And Caver winced under the inescapable cool impersonality of that query.

"That," he said with unexpected heat, "is the young woman who has just saved my life."

"From what?" asked the emotionless girl from the city.

"From a watery grave," averred Caver, coloring a little at the consciousness of an unnecessarily theatrical tinge to his words. "And what's more, she's the person you'll have to depend on to make you comfortable while you are up here at Trail-End Camp."

His daughter's laugh impressed him as both unseemly and untimely.

"In your case," suggested the cool-eyed Joan, as she inspected his water-soaked figure, "she doesn't seem to have been eminently successful."

"Then let's hope," retorted Caver, "that yours terminates more happily."

He was sorry for that, the moment he had said it, for he could see the quick hardening of the hostile young mouth. And she already seemed depressingly remote from him, from the love and the help he should be proffering her.

"I'll at least insist on the privilege of paddling my own canoe," his daughter was saying to him. And that second wave of opposition brought a second tingle of indignation through his body.

"You seem to have had it," was his embittered reply.

Instead of answering that, at once, she turned to her stern-man and motioned for him to push on to the boat-landing. The canoe once more got under way. Aurora Mary kept beside the newcomers, stroke by meditative stroke, as they moved forward. Yet she was watching the other young woman intently, every moment of the time. She noticed the preoccupied set face as it studied the cluster of white cabins and the clean-floored hollow between the hills and the orderly piles of stove-wood, even the row of sweet-peas under the main lodge window-sills. But it wasn't until Pancake, scenting their approach, howled forlornly from the shore-crib, that the city girl spoke again.

"Is that a wolf?" she demanded of no one in particular.

"That's my dog," answered Aurora Mary in her quiet full-throated contralto.

"And who's the woodland sylph?" inquired Joan as she directed her gaze toward an incredibly fat and slow-moving old Indian woman engaged in hanging a multi-colored washing along a sagging clothes-line.

"That's Kippewa Kate," was the same cool-noted reply.

"And who's Kippewa Kate?"

"The squaw who'll look after you when you're in camp here," explained the unexpectedly patient Aurora Mary.

"Oh, my own private and personal *femme de chambre*!" exclaimed the young woman with the insurrectionary eyes. But in those eyes the other woman detected both weariness and frustration. And for one of the few times in her life, she determined to keep her temper under control. It was, indeed, Joan's father who was finding it hard to hold himself down.

"Money," he sharply reminded her, "won't buy you very much up in this territory."

She shrugged and grimaced, to show that she understood, but the lines once more hardened about her young mouth.

"I don't think it ever has bought me much, in any territory!" she exclaimed. Her face remained clouded as she climbed wearily up on the boat-landing. There her restless eye wandered back to the dusky-skinned girl in the birch-bark. She seemed to be appraising her as one appraises a fellow-traveler in unexpectedly cramped quarters.

"So you're to be my jailer?" she ruminated aloud.

"Not by a damned sight," was Aurora Mary's blunt but in no way antagonistic answer.

"How modern we are!" murmured the smaller-bodied young woman. "Cussing like a Park Avenue trooper!"

Aurora Mary flushed, but remained silent.

"Let's get this duffel ashore!" exclaimed Caver, anxious to end an encounter that bore faint promise of being auspicious.

Yet later in the afternoon, when he wandered over to the chintz-hung cabin that was to house Joan, he found the two women in an unexpected armistice of quiet activity, unpacking the bags and trunks that covered the well-scrubbed pine flooring. A new light smoldered in Aurora Mary's eyes as she took up flimsy cobwebs of lace and silk and adjusted them to their hangers. A new intentness of manner took possession of her as she carried toilet articles of ivory and gold to the plain deal dressing-table with the distorting mirror in its frame of lacquered pine-cones.

"This junk," announced Joan with an abstracted stare at the glimmer of metal and shimmer of silk, "certainly looks out of place in the pinelands. But it's what you might call half a trunkful of camouflage. Servants seem so hopelessly nose-y."

Aurora Mary, apparently, was not listening to her. She seemed more interested, at the moment, in the dissimulative finery that was being unearthed before her eyes. For Caver, as he studied her from the doorway, could see the look of hunger that crept into the Indian-brown face as Joan held a foolishly ornate dinner-frock up to the light. It was a tissue of flowing green stippled with silver, and a spangle of rhinestones along its paneled front made it singularly like a mountain waterfall played on by autumnal sunlight. His daughter's gesture, as she shook out the flimsy overdrape, was one of careless disdain. But the woman in the Cree moccasins found her breast heaving in a sigh that was almost audible across the room.

Joan turned to her, her smile remotely commiserative.

"Do you like it?" she asked.

Aurora Mary gasped, breathing deep. "It's—it's a dream!"

"Then take it," said Joan, tossing the iridescent folds across a trunk-end. "I'm sick of the thing."

Caver remembered, at the moment, how it was hunger that eventually tamed the creatures of the wild. It was through their desires that the intractable were controlled. And that hunger need not be always for food. It could be for fripperies and fineries, for freedom and wider fields, for beauty, for love itself. Yet it tamed them in the end, tamed them where opposition and conflict would have left them still fighting and feral.

But Aurora Mary, Caver noticed, was not quick to reach out a hand to the cascading green drapery. She had not even moved toward that proffered dream.

"Don't you want it?" was Joan's sharp inquiry.

"No."

"But you said you liked it."

"What's that got to do with it?" demanded the other, a new grimness about her mouth.

"Don't you take what you want?"

"Not until I've earned it," was the unnecessarily gruff-noted reply.

Joan turned and studied her for a moment. Then she laughed, lightly and defensively.

"How unsullied we are!" she said as she brushed the gown aside and bent over the open trunk again.

Aurora Mary was not unconscious of the mockery in those muttered words, but for reasons all her own the bush-rat's daughter seemed determined to avoid any surrender to anger.

It was Joan's father who none too adroitly stepped into the breach.

"I see you two girls are going to hit it off all right," he proclaimed as he advanced into the room.

"What makes you think that?" questioned Joan, bent over her trunk-tray.

"Because you have so much in common."

"Have we?" queried his daughter as she handed the woman in khaki a photograph in an easel-frame of chased gold. It was the photograph of a man of about thirty, a tanned and sinewed man with honest and humorless eyes and an unexpected promise of laughter about a rather grim mouth. It was an arresting face, the sort of face one looked at for the second time. And Aurora Mary, with her frontier directness, stared at it so openly that a faint current of disquiet flowed through Caver's body.

"Who's that?" she asked with a nod toward the easel-frame she was finally placing on the dressing-table.

Joan turned and looked back at the photograph.

"That's my man!" she proclaimed. She said it quietly, and yet she said it challengingly. Caver, as he met his daughter's eye, frowned and remained silent. If some flash of understanding eddied along their insulated wires of silence, Aurora Mary remained unconscious of it, for she stood with frontier directness staring back at the face in the gold frame.

"Is that your husband?" she bluntly inquired.

Again the wires of silence carried their flash of understanding.

"No," was the unexpectedly grim-noted reply, "but he's going to be!"

CHAPTER IV

Aurora Mary's face was grim as she went *putt-putt* along the quiet shores of the Pakishan. The sunlight fell warm across that winding valley, but the girl in the gas-boat felt that summer was over. For already the September-end frosts had turned the hardwood hills into a riot of color, flaming with crimson and gold and garnet. The days were growing shorter; the birds were stealing away; and a sense of completion, vaguely saddening, was taking possession of the pearl-misted northern world.

Much had happened, she remembered, since she had last threaded those low-shadowed waterways. Some imprint of it, indeed, seemed to have attached itself to her, for her face was thinner and more thoughtful, and the once rebellious mouth seemed set in lines more resolute. Yet the brooding face softened as she shut off her engine, and leaning forward, bent inquiringly over a hammocklike contraption of plaited *babiche* edged with narrow bands of wolf-skin, swung by rawhide thongs from wale to wale of the open boat.

She had fashioned that papoose-cradle with her own hands, and she was proud of it. But she gave it scant thought as she turned back the edges of a slate-gray blanket, peered intently into the little cavern of security between the wolf-skin edgings, and dropped, satisfied, back to her tiller-seat. The earlier look of preoccupation returned to her eyes as she studied the shore-line and picked up the familiar landmarks above Duck Landing. She nursed a sense, as she rounded the river-bend and came in sight of the lonely boat-dock, of history repeating itself. For on that timber-crib, as she drew closer, she could once more discern the mackintoshed figure of John Caver. He was waiting for her, as he had waited for her over four long months before. But time, she could see, had also put its imprint on him, for the pallid face seemed grayer and more deeply lined. She could detect the anxiety in his eyes as she swung in to the untidy tamarack wharf-crib, just as she could decipher the unworded apprehension in his glance as he stood studying her own silent face.

He did not speak, however, until he had passed his hand-bags down to her and clambered none too steadily into the bow of the boat.

"Everything all right?" he asked. He tried to speak casually, but there was an unexpected quaver in his voice.

"Everything's all right," she assured him in her quiet contralto. She even forced a smile, to make his assurance doubly sure, for she still nursed, in spite of everything, a stubborn liking for the man. She even felt a little sorry for him. But he impressed her as less opulent-looking than ever before.

"And Joan?" he asked, dropping his eyes.

"She couldn't be doin' better," was Aurora Mary's mercifully mendacious answer. "She's sittin' up now, eatin' hearty an' takin' sunbaths in a camp-chair."

Caver took a deep breath and looked off along the shadowed shore-line.

"She had rather an awful time of it?" he half questioned and half proclaimed.

"It was pretty awful," acknowledged the grim-eyed Aurora Mary.

Her passenger winced and looked away again.

"It—it must have been equally awful for you," he finally ventured.

"I had Kippewa Kate to help me," casually announced the girl in the boat-stern.

"A squaw!" gasped Caver, shivering in spite of himself.

He found himself darkly assessed by Aurora Mary's dark eye.

"Those redskin women know more'n you'd sometimes imagine," she loyally protested.

Caver, with his lids drooping, pictured a low-walled lodge with strange Indian herbs simmering over a fire and outlandish charms being chanted beside a bed of sleep turned into a battle-ground. And still again he shivered.

"I should have been up here, of course," he resumed, finding it none too easy to go on. "But that appendix of mine went

on strike and had to come out."

"I know," proclaimed the girl in khaki.

"I was on my back in that hospital for three solid weeks. And there was no one to send."

"I know," repeated the girl in the boat-stern. "I got your different messages."

"And the other things?" he inquired, able to meet her eyes once more.

"Everything came through all right," she listlessly acknowledged.

He apparently wanted to put other questions to her, but found it no easy matter to articulate them. He looked at her, frowning heavily, as she leaned forward and stared into the papoose-frame of oddly plaited deerskin thongs.

She thought, for a moment, that he would move toward her and share in that inspection. She assumed, when he failed to do this, that he would in some way refer to the small passenger swinging between them. But he avoided the subject, almost timorously. The light in his eyes was even a stricken one. He was, in fact, pointedly studying her own rough figure. She wore, over her old hunting-suit, an incredibly worn and ragged rain-coat that hung about her in a pauperizing shroud of tatters. And he seemed to resent her raggedness.

"You say those things came up all right?" he repeated.

She nodded assent, intent on picking her course through the channel.

"You don't seem to have made much use of them."

She frowned over that, apparently not following his line of thought.

"There wasn't anybody round here could set up the radio," she explained. "An' Joe said the phonograph made her kind o' homesick for the Silver Slipper. She asked me to call her Joe."

Caver moved, almost impatiently.

"I mean the things I sent up for you," he amended.

"I couldn't use 'em," said the girl in the ragged rain-coat.

"Why not?"

"I hadn't earned 'em."

His smile was both wearied and listless.

"I guess the Cavers," he said with an unpremeditated head-nod toward the *babiche* hammock amidships, "would still be owing you something."

That prompted her to lean forward again, and bend low over the wolf-fringed cradle-swing. Her face, from stooping, took on an almost Indian bronze-red tone.

"He's a great little kid," she proclaimed. "Not one whimper out o' him from Trail-End to Duck Landin'!"

The note of pride in her voice nettled Caver. His gaze, for the time being, was even absorbed in the blue-misted hills that rolled tier by tier into the pallid sky-line. But his eyes, in the end, went back to the girl in the boat-stern.

"You're—er—looking after him?" he guardedly inquired, with a vague gesture toward the papoose-frame.

"I sure am!" was the unabashedly prompt reply. Yet he knew, even before she spoke, that the heart of a mother beat in her body.

"And you're not unwilling to?" he pursued.

"I love 'im!" was her full-throated answer, not without a note of fierceness.

"But his mother—surely——"

Caver let the sentence go unfinished. He sat depressed by a sense of inadequacy, of blunderings and hesitations where he should have been open and honest.

"Joe had a hard time of it. She had such a hard time of it she didn't want to see him. As I said, there was only ol' Kippewa Kate an' me there, an' I couldn't help much. An' when Joe got over wantin' to die, she seemed too weak to show much interest."

Caver closed his eyes.

"It must have been hell," he muttered aloud.

"It was," acknowledged Aurora Mary.

And little more was said until they swung in to Trail-End Camp, where Caver caught sight of a thin-faced figure sitting in the slanting autumnal sunlight. She was wrapped in rugs, and she reminded him of a passenger on a liner's deck. It was only the black-faced husky, lying at her feet, that moved as they approached.

Aurora Mary, for reasons of her own, left father and daughter together. She was quietly sterilizing a row of round-bottomed bottles when, an hour later, Caver somewhat irresolutely joined her.

"Joan tells me you've been taking care of this child as though it were your own," he began, discomfited by her over-direct gaze. But she ventured no reply to that statement.

"She says," pursued Caver, "that you'd rather like to keep him."

He was, for the second time, depressed by a sense of inadequacy, of too closely bargaining with destiny.

"I'd like 'im," asserted Aurora Mary. There was something elemental, he felt, in her singleness of purpose uncomplicated by the tugs and counter-tugs of civilization. And he wondered, as he stared down at her moccasined feet, at the wolf-skin on the floor, at the abraded old bellows-accordion that lay beside a tattered mail-order catalogue, just what this thing called civilization would do to her. But he was remembering, the next moment, how much he himself would have to do for her.

"You said once," he reminded her, "that you'd like to go to the city, to learn city ways and have what other women have."

She stood silent and shadowy-eyed before him. She had no intention, apparently, of helping him along.

"You'll forgive me for telling you, I take it," he laboriously pursued, "that I've a million or two that doesn't seem to have made me any happier than other men. Money, once you've got it, doesn't appear to count much. But what I want you to remember is that four months ago you saved my life. And for that, now I'm able to, I intend to see that you are adequately rewarded."

"That was nothin'," she protested. "An'——"

But he cut her short. "And quite beyond that, there are a few other things for which the Cavers have to balance up your ledger of life. It's coming to you, Aurora Mary, and you can't escape it. The only thing is, I'd like to know where we stand and how we can work it out."

A little of the color faded from her dusky face as she sat down on a camp-chair made of elk-antlers.

"You mean that?" she asked, with the earlier crusading light momentarily gone from her eyes.

"I do," he asserted, slightly abashed at his own secret emotion. "And on this occasion any promises I make will be kept."

The solemn and cloudy eyes were still studying his face.

"Will you take me into your own home?" she slowly exacted.

If he hesitated, it was only for a moment.

"I will," he proclaimed.

"An' keep me there until I've a chance to better myself an' make myself into something you wouldn't be ashamed of?"

"And not only keep you there," he added with a belated small tingle of enthusiasm, "but contrive to have you get the best teaching and tutoring that can be got in all America."

"I was thinkin' more about my boy," she said.

Still again the elemental simplicity of the woman astounded him.

"Your boy?" he echoed.

"Ain't he mine?" she demanded. "Ain't somebody got to mother that poor little unwanted toad?"

"Of course," agreed Caver, trying to keep an absurd and altogether unexpected lump out of his throat. He was remembering, at the moment, his own daughter's recent and mercilessly embittered cry: "I've paid my price, and now I'm through with it." It seemed an unnatural cry, in a way, but perhaps the whole thing had been pervertingly unnatural.

"Of course," repeated Caver, compelling himself to calmness, "he's yours. He should belong to somebody who loves him. And that love, Aurora Mary, will make you richer than you imagine."

There was a tremolo in his voice which he could no longer control. He even reached out for her hand, her brown and toil-hardened hand, and took it in his own, as though a compact were being sealed between them. And his confusion deepened as he saw an answering flame of friendliness break through the fixed moroseness of her gaze. She had, after all, had very little love in her life. And she would be true to her trust. He could even see the great breath that tightened the faded khaki across the Artemis-like breasts still lunar with youth. She was uncouth, but in her own way she was superb—superb, at least, in her own setting. She was, of course, asking for the impossible. Tutors and teachers could never make her over. And her childlike faith in the city would soon come a cropper. But she was entitled to her illusions. She might even surprise him, he amended as he studied the rapt brown face with the pioneering light in the wide-set eyes, for she possessed what the other women of her age seemed so forlornly without, ardency, intensity, a passionate singleness of purpose.

"It will take some time," she was warning him, "to git me civilized complete."

"The longer the better," he could afford to assure her. He even smiled a little at her solemnity, for he was conscious, as he glanced out the window to where Joan basked motionless and remote in the autumnal sunlight, of the lessening of more than one load that day. "And what's more, I propose to accept you as one of my family, as such legally and officially."

He was not unconscious of the harder light that crept into her eyes.

"Then since we're talkin' musquash," she ventured, "I s'pose this could all be put down in writin'?"

"Of course," he agreed, though he wasn't quite sure what talking musquash meant. But she didn't, apparently, entirely trust him as yet.

"An' when you or your womenfolks want me out o' camp, I'll be told so open an' honest?"

His laughter, over that, was inelastic and ended abruptly. It was, he saw, the shadow of her own sex, the women of his household, that prompted her distrust.

"Our womenfolks, all things considered, are a trifle too much in your debt not to remember it."

He wanted to say more, since she had given him the awaited opening, but he noticed that she was no longer listening to him. She was listening, instead, to the hoarse barking of her husky-dog down by the boat-landing. She put aside the feeding-bottle which she had taken up in her abstracted fingers and stepped frowningly to the door, where she stood silhouetted against the strong light, oddly magnified in stature as, with arms akimbo, she blocked that narrow portal. But her call was blasphemous as she silenced the bristling wolf-dog.

"What is it?" asked Caver, following her into the open.

"It's Bill Little-Beaver," she answered over her shoulder. "He must've paddled up after us from Duck Landin'."

A lean half-breed in checkered shirt and corduroy trousers was pulling a much-patched birch-bark up on the shore. He advanced irresolutely, stopped, and stared wonderingly about. It wasn't until he caught sight of Aurora Mary that he moved forward again.

Joan, for some reason, laughed openly from under her rugs at that unheroic figure. He had little of what one could look for in a *courier-de-bois*.

But from his hand Aurora Mary had taken a soiled and crumpled envelope, over which she stood frowning long and intently.

"It's for you," she finally announced, handing the sweat-dampened message to Caver. And he, with a flash of annoyance, took it and opened it, as Bill Little-Beaver caught sight of the portly Kippewa Kate and sagaciously drifted kitchenward.

It was Joan, once more settled back in her rugs, who glanced about at Caver's small throat-sound of dismay.

"What is it?" she demanded.

"It's Somer," he answered, without looking up from his yellow-sheeted message.

"What about him?" was the sharp-noted inquiry.

"It's a night-letter from Gail," Caver said, speaking as quietly as he could. "The Bear Lake operator must have sent it up to Duck Landing. It——"

"What about Allan?" interrupted the over-tense girl in the chair.

Caver, however, did not answer until he had read on to the end. Then he stared for a moment over the pearl-misted water.

"Gail says that he's on his way up here. He got no letters and no word for two months, nearly, and he seems to be so worried about it all that he's insisting on digging you out."

"Oh, God!" gasped the girl in the enmuffling rugs.

Caver's unhappy eyes met Aurora Mary's. But her glance, he found, remained as non-committal as a shuttered window.

"I can't see him!" the other woman was crying. "I won't! I daren't—yet!"

"Then what are you going to do?" demanded her father.

Joan threw off her burdening rugs and rose to her feet with unexpected vigor. "I'll get out of here," she said with equally unexpected passion.

Caver's gesture was a deprecative one.

"Perhaps we can head him off," he suggested.

"You don't know Allan," was the grim-noted retort. "When would he get here?"

Caver reconsidered the telegram. "To-morrow, apparently," he said with a sigh.

Joan swung about on Aurora Mary.

"Isn't there some other way of getting out of this camp," she demanded, "of getting down to where the railway is?"

She colored a trifle under Aurora Mary's assizing glance, but her mouth remained firm. And Aurora Mary, Caver noticed, was still keeping the shutters closed across the window of her soul.

"You could go out by Indian River and the Little Waubigo," the wilderness girl was explaining, "an' by portagin' back to the Kokomis, you could hit the steel at Mashagon Falls. But it's three days' hard goin' by canoe."

That consideration, however, Joan waived promptly aside.

"Who could take us?" she demanded.

"Us?" repeated Aurora Mary, a sudden cloud shadowing her face. It made Caver think of a wild animal with its young unexpectedly threatened.

"My father and me," answered Joan. She even smiled, mirthlessly, as her gaze met and locked with that of the other woman. Yet it was a moment or two before that other woman, breathing deep, could speak with the quietness she wished.

"You couldn't git a better man than Bill Little-Beaver," she answered in a slightly deadened voice.

It was Caver who spoke next. "But what good will that do? You can't——"

"I can't see Allan," was the tight-lipped response.

"But what's to be said to the man? Whatever his feelings may be about you, he's not altogether a fool."

"Neither am I," retorted Joan.

"Then just what word, under the circumstances, do you propose leaving for him?"

"That all depends on Rorie."

"Why on Rorie?"

"Because she'll have to explain to him how the spot cleared up on my lungs and how I left for home, or what's even better, for three weeks of Pinehurst."

"But is that fair to *her*?" demanded Caver.

"It's as fair as I can afford to be, at a time like this."

Caver winced at the half-weary shrug from his own daughter. It said so much, yet left so much unsaid.

"But have you stopped to think just what you're running away from?"

"Rorie and I understand each other," was Joan's abrupt reply. "We both know what we want."

Caver, as he stared at the two oddly diverse figures, battled against a belated sense of frustration. Women, after all, were eternally incomprehensible to him. But he remembered, as a man of the world, that the absconder seldom found absolution in flight.

That mist of perplexity touched with apprehension still hung over him when, after his hour of hurried packing, he saw Joan step into the room where Aurora Mary was stooping over the outlandish swing-cradle of plaited deerskin. But Joan, he noticed with an involuntary tightening of the throat, did not once look down at the papoose-frame so gently swung from side to side by the intent brown hand.

"And you're going to see this through?" she challenged, her hard young eyes fixed on the abstracted Indian-brown face.

"Yes," was the quiet yet determined answer.

"You'll—you'll have to lie for me," exacted Joan.

"I know," answered Aurora Mary.

"And you will?" demanded the other.

"Till hell freezes over," proclaimed the girl in the smoke-stained hunting-suit.

CHAPTER V

Aurora Mary, as she wandered out to the boat-crib for the third time, was conscious of an accumulating sense of anxiety. She had made a mistake, she felt, in letting a numbskull like Indian Joe go down to the Landing for Allan Somer. Yet she had shrunk from that journey, dreading an ordeal that lay so far from the beaten track of experience, postponing to the last a contact that she knew would be uncomfortable. She was not, she told herself for the twentieth time, a good liar. And the happiness of more persons than one, she remembered, depended on how she kept her promises.

But she would keep them, she grimly resolved as she stared out over the darkening water where a promise of frost sharpened the quiet air, and a phalanx of wild duck, flying low, circled about the blue-shadowed Point. The familiar diminuendo whirr of their wings, as they went, made her feel lonesome, for when water-fowl headed south, as they soon would be doing, it meant that summer was over and the freeze-up not far away. Then one denned up like a bear, and sewed and knitted and fell back on an accordion and a row of dog-eared books with many hard words in them, in order to forget the all-pervading emptiness of life. And it seemed to grow harder, season by season, to withstand those long white sieges of silence.

Aurora Mary's eyes hardened as she stared over the serrated black line of the pine-tops that brought the sunset closer. But the unfocused look went out of those wide-set eyes, a moment later, as the girl caught the sound of a call across the twilight water. It was a wild and raucous call touched with exasperation. And she saw, through the diminishing light, that it came from Indian Joe, as he sat helpless in the kicker-boat, with a quietly smoking passenger in the bow. And Aurora Mary knew, from experience, that an adeptly inefficient hand had once more put her engine out of commission.

So she swore softly as she tumbled into a canoe and paddled out to the helpless craft. From its bow-wales, as she drew nearer, she could see that the patiently silent passenger, in a plaid tweed greatcoat, was viewing her with an impassive but interested eye. She even knew, as she paddled closer, that it was Allan Somer. And knowing it, she wondered why she should be so wordlessly afraid of him, why she should so dread this first encounter with him.

So her anger, as she swung alongside and clambered aboard, was largely an artifice of defense.

"Of course you'd do it," she shouted at the Indian who stooped grunting over the rusty gas-engine. "Of course a damned rabbit-brained half-breed'd put a good kicker out o' kilter b'fore you got through with it. Git out o' my way, you God-forsaken sugar-thief, or I'll wham you one with this monkey-wrench."

The man in the bow-seat, she noticed, watched her thoughtfully as she busied herself with the engine. He neither moved nor spoke as she reconnected her magneto-wires, sounded her gas-tank, tested a feed-pipe and truculently turned over the engine, which popped and sputtered and died away again. And her language, as she took the tiller and commanded Indian Joe to crank and keep cranking, was huskily profane.

It wasn't until the engine had caught and was running again that the man in the boat-bow ventured to speak.

"You really shouldn't swear like that," he said in mild and ironic reproof.

"Then how in hell," demanded Aurora Mary, "are you goin' to make a white-livered redskin remember he's got an ounce o' brains in his empty head?"

"What difference does it make?" was Somer's studiously listless inquiry.

"I've had dinner waitin' two hours while he's been bellyachin' along these backwaters an' hollering for help," was Aurora Mary's reply.

She knew, in the ensuing silence, that her little flurry of force had fallen short, that her fireworks had been wasted on empty air. The man in the bow-seat merely knocked his pipe out against the abraded gunwale and glanced over his shoulder at the lights already showing from the lodge windows.

"I suppose you know who I am?" he finally ventured.

"Naturally," retorted Aurora Mary, still on the defensive.

There was a quietness about his voice that she liked yet was vaguely afraid of.

"How about the Cavers?" was his next question. It was asked casually, but there was a detectable undertone of intensity that did not greatly add to her comfort.

"They went out yesterday mornin'."

She spoke with deliberated unconcern, but she was grateful for the uncertain light that was making it so much easier for her. And her reply, plainly enough, had brought him up short.

"Then they didn't know I was coming?" he demanded.

"Wouldn't they've waited, if they'd known?" she countered, nettling at obliquities so new to her.

"Why didn't I meet them?" the man in the gray greatcoat was inquiring. He wasn't quite the same as his photograph, Rorie concluded. He was bigger and more self-reliant than she had expected. And he had a habit of looking you square in the eyes, a habit that was uncomfortable even in the half-light enveloping them. And he was very tanned and lank and sinewed, with a network of humorless small wrinkles about his mouth-corners.

"They went out by Indian River an' the Little Waubigo," dutifully explained the girl at the tiller.

"And how about Joan?" he exacted. "Does that mean she's better?"

It took thought, in a network so tangled, to know just which trail to take.

"She's fit as a fiddle," Rorie finally proclaimed.

"Her cough gone?"

"Not a bark out o' her for two months now," announced Aurora Mary, grateful for the encompassing gloom. They were at the boat-crib, by this time, and the newcomer was peering about in the uncertain light.

"Poor kid!" he ruminated aloud. He was standing close beside the khaki-clad girl, studying her with an abstracted eye. "Did she like it up here?" he finally asked.

"Why wouldn't she?" countered Rorie.

"She must have," acknowledged Somer, staring appraisingly about. "And I'm going to do the same," he proclaimed as he reached for the gun-cases in the boat-bottom.

"You—you goin' to stay up here for some time?" questioned Rorie, with a sinking heart.

He caught the note of concern in her voice and laughed.

"Why shouldn't I?" he demanded, echoing her own words.

"It's a free country," said the girl, stooping over the engine tarpaulin.

"Don't you want me?" he asked, studying her in the dim light.

"It ain't for me to say," she parried, busying herself with the duffel. "I'm merely the camp-boss."

"The camp-boss," he repeated, looking back at her with a new interest. "Then I'll be in your care?"

She made no answer to that as she led him through the twilight up to the dining-lodge. It looked unexpectedly homelike to the travel-worn man, with its blazing open fire and its green-shaded bronze lamp and its waiting white dinner-table glittering with unexpected silver and glass.

She opened the door to Joan's room, which had been made ready for him. She watched him, oddly disturbed, as he stepped in through the narrow door. She pretended to be busy at the table when he reappeared, a minute or two later, with a towel in his hand.

"My nose tells me that a certain lovely lady nested in this room," he announced with a smile that ended in a sigh. "It rather makes me feel like a boy who's got to the circus-lot after the last animal-cage has been trundled away."

A vague twinge of something akin to jealousy went through Rorie's body.

"That was Joe's room," she acknowledged.

"Naturally!" he conceded.

"She—she was crazy to see you," pursued the stubbornly loyal Rorie.

He smiled. "That, obviously, is less comprehensible. But we never seem to get the things we want most in this world, do we?"

Rorie, apparently, had no answer for that. She merely asked him, with an estranging matter-of-factness, if she should serve dinner for him.

"Don't you dine with me?" he asked, viewing with open disapproval the solitary place at the head of the table.

She liked him, for that, just as she liked the gravely cordial tone of his voice and the promise of power in the lean brown face with the pucker of kindness about the otherwise austere mouth- corners. And it would be pleasant, she knew, to sit across the table from him and listen to the notes of that gravely cordial voice. But she was still afraid of him, afraid of the cogitative dark eyes that peered a little deeper into things than they pretended. All her movements, in fact, were still protective, as dissembling as the maneuvers of a mother-bird intent on guarding a threatened home nest.

"I've my work outside," she said with a vague head-nod toward the door of buffed buckskin.

"Well, we'll have to arrange things a bit differently," he quietly proclaimed as he seated himself at the table-end.

She hoped, as she retreated toward the kitchen, that he would miss her. But she found time, despite her other duties, frowningly to inspect every dish that went in to him. She was, in fact, reveling in a sense of tension relaxed, of escape from indeterminate issues, when the buckskin door swung open and Somer himself advanced companionably toward the rocker where Rorie sat with a blanket-wrapped baby on her knee.

"I merely wanted to congratulate you on the broiled partridge," he said as his casual eye wandered over that unexpectedly well-ordered room. "They're the most delicious things I've sat down to since Antoine's roast duckling down in New Orleans."

"I'm glad you liked 'em," answered Rorie, bending lower over her feeding-bottle. And the intruder, at the same time, advanced a step or two and himself bent lower over the bundle on her knee.

"Whose little deer-hunter is this?" he casually inquired.

"Mine," announced Aurora Mary. She uttered that monosyllable, in fact, with a brusqueness that left him frowning and thoughtful.

"Why don't you nurse your baby?" he finally asked. Yet he proffered the question with a matter-of-factness that tended to translate the intimate into the abstract. It even surprised him a little that any such interrogation should cause her to color so duskily.

"I do my own things in my own way," was her combative retort. And Somer, detecting the depth of her embarrassment, promptly respected it. He turned back to the baby, studying it with the remote eye of well-meaning bachelorhood.

"What's the little fellow's name?" he asked.

"I call him Saggy."

He frowned over that, plainly puzzled. "Why such an ugly name for such a lovely child?"

She softened at that, against her will. "It's short for Sagastayo."

"And where or what does Sagastayo come from?"

Aurora Mary quietly folded the blanket-end about the actively kicking small feet.

"It's a Cree word that means *sunrise*," she explained.

Somer pondered this a moment, no longer smiling.

"Then he's part Indian?" he suggested.

Her face promptly darkened at that.

"He's as white as you are," she retorted, tightening her guardian arm about the small bundle.

"But what's his full name?" persisted the intruder.

"Sagastayo Martin Moyne," she finally answered.

"Then Moyne is his father's name?" Somer off-handedly inquired.

"*My* name is Moyne," she promptly corrected. A moment later, however, her face darkened at the thought of the possible misstep.

"And his father's name?" suggested the over-pertinacious Somer.

She did not answer him at once, but she summoned up courage enough to meet his gaze.

"Why are you pryin' into my private affairs?" she demanded with defensive roughness.

"Are you ashamed to talk about them?"

He spoke firmly, but not unkindly. And it would have been easier for her, she felt, if he had been less unruffled and urbane.

"Jus' why should you be so interested?" she challenged with a purely protectional show of resentment.

"Because I'm so tremendously interested in you," was his answer. "I rather wanted to be a real friend of yours."

That prompted her to sit for a moment or two in deep thought.

"Then I guess the best way o' bein' friendly is not to be too curious about me and what I've been," she responded.

He laughed at that, easily and openly.

"I refuse to think that badly of you," he asserted. "I'll even go that one better and say that you're a woman who refuses to think badly of herself."

For that, however, Aurora Mary evinced no gratitude.

"You've got me pretty well figgered out, haven't you?" she cloudily challenged.

"You see," explained Somer as he leaned against the rough-timbered window-sill, "I happened to talk with Father Dumond about you, down at the Landing. He said you were an extraordinarily fine woman."

"A fat lot he knows about me!" said the woman in khaki. Yet the flush that spread over her face did not altogether escape Somer.

"He seemed of the opinion," continued the latter, "that you emulated the porcupine for purely protective purposes, if you get what I mean."

She gave him a quick glance, as though to make sure he was not secretly laughing at her.

"I guess Father Dumond was rememberin' that the first law of all religion is charity," she said with her first touch of bitterness.

"That's interesting," conceded Somer, "but entirely inaccurate. And whatever happens, we're not going to quarrel. We've got to give and take, in this tangled-up life of ours, and I've been wondering, this last few minutes, just what you're going

to do with your future."

She did not answer him, at once, since she was busy at the moment in placing her baby in a roughly carved cradle of red pine and carefully covering it with the Indian-like blanket of flaming scarlet and yellow.

"I guess I've got that pretty well worked out," she finally observed. "You see, early next month I'm goin' down to the city."

That brought a frown of perplexity to the lean brown face.

"What city?" he asked, his eyes on the quietly rocked cradle.

"New York," answered Aurora Mary. She had the trick, Somer once more observed, of squaring her underlip in her moments of belligerency.

"And you'll take your child with you?"

"Of course," she proclaimed. And again he stood thoughtful.

"Why do you want to go to New York?" he finally inquired.

"I want to better myself," was her sullenly defensive reply.

"And how do you propose to do that?"

"Joan Caver and her father are takin' me into their home," she said, compelling her glance to meet his.

"For any particular reason?" he asked, attributing her momentary confusion to her modesty.

"I happened to save Mr. Caver's life this spring, an' I guess he feels he owes me the chance o' gittin' civilized."

"He would, naturally," conceded Somer. "But won't you rather miss the freedom and openness and bigness of life, down there among all the brick and mortar?"

She found that question, apparently, none too easy to answer.

"I've got to take my chance on that," she guardedly replied.

"Do you know much about that big city of ours?"

"No—not much," was the slightly dispirited answer.

"In that case," said Somer with an achieved matter-of-factness, "I'll have to be your guide and mentor before the big migration. You'll be a tenderfoot, remember, in the land of the sky-scraper, about the same as I'm a tenderfoot in the great open spaces. So perhaps, by talking things over, we can make the going a little easier."

She was not, obviously, used to generosity like that, for there was a deeper light in the dusky eyes which she lifted to his face.

"That's uncommon kind of you," she said, not without a touch of embarrassment, as she rose to her feet.

"On the contrary," retorted Somer as he stared at the lithe-limbed body in the smoke-stained khaki hunting-suit, "it's much more selfish than you imagine. But if you were still asking my advice, I'd still recommend that you stick to the bush."

That brought the color back to her face.

"I'm not askin' your advice," she half sullenly reminded him.

"What I mean," he said in a casual effort at appeasement, "is that we always make a mistake when we try to complicate life. Our one enduring problem, you'll find, is to simplify it. That's really why we poor mob-ridden mortals come up into your country for relief. We come here to camp, to fight for a simplicity we don't quite know how to face, to get away from the merciless machineries that grind the soul out of city life. You've probably watched us often enough making fools of ourselves with a pup-tent and a frying-pan, when at heart we were only making a tragic gesture toward freedom."

But his thought, apparently, failed to reach her.

"Folks, I guess, usually want what they haven't got," she cloudily observed.

"Until they get it," he curtly amended. And a touch of pity tinged his smile as he pictured her, in his mind's eye, staring blank-faced up at the Woolworth Building through the traffic-dust of Broadway. "Well, we can at least talk over some of our newfangled woodcraft," he said in a second effort toward appeasement.

"Woodcraft?" she echoed, frowning.

"Yes, the woodcraft you may need in that forest of steel."

CHAPTER VI

Aurora Mary Moyne, for reasons which she could not altogether define, found the ensuing week less exacting than she had expected. It even held its wayward hours of happiness, of happiness touched with unrest, for the camp-boss of Trail-End was not yet entirely at peace with her own soul. But as opaline day succeeded opaline day, she felt less and less like a skater on thin ice. Confidence came back to her like a fluttered bird back to its nest.

Her visitor, she saw, was learning to accept her, though she knew this was being done with reservations entirely his own. And she in turn was learning to key both speech and movement down to the unruffled sea-level of a sophistication which she interpreted as urban, as belonging to a great city that seemed to put its indelible markings on its children. She even, without quite knowing it, fell into momentary imitation of his speech and manner.

What was more, she liked being with Somer. She liked his quietness and his air of dependability and his constrained enthusiasm for the northern woods under their autumnal mantle of coloring, and his cool-eyed subservience to her as they set out, morning by morning, in search for the duck and partridge that abounded in the many-islanded lakes between her pine-clad hills. Yet he tired easily, she found, for he had brought with him from the tropics a touch of malaria which he claimed to be getting rid of in that tonic northern air.

Enticing as those crystal-clear autumn mornings were, Aurora Mary could never wander far from home, circling back like a wood-duck, as Somer put it, before her little *babiche* nest would grow cold. Once, however, they made a half-day of it and went out for deer, though it was Aurora Mary's rifle that brought down their solitary buck, and her own broad brown shoulders that carried in the carcass.

"And I had the nerve," observed Somer as he watched her so efficient-handed with her hunting-knife, "to talk about tutoring you."

"This," said the girl as she proceeded to quarter her kill, "isn't goin' to be of much use to me on Fift' Avenue."

"But ability is ability," maintained Somer, "in any quarter of the globe."

"Then I want to learn about the other things," said the young woman with the bloodied forearm.

"The other things," he amended with a glance about the blue-misted hills, "that'll leave you uncommonly homesick for this."

She turned and studied him with her habitually cloudy eye.

"You still don't seem crazy about me goin' down to the city," she reminded him.

Somer sat down on a windfall and took out his tobacco-pouch. It seemed very pleasant there, in the pellucid northern sunlight that made him think of a razor-blade wrapped in rose-leaves, indolently watching that ardent and vital figure with the ripples of strength along the sun-browned shoulder, high-poised and muscular like a boy's.

"It's not the city I'm opposed to," he said as he struck a match and lighted his pipe. "It's not the city, so much as the general idea of tearing life up by the roots. Transplanting people, you see, is even considerably harder than transplanting trees. And it's wisest, as a general rule, to stick to one's own environment. The Indian, for instance, would never be entirely happy along that Avenue you just mentioned."

"I'm not an Indian," retorted Aurora Mary.

"But you happen to have lived largely in the open," argued Somer. "And as some Frenchman has said, when we go away, we die a little."

"Well, I'm not longin' to die in the backwoods."

"Of course you don't," conceded Somer. "But there's a wrench in suddenly changing your world. It's apt to leave you without rootage, and even wilt something out of your soul. And until you've established your new contacts and learned to fit into your new environment, it can leave you pretty lonesome."

"Other folks've done it," maintained Aurora Mary.

"Of course," acknowledged Somer, realizing, even as she spoke, that this blind impulse of hers toward the splendor of life was not based entirely on reason and could not, accordingly, be argued over as an abstract problem. He might help her, but he could never change her. "What I want to do," he went on, "is to make it a little easier for you, if I can. So let's be level-headed and look around a bit and get at least half-way ready for the big jump."

She sat back, her brown face puckered with thought.

"You mean I'll always be an outsider an' they'll always laugh at me for the way I talk an' dress?"

His manner was cool, even though his intentions were merciful.

"Well, since we're going to Rome, let's see if we can't learn to do as the Romans do. Supposing we begin to-night, for instance, by dressing for dinner."

"How d'you mean, dressin'?" she demanded, puzzled.

"As Joan would," he explained. "As you'll have to do when you're down there with the Cavers."

She sat, thoughtful-eyed, absorbing his intention.

"All right," she finally agreed. "And for the love o' Mike, jerk me up when I git talkin' rough. I want to do it the other way, the way Joe does it, but you can't swing into a new way o' handin' out language overnight."

"It all comes in time," observed Somer, refusing to smile at the intensity which he detected in both her speech and her face.

Yet he caught an echo of that same intensity when, at the dinner-hour that evening, she appeared before him in a straight-lined frock of apricot-colored crêpe-de-chine. He had no knowledge, at the moment, that it had been laboriously made over from a gown left by Joan, but he could see that it was ill-fitting and ill-suited to the ample lines of the body that looked so buoyant and boylike in olive-green khaki. He could also see that she was only too painfully awaiting his verdict.

"You're a knock-out," he valorously dissembled as he advanced, constrained and frowning, toward the table-end. But it disturbed him to discover that he liked her less in the raiment of civilization. She impressed him, for the first time, as awkward and self-conscious. Even the contrast between the Indian-brown tan of her neck and forearms and the creamy whiteness of her bared shoulders proved too abrupt to be lightly overlooked. It wasn't until he drew out her chair for her that he realized how amazingly unfamiliar it all was to her, how prodigiously novel must seem that new rôle. He already had reason to accept her as a woman of exceptional courage. But he noticed, to his surprise, that her hand was shaking a little as she unfolded her table-napkin.

"What we've got to remember," he said as he seated himself opposite her, "is that this is all relative, and never final. We talk about good form and bad form, but George Washington drank out of his saucer, and Nelson bit holes in his wine-glass, and Amy Lowell used to smoke cigars. The main issue, it seems to me, is merely to be as honest and sincere as possible. But outside of that, society has carpentered together a sort of code, a code for its own comfort. Some of it may strike you as foolish, but most of it, you'll eventually find, is based on reason."

"Then lead me to it," she said with her grim yet wistful ardor. But he was teased by a vague impression, as he watched her, that she was giving an imitation of Joan Caver, that the newer and more studied movements of her hands were like Joan's, that her intonation, as she spoke with a deliberated new precision, was phantasmally like Joan's. And he wondered, as he studied her in the wavering side-light from the open fire, if that was why he liked her, if that was why he was wringing a perverse sort of joy out of her momentary dependence upon him.

He was even wondering, in an abstracted sort of way, just how many weeks of city life it would take to bleach that butternut-brown off her skin. And he was wondering, a moment later, if he would like her as well when they had reshaped her to the impersonal and universal mold of their sophistication. There would be experts enough, in that city of experts, to perfect the exterior, to apply the essential veneer. It happened, day by day, with hundreds of *émigrés* from the untutored hinterlands. It was continuously taking place with those abruptly affluent small-townners who wanted the seal of Manhattan as abruptly placed on their mode and manner. But what would happen, he wondered, to the inner soul of this untrammelled girl. She may have been without morals, in her wilderness way, but she was also without remorse. She was

awkward, even ludicrous, at the moment, but there was a salvaging largeness about her which he could not quite put his finger on. She had made a muddle, obviously, of her unguarded and undirected girlhood. But her one hope, he felt, lay in her ardency, her blind determination for a widened frontier of experience, her passion for more and more knowledge of life. She would never be listless. And, in the right sort of gown and with the right sort of grooming, she might eventually be lovely.

"I guess," said Aurora Mary as she thoughtfully transferred her fork from her left hand to her right, "that it's more'n a matter of table manners. I know the difference between a finger-bowl and a foot-bath. But it's your whole way o' livin' and lookin' at life that seems to count."

"Then let's begin," he reminded her almost sharply, "by not dropping our g's."

She winced, but kept her temper under control.

"It's more your whole way of living and looking at life," she dutifully repeated. And her color deepened a trifle at his diffident nod of approval.

"The trouble with me," Aurora Mary went gropingly on, "is that all those other women have got a ten-year start o' me. They've been able to go to schools and colleges where they learn things. It comes easy to them. They can do the right thing without thinkin'—without thinking—the same as I can tan a doeskin or follow a forest trail, or get a camp-fire going in the falling rain."

"Don't worry too much about those college girls," averred the frowning Somer. "They've impressed me as knowing confoundedly little. It's mostly a matter of veneer. They're sent to a fashionable school and get a few tags and tabs of what they regard as culture, with a smattering of Shaw and Wells and a mixture of calisthenics and Karl Marx and a fricassee of fudge and college-weekly slang, and a nut-sundae of prom-souvenirs and pennants, and a passion to start Little Theaters in abandoned barns. But they know about as much about life, actual life, as I know about the *pliohippus* fossils of America."

He suspected, from the blankness of her eye, that she had not succeeded in following his line of thought.

"You get what I'm driving at?" he interrogated.

"It's plumb over my head," she meekly admitted.

"Well, it'll come home to you after you've picked up a little more of their lingo and confined yourself in a little more of their veneer. But you won't find them all wearing halos."

"I've got to take my chances on that," she persisted.

"To get what?" he demanded.

"I want to get some of that veneer," averred the unsmiling Aurora Mary. "I want to know how to go into a hotel and order a meal, the same as Joe would, and how to get undressed in a sleeping-car, and what you have to put on when you go to the opera-house, and how to wear clothes and walk into a room without falling over the furniture."

He was tempted to smile at her solemnity. But his eyes, in the face of her earnestness, remained discreetly abstracted. He was even regretting, as he glanced at her in the wavering light, that she had not fallen into his hands when she was still a pliant and impressionable child, before she had drunk at those darker waters of life that left a vague undertone of bitterness in her ardency.

"Then let's buckle down," he suddenly suggested, "and see what another ten days of real study can do to straighten out our problem."

"Another ten days" she repeated, looking up from her plate. "Can you stay that long up here at Trail-End?"

"I've decided," he replied with his enigmatic smile, "that another ten days up here is about the best thing that can happen to me!"

"That's great!" said the girl with the over-ardent eyes. But she was wondering, at the moment, just what Joan Caver

would say.

They were, indeed, a strange ten days to both Somer and his companion. It began with a hurried trip down to Duck Landing, where they gathered up what schoolbooks they could, elementary text-books that had been thumbed and frowned over by *métis* children in the mission-school, a geography without a cover, a dog-eared second reader, a *Short History of America* with its first ten pages missing, and a *Spelling Book for Beginners* with its margins generously decorated with berry-stains.

It was not much, he remembered, that could be done in the time allotted, but he proposed to make the most of the ten days that remained to them. Aurora Mary, he found, could read a trifle better than he expected, but her penmanship was a weird and mysterious rite of her own, and her spelling betrayed a fixed inclination to stray from the narrow trail of authority. But once he realized she was too much in earnest to be laughed at, he proved incredibly patient with her. He taught her as he would teach a child. He showed her how to hold a pen and how to form her words a little closer after the fashion of the copybook. He persuaded her to read aloud, page after page, from a faded blue copy of Lamb's *Tales from Shakspeare*, though she was much happier when they transferred their attentions to Anthony Hope's *Prisoner of Zenda*, where in the excitement of the action she betrayed a tendency to disregard the bigger words and forget his repeated instructions as to intonation and accent.

He taught her spelling, column by column, and opened her slightly bewildered eyes to the importance of grammar, and with the help of the dog-eared mission geography showed her that it was a rather big world that lay beyond Duck Landing and Goldpan Portage.

In the evenings, with the open fire crackling before them, they talked of the city and its ways. His intention, during those discussions, was to prepare her for her new world, to bring home to her a comprehension of the difference between life on the Little Winiska and life on the Hudson. But he was forced to smile at the artlessness of many of her questions, just as he was compelled to prick the bubble of many illusions. For he realized that her conception of New York was a purely romantic one, patched together from illustrated magazines and Sunday supplements and her one bewildering contact with a motion-picture hall was during a week's visit to a pulp-mill town known as Schick Falls. It was her Land of Promise, the far-off country that held everything out of which her narrow frontier life had been cheated. And as she sat questioning him and pondering his answers, she impressed him as more child than woman, while he in turn took on a perverse feeling of age. He was the teacher, mature and experienced and monitorial, and she was merely the pupil.

Yet he could quickly enough lose that slow-garnered sense of the pedagogic, with its inevitable overtone of condescension, the moment he saw her functioning in her own field. He was always a trifle humbled when he sat and watched the skill with which she could handle a canoe. She seemed no longer childlike as she stepped back into her manifold duties as camp-manager and awakened the lethargic Indian Joe and Kippewa Kate into undreamed-of spurts of activity. And one morning, when he was startled by the sound of pistol-shots, he emerged to see Aurora Mary with her big six-shooter in her hand, nonchalantly spinning an empty tomato-can in the air, keeping it poised above her, like a rubber ball on a fountain-jet, until her ammunition was exhausted.

"I hope, Annie Oakley, that we never get into a gun-fight," he said as he watched her reload.

She frowned over the "Annie Oakley," which was lost on her, and with her next bullet casually cut the tip off a jack-pine thirty paces away. Yet an hour later she was sitting meek-eyed and submissive while he corrected her laboriously penned composition on "The Source of the City's Furs" and pointed out that it would be better to get an "a" into her "beever."

Three hours later, however, when they were out with their guns after partridge, the scales were abruptly turned. For Aurora Mary, sniffing the thin autumnal sunlight, mounted a small hill and stared frowningly toward the north.

"Bush-fire!" was her laconic report as she headed homeward and loped, Indian-like, toward the boat-landing.

"And what do *you* have to do about it?" demanded the panting Somer as he saw her toss axes and shovels into the kicker-boat.

"It's part of my work," she exclaimed, pulling the tarpaulin off the engine, "to fire-range this district. And I think I can cut off that flame-run between Lac Lumier and Lone Wolf Creek. Are you coming?"

"Of course," answered Somer, tumbling into the boat. "But would you mind telling me just how you propose to stop a forest-fire?"

She did not reply to that question until her engine had caught and they were under way.

"We'll choke her off in her narrowest corner," she casually explained. "That means runnin'—running—a line from the creek over to Lac Lumier, widening the portage-trail and cutting a swath the flames can't jump. Then it just naturally burns out in its own backwater."

"Doesn't that mean cutting down some pretty heavy timber?" asked Somer as he studied the increasing smoke-drift over the hilltops.

"Yes, it means ax work," she acknowledged as her eye skirted the shore-line for a likely landing-place.

Yet fifteen minutes later, after they had scurried over hog-backs and pushed through dry bracken and hurried down needle-carpeted colonnades of spruce, he gained a new respect for her as he saw her take up the bright-bladed ax and sink the ringing steel into a pine-bole, as, not so many months before, he had seen peons sink *machetes* into tropical undergrowth.

There was no questioning her efficiency. Every stroke fell true, and every slender tree-trunk tumbled as ordained. He was no stranger to an ax, but he seemed without either the skill or the strength of his frailer-bodied companion. Once or twice, in fact, she even waved him impatiently aside as he ran to help her where she tugged at a fallen timber that seemed too heavy for her.

"Grub that trail clean," she commanded as she worked her way down-hill into a white birch grove. And as Somer sweated over his task of widening the portage-path, he could hear the remote and musical ring of her ax-blade and the periodic crash of a falling tree. He began to feel, as the air grew more acrid with smoke, that it was already too late, that the fire would be upon them before that divorcing channel could be struck through from water to water. He also found the smoky air extremely distasteful to his lungs. But he nursed no intention of retreating while that over-active figure in stained khaki remained on the firing-line. He even caught up a shovel, as the crackle and roar came closer, and emulated his leader in beating out the flames where a burning ember fell across their jealously guarded barrier and threatened the bush-land that opened fanwise to the south. His throat was dry and his sooty face was runneled with sweat and his boot-soles were hot from stamping out widening islands of flame when Aurora Mary triumphantly announced that everything was all right.

"We've got 'er!" she proclaimed, leaning russet-faced on her shovel.

Somer, staring at the blackened and smoking stumpage to the north, felt that at least one day of his life had not been lived in vain. And he felt oddly drawn toward the silent and smoke-stained sharer in that triumph over blind force. His companion even noticed that narrowed yet abstracted gaze of his, when she looked up, and became vaguely uncomfortable before it.

"I s'pose I look like a half-grilled she-bear," she said as she pulled off her battered hat and with it slapped at her ash-covered body.

"You'll never look more wonderful, young woman, than you do at this moment," was Somer's unexpectedly solemn reply. And that, in turn, seemed merely to increase her embarrassment.

"I guess," she casually suggested, "a quart or two o' drinkin' water is what we need most."

And without more ado, she turned back to the kicker-boat beached beyond the bracken-covered hills.

Yet still another evidence of that barricading reticence of hers confronted him when, toward the middle of the second week, he rather dolorously began his preparations for departure.

"It's just occurred to me," he said as he looked up from his half-filled hand-bags, "that for two mature-minded adults we're acting uncommonly like children. There's no reason, if you're going down to New York in five or six days, why I can't wait over and go with you. It would certainly make your traveling a little less trying."

"I don't think it would," said Aurora Mary, not meeting his eye.

"You mean you'd rather go alone?" he questioned.

"I've got to," was her answer.

"And you don't want a guide down into new territory like that?"

"I can't afford one," announced Aurora Mary.

"You mean it wouldn't look right?" he demanded.

"If you want to put it that way," she conceded as she moved over to the cradle where the blanketed Saggy had awakened from his sleep.

"You weren't always that particular about appearances," Somer was thoughtless enough to observe. He caught, a moment later, the flash of fire from the deep-hooded eyes, but her voice, when she spoke again, was unexpectedly patient.

"Then it's time I was starting to be," she quietly asserted.

Little more passed between them until, later in the day, he caught sight of her solitary figure wandering meditatively along the water-front where a sun of Roman gold was foundering, beyond the lonely reaches of the pinelands, in a striated sea of Burgundy red. He watched her as she sat on an empty crate on the boat-landing, with Pancake's nose between her ankles. And he noticed, as he joined her, the deepening coolness of the northern air.

"You won't have many more days like this," he said as he stared out over the wind-riffled water, opal and orange and silver in the slowly paling twilight. Before morning, he knew, the more sheltered bays of that water would be sheeted with ice.

"No," she said, without turning her face to him. And he joined her in studying the lonely northern sky-line where the Burgundy red melted and merged into ashes of roses and pearl and opaline green.

"Dark and true and tender is the North," he suddenly quoted aloud.

"Who said that?" demanded the girl at his side.

"Why?"

"Because it's—it's so true."

"Our oldest English poet said that, about a thousand years ago," he patiently explained. "And about nine hundred years later a man named Tennyson said it over again."

"I've read some of Tennyson," she announced, not without a touch of pride.

"Then you've done more than most of the younger generation," proclaimed Somer. But Aurora Mary didn't seem to hear him.

"Dark and true and tender is the North," she repeated, in an oddly softened voice. "That's—that's the kind o' thing I want to learn when I get down in your world."

"You mustn't expect it to be all poetry," he ventured, disturbed by the luminous light in her eyes. She essayed no answer to that. But he noticed, as he studied the silent figure that seemed to fit so well into its background of the moment, that her face had hardened again.

"There'll be some things that you'll be sure to miss," he added.

"Yes, there'll be some things I'll miss," she dully acknowledged.

"How about Pancake?" he asked as he looked down at the old husky-dog.

She looked up, at that, with a quick frown of concern.

"Why, can't I take him with me?" she demanded.

"That wouldn't be kind," he reminded her.

"Wouldn't be kind?" she echoed, her brown hand stroking the shaggy neck between her knees.

"He's an old dog," explained Somer, "and he's used to his own ways. He's used to the open. He'd only be unhappy and homesick if you cooped him up in the city."

She sat, silent and wide-eyed, as that unregarded fact slowly filtered through to her consciousness. Then she stooped forward and held the pointed black nose between her two hands, staring long and intently into upturned eyes that looked so hungrily back at her.

"I'll—I'll never see him again," she said in little more than a whisper.

"But what can you do?" demanded Somer, conscious for the first time of the tears coursing slowly down the Indian-brown cheeks.

"I don't—don't see how I can leave him," she contended.

"You'll have to."

She took a deeper breath as she dashed the tears from her face.

"I guess," she said, squaring her shoulders, "you were right in what you said the other day, about dying a little when you go away."

But even as she spoke, Somer noticed, she held the shaggy dark head pressed closely against her unhappy body. And the man from the city, in his perplexity, knew of no way of consoling her.

CHAPTER VII

Aurora Mary's change of world was considerably less expeditious and agreeable than she had expected. Her spirits had sagged as she left Duck Landing behind her, and a new desolation of soul had possessed her as she rattled southward in a branch-line day-coach toward Moosehead Junction. But once she and her odd assortment of baggage were aboard the main-line express for Montreal, her discomfort of the mind was eclipsed by more tangible discomforts of the body. The Pullman in which she found herself seemed distressingly hot and dusty; she fretted for a freedom of movement no longer available, and traveling with a small baby peevish from parched air and upset from a change of milk was in itself a tax on patience. And to the dusky-eyed woman so cloudily watching mile after mile of rock and water and woodland slowly merging into farmland, it seemed an incredibly big world opening up before her.

As she approached Montreal, in fact, her journey began to impress her as an accumulation of indiscretions. She had been wrong in everything, wrong in traveling alone, wrong in the kind of clothes she had chosen for the trip, wrong in bringing a hamper of cooked food when a dining-car stood at her service, wrong in the clutter of useless things she had so stubbornly carried along with her, from the superfluous roll of Hudson Bay blankets and her beloved yet battered old hat, to her equally beloved old accordion and her Cree moccasins and snowshoes tied up in bagging-hemp, to say nothing of the big six-shooter so carefully wrapped up in a fringed shirt of beaded moosehide that had seemed too precious to be left behind. It was all wrong, from the acerbity with which she checked the advance of a kind-eyed old gentleman who showed her how to ring the porter's bell to the indignation with which she declined a rubicund traveling-salesman's invitation to share his table in the dining-car.

But she was still smolderingly self-conscious and still morbidly sensitive to ridicule. When she left the sleeping Saggy and wandered disconsolately back to the observation-car, she found the rear platform occupied by two college students, one of whom indolently and spasmodically thrummed a ukulele while the other high-spirited youth studied her with an ardent if slightly condescending eye. She could feel that eye burn through her, even as her ear caught the unmistakable query: "Who's the woodland beauty?"

Yet she both held her ground and held in her temper. It wasn't until the ukulele-player audibly observed: "Pipe the bead-work on your Piute friend!" that she felt the feral flash go through her body. And at that she wheeled about, tingling, confronted him as he rose startled to his feet, and before he quite realized either her intentions or the extent of her anger, she smote him with a work-hardened hand on one plump cheek and then with an equally hard palm on the other, after which she violently thrust him back in his folding-chair, where he sat astounded and scarlet-faced, staring at what impressed him as a cyclone in petticoats.

But she cried a little, furtively, as she groped her unsteady way back to her Pullman section; and the hurrying world which she looked out on through blurred window-glass impressed her as an alien and friendless one.

Yet never once did she question her end or falter in her resolution. That migration, as unreasoned and implacable as the migration of water-fowl, was still dignified by its purpose, remote and grim and immutable. The vastness of the city on the St. Lawrence depressed her, but never for a moment did it shake her will. The mystery and the unexplored intricacies of the night-train that was to carry her on to New York momentarily overawed her, but never once was she tempted to turn back from the unknown. She was on her way to her Promised Land, to the City of Light, where all life was going to change for her. And if, in the pulsing and swaying darkness of the night, faint waves of desolation crept through her as she stared out at clustered yard-lamps and cavernous stations and a black country-side spangled with forlornly small home-lights, she forgot her loneliness in remembering Saggy's small body beside her. The warmth of that small body consoled her. And he was to remain the link, the living link, between her new world and her old.

Yet the difference between those two worlds came home to her as, in the early morning light, her twining train flowed smoothly along the curving shore of the Hudson, rumbling through suburban settlements that grew more and more crowded with life, flashing by towns astir in the bright autumn sunlight, skirting hillsides stippled with awakening homes. Then came the outskirts of the city itself, benumbing in its immensity, huddling on hills where bright-colored sign-boards filled the gaps in its brick and mortar, leaving a mere onlooker puzzled as to how and where so vast an army of human units could meet and fight on so narrow a battle-field. Then came tunneled darkness and the mysterious flash of colored lights and a sharpening of expectancy that quickened the pulse and tightened the throat of the watching girl.

She knew, at last, that they had come to a stop, and that the passengers were pouring out on concrete piers where crowds

jostled and red-caps called and self-propelling baggage-trucks were swallowed up in pillars that opened and closed before them like hungry mouths. But it was the crowds that most impressed and oppressed Aurora Mary, the milling and self-immured and intermingling and yet ever-hurrying crowds, so intent on their own way and so oblivious to a wide-eyed young woman in crumpled blue serge staring for the first time at the star-strewn ceiling of a terminal concourse.

She had no knowledge, at the time, that she stood in the lordliest gateway of that lordly city. But never before had her mind grasped its magnitude, just as she had never before realized there could be so many people in this crowded world. She had never dreamed that these sluiceways of commotion could ebb and flow with such eddying currents of life. And for all the Indian-like restraint of her movements, never before had she felt so humbled and homeless. It seemed a long way back to Trail-End, with the blue smoke of the birchwood fire going up from the lodge-chimney, and the hill-pines standing black against their green-gold fringe of twilight. And as she held Saggy's whimpering body closer against her breast, it impressed her, for the first time, as a fragile and vulnerable thing to bring into such a maelstrom of force.

Nearly an hour later it was, that a neatly uniformed chauffeur hesitated for the second time before a serge-clad young woman sitting on a waiting-room bench with a baby in her arms and an odd assortment of hand-baggage clustered about an abraded Klondike bag at her feet. She may have looked, at first sight, suspiciously like a dark-skinned immigrant fresh-laden from a lower deck of a liner. But at a second glance one detected a faintly luminous glow in the watchful eyes and an unexpected promise of intelligence in the barricaded brown face, which was, in turn, unexpectedly appealing under a dissembling flat hat of dusty plush adorned with yellow marigolds.

"Pardon me, madam, but are you Mrs. Moyne?" inquired the man in the uniform.

Aurora Mary, obviously, had not been prepared for that. It even took a moment or two of thought for the significance of it to filter through her brain.

"I guess I am," she guardedly admitted, with a wintry enough smile down at the bundle in her arms.

"I'm Mr. Caver's chauffeur," explained the man in the uniform. "And I was sent to take you out to Westbrook."

"But Mr. Caver was to meet me."

"I know, madam, but he was called into conference and was unable to leave his office. I'm to take you out, madam."

"But aren't the Cavers living in the city?" demanded the perplexed girl.

"They come into their town house, madam, next month," was the altogether disappointing answer. "They are still in the country."

"In the country," echoed Aurora Mary in the flatted voice of frustration. She had just traveled half a thousand miles, she remembered, to get away from the country. She had just fought her way into the Promised Land, to be whisked out of it again.

"We're to go out at once, madam," explained Gleason, the chauffeur, as he began collecting the hand-baggage about them. He was respectful, she noticed, but crisp and non-committal. And he did not smile at the oddity of some of her parcels.

"But where do we go in the country?" she demanded, following him through that ever-milling crowd which seemed to know and care so little about her existence.

"To Westbrook, madam," answered Gleason. "That's the family home on Long Island."

This puzzled but did not surprise her. She was, in fact, no longer capable of responding to shock. She could digest only so much sensation and her last two days had been replete with it. But her spirit was not entirely crushed.

"How many homes do they have?" she inquired with ironic intent.

"Four, madam," answered Gleason with the utmost solemnity, "not counting the camp in the north woods."

"Then you know about that camp?" demanded the slightly homesick Aurora Mary.

"You've just come from it, I believe," answered Gleason, with a faint and more friendly smile. She liked him better, she decided, when he was less like a totem-pole.

"And I had some time getting here," she acknowledged, forlornly hungry for even that casual human contact.

"You'll find it quiet and comfortable at Westbrook," said Gleason, swinging open the door of a somber-looking limousine.

But Aurora Mary, rocking in the unexpectedly soft arms of that car's padded upholstery, found small consolation in the thought of Westbrook. She was not, she told herself as they circled about colonnaded ramps and shuttled through contending traffic and emerged into narrow cañons overhung by gray-walled sky-scrapers, in search of quiet. She wanted life, city life, spectacular life close about her. But she desired to be a part of it. She knew a keen but indeterminate hunger, as she listened to the million-throated roar about her, to emerge from insignificance, to be eventually identified with that complicated machinery whose wheels made the air about her shrill with music. It was, she felt, something to be met and conquered as one conquers a bush-fire, to be confronted and worsted as her pugnacious old Pancake would worst a badger. And she would do it, she told herself as she clenched her hardened brown hands; she would do it, she repeated a little dizzy with excitement and hurry and noise, or there would be some feathers to sweep up before she got through. She may have been merely a bush-rat's daughter, but somewhere, just beyond some vague turn in the road, was some redeeming grandeur of life which she proposed to know and understand.

It was her first ride in an automobile and her first journey through the heart of a great city. And those twin intoxicants, apparently, were a trifle too much for her. She even realized that she was a little drunk with it all, for as they purred their way between those shadowing palisades of stone and steel, she leaned back with dreamy eyes and murmured aloud: "I've done it!" She had crossed her Rubicon and come to the city. And the day would dawn, she averred as they threaded their way down a broader avenue overhung by towers of marble and minarets of receding gold,—an avenue crowded with burnished motor-cars in which sat stately and remote-eyed women with jewels flashing above their autumn furs,—the time would come, she somewhat dizzily repeated, when she would know and understand and be one of those daughters of radiance. She would find her place in the sun.

Yet that mood passed, shriveling in the fierceness of its own fires. It was her first journey behind a liveried chauffeur and in the upholstered quietude of a limousine. Yet she was not alone in her glory. There were other cars equally resplendent all about her. They may have impressed her as flowing miracles on wheels, as symbols of power. But there seemed to be too many of them, each in some way strangling the grandeur out of the other, each leaving a trail of gases that choked a little of the splendor out of the golden-moted air. Her throat even tightened a trifle, at the unfamiliar fumes, and she was almost glad when they crept out over a colossal high bridge with the huddled sky-line of the city behind them and doll-like shipping threading back and forth below them. But the reaction of depression that had taken possession of her did not diminish. She felt, of a sudden, infinitesimally small and lonely and insignificant. And in that moment of desolation she looked down at the life which she held clasped in her arms.

"We'll have to stick together, Saggy," she said as her arms tightened about the small warm body against her breast. "We sure will!" And that seemed to console her. She could even smile as they wound their way on through dull suburban streets and scattered settlements that melted in turn to the open country.

It became country unlike anything she had seen before, a country of secluded homes and stately gardens and emerald-green houses, of parkways and smooth black pavements traversed by quick-moving traffic, of hedges and walls and manorial iron gates. It seemed a tamed and petted country to the girl from the North, subdued and finished and brooded over by a sense of age and order. It carried a suggestion of achievement and security, of battles won and forgotten, of struggle flowering in autumnal repose.

Yet some of it, she could see, was new, new as the pointed yellow shoes that pinched her feet, new as the macadam through freshly planted parks and bright-colored villas in the midst of cunningly terraced lawns. And when the car turned in through a pillared gateway and wound along a graveled driveway flanked by Scotch laburnum and English lilac and late hydrangeas still in bloom, Aurora Mary caught fleeting glimpses, through clusters of copper beeches and maples and elms, of a many-windowed manor-house of red brick basking secluded and stately in the mild and misty sea-air that made her think of a knife-blade muffled in doeskin. She saw two gardeners raking leaves along a shrub-bordered walk as level as a mill-floor, and the flash of a fountain above the close-clipped hedge of a sunken garden, and the gleam of marble beyond terraced green lawns where a pair of peacocks strutted grotesquely above their own shadows. And it seemed a new and incredible world that lay before her.

She was not conscious of gliding into the high-pillared porte-cochère and of the maroon-uniformed chauffeur's movement

as he descended from his seat and opened the car-door. She was occupied, at the moment, in quieting the fretful child in her arms.

"This is Westbrook, madam," Gleason was respectfully explaining.

It was only slowly that the newcomer came out of her trance. A butler and a footman in maroon and scarlet had emerged from the high-paneled door and were solemnly taking possession of the parcels clustered about her feet.

"You mean this is where Mr. Caver lives?" she asked in a voice slightly flattered with a new and nameless uneasiness.

"Yes, madam, at present," admitted the grave-eyed Gleason.

As she walked hesitatingly in through the great door, holding her blanketed baby to her breast and dutifully followed by the uniformed servants, she felt for a moment that she had foolishly stumbled into a church. For silence reigned within that high-ceilinged hall, and the light that filtered in through the leaded glass windows seemed disturbingly meager. It was Saggy, now crying lustily, who put an end to that dim religious silence.

"Jeeze!" said Aurora Mary, under her breath, staring blankly at the dim brocaded walls and the cascading white stairway that curved upward into higher and hidden glories. And she was conscious, for the first time, of the prim-faced elderly woman in prim black who had so quietly advanced to her side.

"I am Mrs. Pusey, Mr. Caver's housekeeper," she sonorously intoned. "And I'm sure you would like to go to your rooms."

Aurora Mary looked at her with an opaque eye.

"Thank you," she said, swallowing hard as one part of her brain pondered the immensity of a home demanding so varied and so resplendent an army of servitors.

Yet she swallowed still harder as she saw Mrs. Pusey's lean finger play on a series of mother-of-pearl wall-buttons and beheld a door open automatically and found herself ushered into a quilted satin compartment which suddenly took unto itself wings and silently soared upward through space. Aurora Mary crouched back, in a corner, gasping, wondering what should be done to stop that mysterious machinery of ascension, when the lift stopped of its own accord, a door slid noiselessly open, and she found herself in a second wide hall carpeted in muffling old rose and lighted by narrow windows through which the modified morning sunlight shone mellow on waxed parquetry and rugs and wainscoting of dark-wooded walnut.

"These have been set apart for you," Mrs. Pusey was explaining as she swung open a door that disclosed a sitting-room done in rose and ivory. It was a welcoming-looking room, with a great cluster of roses on the writing-desk between the windows, with imploring-armed easy chairs, with soft-toned pictures on the wall, and a second cluster of orchids in a fluted silver vase beside the reading-lamp that flanked the cream-and-rose cushioned chaise-lounge. Beyond an open door the dazzled Aurora Mary caught sight of a second room, a mirrored dressing-room all done in green and silver, and beyond that again a bedroom in which she could glimpse a high-canopied Italian bed with pink and gold cornucopias of flowers on its massive carved foot-board.

"Shall I have your bath drawn for you?" Mrs. Pusey was asking of the young woman with the impossible plush hat and the oddly luminous eyes.

"Have my bath drawn for me?" echoed the uncomprehending Aurora Mary. "What does that mean?"

Not a shadow of change flickered over Mrs. Pusey's pallid face.

"You should like to bathe, I'm sure, after your long journey," intoned the austere-eyed woman in black.

"I guess so," admitted the newcomer. She felt, of a sudden, very tired and depressed and travel-worn. She wanted to be alone, to think things over, to get her bearings again, to adjust her bewildered spirit to this new order of things. Her head ached and her eyes for once were listless as they followed the movements of the older woman in black, who explained where the bells were to be found and how the telephone was hidden in a pagoda of Chinese silk that opened like a wolf's jaw, and how the bathroom lay on the immediate right of the bedroom, which Mr. Caver had had done over against her arrival.

"Mr. Caver felt that you would prefer picking out your own maid," explained Mrs. Pusey as she motioned a parcel-laden footman into the next room. "In the meantime I'll have Francine, Miss Joan's maid, look after you."

Aurora Mary regarded her with a cloudy eye. "Am I to have a maid of my own?" she demanded.

"Don't you wish one?"

Aurora Mary knew that the woman in black was being polite, but it impressed her as a forced and formal sort of politeness, a politeness with an undertone of contempt as baffling as a coulée cloud of mosquitoes.

"No, I don't," was the unnecessarily curt reply.

"The trained nurse to look after your baby," Mrs. Pusey went on, "is to be here to-morrow morning."

"Trained nurse?" echoed the frowning Aurora Mary. "That baby isn't sick."

"But Mr. Caver felt that a trained nurse would relieve you of a great deal of responsibility."

The girl from the North took a grip on herself. She declined to blurt out, as she had momentarily been tempted to do, that she would take care of her own baby. But they seemed to have new ways in this new world. And the most she could do now was to mark time and study out a bewildering tangle of trails through a bewildering forest of mysteries.

"Where is Joan?" she abruptly inquired.

"Miss Joan is down at Pinehurst just at present," was the answer. "But she is expected back on Thursday. Mr. Somer, in fact, went down day before yesterday to fetch her."

"Oh!" said Aurora Mary, with an unexpected new cloud about her heart. She felt, more than ever, very much alone in the world.

She felt so much alone that when Mrs. Pusey asked if she would prefer having luncheon sent up to her own rooms, she gloomily proclaimed that she most certainly would. Her one dominating desire, at the moment, was to be alone.

But, solitude, apparently, was a luxury no longer to be indulged in. For when she wandered, timid-eyed, into the green-and-silver dressing-room, she found her imitation leather hand-satchel opened and emptied and a neatly capped maid busily but impersonally abstracting the contents of her battered Klondike bag.

"Why are you nosin' into those things o' mine?" she cried with a sudden and uncontrollable flash of resentment.

"I was sent to unpack your bags for you, madam," answered the slender-bodied young woman with the non-committal eyes as she placed a pair of moosehide moccasins on a table beside a gray flannel hunting-shirt with a bandolier for holding rifle-cartridges.

"I'll unpack my own things," proclaimed the owner of the Klondike bag.

"Very well, madam," was the prompt reply. But it was uttered with that stubborn impersonality which Aurora Mary found hard to understand and still harder to endure. Yet she was compelled to eat crow, a moment later, for the repeated shrill of the telephone-bell persuaded her that the instrument under the pagoda of Chinese silk was demanding her attention. And to face a telephone was still an ordeal that could send tingles of apprehension up and down her backbone.

"Shall I answer for madam?" asked the pink-and-white maid in the snowy service-cap.

"Please," said the humbled Aurora Mary. She was thinking at the moment, of how blind she had been to all that Allan Somer had tried to explain to her. She realized, as she stared at the abraded snowshoes leaning so out-of-place and accusatory against a silver-framed pier-glass, how patiently he had struggled to school her into some knowledge of what lay before her, and how blind she had been to his mercifully tempered warnings. But she had no intention of being a quitter. She had mushed into unmapped territory and she had to push on to the end of the trail. She had staked out her claim and she had to strip and dig and drift until she came to her promise of color.

"That was Mr. Caver, madam," the maid explained as she restored the receiver to its tinted booth. "He wished to welcome you to Westbrook, and said that he would be out immediately after luncheon."

That message lightened the heaviness that hung about Aurora Mary's heart. She even wondered why, in that new world of hers, she should be less afraid of the men than of the women. But she remained in her room, vaguely restless and intimidated and ill at ease, until word was brought up to her that Mr. Caver was awaiting her in the Chinese drawing-room.

She found him there, pacing nervously back and forth as he smoked a cigarette. He looked older, she thought, and more pebbled about the eyes, but his manner, although constrained, was unmistakably kindly. And there was something more than gratitude in his troubled glance as he studied the fatigue-shadowed face of the young woman who had so incredibly come into his home.

"I hope you're going to be happy here," he said as he detected the tremulousness of the full red underlip, which had the habit of squaring itself in its moments of belligerency.

"I'll have a great deal to learn," she acknowledged, softening under the unexpected gentleness of his voice.

"Oh, that can be arranged," he said with his half-weary smile. "The important thing, in this era, is to have the will to learn anything." He walked to the window and back, dropping into a more casual tone as he spoke again. "I'm taking my sister, Mrs. Abbott, and Gail, my married daughter, over to the Meadow Brook polo-match this afternoon. I was wondering if you'd care to come along."

She hesitated, not knowing just what was expected of her.

"I'd have to bring Saggy," she reminded him. She said it with a certain deliberateness, remembering as she did that he had not once referred to the child.

Caver's gaze, as she spoke, became suddenly abstracted. And he meditatively looked about for another cigarette before he spoke again.

"We'll really have to get another name for that boy," he observed as he touched a bell-button.

"He *has* another name."

"What is it?"

"I called him Martin, after my father. He's really Sagastayo Martin Moyne."

Caver frowned over the note of pride with which she said it.

"Then let's make it Martin," he abruptly conceded. "And do you mind, after this, if we call you Mary?"

Her clouded eyes, for one brief moment, studied his half-averted face.

"Of course not," she said with an entirely new meekness. But she turned on him, a moment later, with a surge of her old spirit. "They've already made me Mrs. Moyne around here," she curtly reminded him.

He winced, at that, and crossed to the window again.

"There are certain things," he took his turn at reminding her, "that come at a price."

She wondered why she should feel sorry for a man who could claim about everything that life had to offer one. But the dreariness of his face, in the strong side-light, did not escape her ever watchful eyes.

"I intend to do my part," she quietly assured him. And they both knew a moment of embarrassment as their hands met and clasped over the lacquered table-end. But he was smiling, a moment later, with the abashment of a man rarely given to emotional surrenders.

"And now the important question is," he pursued with a shrug of dismissal, "whether you're going to come over to the Meadow Brook polo-game with us?"

"I'll come," she said, knowing that it was the opening of a new trail that must inevitably be traversed. Being a woman of action, she even experienced a vague lightening of spirits at the prospect of some definite movement ahead of her. "And

"I'll have to take Saggy, of course."

Caver, as he confronted her, was conscious of the rough-hewn stubbornness of will behind her hesitations of the moment.

"I don't believe," he pursued, "that we could take so young a child to a—a sporting event. It'll be quite crowded and fussy over at the field. Isn't he a pretty good baby?"

"He's as good as gold!" proclaimed Aurora Mary.

Caver tried not to show his smile at the prompt flash of pride on her face.

"Then couldn't he be fed and tucked up to sleep for a couple of hours?"

It was Aurora Mary's turn to combat a smile born of her new guardian's groping male hesitations. She was being schooled, she knew, in an unfamiliar kind of woodcraft, a more complicated woodcraft that obtained only in the tangled forest of civilization. And she was passionately averse to being known as a tenderfoot.

"All right," she finally agreed. And she harvested the impression, as she returned to her room, that this quiet-eyed man was in some way campaigning to make her entrance into that new world an easier one.

But when she ventured hesitatingly down-stairs, half an hour later, she was not unconscious of the animosity in the eyes of the lugubriously estimative Mrs. Abbott. And when Gail's car swept up to the door, a minute or two later, the girl in the crumpled blue suit could see the sudden stiffening of the ample neck under its furs and the forced smile that was little more than a movement of the geranium-tinted lips. But that smile went out like a lamp and left a new hardness about the rebellious soft face.

"Who is that creature?" was the altogether too audible question which the newcomer directed toward her mournful-eyed aunt.

It was John Caver himself, however, who answered that question.

"This is Mary Moyne," he said with a studied intentness that was not without its threat of inner fires, "and she's coming over to the Meadow Brook polo-match with us."

Gail's bosom heaved with something akin to indignation.

"With us?" she repeated, insolently incredulous.

"If you're *coming*," challenged the white-faced man in the doorway. And his mouth hardened as he watched the deliberateness with which the larger woman reinspected the brown-faced stranger with the unexpected tremulous movement about her underlip.

"Coming? Of course I'm not coming," announced Gail as she turned on her heel.

Caver's eye, as he confronted his sister, was a coldly inquiring one. The moment, for some reason, seemed trivially momentous.

"I'm waiting, Aunt Agatha," called the woman at the car-door. But the older woman in black still hesitated. Life, apparently, had tamed her a little, had taught her that personal triumphs could sometimes be reckoned as Pyrrhic victories. And her brother John, she remembered, had the habit of eventually achieving his own ends.

"You'd be near to the Whitney box," the ruffled Gail was reminding her. "And it would be a Roman holiday for the press photographers."

Caver's lips tightened, but he said nothing.

"I think I ought to go with Gail," proclaimed Agatha Abbott as the long lean car began to purr in the porte-cochère. Then with a half-placatory and half-accusatory glance at her brother, she turned and went down the broad house-steps.

"It's all right," murmured Aurora Mary, conscious of Caver's eye on her face. But her hands clenched as she stood

fighting back the feral spark that sent little tingles of fire up and down her body. Her instincts, after all, had not been amiss. It would be the women, she realized, from whom she could expect the least.

"It's all right," she repeated with a forced and wintry smile, as she twisted her gray cotton gloves into a ball. "Didn't I tell you there'd be a heap o' things for me to learn down here?"

But Caver was no longer looking at her. His gaze, oddly hardened, was directed toward the departing motor-car.

"There seem to be a few others around here," he said with a laboriously achieved quietness, "who have a lesson or two to learn."

CHAPTER VIII

It was Allan Somer, circling up to the Westbrook porte-cochère in his own dust-covered car, who unexpectedly drove the gloom out of Aurora Mary's day. She had had a depressing morning of it, what with hastily-summoned costumers and couturières and an even more hastily dismissed masseuse and rather inconsequential conferences with Mrs. Pusey as to the more immediate needs of Martie—for Saggy, she remembered, was thereafter to be known as Martin, just as her own name from that day forward was to be simplified into Mary.

But these changes, small as they seemed, tended to increase the sense of the phantasmal which had overtaken her world. So, convinced that she could not face many more such abrupt alterations, she had put off for a day or two the question of a secretary for herself and a trained nurse for Martie. She had escaped from the house and made her way out to the open, where she wandered about looking over the conservatory and the stables, the swimming-pool and the Italian garden, the park-like lawns and the partly denuded arbors.

They were all very wonderful, in their way, but they did nothing to lighten the intangible heaviness about her heart. She felt singularly alone in that high-walled world of autumnally-tinted beauty. She felt oddly friendless and forgotten, until, of a sudden, she caught sight of Somer's car crunching along the graveled driveway and heard his baritone call as he swung down from his seat.

When he advanced toward her, he came pulling a young wire-haired Irish terrier on a leash.

"What's that?" asked the perplexed Mary, staring down at the russet-colored pup which showed his friendliness by first sniffing at her new silk stockings and then abandonedly biting with his needle-pointed teeth at her tingling ankles.

"That's a pinch-hitter for Pancake," explained Somer as he placed the leash-end in her hand, "and his name is Rusty."

"You mean he's for me?" demanded Aurora Mary, bending low over the stubby-tailed young terrier.

"If you want him," acknowledged Somer, wondering why he should like the way in which she puckered her eyebrows.

"He's a darling!" murmured the stooping girl. The word was a new one, though the gesture was old.

"I thought he'd—he'd fill in," confessed Somer, not caring to meet her eye.

"That's lovely of you," proclaimed Aurora Mary, still kneeling on the greensward. If she was conscious of any constraint in the other's manner, she chose to disregard it. "And I'm just beginning to understand how much you tried to help me, up at Trail-End."

He stood silent a moment.

"How are you getting along?" he asked with an achieved matter-of-factness that did not entirely succeed in hiding his embarrassment.

"I guess I haven't started yet," was the answer, unexpectedly subdued. "But now that Joan's back I'll probably find the going a little easier."

Still again Somer stood silent a moment.

"You must be patient with Joan."

Something in his voice brought her eyes up to his face. But his expression, as he stooped to stroke the pup's back, was non-committal.

"I guess it's Joe," observed Mary, "who'll have to be patient with me."

"She's not herself yet," explained Somer, with a small frown of perplexity as he stared toward the house. "And I rather fancy that illness of hers hit a little harder than she imagines."

"D'you mean she's changed?" asked the girl stooping over the dog. And she took her turn at avoiding the eyes of her companion.

"In some ways, yes," acknowledged Somer. "She seems quieter, and more serious-minded. But I don't like to see her face so thin and drawn."

Mary remembered, at the moment, that she had a cause to be loyal to.

"She'll be all right in a few weeks," asserted the girl with the barricaded eyes.

"We'll both have to do our best to see that she is," rejoined Somer. He spoke casually, but Mary searched his face with a quick side-glance, as though in quest of some inner meaning which might be escaping detection. It seemed almost like a warning.

But, a moment later, he stood before her his old self.

"Are we as civilized as you expected?" he was asking with some shadow of his earlier spirit.

Mary, gazing over the terraced lawns and gardens, found that question hard to answer.

"It's so different," she frowningly acknowledged. "Things ain't never—things *are* never quite what you expect. And I can see where I've bit off considerably more than I can chew. But I'm not going to back-trail. I'm going to mush through, now, or blow up into crow-bait."

He noticed, as he studied her face, that she had already lost a little of her woodland ruddiness of coloring, just as some rougher note had slipped away from her voice. But she was neither tamed nor intimidated. It was, on the whole, more perplexity than frustration that showed in the dusky and deep-hooded eyes.

"Then remember," he told her with a smile that was intended to be merely fraternal, "that if you happen to find yourself in—in doubt about things, or if the going happens to get too hard, I'm your duly appointed trail-guide in this territory."

She smiled gratefully at that, and the small glow that burned in her heart expressed itself in a corresponding glow in her eyes. Yet Mary remained silent as they turned, side by side, leisurely back toward the house. There they could see the door open and Joan, in chinchilla and black velvet, inspecting them from the glimmering broad step.

"What's that?" she demanded, her face hardening a trifle as she stared down at the Irish terrier.

"That's a pup I've brought for Mary," explained Somer.

The girl from the North noticed the vague clash of their contending glances.

"Hasn't she enough animals around here?" was Joan's unexpectedly reckless query.

Somer stood silent, digesting this shock.

"A dog," he finally observed, "can be a pretty good friend, when you haven't any too many of the other kind."

A second shock, apparently, had to be digested.

"But she seems to have quite a number of the other kind," was Joan's delayed but still acid retort. And Mary, studying the other woman with cloudy eyes, noticed for the first time the diamond ring that flashed from the third finger of her thin white hand, just as she noticed that Somer's smile became a remote and meditative one.

"Well, let's not cloud a perfectly good day by the shadow of a perfectly useless pup," he said with his quiet and placatory smile. The deeper color that had mantled his face, however, did not escape the observant woodland eyes. But a footman, stepping out through the open door to hand Joan a suede vanity-bag and a chased gold cigarette-case, added sudden selvage to the ragged edges of their unrest. Joan even shrugged, condoningly, as she took out a cigarette and snapped open her little gold lighter.

"Allan," she said through a trailing small cloud of smoke, "would you mind running me over to the Rhinelanders?"

"Of course not," answered Allan as he dutifully swung open the car-door.

Mary stood watching them as they flowed away along the smooth-winding drive. The feeling that crept through her was not altogether one of betrayal and not altogether one of defeat. But it was very far from one of happiness. She had

expected too much of life. And still another resource had failed her.

She did not bathe long, however, in the lethal waters of self-pity. She was not a claim-jumper, and her youth had been too turbulent to permit any promise of opposition to leave her passive. If they couldn't take her on credit they could take her the other way. But she would not be turned back. The grade, apparently, was going to be steeper than she had expected. But she intended to make the hill. To remain meekly inactive, under threat of conflict, either near or remote, was not in her nature. And where the territory was hostile, she remembered, you had to be sure of your trail.

There were, accordingly, new lines of resolution about the rebellious red mouth as she reentered the house with Rusty at her heels. She made her frowning way to the library, where a footman was filling the ink-well clasped to the shoulder of the Clytie in gold.

"What's your name?" she demanded of that quiet-mannered servitor.

"Perkins, madam," was his prompt answer.

"How d'you use that thing?" she said with a hand-movement toward the telephone-transmitter.

Perkins stood silent a moment, but his face remained expressionless.

"You make sure of the number you want, by consulting the directory," he explained. "Then you lift the receiver and place this larger end of it at your ear. Then Central will say 'Number, please?' and you will speak the number into the mouthpiece. Then, when the connection has been made, you will talk to the person at the other end of the wire."

"To anybody—anywhere?" demanded the frowning girl.

"Yes, madam, to anybody with a telephone connection."

Mary stood silent a moment, absorbing the incredible. It was more amazing, apparently, than even the moccasin-telegraph and the smoke-signal of the Indian.

"Could you get Mr. Caver on that?"

"Quite easily, madam."

"Will you get him for me, please," commanded the grim-eyed young woman. And she watched Perkins, closely, as he proceeded to do so. For here was a part of their city-lore, she remembered, which she must know and understand, without loss of time.

"Mr. Caver, madam," announced Perkins as he stepped to one side. And still again her eyes were wide with wonder as she sat down at the dark-wooded table and applied the receiver to her ear. If a faint dewing of moisture showed on her forehead as she accomplished that first miracle of talking through space, her voice was steady enough as she caught the slightly impatient query of the man so many miles away.

"This is Mary," she said slowly and distinctly into the mouthpiece, "Mary Moyne. I've changed my mind about what you suggested last night after dinner. I think you're right, after all, about taking out those papers of adoption, or whatever you call 'em. And if you'll tell me how and where I can find that family lawyer you spoke of, I'll do what you said any time he's ready."

"You'd better come in to my office," answered the voice over the wire. "Be here about half past two."

But that, she remembered, was easier said than done.

"How'll I get there?" asked the dewy-browed young woman at the phone.

"Have Gleason motor you in," was the answer. And it seemed to come from a speaker not ten paces away from her.

"All right," murmured Mary, sitting back and staring at the inadequate small machine that could suddenly make space so small.

"Hang up the receiver, madam," suggested Perkins with an entirely new note of respect in his voice. And he showed her,

without a smile, just how to restore the receiver to its hook, after which she inspected the directory labeled "Manhattan and The Bronx" and sat rather appalled at the countless columns of people with whom she could be connected by incredibly elastic threads of metal. And they weren't altogether to be despised, these fantastic-minded city-folks who had devised such intricate and cunning tricks to make their beehive life still bearable.

But all thought on the matter ended in an abrupt rescue of Rusty, who was doing his determined best to bite holes in the upholstery of an over-stuffed armchair. He must be taught, she suddenly realized, not to destroy their instruments of comfort, not to mar the smooth surfaces of their laboriously maintained well-being.

And she, in turn, must in some way learn the same lesson as Rusty.

She remained unusually thoughtful, accordingly, on her way in to the city. But there was less thrill, she noticed, in covering ground for the second time. The estates past which they purred seemed a trifle less glamorous and the country flowing by on either side seemed a trifle less Edenic. Even the towers and canyons of lower Broadway failed to take her breath away and the tumultuous flume-way of Wall Street, when they stopped before John Caver's office-building, made only a vague impression on her mind. For her thoughts, at the moment, were on other things. She was remembering what Allan Somer had said about doing, when in Rome, as the Romans do. She would have to bend to their ways and look at life as they did and learn those mysterious traffic rules that kept one from collision. But they could only crowd her so far. She would fight for her elbow-room, no matter how close the press. And if they jammed her too tight she would let loose and cut a swathe through their politely indifferent self-interest.

Some trace of that quiet determination remained with her as she confronted John Caver in his unexpectedly luxurious private office, where she found herself looking into a singularly bland eye and shaking hands with a large-bodied man who was introduced to her as Mr. Crofts.

"I'm proud, Mrs. Moyne," he said as he blinked down at her through his pince-nez, "to meet so modest a heroine."

"A heroine?" she echoed, her puzzled glance on John Caver's fastidiously averted face.

"My client has explained to me how you so courageously saved his life last summer. And I'm glad to see him rewarding courage as it ought to be rewarded."

The course she was taking, he pursued as he turned back to the papers in front of him, should be more satisfactory for every one concerned. And the trust fund which Mr. Caver was establishing for her would insure her a personal income of twelve hundred dollars a month, with an additional three hundred dollars for her child.

"But it's not *money* I want," interrupted the somewhat bewildered Aurora Mary. "I've got enough money of my own."

"Perhaps so, Mrs. Moyne, according to frontier standards," answered the imperturbable Mr. Crofts. "But all that is changed, naturally, with your change of *locale*. I understand both your parents are dead?"

"Yes," admitted the girl.

"And you are of age?"

"Yes."

"And your husband, Mrs. Moyne?"

Her glance still again sought Caver's face. "My husband is not living," asserted Aurora Mary.

"And you understand the nature and purpose of this trust fund?" proceeded the man of law.

"I don't," admitted the girl. "And that's what I wanted to speak about. I've over nine hundred dollars of my own, and with that——"

Mr. Crofts interrupted her with a wave of his pince-nez.

"My dear young lady, you are being legally adopted by a man of—well, of unchallenged financial and social standing. When these papers are duly approved by the Supreme Court of New York you will rank as one of his own children. And as such you will have a position to maintain."

"But the money you speak of shouldn't be needed for that," protested Mary. She had a feeling of being in rapids she could neither fathom nor master.

It was Caver himself who spoke up before the other man could frame an answer to her protest.

"It's not primarily a matter of money," he said with his quiet and slightly world-weary voice. "It's more a matter of security, the only security I can really offer you. And I take it you want to be secure."

She was conscious of the kindness of his tired eyes as they rested on her face.

"I was hoping it wouldn't need to be this way," objected Mary.

If Caver winced, at that, the lines hardened once more about his lips.

"I hoped the same thing," he proclaimed. "But I still happen to be the captain of this ship. And while I'm on the bridge I'm going to have a word or two to say about our course, even if I can't altogether control the weather."

The meditative dark eyes of the girl continued to study his face.

"I don't quite know what that means," she finally acknowledged.

"It means," said Caver with an entirely new solemnity, "that when you legally become a member of my family, as you're doing, you're going to be accepted as such."

"But you can't compel people to be kind to you by law," complained the girl with the pen in her hand.

"Then we'll try some other way."

And she knew, even in the bewilderment of the signing and witnessing of an intimidating number of papers, that he was still on her side, that he was campaigning for her happiness. But there were certain things, she remembered, that couldn't be hunted down like a wounded doe.

"And that, I think, covers everything," Mr. Crofts was announcing as he restored his pince-nez to its case.

"Does it?" asked Caver of the solemn-eyed girl as the door closed on the attorney.

Aurora Mary, as she met his gaze, found it hard to say just what she wanted to say.

"I'm used to hard goin'," she hesitatingly explained, "but I've never tried to crowd other people off the trail. And I don't want to travel with folks who are ashamed of me. I'd rather——"

"Who's ashamed of you?" demanded Caver.

Her answer to that was an unexpected one.

"Joe doesn't like me."

Caver's lips twitched ominously.

"She can't afford to dislike you."

But the brown-faced girl brushed that aside. And her eyes, as she spoke, became less ruminative.

"I've got 'o get like the people I'm going to live with," she grimly pursued. "And the sooner I'm busy at that job the better. I want to buy things, the right sort o' things. And I want 'o learn. So the quicker I get the right teacher the sooner I'll get civilized."

Caver could afford to smile at her solemnity.

"Let's call it a private secretary," he suggested.

"I don't care what you call her," retorted Mary, "but she's sure got her work cut out for her."

Caver's face was sober again as he touched a bell on his desk.

"I'm looking into that matter," he announced, "and I'm hoping in a day or two to get what we want. I've decided, of course, that it must be a woman, and a very exceptional woman."

Mary's morose head-nod did not altogether escape his attention.

"She sure will," acknowledged the girl from Trail-End. "She'll have to be an animal-trainer and a grammar-shark and a shop-guide and a mule-driver all in one."

Caver's smile was a condoning one.

"Allan Somer tells me you are very quick at learning things."

"Only some things," amended Mary.

If Caver detected a touch of bitterness in that retort, he chose to disregard it. His attention, at the moment, was directed toward a secretarial-looking young man in spectacles, who had quietly entered the room and crossed to the rosewood desk.

"We were speaking of Somer," resumed Caver when the young man in spectacles had taken his departure. "You understand, of course, that Allan is going to marry my daughter Joan."

"I know," said Mary, not meeting his eyes. But the somberness of that half-averted face did not add to his peace of mind.

"And you don't approve of it?" he exacted.

She was able, this time, to let her gaze lock with his.

"Do you?" she countered.

Caver's gesture seemed a defensive one.

"I'm merely a modern American father," he explained. "And it won't be long before you realize how unimportant we stand in the eyes of the younger generation."

"But can't you make her play square?" was Mary's unexpectedly blunt demand.

"With you?" countered Caver.

"No, with Allan Somer."

She was conscious, even as she spoke, of the remote look that came into those none too happy eyes of his.

"Isn't Somer," he finally inquired, "capable of taking care of himself?"

"Isn't it," parried the other, "more a case of taking care of Joe?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Can she be happy, I mean, if she marries a man she isn't honest and open with?"

That, obviously, gave Caver a good deal to think over.

"I'd say, knowing her as I do, that she'd be much more unhappy if she didn't marry him. And we all seem to be groping, in our own blind way, for our human share of happiness."

"But will it work out?"

"That," proclaimed Caver, "all depends on you."

"On me?" questioned the frowning woman.

She was too aboriginal, Caver realized, to know that she was trespassing on territory not lightly invaded by the outsider.

But candor demanded its right of candor.

"Yes, very largely on you," was his deliberated reply. "You had your own idea of happiness, and to reach it you're paying a certain price. We can't even argue now whether it's foolish or not. It's too late for that. But the happiness of the Caver family, apparently, pretty well depends on whether or not you keep your compact."

It was not as simple, after all, as she had expected. Life even presented itself to her as a tangled-up compromise between good and bad, with one merging bewilderingly into the other, and with only a confusion of instincts to fall back on. But older than all, in that twilight of uncertainty, was the frontier instinct of loyalty.

"When I make a promise," she said as she rose to her feet, "I generally keep it. And when you get me that teacher-woman she won't need to start off by showin' me what square-dealin' means!"

She said it quietly enough, and quite without guile. But she wondered, as she struggled with her intractable new gloves, why a faint showing of color should creep up into John Caver's customarily impassive face.



CHAPTER IX

When Joan Caver came back from tea at the Country Club, where everything but tea was partaken of, she was dropped at her own door by a burgundy-colored car crowded with light-hearted companions whose laughter suddenly died away as a brand-new English couch-perambulator upholstered in dove-gray was solicitously eased down the broad house-steps by Perkins. And behind the dove-gray carriage with its quilted pink coverlet walked Aurora Mary. She was conscious, as she crossed the porte-cochère, of the strangers in the wine-colored car staring down at her. But she caught no echo of Joan's gasp of indignation and the casually derisive laughter of the others.

"Heaven bless our home," observed a sallow youth with a sunken eye, "but where did *that* matrimonial fruit-basket drop from?"

"What dark secret is this, Joe?" demanded Sally Meredith through her cigarette-smoke.

Joan, with a forced and brittle laugh, merely waved them good-by and stepped lightly in through the still open door.

But once inside, her manner promptly altered. She flung her fox throw from her shoulders and strode as far as the stairway. Then she turned about, with darkened face and unsteady hands, and stooped over a silver dancing slipper much punctured and abraded by needle-pointed teeth.

"Who brought that here?" she demanded, recognizing it as her own.

Hadley, who had solemnly closed the door, confronted her with an impassive eye.

"That's the pup, Miss Caver, Mrs. Moyne's pup. He seems set on chewing things about the house."

She stood, singularly tense and silent, looking down at the lacerated dancing-shoe.

"Then he'll damn' soon chew himself into another home," she proclaimed as she threw the tattered slipper to the farthest corner of the hall. Twice she paced back and forth, with her eyes still blazing, oblivious of Hadley as he solemnly retrieved the slipper. Then she came to a stop, tight-lipped and thoughtful. She was still standing there when the door opened and Caver entered.

"What's wrong?" he demanded, his eye on Joan's colorless face as Hadley took his hat and coat. But she did not speak until the servant had disappeared.

"This can't go on," she cried with her clenched hands held suddenly to her sides.

"What can't go on?" asked Caver, disturbed by the shrillness of that reckless young voice.

"You've got to get rid of that woman," cried Joan with altogether unexpected passion. "I can't and won't stand a situation like this."

Caver, after studying her for a silent moment, crossed to the library door.

"Well, don't shout in the hallway," he said with an achieved quietness of tone. "If you have anything to say, say it in here."

"I *have* something to say," gasped the white-faced girl as he closed the door behind him. "I can't and won't stand a situation like this."

"What situation?"

"That woman, and that child, eternally under my nose, here under this roof. It simply can't go on."

"Then what do you propose doing about it?"

She stared at him, her eyes unnaturally hard.

"The whole thing's so ridiculous," she cried, her face still white with indignation.

"But so inevitable," amended her father.

"Well, it's not going to go on. I won't endure it. It makes me feel like—like something out of *East Lynne*."

If he pitied her, he could not afford to show it.

"Then as the primary cause of the predicament," he solemnly reminded her, "you ought to be able to suggest the final solution."

"But that woman should never have been brought here. She belongs to the bush, to the backwoods. And she ought to go back there."

"She apparently prefers being here."

"But she has no right here," and, for the first time, a trace of tears showed in the hard young eyes.

"On the contrary," said Caver, "she happens to have about as much right here as you have. A bargain was made and the Cavers had their side of the compact to carry out, to carry out, remember, for your peace of mind and your eventual protection. And for that protection, you must also remember, I've just had Aurora Mary's papers of adoption made out."

"Then she's more than ever one of us!" was Joan's embittered cry.

"Because you wanted it," Caver reminded her.

"But I didn't want *this*," gasped his indignant-eyed daughter. "It's intolerable. It's——"

He stopped her with a gesture.

"Joan, for one of the few times in your life you're down to fundamentals. You've had about everything you wanted, in the last few years, and you've got it without much thought of how the piper was to be paid. You've got what you wanted, but _____"

"I've got *more* than I wanted," cried the white-faced girl.

"But there's one thing," continued her father, "that you'll have to pay the price for. It may have its discomforts, but that's the penalty for your own mistake. I'm trying to be modern and unemotional about all this, and I'm not forgetting you're my own flesh and blood. And I'm not harping on what's already happened. But you'll have to put up with what can't be avoided or evaded. And considering what she has shouldered for you, Aurora Mary will have to stay under this roof."

Joan stood, hard-eyed, considering that ultimatum.

"Do you want me to lose Allan?" she suddenly demanded.

"Do you feel that you deserve to hold him?"

"That doesn't count. *I'm going to marry him, whatever happens.*"

"You mean, whatever has happened," he grimly corrected.

"I don't worry over that as much as you do. But I'm not going to see another woman come between me and Allan Somer."

Caver's smile was a mirthless one.

"Doesn't that smack a trifle of the primitive?" he questioned.

"Well, we can be primitive without being born in a bush-rat's shanty. And even though that woman has shouldered her way into our family circle, it certainly won't last long."

"Why not?"

"It's simply a matter of not belonging," was the slightly impatient answer, "of being ridiculous and making other people as miserable as she is and for ever threatening to mess things up."

"But she's eager to learn," argued Caver. "And I was given to believe that it was somebody else's mess she was dragged into."

It was cruel, he knew, but it did not impress him as the time and occasion for kindness.

Joan's gesture was one of revolt touched with frustration.

"But she's merely an animal—an ignorant animal. I can't even understand what you men see in her."

That angered him, even in spite of his effort at self-control.

"You may be my own daughter, Joan, but there are times when I almost wonder what Allan Somer sees in *you*."

She stared at her father with the insurrectionary eyes of youth.

"If your forest lady had a different sort of face," she eventually flung out at him, "you wouldn't all be so interested in her future."

Caver stopped short at that.

"So you're paying her the compliment of being jealous of her?"

Joan's eyes narrowed.

"No, it's not jealousy. It's merely that she's not our kind."

"Then supposing we try to make her our kind?"

"I'm not strong for that Cinderella stuff!" And the girl's *moue*, as she reached for a cigarette, was one of disdain.

"Well, in this case, I *am*," averred Caver. And their glances locked for a moment of silence. It was Joan who turned away with a body-movement of wearied abandonment.

"After all, you're merely my father," she coldly proclaimed. "And it's foolish, of course, to expect too much of one's family."

That wounded him, wounded him as deeply as it was intended to wound. But he remained in control of both his voice and his feelings as he crossed to a window, deep in thought, and then turned back to his daughter. She impressed him, in the modified light of the room, as orchid-like and unequipped for struggle. But her air of fragility, he knew, was largely delusive. If he was once more conscious of her outer fineness, like glazed porcelain with a promise of brittleness in its beauty, he was also conscious of her hardness, her estranging and isolating hardness.

"Joe," he said with a forlorn effort at friendliness, "wouldn't you rather like this winter abroad? Say Taormina for a couple of months and then Biarritz and then up to Paris for Easter?"

The abruptness of that query held her for a moment, but only a moment.

"Not by a long shot," was her equally abrupt reply. "I've a privateer or two to keep off my trade routes. And I'm going to fight my battles in my own way."

He looked at her with the mildly commiserative glance of a man who has not altogether escaped the blows and bruises of life.

"Then I can't be of much help to you," he said, not without his own touch of bitterness. And he vaguely resented his daughter's restless movements as she took up a second cigarette and lighted it.

"Yes, you can," proclaimed the girl with the cigarette. "You can leave that woman and her baby out here at Westbrook when we go into town."

"*Her* baby!" echoed Caver. And he realized, as he saw the color mantle the hard young face confronting him, how reluctant he had remained, all along, even to articulate the actual. Silence seemed so much more merciful.

"That," cried Joan, white once more to the throat, "is exactly what I'm sick of—having the thing flung in my face. And I'm not going to stand it. You may cure an Airedale of killing chickens by tying one of them around its neck, but you can't change me by having a child I never asked for and never wanted paraded around under my nose."

Caver steadied himself under the shock of that proclamation, staring meditatively at the wilfully hardened face of the young woman who as yet had yielded so little up to life. And he stood confounded by the depth of the lesson she had still to learn.

"Don't or can't you ever love anything?" he finally inquired.

She moved at that, sharply, but her glance remained a vitrified one.

"I love Allan," she said with an achieved quietness.

"But your own child?" began Caver, the more embarrassed of the two.

Joan, with her lip trembling, tossed away her cigarette.

"Let's not be mid-Victorian," she cried with a protective new flippancy. "I'm not trying to get away with murder."

"But you're trying to get away with the impossible," he reminded her. "And you can't cheat your way through life without paying for it."

He could see the reproof in her quick glance.

"Perhaps I *have* paid for it," was her slightly retarded reply. And it came poignantly home to him, as he studied her pale face, that she was no longer a girl.

"Then don't try to make others do the same," he suggested.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean," answered Caver, "that you might be a little kinder to Aurora Mary. She's not only keeping your child, remember, but she's also keeping your secret."

"Well, she seems to get her fun out of both ends of the game," was the other's uncompromising retort.

"That's both untrue and ungenerous."

There was little joy in Joan's bitter and over-crisp laugh.

"Perhaps it is, but I can't make a bosom companion of a kitchen-minded illiterate from the backwoods. And as for being kind to her, it seems to me you've done about enough for the entire family."

It was Caver's face that hardened, in spite of his effort at self-control.

"Then I may as well tell you," he proclaimed, "that I shall continue to be kind to her. And what's more, she's going to be accepted by this family of mine, or I'll know the reason why. From to-day forward, in fact, I'm going to see that she's treated with the respect she deserves."

Joan reached for still another cigarette. But her fingers were none too steady as she took it up, broke it in two, and tossed it away again.

"And how do you propose to start the party?" she asked with an insolence which for some reason failed to reach its mark.

"That's entirely my own affair," answered Caver as he crossed to the door and opened it for his daughter.

Joan, with a shrug, reached for her fox throw. There was even a smile on her thin lips as she went from the room. Yet, beneath that armor of indifference, she knew the final strength of her father's will. She knew, for all her narrow intentness on her own ends, that there was a limit beyond which she dare not oppose him, or, at least, openly oppose him.

Her mood was still a thoughtful one when, an hour later, Somer dropped in for tea.

"I see Mary's been getting a new outfit," he inopportunistly observed. "And I must say she looked remarkably well in it."

"Where did you see her?" casually inquired the girl beside the open fire.

"Showing your second gardener how to rake leaves," was Somer's half-laughing reply.

"The poor girl finds them more companionable out there," explained Joan as she reached for the Sèvres teapot. "She's been over the stables twice this week. And she asked them not to empty the swimming-pool before we move into town."

"She will, of course, always be an open-air woman," observed Somer.

"Besides always being a sort of human Medicine Hat," amended the thoughtful-eyed Joan.

"I don't quite get your meaning," objected Somer.

"Isn't it Medicine Hat where most of our big storms come from? Well, your Aurora Mary will always be a storm center, you'll find. She'll always, in some way, turn life into melodrama. That kind does, the same as the steerage people who howl and sob along a dock when your steamer sails. They're the kind who bump around without fenders and mess up traffic. They're *made* that way."

Somer sat silent a moment.

"Perhaps," he ventured, "she'll eventually learn the rules. She certainly *wants* to learn them."

"At other people's expense!"

"Perhaps the other people owe her that much."

"But while she's making them unhappy, she's also adding to her own misery. And the very best you'll ever do with her is to turn her into a sort of dancing bear."

"But she's human, Joan, and——"

The bright-eyed girl cut him short.

"So is a boiler-maker, but we don't ask him in to dine with us."

The sudden color dyed Somer's lank cheek.

"Yet there are some of you, I notice," he said with dangerous quietness, "who dance with negroes in those Harlem night clubs."

Joan paled a little as she put down her blue and gold cup. But she was smiling again as she turned to pick up a much-smudged sheet of writing paper.

"Here's an epistle of the lady's I found in a Joyce book I brought back from Trail-End. It seems to show what one must really expect of her."

Somer's face remained solemn as he took the scrap of paper from her extended fingers. He remained equally solemn as he read the uneven lines laboriously written in berry-juice ink.

"I tak my pen in hand too advis you the Camp is o. k. The roove on Numer Thre has bin repaired, the ice is putt up and the wrifles and duk-guns al oilled and pakked in cazes. And the other stuf is fixt as per ordder. That louzzie bazstard Injin Joe brot bedbuggs too Numer 4 cabbin but there all cleened out with sulfur and col-oil agen and sparck pluggs for kiker-boat duly receeved all-so painnt for canoes but wont use same til spring.

"AURORA MARY MOYNE."

Somer, as he handed back the paper, refused to smile.

"That's what we've got to save her from," was his altogether unsatisfactory observation. And Joan, bent over her tea-tray, did not speak for a moment or two.

"Do you really think people can be made over, like a last year's gown?" she finally inquired.

"Didn't you say I was doing that to you?" challenged Somer, groping for some lighter path.

Joan's smile was abstracted.

"Father is being very generous with Mary," she proclaimed as she passed Somer his cup.

"He seems to have a reason for it."

"What do you mean by that?" was her quick inquiry.

"Wasn't she guilty of saving his life?"

Joan's laugh, although one of relief, was unpleasantly crisp.

"Do you suppose that's the only reason?" she ventured out of the ensuing silence.

Somer stopped short, studying the shell-like face above the shell-like china.

"Must there be another?"

Joan's gray-green eyes remained unflinching, even in the face of the sudden knowledge that she was playing with fire.

"Couldn't there be?" she countered. And again she was conscious of Allan's troubled gaze on her face.

"You're not implying——" he began. Then he broke off. "But that's absurd, of course. It's unthinkable."

"What's unthinkable?" was Joan's quiet inquiry. She knew the ice was thin, but she had her own obscure ends to reach.

"Nothing!" replied Somer with an abrupt movement in his chair.

Joan's sigh was an audible one.

"The older men get," she averred, "the more foolish they seem to grow."

He came and stood beside her.

"I rather hope you're applying that to me, Joe," he said with unexpected solemnity.

"Why?" asked Joan, surrendering the hand which he rather awkwardly reached for.

"Because otherwise you'd be hanging a rather unpleasant suspicion on the one man you ought to be loyal to."

"What man?"

"Your own father."

"Oh, father insists on going his own way," observed Joan as she dropped a slice of lemon in her teacup. "He's just announced that he intends making Mary one of us."

"And you're going to accept her?"

"We've got to," acknowledged Joan, once more bending over the letter so roughly scrawled in berry-juice ink. "And everything that goes with her!"

Somer stood silent, staring into the open fire. It made him think of another open fire he had stared into, not so long ago, with another woman at his side.

"Well," he finally observed, "Saggy shouldn't be so hard to accept."

She looked up sharply, at that, her hand poised over the cream pitcher.

"Why?" she demanded.

"Because," said Somer, swinging about with a meditative smile, "he's such a little peach."

"You mean—mean Martie, as they call him?"

"Yes. I wouldn't mind taking him under my own wing."

And that unexpected pronouncement apparently gave Joan, as she reached for the cigarettes, a great deal to think over.

CHAPTER X

Aurora Mary may have been acceptive rather than diffusive, she may have been reluctant to express opinions and averse to taking sides, but she had her own ideas as to the type of young woman to whom she could surrender her Martie. The result was that three sedate and maturely professionalized trained nurses were sent packing, while the fourth, and only the fourth, who happened to be a Mattawa-born girl trained in a Montreal hospital, was promptly taken in under her compatriot's wing.

"She has kind eyes, like Pancake's," was Aurora Mary's only explanation of that decision to John Caver.

The problem of finding a preceptress for the girl from the North was an even more difficult one. For a time, indeed, Caver almost despaired of discovering a suitable "secretary" for his ward. The position, he knew, would be no easy one to fill, and much would depend, he also knew, on the manner in which it was filled. He interviewed dowdy and listless ex-teachers; he put through the third degree unsatisfied and ambitious governesses; he examined thin-lipped and tight-mannered schoolmistresses without a school; he even sought out an aged and atrabilious corypheus highly recommended by the Bishop; he canvassed the agencies and practically exhausted the employment bureaus. He was, in fact, on the point of abandoning the sterile unfair sex for the more combustible sterner sex when Betty Wilder blew like a belated autumn leaf into his office and suggested herself for the job.

And with the advent of Betty came the conviction that he had at last found the right woman. For Betty, although a graduate of Smith, was neither pompous nor pedagogic. She was a small-bodied and bird-like person somewhere in the indeterminate thirties, with a quick hazel eye, a sense of humor, and the ultimate impression of having lived and had her being in the midst of people inadequately known as "smart." She had taught dancing and French in a girls' school for a year; she had tried writing for the magazines; she had been social secretary to the wife of a Detroit automobile magnate for eleven unhappy months; she had sold antiques on Madison Avenue and had attempted on the next avenue to run a tea-shop that was as marked a social success as it was a financial catastrophe, and she had just chaperoned a travel-party of Cleveland girls through the art galleries of Europe. She dressed well, notwithstanding her confession of being still dolorously in debt, she had complete confidence in herself even while she acknowledged that she was a colossal failure at everything she attempted, and she spilled epigrams in that well-modulated voice which marks one as emanating from the urbanized urbane of her native Island.

So Caver, having explained both his predicament and his difficulties, promptly mentioned a salary-figure that rather took Betty Wilder's breath away.

"Why, I'd tutor a Bengal tiger for that," she as promptly acknowledged.

"This," ventured Caver, "may be a trifle more difficult."

"Well, I'll at least have virgin soil to work in," retorted Betty. "And after the dreadful and dreary sophistication of the city type that ought to be rather a godsend."

"Everything, of course, depends on your attitude toward your pupil. Unless you actually like her, I don't think you'll ever lead her."

"Naturally," admitted Betty. "But it's more important, I think, that she should like *me*."

"Then let's find out," suggested Caver. "I'll have Gleason bring her into the Ritz and we'll all lunch together at one thirty."

"Why the Ritz?" demanded Miss Wilder.

"For the same reason," answered Caver, "that the jewelers show you a pearl on black velvet."

"Is she that wonderful?"

"Wait and see," was his quietly confident reply.

And if a slightly incredulous Betty Wilder waited in the murmurous archipelago of tables until a free-swinging and firm-lipped and cloudy-eyed and dark-skinned young woman silently seated herself in the chair next to the balcony-railing, a

little of the skepticism slipped out of the older woman's eyes as she caught the note of ardency behind the newcomer's narrow façade of indifference. For Aurora Mary was ill at ease, and as was customary with her during her moments of disquietude, she remained singularly silent and watchful. She was traveling a new trail and she wanted to be sure of her ground. She was in the encampment of hostile tribes and it behooved her to tread softly. And if her replies to Betty Wilder's volley of lightly-put questions were mostly monosyllabic, the ever-observant and Indian-like eyes behind the cloudy face were stubbornly drinking in the details of that new and oddly colorful background.

"I see it's not altogether Alice in Wonderland stuff," observed the astute Miss Wilder, impressed by some latent but evident unhappiness in the face of the other. "Why don't you like us on parade like this?"

"I don't understand it," acknowledged Aurora Mary.

"It's much simpler than it looks. The rather badly dressed people, you'll find, are the really smart ones. They're so established they can even afford to cover their motor-car nickel with black paint, on the same principle, I suppose, that the shabbiest hat I saw in London last summer happened to belong to a duke. And the over-dressed younger set you see all about us are either our Island idlers or the outside climbers who want to run along in their dust."

"I can't even smell their dust," admitted Aurora Mary. "It's like trying to read a book when you don't even know the language it's written in."

"Well, some fine morning you'll find it opening up like a chrysanthemum and there won't be romance in it any more. Personally, I'm not greatly given to eating like a goldfish, but when you're merely a cliff-dweller on a street turned up on end and called a sky-scraper you've a natural craving to emerge from the cell and see a bit of the world about you. And we do that, nowadays, in places like this. You may like it, or you may not. But, if I'm not greatly mistaken, you're an open-air woman."

"If you'd a dollar for every deer Mrs. Moyne has shot," exclaimed Caver, "you could probably wear as many pearls as that dowager at the next table."

"Heaven forbid," cried Betty with a quick glance at the jewels in question. "And it's going to be equally hard for me to call anything as young and virginal as you 'Mrs. Moyne.' If you don't mind, I'm going to slide right over to 'Mary.'"

"I wish you would," answered the lonely-hearted girl. And if her color deepened, as her eye met Caver's, it was for reasons quite foreign to Miss Wilder's conjecture.

"And now, John Caver, I want at least eighteen hundred dollars to buy this girl some city clothes," proclaimed Betty as her host signaled for his waiter.

"Of course," smiled Caver, knowing that a compact had been sealed.

"And that's only the beginning," he was duly warned.

"Here are the shops where I have charge accounts," he explained as he penciled a line or two on a card. But Aurora Mary, with a brow still more deeply mantled with color, protested that it was impossible.

"I've got to keep within my allowance," she explained. All reference to money, she found, was still an embarrassment to her.

"Allowance my eye!" scoffed Betty Wilder. "From to-day forward you're in my hands. And if you saved John Caver from a watery grave you most certainly shouldn't disgrace his family."

Caver's glance, as he looked at Aurora Mary, was almost a suppliant one. He knew her, he remembered, a little better than the other.

"We'll be implacably businesslike," he explained, "and keep most careful track of all expenditures. Then at the end of the year they'll be charged against your trust fund. But I'll most assuredly draw the line at diamonds and motor-cars!"

Betty laughed at that, as was expected of her, and most blithesomely got up from her chair.

"Then we'll run along, old dear, and make hay while the sun shines. For when you save the surface, remember, you save

all—and we're going to begin by turning our Carnegie medal into clothes."

Aurora Mary's memory of that initial afternoon of city shopping was always a somewhat misty and muddled one. No single impression stayed with her. But on her bewildered mind beat wave after wave of wonder, the first wiped out by the second and the next obliterated by the one that succeeded it. All that survived was a confused picture of incredibly elaborate emporiums stocked with incredibly luxurious wares, of glass-fronted bazaars heaped with the wealth of the world, furs and fabrics, silks and laces, colors and softnesses, the thousand and one things instinctively loved by every woman, the cunningly made and cunningly paraded machinery of adornment so petty and yet so important to modern life, the filmy sheathing that could bring its sense of well-being to the deluded body. It seemed the market-place of the world crowded along one opulent avenue, designed for the enticement and diversion of woman, a warm and many-odored and flowing-aisled market-place with floor-spaces as wide as beaver-meadows and patient salesmen and elevators that brought your heart up into your throat and fitting-girls who asked if you got that wonderful tan at Southampton or Newport and suave-voiced duchesses in disguise who suggested that the newer French model went best with the high-shouldered figure, and haughty grand dukes in frock coats who inquired if the deliveries were to be made to the Long Island or the town house and hydrogenated couturières in heavily-carpeted rooms that looked like Parisian salons and pallidly efficient bootmakers housed in mahogany-paneled chambers where every vestige of their stock in trade was sedulously hidden from the eye.

It brought back to Aurora Mary both a touch of the vanished Alice in Wonderland feeling and an entirely new respect for Betty Wilder, who could so miraculously know and remember every turn and every shop and every street, who could so promptly decide that kasha cloth was more desirable than camel's-hair and smilingly announce that the apricot-colored step-ins were not exactly what she wanted to-day.

Aurora Mary, in fact, soon found many other reasons for entertaining a heightened respect for her guide and mentor. It was wonderful to be always suave and quiet-mannered and smiling, to be able to hide your inner feelings in the face of outward affront. And it was wonderful to be able to face crowds and commotion, hour after hour, without getting tired and depressed and a trifle homesick for some darker corner of quietness, without dully longing for the welcoming whimper of a dog like Rusty and more acutely hungering for the groping of tiny fingers like Martie's about one's stooping face.

But Miss Wilder, Aurora Mary soon found, was marvelous in more ways than one. That fact came home to the girl from the North on the first day her new secretary was hurriedly but happily installed at Westbrook.

"Modern flappers, apparently, are never at home at home," observed the sententious Betty. For Joan was studiously ignoring a plainly unwelcome accession by absenting herself for the day.

It was, however, a mere deferring of the inevitable, since dinner that night, Aurora Mary discerned, was unmistakably in the nature of a family affair, "a round-up of the mavericks," as Betty later designated it. For seated about the grimly elongated table was a repressed and pearl-laden Gail Rhineland, an austere and empty-eyed Aunt Agatha Abbott, a fidgety and fretful Uncle Ellis Norcross, and a morose and rebellious-looking Joan who sedulously ignored the intrusive Miss Wilder and openly smiled at Aurora Mary's new Patou dinner-gown of cream velvet. The newcomer even surmised, from the grimly subdued demeanor of the others, that John Caver had quietly coerced his wayward family into participating in that function.

It was a function, accordingly, that limped along none too auspiciously until Allan Somer came in late, explaining that he had been held up by his laboratory work. When Miss Wilder politely inquired as to the nature of that work, the late-comer, ignoring Ellis Norcross' muttered proclamation that Somer was the scientific genius who had first benefited civilization by making poker-chips out of skim-milk, solemnly explained that his efforts were purely ventral, as he was not only trying to work out a cellulose covering for pork-sausages but was also doing his darnedest to ripen bananas by ethylene gas. And when, over the coffee-cups in the library, Allan somewhat more animatedly discussed atoms and electrons with Miss Wilder and later argued about Indian burial-customs with Aurora Mary, it was Joan who lighted her second cigarette and audibly remarked to the morose-eyed Gail: "You must remember, darling, that she comes from the country where they always get their man!"

Aurora Mary, at that, felt the blood sing hot in her veins and her fingers closed tight in her lap. But her eye, meeting Betty Wilder's, read therein a quick yet imperative message. And Betty was still smiling as she turned back to Somer and asked if it was true that it took one hundred million atoms side by side to fill one cubic centimeter and if he used an

adding-machine to count 'em up. That, Aurora Mary remembered, was the way of this new world, the code of their civilization. When hit, instead of hitting back, you merely sat tight and showed your teeth in a carefree smile.

But the next few days were much too busy to meditate long on such problems. There were journeys into the city for more shopping, for text-books, for atlases and dictionaries, for countless road-maps through a new kingdom of knowledge. But the astute Betty did not altogether neglect the outer woman, since there were equally solemn visits to hair-dressers and beauty-parlors and dispensers of face-creams and a final call on a dentist, who pronounced Aurora Mary's teeth disappointingly perfect, and able, as he expressed it, "to bite a number-ten nail in two." And if lessons began with a promptitude that rather took Aurora Mary's breath away, there was no lapse of judgment in the mind directing their course.

"No, Mary, there'll be no accordion lessons," proclaimed Miss Wilder after one exhibition of her pupil's prowess with that instrument accompanied by a carefree singing of *Sweet Adeline*. "We'll get lots of fun out of concerts, but we'll not try to outdo Lem Haines and make music of our own. They tell the painters to leave the moon to literature, and we'll have to follow in their steps. Instead, you're going to take riding lessons. We'll save the music for symphony concerts and for learning to dance. And if you take up golf, later on, it will surely keep you more sweet-tempered. But you mustn't throw horseshoes with those men who work in the stables any more. And the mornings are getting a bit chilly, don't you think, for going out to that swimming-pool?"

Aurora Mary, lost in that new labyrinth, meekly accepted these instructions and morosely questioned her ability ever to emerge into the light of common day. But she was learning much more than she imagined. She became reconciled to bath-salts and to silk next to her skin. She no longer lost herself in the bewildering wings of Westbrook and she no longer engaged Perkins and Mrs. Pusey in unsolicited conversation. She was no longer afraid of an avocado salad or a boiled artichoke and she learned to walk across waxed parquetry without losing her footing and lapsing into unexpected profanity. Those little outbursts, in fact, became more and more infrequent, and a new quietness of demeanor overtook her.

Yet in the midst of that quietness, with her Indian-like quickness and keenness of observation, she was studying and remembering countless small things along the crowded trail of her new life. And even the traditions of that new life, as she became more familiar with them, took on a less awesome coloring. She was acquiring poise. And with it, without being quite conscious of the fact, she was also acquiring power.

For, in the newer trappings that fitted her to her newer environment, she was a vital and arresting figure, with a touch of the exotic that prompted the wandering eye of the male to study her for the second time. Her skin lost some of its duskiess and her carriage lost a little of its earlier carefree audacity. But a slumberous eagerness still burned in her eye and an elusive sense of superbness still dignified her movements. Men responded to that appeal, without always stopping to question its source. John Caver found it anything but a hardship to face her across his often empty breakfast-table and smuggle absurdly mature mechanical toys up to the prodigiously growing but quite unappreciative Martie.

Even Allan Somer was troubled by a newer feeling for Aurora Mary which he did not care to fathom. He was merely interested, he inwardly claimed, in a somewhat novel problem of domestication, of watching how *rus* and *urbs* could eventually merge. But he stood more and more perplexed by a sense of emptiness when he failed to intercept Aurora Mary on her walks or was unable to stumble across her somewhere about the big house. He found it increasingly easy to confer with Betty Wilder on the best text-books for their pupil and to discuss with the pupil herself the reading-matter that would be most helpful to a beginner. His interest in Martie was both active and continuous, and even Rusty was not to be altogether overlooked. One mellow Saturday morning, in fact, when Joan had motored to New Haven with the Whitneys for the football match and Miss Wilder had declared a holiday in the green-and-silver classroom with the mullioned windows, Somer abandonedly whisked Aurora Mary off to New York in his car, ostensibly to visit the Metropolitan Museum of Art. But they changed their plans on the way and journeyed recklessly about the city and lunched at an unknown but entirely lovely place overlooking a majestic sweep of river-water.

Then they once more hit the open trail and stopped to admire the deepening amethyst and purple tones along the face of a distant rock-wall which Somer spoke of as the Palisades. Aurora Mary remained silent as she sat studying the light beyond that wide-flung rampart across the western sky-line. Then her shoulders heaved with a deeper breath.

"How does that appeal to your woodland eyes?" Somer asked with the pride of the native-born.

Her reply to his question was an unexpected one.

"It leaves me a little lonesome for my own country."

"Which you still like better than this?" He smiled, without meaning to, at the solemnity of her gaze.

"Dark and true and tender is the North," she quietly quoted.

"Ah, you remember that?" he said, quite sober again.

"I've remembered everything you've ever said to me," she was still primitive enough to confess.

"I'm afraid you'll find those observations of mine," he said with self-defensive levity, "progressively diminishing in importance."

"But I'll always feel they're based on truth," was her stubbornly solemn retort.

That brought his glance about to her face. He was no longer smiling.

"And can I expect the same from you?" he exacted.

"What from me?" she questioned, evading his eyes.

"Always the truth?"

That sudden gravity on his part seemed to embarrass her.

"Why shouldn't you?" she parried.

"Because some time," he ventured, apparently groping for his words, "there—there are certain things I want to see cleared up."

Her face became a barricaded one.

"When there's so much in the future," she finally observed, "I don't seem to think much about the past. And I guess it's about time we were heading for home."

He became conscious, as he started up the car, of her remoteness, of disturbing reservations which he would always be compelled to respect. Yet he felt the need for candor between them, even though it came at a cost. He knew a craving for a nearness more than the nearness of her unconsciously swaying body.

"I suppose Martie will be waiting for you?" he finally ventured.

She felt the probe in the wound, but she did not wince. She was, after all, learning a little from those about her.

"That's the trouble," she admitted. "I seem to be of less and less importance to Martie. You can't even be a mother, down here. They appear to have experts for everything. They even take your children away from you and hand them over to trained nurses or English governesses. And that seems as funny, to me, as having some one polish your finger-nails for you."

"Then you miss Martie a little?"

"You miss anything you love, when it's not near you," acknowledged Aurora Mary. "Aren't you missing Joan to-day?"

Somer's laugh was a slightly acidulated one.

"The more important question is whether Joan is missing *me*."

To that, however, Aurora Mary proffered no answer. She knew that Joan, of late, had been treading a path of her own. It was a feverishly crowded one, but there was an obviously forced note about its gaiety. And all was not well, she surmised, between Somer and the girl he intended to marry. There were currents and counter-currents which she could not fathom, allusions which she could not place, electric silences which she could not define. The newcomer to Westbrook, in fact, could never quite rid herself of the impression that Joan's newer passivity was merely an armistice, a

blithely sullen acceptance of the unavoidable. There was enmity there, enmity which she could not altogether fathom. And she had done nothing to deserve it. Yet the thought of it clouded her happiness as she rode quietly homeward with the preoccupied Somer at her side.

CHAPTER XI

Joan, in treading a path of her own, made that path an arrestingly wide one. She sought out her own friends, and kept her own hours, and let it be known to Westbrook and the world in general that both her happiness and her habits were entirely in her own hands.

That valiant fight for freedom, however, could come only at a cost. For the shadowy-eyed Joan, returning from an all-night dance when a rind of pearl and gold was showing itself in the eastern sky, stumbled over a rust-colored puppy blithely dragging a gray-squirrel sports-coat along the polished floor. The girl with the unnaturally bright eyes decided, as she recognized the coat as her own and realized what ecstatic young teeth had done to its contours, that she had endured more than reason demanded. She captured Rusty and imprisoned him in her bathroom, smoked three cigarettes in succession, and finally let the frustrations of more than one unhappy day flower in unequivocal and passionate action. And when she acted, she did so with a promptness and a completeness entirely her own.

It was Mary, with her morning's lessons over, who first became conscious of Rusty's absence. She had whistled for him as she hurried out to the quiet nook between the Chinese pagoda and the tennis-courts where Martie, after being duly bathed and dressed and fed, slept of a morning while his nurse sat in the slanting November sunlight acquiring a tan and reading Meredith.

"I want him to be an open-air boy," Aurora Mary had proudly proclaimed when she first led Betty Wilder to this retreat.

"He's a darling," acknowledged Betty as she stooped over the plump pink face with the carelessly cooing lips. Then her face saddened, as the faces of childless women sadden before the ancient miracle of unfolding life.

But Aurora Mary missed Rusty. She was worried about him and decided to round him up without loss of time.

Her first cursory search, however, proved a fruitless one. And then she made it a more methodic one.

"Anybody see my dog?" she demanded of the tight-lipped Mrs. Pusey.

"No, madam," was the prompt but impersonal reply.

She stopped Hadley in the hall a minute later and confronted him with a challenging eye.

"Have you seen my dog to-day, Hadley?" she demanded, remembering that that functionary had never taken kindly to Rusty's presence at Westbrook.

"No, madam," answered the impassive Hadley. And she was compelled to believe him, but she did not give up the search. She transferred it to the gardens, and then to the garage, and then to the stables. But she met always with the same answer. And an absurd new sense of desolation crept over her at the thought that Somer's pup, her pup, could be slipping out of her life. She even went to the lodge, and wandered out past the great iron gates, looking disconsolately for that rusty-colored wanderer who meant so much in her life and so much to her happiness.

She turned back along the empty drive and stopped before the young Scotch under-gardener.

"Sandy, have you seen anything of my dog?"

"I have not, ma'am," was the slightly retarded answer.

"I've lost him," explained the sorrowful Aurora Mary.

"I know that, ma'am," acknowledged Sandy.

Aurora Mary's quick eye studied his dour young face.

"How did you know that?" she demanded.

"I'd rather not be tellin'."

But she was on him, the next moment, like a catamount.

"Tell me what you know, Sandy," she cried. "Tell me, or I'll—I'll shake you out of your shoes!"

"It will only mean trouble, ma'am."

"But I'm going to know. I've *got* to know!"

"Then ye'd best find out from others," protested Sandy as he turned back to his task of strawing the rhododendron-bed. But a strong brown hand promptly swung him away from that protective occupation.

"You're going to tell me," proclaimed a grim-lipped Aurora Mary, "and you're going to tell me now!"

"It'll make you no happier," Sandy answered as he glanced toward the manor-house.

"But I intend to know," she said with her fingers tightening on his Cardigan-jacket. "Where is he?"

Sandy looked at her for a moment of silence.

"He's dead, ma'am."

Aurora Mary's hand fell away from the soiled Cardigan-jacket.

"He's dead?" she echoed vacuously. "How d'you mean he's dead?"

"He was shot this mornin', ma'am, back o' the stables."

Her face flamed scarlet, then went gray.

"My Rusty was shot?" she exacted, shaken and incredulous. "Why, they couldn't, they surely wouldn't——"

She broke off abruptly, shocked by a sudden new suspicion. She backed away a little, taking a deeper breath.

"Who shot him?" she suddenly demanded.

"I'm not tellin'," was the guarded answer, "but you might be askin' somewhere about the garage."

She did not wait for more. She strode with a hardened eye and an oddly squared jaw back to the house. She felt battered and stripped, as though a blast of wind had blown away, at a breath, all the softness of silk and quietnesses of manner with which she had been so patiently covering her forest wildness. Her new world, of a sudden, fell away from her. The many-gabled Long Island manor-house abruptly relapsed to a rough-timbered lumber-camp on the Little Winiska, a lumber-camp where one openly fended and fought for one's own. Her underlip was squared, ominously, as she unearthed from its hiding-place her ponderous old six-shooter. Her hands were slightly tremulous as she buckled the abraded old holster-belt about her waist. Yet she had the forethought, before reemerging, to fling a raglan rain-coat over her shoulders.

When she reached the garage she found Gleason solemnly backing out the limousine. On the cemented areaway behind him a younger man, known as Kelder, was engaged in washing Joan's lemon-yellow sports roadster. Its metal glittered bright, but it was mud-stained and had a crumpled fender.

"Gleason," said the cloudy-eyed woman in the raglan, "who shot my dog?"

She could see him hesitate. But he stood, a moment later, in complete control of himself.

"I don't know, madam," was his maddeningly impersonal reply.

"Do you?" she demanded as she confronted the sallow-faced under-chauffeur known as Kelder. He glanced at her, insolently indifferent, as he continued to chamois the side of the car.

"What if I do?" he inquired as the question was repeated.

"Then you know?" she gasped, catching at the wet rubber apron that covered his body. He not only resented that clutch, but he promptly tore himself free from it. Yet every instinct in her body, as he paraded his indifference by stooping to pick up his sponge, told her that she was on the right track.

"Did you kill my dog?" she said with a quiet intensity that brought his casual glance swinging back to her. But his eyes widened as he looked this time, for he found himself staring into the barrel of a foolishly big revolver. He studied it, for a moment, and then he studied the intently malignant face behind it.

"Be careful how you handle that thing," he warned her. But he refused to back away. There was, in fact, more hate than fear on his face as he stood confronting her.

"How I handle it!" cried the woman. "Why, you puny-hearted pup-killer, I'm goin' to blow your God-forsaken soul out o' your rotten carcass with it!"

He refused to believe her, apparently, for he still held his ground. But he kept an alert eye, all the while, on the ugly barrel-end still balanced before him.

"I guess you better remember that pup's been destroyin' property round here for over two weeks," he even said with a sullen sort of fortitude. "And when he was shot, it was done on orders from the house."

"Whose orders?"

"Miss Caver ordered it," was the answer. "And it was done." He tossed aside the sponge and coolly unbuckled the rubber apron. "So if you're goin' to shoot anybody up, you'd better begin on the boss' daughter!"

She stood, for a moment, studying his venomously indifferent face. He was not, she realized even through her diminishing waves of rage, like the other paid helpers about Westbrook. He was not meek and impersonal, like Hadley and Perkins and Haddow and the Pusey woman. He was a free-footed occasional, a mere under-chauffeur, and he probably regarded himself as more of a mechanic than a servant. He even had that free-riding independence which seemed to go along with a mastery over machinery.

But she wasn't afraid of him. And she showed that, in a sharp resurgence of anger at his repeated brow-lift of indifference, by thrusting him violently away from her. It was both an unwilling gesture of repudiation and an unreasoned expression of repugnance. But it was as abrupt as it was vigorous, and it sent the startled man stumbling back over a water-bucket that threw him floundering on the pooled cement.

"You'll pay for this," he said between his teeth, once he was on his feet again.

"How?" challenged the cloudy-eyed Aurora Mary.

"Wait and see!" was his sullen counter-challenge.

But Aurora Mary's gesture, as he turned and walked away, was one of revulsion. He was merely the hireling of others. And those others would never fight in the open or be conquered with firearms. It was all wrong, as wrong as Kippewa Kate trying to fight a fever with a tomahawk.

Aurora Mary fell back a step or two, with the light of battle faded from her eyes. Her weighted right hand dropped between her knees as she sank down on the wet running-board beside her and she remembered that she was no longer at Duck Landing. The battered old weapon in her hand was as out of place, she remembered, as she was at Westbrook. It didn't belong to her newer plane of life. It belonged to the raw and unsettled frontier, where you fought openly for your own, where people played square or paid for their double-dealing.

Those tumbling thoughts, however, were interrupted by a sudden sound of voices. Aurora Mary could see, as she rose to her feet and swung about, Joan Caver on a cropped roan hunter talking to Kelder. Joan turned and glanced in Aurora Mary's direction, and a moment later swung down from her saddle.

"Take this horse to the stables," was her crisp command as she tossed the reins to Kelder.

Then she walked, confident and cool-eyed, toward the waiting woman in the raglan.

"I see you're still trying to pull your wild and woolly stuff," she said with an outward composure that did not go well with the light in her gray-green eyes.

Aurora Mary, instead of answering her, stood studying the slender-bodied woman in the whipcord riding habit. Joan was

booted and gloved and looked oddly unsexed in her riding-breeches and mannish black derby that shone in the sunlight. Her highly polished riding-boots also shone in the slanting sun's rays, giving her an armored and burnished appearance that failed to harmonize with the womanly frailty of her figure. And as Aurora Mary's deep-hooded eyes continued to regard her, she smiled thinly. She even slapped her burnished boot-leg with her silver-mounted crop.

"Why do you hate me?" Aurora Mary suddenly asked.

"I don't hate you," was Joan's slightly tremulous reply. "I merely feel sorry for you."

"Is that why you shot my dog?"

Joan's laugh was carelessly defiant.

"Well, we can't have this house turned into a kennel. And a trifle too many things were being destroyed."

"D'you know what *you've* just destroyed?"

"In whose opinion?"

"In mine," was Aurora Mary's answer.

"Then I'm not greatly interested. But I really can't have people threatening to shoot up the servants here. You see, you can't make all this family of mine go native, just as they'll never accuse you of going patent-leather."

Aurora Mary looked down at her hands, which were not as steady as she wanted them to be.

"How long do you expect this to last?" she finally inquired.

"What?"

"One woman trying to make a hell out of life for another."

Joan's laugh was both brittle and mirthless.

"You seem to have got about everything you went after."

Aurora Mary did her best to speak quietly.

"I didn't expect you to fall over yourself to make me happy around here," she acknowledged. "But even an Indian sticks to a bargain, after he's made it. And I thought you were considerably better than an Indian. I thought you were civilized. I thought because you were high-born and school-taught, you'd at least be as fair as a backwoods bohunk. But you're no better than the shanty-men and the bush-rats and the sour doughs back on the Little Winiska. You're not even as good, for when a man makes a promise in the country I come from, he keeps to it. And when it's a matter of fighting, he at least fights his man in the open."

The girl with the riding-crop stood motionless.

"Since you've spoken of bargains," she said in a voice less controlled than before, "I'd like to point out that you're taking a particularly mean and cowardly advantage of the power this particular bargain gave *you*. You've black-jacked your way into my home with it; you've imposed yourself on my friends with it; and now you think you can club me into silence with it. But I'm not as afraid of you as you imagine. And I'm not losing sleep over anything you can say or do."

Aurora Mary looked, for the first time, straight into the gray-green eyes of the girl in the mannish black derby.

"If you knew me a little better," she quietly affirmed, "you'd be feeling that it's *you* who's taking a cowardly advantage of a promise, the promise I made to you and your father. You'd know I'm not a liar. You'd know that when I say a thing, I'd stick to it till hell froze over. But now it looks as though you were doing your best to make me the welcher I can't and won't be. You've said——"

"Oh, you've played the primitive very cleverly," cut in the white-faced Joan, "but there's a limit to everything. I guess we've about reached it in this situation. And if this sort of thing keeps up, you'll be losing more than your dog."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that I still have the right of taking Martie back."

Aurora Mary's breath quickened.

"You don't love him!" she cried, the last of her color gone.

Still again Joan laughed her brief and brittle laugh.

"You can't expect to rope down everything I've a right to love. And you'll find I can be as primitive as you are, when it comes to fighting for my own."

Aurora Mary, at the moment, was thinking only of Martie.

"But you've never fought for him," she contended. "You've never wanted him. You don't want him right now. You'd rather see him a thousand miles away, at this very minute."

Joan's eyes narrowed as she studied the dusky face in which she detected more than mere hostility. She saw there, for the first time, a shadow of fear.

"I'd at least prefer seeing him out here at Westbrook for the winter," she coolly acknowledged.

"That means you don't want me in the city."

"Frankly, I don't."

"Why?"

"Because you're both better in the country."

"Is that the only reason?"

"It strikes me as a sufficient one," averred Joan, as she drew off her riding-gloves.

The woman in the loose-fitting raglan stood silent for a full minute. There was a new and unexpected humility on her face when she finally looked up at the other.

"All right," she said. "I'll back-trail."

"What does that mean?" asked Joan as a bare-headed footman approached them from the direction of the house.

"It means," Aurora Mary quietly explained, "that I'm giving up considerably more than you imagine."

Instead of replying, Joan swung about to the waiting footman. "What is it, Haddow?"

"Mr. Somer is calling you from the city."

"Tell him to hold the wire."

She turned back to Aurora Mary, who had sunk down on the running-board of the lemon-colored roadster and sat staring meditatively at a water-pool in a depression of the cemented areaway. The girl in the riding-suit seemed about to speak. But she hesitated, before the remoteness of the face confronting her, turned on her heel, and walked toward the house, not without a touch of triumph in her movements.

Yet any sense of triumph which Joan may have wrung from that encounter was not as enduring as it promised. For when Caver returned to Westbrook that afternoon he casually inquired for the intrusive and obstreperous Rusty, eventually learned of his taking off, and visited the little new-made grave at the end of the dahlia-garden. Whereupon he returned grim-lipped to the house and promptly summoned Joan into his presence. Having expressed in no uncertain language his opinion of her conduct, he as promptly sent for the pallid and sullen-eyed Samuel Kelder, who was expeditiously informed that his services were at an end and that he was given exactly one half hour in which to get his person and his possessions off the premises. And Kelder, who knew an enraged man when he saw one, did not waste thought on the

manner of his going. The only hiatus in his preparations for departure was when Joan Caver appeared white-faced at the door of his hastily summoned taxicab and thrust a recklessly plump roll of bills into his hand.

"I'm sorry, but that's all I can do."

Kelder's shrewd eyes studied her face and once more studied the bank-notes.

"I know," he said with his mirthless and one-sided smile, "but if they ever jam you too close, lady, just call on me!"

CHAPTER XII

Although Joan habitually referred to the Caver town house as the "Mausoleum" and described it as being hopelessly archaic and dowdy, she betrayed an entirely new impatience to move into that Fifth Avenue "atrocity in sandstone," as she frequently called it, where three generations of Cavers frowned down at her out of their time-mellowed frames.

But her father, for reasons entirely his own, not only deliberately postponed any such migration but let it be understood that Joan herself was to remain at the Long Island house as long as her family was still officially installed under the many-gabled roof of Westbrook. If the girl with the gray-green eyes accepted that ultimatum without open protest, she was not without her secret moods and moments of insurrection. It was a command, in fact, which she flouted to the limit of her ingenuity. For day after day when Betty Wilder was engaged in "putting hoops on the powder-barrel," as she phrased it, and Mary was intent on her lessons, Joan was off in her rakish yellow speedster, only to return when the house was in darkness and Haddow asleep in his hall chair.

But Caver did not give up the helm. His quiet determination to pilot his own course was evidenced by a final proclamation that Joan should give a small dinner-dance, ostensibly for Aurora Mary, before Westbrook was shut up for the season.

It was an order from the bridge, and Joan accepted it as such.

"They're making the *insurrectos* salute the flag," as she blithely expressed it to Sallie Meredith over a cocktail-shaker.

But Joan, once committed to that disciplinary course, set about her preparations with a stoic deliberateness that somewhat puzzled the girl from the North. Aurora Mary was equally puzzled, a few days later, when Caver was unexpectedly called to Washington to testify before a senate committee, by the light-hearted celerity with which his daughter revised her lists and widened her call for hilarity.

"She certainly seems to be rounding up the high-steppers," Betty confided to Somer, in the midst of an intruding army of decorators and florists and caterers. "There's to be costumes—and seven punch-bowls!"

"I'd rather like you to keep an eye on Mary," ventured the solemn-eyed Somer.

"But I'm not included," confessed the shrugging Betty.

"Then I'll do what I can," observed the other as he turned away to fulfill his afternoon mission of smuggling a mechanical elephant up to Martie.

But there were occasions, Aurora Mary discovered, when an outsider could give her very little help. And her official emergence into their upper world was one of them. There was something disturbing in the very elaborateness of the preparations all about her. She was conscious of both an ever-increasing tension and an entirely new timidity. Westbrook, embowered in hot-house flowers and with its great room stripped for dancing, may have looked to the outward eye like a dream come true, but to her inner soul it looked like a battle-field to be won or lost.

She declined, at the last moment, to wear a costume, but she dressed with much care and a secret aversion for the flimsy thing of georgette and silk that was to cover her body. It seemed like dressing in a cobweb, leaving her acutely conscious of exposures to which she was not inured. Even her hands bothered her. They seemed unmanageable and ungraceful, with the still calloused palms moist from suppressed excitement. Her fingers were shaking a little as she fastened about her throat the seemingly meager string of pearls which John Caver had so casually sent up to her. They were lustrous and meticulously matched, but she had seen street-peddlers selling much bigger strings for a song. And she felt grateful to Caver, in her blindness, for making any such gift so appropriately modest.

"You don't look happy, Mary," ventured Somer as he met her at the foot of the cascading wide stairway while the first cars were rolling up to the lamp-strung port-cochère.

"I'm not," was the unexpectedly blunt reply.

"What's wrong?" he asked, conscious of a slumberous eagerness that could still burn in her eyes and an elusive sense of superbness that still dignified even her over-abrupt movements.

"It's nothing but buck-fever," she acknowledged.

"But you're among friends," he smiled back, remembering the meaning of her forest-life phrase, "and we're here not for murder but merely a good time."

Aurora Mary, however, found little relief in that throng of strangers. She was conscious of men, gay and foolishly garbed men, shaking hands with her, of young women smilingly or solemnly appraising her, of much calling and laughter and talk and cross-volleys of wit to which she could find no key. Allan Somer later returned to her through the crush and told her he intended to take her in. But it was, apparently, destined otherwise by the powers in control, for Somer found himself officially linked up with Paddy Winslow and the desolated Aurora Mary went in on the arm of one Peter Cowley, who impressed her as effeminate but was described to her as the "professional and perpetual bachelor of New York."

Peter Cowley, it is true, was companionable enough, demanding to know why she was afraid of the cocktails and inquiring if she'd got her sunburn at Deauville or Asheville and insisting from her size and coloring that she must be first cousin to Jeanne Gordon of the Metropolitan. But Peter, as a man-about-town, obviously believed in team-play, and when his allusion to the new Barrymore play met with no response, and his dubious *mot* about Texas Guinan fell on barren ground, and his casual reference to the Piping Rock Horse-Show commanded no acuter show of interest, he suddenly found, as he phrased it to the sparkling young blonde on his right, that his gas-tank had gone dry. Peter, in fact, devoted more and more of his time to the ebullient young lady adroitly beside him in body and spirit, and the cloudy-eyed Aurora Mary, as she studied him, arrived at the entirely erroneous conclusion that he was merely a flabby-bodied and overfed city idler with disagreeably protuberant eyes and the discomforting habit of staring too pointedly at one's bare shoulders. She was so singularly unhappy and ill at ease that silence enclosed her like a shell. And a silent woman, at a board supposed to be festive, is at a disadvantage not lightly overlooked.

She realized this as she glanced along the table toward Joan, who sat triumphant in her upper estuary of laughter and talk and light-hearted banter. And when, in the midst of the jokes and allusions and the very language that was Greek to her, she looked up and caught the coolly derisive and slightly triumphant gaze of Joan fixed on her face, the girl from the North wondered if the entire situation had not been deliberately fabricated for her own discomfiture. She was being shown up as a misfit, as a fish out of water. She was being publicly paraded as a numbskull from the backwoods.

This impression of being exhibited like a caged black bear was increased when Peter Cowley next openly and solemnly addressed her.

"And do *you* believe that ontogeny repeats phylogeny?" he questioned, dipping a spoon into his orgeat and orange ice.

"I don't know what that means," was Aurora Mary's curt retort. But she noticed the telegraphic glance that passed between Joan and the protuberant-eyed man beside her.

"Ask her about potlatches," Joan called down the line. "She comes from the land of the Indian."

It was said blithely enough, but there was a barb in it.

"Ah, you come from the great open spaces," derided the smooth-voiced man beside her.

"Where men are men," she added with sudden and unexpected hate in her voice.

"And women are so often wildcats," amended her stubbornly smiling dinner-partner.

He said it airily, and with obviously humorous intent. But his touch fell on a hidden wound. It was like a match tossed into sun-dried undergrowth. Mary could feel the fatal flame sweep through her body and her instinctive reaction was an impulse to fling the glass of orange ice straight at her oppressor's head. Yet even as her fingers trembled on the glass-stem she caught sight of Allan Somer, half risen from his chair. She saw his look of warning touched with pleading. And then she remembered. She emerged from her mist of violence and her hand sank slowly back into her lap. But during the rest of the meal she remained silent.

Nor did her spirits revive when, later in the evening, larger and more hilarious groups swarmed in to the already crowded house. These newcomers obviously belonged to the younger set and they lost little time in keying the proceedings up to a higher pitch. They came, as a rule, in elaborate and colorful costumes, a tumult of Arabian Sheiks and Marie Antoinettes and Captain Kidds and Geisha Girls and Columbines and Pierrots, a tideway of tinsel and silk

and metal and rice-powdered flesh. They swarmed about the replenished punch-bowls and eddied on to the dancing-floor, where a slipper flew across the room and crashed into a mirror and an incredibly thin girl in a harem-veil did a Cairo music-hall contortion-act for her own personal circle. Then a woman in star-spangled cheese-cloth mounted a table and sang a song in French which sent tides of laughter about the momentarily arrested crowd and a dimpled blonde convict in prison-stripes gave an exhibition of the *Matiche* that ended with a tidal movement toward the door when an Indian Chief in a war-bonnet triumphantly announced that Joe had found the key and the wine-cellar was open.

Aurora Mary, ill at ease and morose-eyed, was watching that Bacchanalian scene when Joan smilingly joined her, followed by a lean-faced man not in costume.

"You two people ought to be kindred souls," she lightly announced. "This is Owen De Witt. Owen's an outdoor man. And he's not even a dancer since he crocked his knee playing polo in that Army match last month."

Mary looked up into the high-bridged brown face with its bony jaw and its soft and smoldering eye. He seemed different from the others, in some way, and she hoped it was due to more than the absence of a costume.

"You don't seem very happy here," he observed as Joan drifted away.

"I'm not used to this sort of thing," acknowledged Mary.

"So Joe's been telling me. Let's get out somewhere where it's cooler and cleaner," was his altogether disarming suggestion.

She was willing enough to let him pilot her through the tumult and the smoke-blue air.

"How about my car—and a dip into the Island landscape by starlight?" he casually suggested.

"I'm not dressed for motoring," explained the puzzled Mary.

"Then I know a corner made to order, at the end of the conservatory. But don't step on these neckers in the dark. And if you must have a light, I'll carry along this Chinese lantern."

He seemed companionable and casual enough as he led her to the allotted corner, where she could scarcely hear the far-off pulsations of music mingled with a hum of voices and laughter.

"They've been telling me what a wonderful woman you are," he said as he lighted a cigarette. And his face shone almost bronze-like in the sudden light of his match.

"In what way?" asked Mary, wordlessly chilled.

"In doing exactly what you want to do and living as you want to live. In being just yourself and letting the mob go hang."

"But I'm beginning to find out you can't live that way."

"Well, this isn't the night to remember it," he said as he let a hand rest on her shoulder.

She turned, at that, and studied his face in the uncertain light. And he, in turn, stood studying the dusky face so intently staring into his own.

"Poor little wood bird," he said in a voice suddenly bantering and tender. And he followed her, step by step, as she moved slowly away. But he obviously misconstrued her silence, for he leaned forward and took both her hands in his.

"You believe in being free, don't you?" he murmured.

"Much freer than you imagine," was her quiet-noted retort. Her breast was heaving, but it was with neither agitation nor alarm. It was with a sharp disappointment shot through with disgust and crowned with despair.

"What a wonderful engine you are," he said, leaning over her.

"Engine—engine of what?" she questioned in a slightly hardened voice.

"Of rapture—to the right man," was his softly murmured reply.

A sudden chill crept through her body.

"Did Joan tell you to say things like that to me?"

He laughed at that, quietly and contentedly.

"I'm not thinking about Joe just now. I'm thinking about *you*, about that beautiful lithe body that keeps calling out for its fulfillment. Look at me."

He could feel the tremor that went through her. But he neither knew nor understood the source of it.

"Are you all like that?" she asked in a voice which she tried in vain to keep steady.

"We'd have to be, with you," he said in a whisper.

"And I thought," she began with a gasp of desperation. "I thought——"

But he cut her short by slipping an arm about her waist and drawing her close in under his shoulder.

"Let's not think," he murmured as he leaned closer over the full red lips oddly squared in the uncertain light.

"Stop," she gasped, straining away from him. She was not conscious of the dozen electric bulbs suddenly flowering into light all about her, just as she was not conscious of Joan and Allan Somer standing arrested between the tubed palms and the long parterre of Bourbon roses.

"And behold our woodland lily," was Joan's quietly derisive cry.

But Aurora Mary was equally unconscious of that cry as she felt the sinewy long arm clasped about her body. Still again she called out "Stop" as the stooping face, no longer smiling, bent closer above her own. Then she took a great breath, not of surrender but of desperation, as the telltale feral flash went tingling through her.

Her movement, when she broke into sudden action, seemed too prompt to be studied. But her aim was unquestionably accurate. For she brought her clenched right hand in a foreshortening circle clean against the slightly relaxed bronze jaw of the man.

The impact of it threw the man's head back, ludicrously, but he was too heavy to be thrown lightly from his feet. So her other clenched hand, swinging wider, struck hammer-like on the still hanging jaw. He wavered there, stunned, but still on his feet. And as he wavered the ashen-faced girl, throwing all the rage and disgust of her being into the charge, thrust him crashing backward over a bank of potted azaleas, where he lay with his patent-leather pumps shining bright in the midst of the tumbled foliage.

Aurora Mary, in the ensuing movement of absurdly gay masqueraders toward the fallen man, turned grimly on her heel and started away. But Somer caught her by the arm.

"Where are you going?" he demanded, alarmed by the tigerish afterglow still in her eyes.

"Going?" she echoed, flashing-eyed. "I'm going back where I belong."

"You belong here," contended Somer, doing his best to remain calm.

"Like hell I do!" was her impassioned retort. "I've had my try at your high life and I'm through with it. I tried to tell myself you were a little better'n bohunks and bushwhackers, but now I know different. I'm goin' back to my own people where I can keep my self-respect and breathe clean air. And I'm goin' now."

Somer, paling before the stress of her passion, was conscious of a splintering of veneers. All they had done to her, during those laborious weeks of socializing her lone-wolf spirit, all she had so sedulously done for herself, lay swept aside in one atavistic hour of rage. There was, and there always would be, that streak in her make-up, that frontier streak which would continuously have to be reckoned with and made allowance for. So he turned to her, implacably patient.

"Let's talk this over, first," he contended.

"There's been too much talk around here," she cried as she tore the string of pearls from her neck and flung them aside.

"But there are things we have to consider," he persisted. "There's the question of Martie, for instance. Are you willing to leave him?"

"Leave Martie? Of course I won't leave Martie!"

"But you haven't the right to——"

"*But* nothin'," she cut in, shaking. "He's mine. He's mine and I'll take him out of this and give him a chance o' some day bein' a *man*."

"But won't you wait?" pleaded Somer. "Won't you wait at least a day? Or until Caver gets back?"

She was, however, impervious to control.

"I can't and won't stay under this roof," she proclaimed as she shook him off. "I'm through!"

It was as he stood there, so wretchedly conscious of his helplessness, of his inability to call her back, that the grim-lipped Hadley stepped up to him.

"Mr. Caver is just back, sir," that for once flustered servant said in an unnecessarily confidential whisper. He repeated it, in fact, before Somer turned and faced him.

"Where?" was the curt inquiry.

"Up-stairs in his study, sir."

Somer, a minute later, was knocking on the study door.

John Caver's face, the younger man observed as he stepped inside, was both tired and touched with frustration.

"What's all this rout?" demanded the returned traveler. His hand-movement seemed a very wearied one.

"It's Joan's dinner-dance going into high," retorted Somer. "But the unexpected feature of it is that Aurora Mary is leaving us."

"Just what do you mean?" said Caver, his frown deepening.

Somer told him, as briefly as possible, what had so recently taken place below-stairs.

"But I must talk to her," cried Caver, starting toward the door.

"It's no use," contended Somer. "She's not in a state to listen. She's bound to go. And knowing her as I do, I'd say that nothing will bring her back."

"She's got to be stopped."

"She can't be stopped. Unless you do it by force. And it will take even more of that than you imagine."

"Is she taking Martie?"

"Of course."

"And she won't listen to reason?"

"Not in the condition she's in now."

Again Caver stood silent.

"Then we'll have to hold her, in some way, until she cools down. For her own good, I mean. We—we owe her that much."

Twice he paced the rug. Then he stopped and turned abruptly on Somer.

"Would you mind slipping down and telling Gleason to get my car out again. It seems about the only way left to us."

"What are you going to do?" asked Somer, with his hand on the door-knob.

"I'm going to see if I can't tame our she-bear by taking her cub," was Caver's grim-noted reply.

"What does that mean?"

"It means I'm going to whisk Martie and his nurse into our town house, for a day or two at least. And I'm going to do it right now. That ought to hold her. It will hold her, at any rate, until some of this berserk fire burns out."

Somer, even after he had delivered his message to Gleason, nursed his doubts. He eventually surrendered, in fact, to a recurring urge to seek out Aurora Mary and make one last effort to reason with her. But half-way up the wide stairway he came face to face with Joan, a provocatively composed Joan still trailing a green feather fan from her wrist.

"Well, the inevitable has happened," she said with a shrug, "as I warned you it would."

He looked at her, stung into resentment by her composure, behind which burned a vague green flame of triumph.

"What d'you mean?" he curtly enough inquired.

"I mean you're getting your melodrama," retorted Joan. "And also that the neolithic lady insists on going."

"I'd like to see her," asserted Somer, following Joan as she turned and ascended the stairs.

"What's the use?" said the girl in green, with a shoulder-movement of *ennui*. "It's all been like—like a bull in a china-shop. And I'm almost glad it's over."

"I want to see her," repeated Somer.

"But your woodland nymph is now tearing round for her clothes. And she's already ordered a car."

"We mustn't let her go."

Joan could afford to laugh at that. "How will we stop her?"

That question remained unanswered. For a door was abruptly opened and the subject of their talk appeared for a moment before them as she stormily passed from one room to another.

"Does she look like anything you can argue with?" was Joan's acid taunt. But still again her question went without an answer. Before Somer could speak, indeed, a muffled cry rang through the upper house, and Mary was once more before them, the old tigerish light aflame in her eyes.

"Where's Martie?" she panted, confronting the girl at Somer's side. "Where's my Martie?"

"How should I know?"

"He's gone," was the other's forlorn cry. "He's not in his room."

"That's ridiculous," contended Joan. "He must be there."

"They've taken him away," gasped Mary, white to the lips. "And I'm going to find him."

Somer could feel Joan's quick glance searching his face as Aurora Mary swung back through the open door. But he remained silent.

He remained silent even when Aurora Mary reappeared, tremblingly buckling her absurd old six-shooter about her waist.

"You seem to be getting ready for the trail," proffered Joan, with her derisive pale laugh.

"I am."

"But this isn't the backwoods."

"It's something worse," cried Mary, with her underlip squared. She was back once more to the primitive, an unreasoning and embattled wildcat of the forest.

"And you propose to find Martie with *that*?"

"You're God-damned right I'm goin' to find him. I'm goin' to find him even though I kill a boat-load o' white-faced liars in doin' it!"

Joan, with the green feather fan still in her hand, turned slowly about and faced Somer.

"You see, I was really right, after all, about people not being made over like a last year's gown," she asserted with a purely achieved languor.

CHAPTER XIII

A cheerful open fire brightened the living-room faintly redolent of cigarette-smoke and cut flowers. But Joan Caver, as she paced between the book-strewn table and the wide window against which the rain was beating in oblique gusts, betrayed little of the peace brooding over her surroundings. She was back at the fireplace, staring frowningly at the flames, when the door opened and Allan Somer stepped into the room.

"You sent for me?" he said, stopping short at the table-end.

Joan, looking up at him, observed both the pallid weariness of his face and the newer sternness that seemed to age him beyond his years.

"Is this the best we can do?" she questioned with a meekness that was new to her.

He crossed to her side, at that, but his kiss was perfunctory and his manner remained abstracted.

"I know, of course," said Joan as she reached for a cigarette, "what you're worrying about. And I've been wondering if you've found the lady."

"Not a trace of her," he answered, outwardly disregarding a satiric note in her voice which he inwardly resented. "And I've done everything but call in the police."

"I wouldn't worry too much about it all," observed Joan as she settled back in her chair.

"Why shouldn't I?" Allan demanded almost sharply.

"Because," was Joan's leisured reply, "the lady was here yesterday. Not in the house. But she sleuthed around the garage and the grounds and the stables like an Indian on a game-trail. She also cross-questioned the servants, I understand, but I don't think, Allan dear, that she got an inkling of your secret."

"Of my secret?" he challenged.

"Well, of yours and father's," was the other's cool-noted reply. "I motored in to the Mausoleum yesterday and I was both surprised and interested to find your baby and its nurse so safely installed there. That was rather clever of father, Allan, but it was also rather foolish. Pen up the calf, as it were, and the cow won't go far away!"

"We were desperate," he acknowledged, his face dark with misery.

"We?" she questioned.

"We talked together, your father and I, before he took Martie in. But he thought, of course, it would be for only a day or two. It was to *hold* Mary, not to lose her."

"But is it, after all, playing quite fair with her?" demanded Joan, none too happy over the misery on his face. "What will she have to say about such a trick?"

"That's why I've got to find her."

"And tell her?"

"Of course," he retorted, nettled by the other's wintry smile.

"Aren't you afraid she'll hate you for it?"

"Perhaps she will," was Somer's slightly delayed reply. "But we felt, at the time, it was for her own eventual good. And now that it's proved wrong I want to put things at least half-way right."

"And when you find her?" ventured Joan.

"I'll take her to her child, of course, and let her go north if she insists on it. I'll even go with her, if it'll help any."

That brought a quicker movement to the thin shoulders stooping over the burnished fireplace fender.

"But a baby would be apt to die, in a climate like that," objected Joan out of the silence that fell between them.

"Quite a number of them have survived it," was Somer's unexpectedly brusque retort. "The problem is, is it best for his future?"

"And also Aurora Mary's?"

"Yes, also Aurora Mary's."

Joan's sigh was an audible one.

"I feel sorry for the poor thing," she admitted with her face once more toward the fire. "She's almost out of her head, I suppose, but it's absurd, the way she's going about it. You'd think, under the circumstances, she'd go to the police."

"That's a city habit," retorted Somer, pacing back and forth on the rug-end. "They don't keep patrolmen in the country she comes from. People in that territory do their own police work."

"Apparently," observed Joan. "They go out on the war-path with pistols and rifles. And it will be a final humiliation, of course, when the whole absurd thing gets into the papers."

He turned to her, as though about to speak, but remained silent, his remote gaze on the rain beating against the window. When he swung about Hadley was wheeling in the tea-wagon. The clustered china and silverware shone rich in the warm firelight.

Joan, conscious of Somer's air of aloofness, looked up. "You're going to wait for tea?" she asked.

Somer's head-movement was one of negation.

"I must get back for a report from one of my men. He may have something for me."

Joan, with a small tightening of the lips, got slowly up from her chair and crossed as slowly to Somer's side.

"You're not thinking much about me these days," she said with an unlooked-for wistfulness in her voice. He gazed down into her face as the thin white hands clutched at the rough tweed of his coat. And he wondered, as he looked at her, why she should seem so far away, so remote, at that moment, from both his hopes and his anxieties.

She drew back, at that estranging gaze of his, with a blithe enough smile and shrug.

"We've both got to be more generous to that woman," was his defensive cry.

"No matter what it costs?" countered the girl with the quickly hardening eyes.

"No matter what it costs," repeated the other as he moved toward the door.

Joan sat alone before her fire, silent and thoughtful. She sat without moving, her narrowed eyes taking on a new light as she stared unseeing into the ruby coal-bed under the dwindling hickory log. But Joan's mind was far from drowsy. She had the twin gifts of candor and quick decision. And she saw clearly enough how it would end. It would end in leaving her a total loss, as her circle so aptly phrased it. She would be sunk. Even Allan would be lost to her, for ever. But she had a right to her own baby. And she could trump their ace and take it. She bore it, and it belonged to her. She might even grow to understand it a little better, and perhaps, in the end, love it a little and be proud of the little baby tricks they all talked of so much.

But there was still Aurora Mary to think of. There was still that wild woman out on the war-path. Anything, from now on, might be expected from that unpredictable quarter. And the old compact, of course, was now a thing of the past. If the woman was going north, as Allan implied, the sooner she got back to her wilderness the better. And nothing was more nauseous than inertia. She had sat back too long, watching other people juggle with her happiness. The one thing now needed, Joan told herself, was time, just a little time to let the wounded she-moose creep off to her covert. Then they could all get back to sanity again.

Joan's gray-green eyes were still preoccupied as she rose to her feet, ordered her car, and made ready for the open.

Even though her plan failed, she told herself as she went speeding cityward, purring purposefully along the half-empty parkway, she would and could not altogether face defeat. For it was not she who had first stooped to trickery. And if for any reason the impassioned Aurora Mary swung back on them, she would quickly enough learn it was Allan and her father who were at the root of her suffering. And it would not be in her nature to forgive them. They could fry, then, in their own juices, and find out that the daughters of bush-rats had no corner on audacity.

So Joan, before approaching the East River, turned sharply southward, stopped at an arcaded corner service-station, and inquired for one Sam Kelder. From there she was directed to a poolroom seven blocks farther south, where, in turn, she was redirected to a public garage a half-mile eastward again.

She found Kelder in oil-stained overalls, working over a truck engine. He showed no surprise as he looked up and recognized her. And he remained equally impassive as she quietly inquired if he could come out and look at her car.

"Sit inside," she as quietly suggested, "so we can talk together."

They talked together under the dripping top, talked guardedly and earnestly, with a frown of doubt slowly increasing on the sallow brow of the listening man.

"That's tricky stuff to get away with," he demurred.

"But it's only for a few days," Joan Caver pointed out. "Then I'll come myself and—and either get the child or find it by accident. And it will be a very profitable few days for you."

"But that kid wife o' mine never took care of a baby," interposed the sagacious Sam Kelder.

"Then she'll get twenty dollars a day for taking care of this one," announced the young woman beside him.

"And what do I get?"

Joan, in answer to that, reached into her jeweled hand-bag and lifted out a somewhat disordered roll of yellowbacks. Kelder's eye, as he studied the numerals on the bank-notes, perceptibly widened and narrowed again.

"And you'll get that much more," she proclaimed as she thrust the roll into his grease-stained hands, "when you've done what I said."

Kelder counted the bills over, one by one. Then, having grimly pocketed them, he sat studying the rainswept wind-shield.

"It looks good to me, lady," he finally observed. "I'm game."

The pale-faced girl was once more searching in her hand-bag.

"This," she coolly explained, "is the pass-key to the town house. I don't think you'll even have to use it. But in bad weather, of course, the nurse won't take the child to the park."

Kelder's smile was a studious one.

"I get you," he announced.

"And I can depend on you?" questioned the other.

"To the last dollar," he was about to reply, as he swung open the car-door. But he amended that proclamation to, "To the last ditch."

She was not altogether sure of him. Yet she was, on the other hand, in no way afraid of him. She even knew a faint and not unpleasurable tingle of excitement at the thought that he belonged to a walk of life far removed from her own, that he was probably much closer to what they called the "underworld" than it would be polite to ask about. He was like a bootlegger; but even bootleggers, she remembered, knew their people. And life, with one dolorous exception, had involved her in no trouble out of which, eventually, she had been unable to pay her way.

"You said, you know, that if I ever got myself into a jam——" she began.

But he brushed that aside, almost airily.

"It'll seem like old times to me," was his somewhat dubious retort. "And I ain't so crazy about this tinkerin' on car-engines ten hours a day."

She was about to swing shut the door when he stopped her with a hand on the nickeled knob.

"Just one more question," he said as he stood with the rain-drops dripping from his oil-stained cap-rim. "Who's kid is this, anyway?"

Her gaze went opaque, at that unexpected question, for deep in her imperious young body she could feel the stirring of ghosts that were not entirely dead. She was even prompted, for a moment, to cry bluntly and abandonedly out to him: "It's *mine!*"

But that impulse was smothered at birth. She might be trumping their ace, yet she wasn't putting all her cards on the table.

"What difference does it make?" she parried.

"Not much," retorted Kelder. "But if it belongs to that she-panther in petticoats you had back at Westbrook, I naturally want 'o be ready for gun-play."

Joan's laugh was a brief and mirthless one.

"It no more belongs to her," she acridly averred, "than it does to me!" And her face, as she switched on her engine, carried a touch of its old-time arrogance.



CHAPTER XIV

To Aurora Mary the great city between its three triangulating rivers was more or less a closed book. But it no longer intimidated her. She was no longer afraid of it. The only chill that came to her blood grew out of the ever-recurring consciousness that somewhere in that crowded and undecipherable wilderness her Martie lay lost and alone, in need of her, crying for her in his helplessness. And that thought promptly roweled her into new and unreasoned activity.

Yet even her movements, as she worked along those devious new trails, were unreasoned and instinctive. She had no definite clue of the culprit, just as she had no clear-cut plan of action. But she was buoyed up by a blind determination to find her own. And to offset her ignorance of urban conditions she could claim an Indian-like sagacity and the frontiersman's belief in individual effort. She was, too, a trained and resourceful trailer, quietly observant and vigilant, and from the moment she gleaned the trivial information that a closed car had hurriedly left Westbrook, in the middle of Joan Caver's *bal masque*, she stood persuaded that her field of search lay somewhere about the city.

But that city soon confounded her. Beyond its main arteries it remained a *terra incognita* to her and time and time again she found herself at sea in its outer tangle of side-streets and lost in those darker byways where women seldom walked alone. What she saw, however, she marked and remembered, and after buying a news-stand map of New York and studying it closely she soon mastered the general plan of the city.

She avoided, in her blindness, all official and institutional help, but never for a moment did she give up her search. She patrolled the city as restlessly as a hound on a rabbit-trail. She watched the heavier tide-ways of traffic and peered into passing prams and go-carts and turned an appraising eye to every small-bodied crowd about a tenement doorway. She seined the groups about open playgrounds and quietly canvassed the child-carriers filtering away from the foyers of banner-hung picture-houses. When she grew hungry she ate at any near-by lunch-room and when night came on she found a humbler side-street hotel willing to accept a stranger without baggage, and after a night of troubled sleep was out on the open streets before the city was astir again. She was quite fearless, in that blind preoccupation on her own ends, and skirted dangers which she neither saw nor understood. Once she was followed by an antique dandy in pearl spats and a gardenia, who suggested that she was much too charming to be wandering about on foot. It was not until, with a hand on her arm, he triumphantly turned to hail a taxicab that she suspected the true inwardness of that movement. Then, in an atavistic relapse to her camp-day language, she told him in sulphurous and no uncertain language just what she thought of him.

Still later in the day she was shadowed and accosted by a less resplendent figure, a bland and shifty-eyed young stranger who promptly fell away, stunned at her blasphemous outburst when he addressed her. Still later, in the crush of the Bridge crowd in a rush hour, she felt a tug at her pocketbook, grasped the lean hand clutching at her meager wealth, and quickly jerked its startled owner to her side, where he escaped a clenched fist in his face by adroitly ducking, twisting away, and losing himself in the ranks of the astounded city workers.

But, hour by hour, she was learning her lesson. And among other things she learned the urban habit of non-participation, of abstaining from interference with other people's enterprises, of standing aloof from all interests not strictly her own. Even accidents and suffering, she soon saw, were taken care of by duly appointed officials in uniform. And when, in front of an unsavory looking dance-hall, she attempted to rescue a thin-armed girl from the blows of an indignant and gin-fired young escort, she was openly berated by that suddenly reunited couple and warned by a uniformed patrolman to be on her way or he'd run her in.

It brought before her new aspects of the city, aspects which she in her blindness had omitted from her earlier mental pictures of metropolitan life. She sometimes wondered, during those puzzled surveys of sordid slum districts and even more sordid street life, how people could live in such warrens, how human beings could be happy under such conditions. Sometimes, too, she felt that her quest was a foolish one, that this newer wilderness of brick and stone and steel was too immeasurably intricate for the stranger to patrol and comb for an unknown fugitive.

But that fugitive, she felt, was not altogether unknown. For in all her blind quest the thought of one face and the shadow of one figure lay phantasmally across her path. And that was the face and figure of Sam Kelder. Instinct, and something more than instinct, kept whispering to her the name of her enemy. Even honest-faced young Sandy had warned her to have an eye out for Kelder. A man who had been merciless with a dog would be equally merciless where a child was concerned. And Kelder's final word to her had been in the nature of a threat. She felt, in fact, more and more assured that

her one hope centered about that sullen-eyed ex-chauffeur. She also felt, unreasoned as were many of her other assumptions, that a man primarily interested in cars would be more readily traced through places where cars were sold and kept. So she began her slow and laborious assessment of the city's garages. She went with infinite patience from salesroom to salesroom, from workshop to workshop, from office to office, inquiring for one Sam Kelder. Sometimes she was laughed at; sometimes she was banteringly cross-questioned, and sometimes she was sent off on false trails that led to nothing.

But she did not give up. She was as grimly untiring in her movements as a spawning salmon in its migration. She even crossed the East River and canvassed Long Island City and worked her way south to Brooklyn, where the first ray of hope came when she addressed herself to the rotund manager of a taxicab repair-station.

"Sure, I know Kelder," that obese individual finally proclaimed. "He's workin' for a millionaire somewhere out beyond Westbury."

Aurora Mary's heart sank again.

"But he left that place, two weeks ago," she explained to her informant. And something in the dusky and deep-lined face left the cogitating fat man a little less unsympathetic.

"Just a minute, lady," he called back as he crossed to an inner doorway. "Slim," he shouted into the gaseous cavern confronting him. "Slim, you got any idea where Sam Kelder's hangin' out now?"

A tall and bony youth came forward, wiping oily hands on his blue-jeans.

"Sure, Sam's engine-wranglin' over at Big John's garage."

Then he saw, for the first time, the waiting and intent-eyed woman. And, for reasons all his own, he underwent a prompt and complete change of front. He gestured spaciouly as Aurora Mary demanded to know where Big John's was.

"Gee, I'm mixed up in my numbers. Is it Sam Kincaid you're askin' about?"

"It's a man named Sam Kelder," was the answer.

"Kelder? I don't know any Kelder," frowningly proclaimed the youth in blue-jeans. And the intent-eyed woman eventually realized that nothing more was to be gleaned from that quarter.

Yet when she took her departure she went with a new ray of hope in her heart. Patiently and laboriously she set out to find a garage-owner known as Big John. It was from a taxi-driver, at the end of her second day of inquiring, that she not only verified the existence of Big John Halliday but also determined the exact street-corner location of his garage.

She was warier, by this time, and attempted no open and betraying invasion of the premises. But, with Indian-like patience, she kept watch on its doorways, inspecting every figure that went back and forth, studying every face that showed itself at a window. And she was rewarded, late in the afternoon, by a glimpse of the sallow-faced Sam Kelder as he climbed into a ruinous old cabriolet and speeded away.

She as promptly hailed a passing taxicab, swung aboard, and proclaimed to its youthful Celtic driver that there was a ten-dollar tip for him, over and above his fare, if he could keep within sight of the speeding cabriolet.

"I'll do my darnedest," announced the youth at the wheel. And as they swerved through traffic and bounded along car-rails and shuttled over cross-streets the dusky-faced woman in the cab-seat made quick but careful note of every change of direction and every landmark that could impress itself on her memory. Yet that journey was not a brief one. Aurora Mary, in fact, found the buildings thinning down on either side of her, dwindling away into open lots and scattered colonies of bungalow homes. Into the narrow driveway of one of these bungalows she saw the faded old cabriolet suddenly turn, stopping close beside the umber-stained shingle walls, where Kelder as hurriedly alighted and ran into the house.

Aurora Mary motioned for her driver to keep on to the block-end, where she called for him to stop. She sat silent, as he drew up at the roadside, plotting out her next possible line of action. She went over that course so meticulously, point by point, that her impatient driver turned and inspected her.

"What next, lady?" he inquired with a glance at his taximeter.

That question, however, remained unanswered, for before Aurora Mary could speak the faded old cabriolet had once more swung out of the driveway, had taken the first turn, and was rattling off eastward.

"There goes your man," cried the startled taxi-driver.

"Follow him," was Aurora Mary's quick counter-cry. And once more the pursuit was taken up. But the occupant of the first car, in this instance, must have had some knowledge of the fact that he was being followed, for he promptly speeded up his engine and went careening onward at a rate wholly unexpected from so decrepit a vehicle. He slowed down for no crossroads, obeyed no signal-lights, and threaded his reckless way on through startled traffic. Then he turned sharply to the left, and again to the right.

When the pursuing taxicab arrived at the corner he was no longer in sight; he was hopelessly lost in a wilderness of uncharted suburban streets, a tangle of streets already gray with the gathering twilight.

"He's got away from us," proclaimed the driver, pulling frowningly up at the curb.

For a full minute Aurora Mary sat silent in her seat.

"It's all right," she finally announced as she counted out her money to pay the driver. "You did your best. And now I've got 'o go back and do mine."

The driver turned and studied her as she stepped out on the road.

"What's the game, lady, anyway?" he inquired with good-humored effrontery.

She stared at him with an abstracted eye.

"It's nothing much," she said with an embittered laugh, "except to me and Kelder." And a moment later she was off in the slowly deepening dusk, quietly but unerringly retracing her path toward the umber-shingled bungalow.

She found it, eventually, but night had fallen by the time she was back in what she regarded as her enemy's territory. Yet this in no wise disturbed her. Nor was she conscious of either weariness or hunger as she patrolled back and forth before that enigmatic small house in the midst of its empty sand-lots. She even circled about it, inquiringly, pushing her way through weeds and underbrush, studying a solitary back window from which a light suddenly shone. She could see a woman moving slowly and listlessly about a kitchen and as listlessly cross to the blind and pull it down. So the quiet-moving stalker pressed closer, until she found herself under the shadow of an umber-shingled garage within a biscuit-toss of the house-steps. She was standing there, studious and intent, formulating her line of advance, when her quick ear caught the sound of a car, followed by a sharpening grind of brakes and the sudden flare of headlights as the dark mass of a cabriolet turned into the cindered driveway.

She could see that it was Kelder, even before he stopped short before the closed garage door. She was within ten paces of him as he swung open this door. Yet her hands were steady and there was no perceptible quickening of her pulse. She watched him as he switched on an unshaded electric-bulb in the narrow cavern of darkness. And when he turned back to his car she was standing there confronting him.

"You remember me?" she quietly inquired.

His startled eyes fell from her face to her right hand, so casually yet so pregnantly hidden under the folds of her loose raglan coat.

"Sure I remember you," he as quietly acknowledged. But there was less effrontery about him, on this occasion, and his face looked haggard in the bald light from overhead. There was, too, a vigilant and estimative air about him, a look of intent appraisal touched with perplexity, as though his stunned mind was reaching out for the source of her exceptional fortitude, obviously based on powers which he could not fathom.

He even moved, experimentally, but she brought him up short. For her hidden right hand, reappearing from under the raglan, suddenly confronted his lean torso with a blue-metaled and carefully balanced revolver in its clasp.

"Back up against that wall," she commanded. And something in her voice persuaded him not to oppose that grimly delivered order. But he in no wise surrendered to panic. He plainly had his wits about him as he cast a quick glance toward the open doorway and then resumed his study of the barrel-end so close to his coat-front.

"Why in hell are you houndin' me?" he huskily complained, with a second frowning glance up into her face. And the expression of that face was not altogether to his liking.

"Where's my Martie?" she said in a sudden flat-noted intensity that brought her grimly set jaw a foot nearer his lined and colorless face.

"Your what?" he parried.

"Where's my baby?" she repeated, with a new and venomous quietness in her voice.

"What baby?" he countered, obviously fencing for time, watching for the precious moment when he could catch her off her guard. But never for a second did the leveled firearm waver or the watchful and deep-hooded eyes leave his face.

"Don't quibble," she commanded. "And don't lie to me or I'll put a bullet through your black heart as quick as I'd spit on this floor. Where's that child o' mine?"

For almost a full minute they stood there with glances locked. And a thin sweat came slowly out on the face of the man backed against the wall.

"I haven't got him," was the mutter that finally came from Kelder's tightened lips.

"Where is he?" was the coldly repeated question.

"He's back home," said Kelder, his eyes once more falling to the menacing revolver.

"What d'you mean by that?"

She noticed the vague shiver that sped through his body. She also noticed an equally vague horror in his eyes that was not altogether fear. And it disturbed her more than the thought of his treachery.

"Honest t' Gawd, lady, I took him home to-night," cried the man with the barricaded eyes.

"What home?"

"Back to the Caver house—to Westbrook," was the slightly delayed answer as the pistol-point pressed disturbingly against his lean and catlike body.

"Why?"

The furtive eyes watching her wavered and fell.

"He seemed to be kind o' sick, and I didn't want anything to happen to him on our hands."

"Sick?" echoed in a sharpened note.

The yellow-faced narrow head nodded in assent.

"Yeah. He seemed to have trouble in swallowin' this mornin' and my wife got scared. She called me up at the garage and when I got out here I got on the wire and talked to Miss Caver. That's Joan Caver. She told me to bring the child straight back to Westbrook. I—I tried to tell her she was takin' a big chance, for it smelt—well, honest to Gawd, it smelt like diphtheria to me. She said she was willin' to take chances, but she couldn't and wouldn't lose that child. She's got 'im out there now, with the best doctor on Long Island with her, doin' everything she can. And she's damn' near crazy over it all."

The opaque hard eyes compelled his glance.

"D'you mean he's dyin'?" demanded the tight-lipped Aurora Mary.

"Naw, he ain't dyin'," contended the flaccid-faced Kelder. "He's a sick kid, o' course, but he's gettin' the best o' care and

in two or three days he'll be——"

But her mind, at the moment, was not on his words.

"Get in that car," she suddenly demanded.

"But first I got 'o——"

"Get in that car," repeated the woman with the disturbingly glowing eyes.

"Where we goin'?" parried Kelder, with a glance down at the revolver.

"We're goin' straight to Westbrook," was the answer as she followed him, step by step, to the car-door. "And as God's above us you'll get a bullet through your ribs at the first move that ain't a straight one. Go ahead!"

If he hesitated, it was only for a moment. For she was still close at his side, guarded and watchful, every step and every move. And never once was that ominous and ugly-looking weapon out of her hand. She was beside him, coldly vigilant, as he backed out of the narrow cindered drive and turned about in the roadway, as he started forward and gathered speed and turned eastward again and went throbbing and rattling through the sparsely-lighted suburban streets, until they faced the emptier loneliness of the open country. She sat rigid and watchful, speaking to him only when he hesitated at an uncertain corner and once again when for reasons of his own he let his engine lag a trifle.

"Go faster," she peremptorily commanded.

"The old boat's gettin' hot," he complained.

"I don't care if she blows up," retorted the other. "But get me to Westbrook and get me there quick."

She could detect an increasing tension in his poise and movements, but she soon realized, from a familiar landmark or two on either side of the road, that he was headed in the right direction.

"Remember," he belatedly expostulated as he turned in through the great pillared gateway, "I ain't responsible for all this."

She essayed no response to that. Her eyes and her thoughts, at the moment, were on the distant lights of the house. A car passed her in the driveway and into a second car, as they drew nearer the illuminated porte-cochère, she could see a bearded man step with a small black bag in his hand.

She watched that car, frowningly, as it melted away in the darkness. But her manner was oddly restrained as, before the wide-stepped doorway, she ordered the man beside her to precede her out of the faded old cabriolet with the steaming engine.

"Ring the bell," she quietly commanded.

He drew back, ill at ease, and turned to her as though to make some final explanation or expostulation. But before he could speak the door swung open and Aurora Mary could see a young woman with a handkerchief held up to her face. She thought, at first, that it was Joan Caver. But she saw, at a second glance, that it was Betty Wilder who was stepping slowly and somewhat gropingly out toward her. She was crying as she came, crying quietly yet continuously. It wasn't, in fact, until she was assured of Aurora Mary's identity that she made a final and frantic effort to control herself.

Aurora Mary, as she backed away, was thinking more of Kelder than of the other woman with the foolishly tear-stained face.

"My dear, my dear, you must be brave," Betty Wilder was saying in an oddly thickened voice. And she moved toward the wide-eyed Aurora Mary with a gesture of the hands that was almost implorative.

"What's happened?" asked the woman with the ridiculous big revolver still in her hand.

"Oh, I can't tell her," gasped Betty, with a hand-movement of helplessness. "You'll have to tell her."

It was then, and then only, that Aurora Mary realized Allan Somer was standing in the doorway. His face was

unnaturally stern and white as he moved slowly down the wide steps. He looked oddly shrunken and bloodless and prematurely aged. But his movements were resolute as he crossed to the waiting woman with the luminous eyes.

"Will you promise to be brave?" he asked with the same half-imploring note that she had detected in her earlier questioner.

"About what?" was her suddenly sharpened query, unconscious of the hand he was reaching out to her, as though to sustain her in her moment of weakness.

"It's—it's Martie," was his tremulous answer.

She knew then, without further recourse to words. It came home to her in a flash, with the flat abruptness of a bullet. She could read the news in Betty Wilder's contorted face, in Allan Somer's eyes shadowed with pity and misery, in the gaping and vapid mouth of Sam Kelder, who had shrunk back against the faded paneling of his car.

"He's dead?"

She said it quietly, but she could feel the icy currents of hopelessness that coursed through her body and the accumulating sharp ache that pushed like a spear-head through her heart. She was scarcely conscious of Allan Somer's action as he moved his head slowly up and down in assent. She merely felt a great anger boil up through her chilled body, a primitive rage at deprivations too vast to be endured, at injustices too gross to be overlooked. And her fury, at the moment, centered itself on the shrinking Kelder.

"Damn you, you did this!" she cried out as she swung about on him.

"No, no," gasped Somer, trying to intercept her. But she evaded him.

"You did this!" she repeated with low and throaty intentness. She did not attempt to push forward, to bear down on him. But with the promptness of the trained marksman she swung her right hand up, took deliberate aim with her foolish big revolver, and pulled the trigger.

Somer at the same moment swung his half outstretched arm sharply upward, striking the heavy metal weapon. He struck it at the exact moment of its detonation, jerking up the barrel sufficiently to send the diverted bullet crashing through the cabriolet top. And he had seized her, before she could repeat the movement, and wrested the weapon out of her suddenly flaccid and shaken fingers. She was weeping bitterly, in fact, as he held her up and drew her in through the still open house-door.

"Hate gets us nowhere," he reminded her. He tried to speak sternly, but there was a suspicion of a tremor about his lips. Before he had complete control of himself, however, Betty Wilder had pushed him almost bruskiy aside.

"Leave her with me," she said as her arms clasped possessively about the bowed dark head of her lost pupil. And Somer, conscious of a devastating new inadequacy, turned and walked slowly away.

CHAPTER XV

It was three weeks later that Betty Wilder kept a twice-broken promise to have luncheon with Allan Somer at the Crillon. And she looked up with an abstracted eye when Somer somewhat laboriously thanked her for coming.

"You wanted to ask me about Aurora Mary," she said, without further evasion.

"Yes, I wanted to ask you about Mary," conceded the other, with a none too happy light on his face.

"Well, I can at least report progress," announced the quiet-eyed lady across the table from him. "I can't really say she is less unhappy, but she seems less restless. You naturally can't face a thing like that and forget it overnight. It was a knock-down, of course. It was more or less a knock-down for all of us. But there's good stuff in that girl. She consumes her own smoke. On the whole, I'd say she was made of tougher fiber than most of us."

"Is she lonely out there?" asked Somer, with an ineffectual effort at casualness.

"Not so much lonely," was the answer, "as unsettled. And I'm trying to cure that by doing my best to get her back to her studying. But she seems quieter and more self-contained and it's hard to say what's going on behind that dusky frontal bone of hers. She never even refers to Martie's death any more. It seems almost like a closed book to her."

Somer sat silent a moment.

"Things like that are never a closed book," he finally averred. "Especially with a woman of Aurora Mary's make-up."

"Yes, it's rather awful to have a hunger to love something and then have it taken away from you."

"Is she going back to Trail-End?" Somer asked out of his second silence.

"I'm not sure," was Betty's slightly delayed reply. "I think she's waiting for something."

"Waiting for what?"

"To see you, I imagine," was the frank reply.

"But she refused to see me."

"Well, it's woman's inalienable privilege to change her mind now and then. And she's probably thinking more about you, Allan Somer, than you could possibly deserve."

That statement, however, altogether failed to add to his happiness.

"I rather imagine she hates me," he confessed. "She couldn't help hating me."

"Has she ever told you so?" demanded Betty. "That type of woman, remember, is dangerously apt to tell the truth."

"You feel she would always be truthful?"

"Why shouldn't she?"

Somer sat, for a moment, deep in thought.

"Yes, why shouldn't she?" he conceded. "Yet there's something about that same young woman I can't quite fathom."

"It's the primitive that's always more complex to us," acknowledged Betty. "But there's nothing very mysterious about Mary. Life has cheated her, and she's nursing a human enough hunger to make up for those earlier losses. She's young and vital and eager for living, but she's never learned where and how to find it."

"I can't say we've helped her much."

"The time for that may come later on."

Somer, apparently, harvested no personal application from this impersonal statement.

"It's not her future that puzzles me," he finally confessed. "It's her past that I keep scraping keel on. It seems so incompatible with her character. It doesn't seem to scan, if you get what I mean. But I'm going to dig to the bottom of that, if it takes me the rest of my natural life."

Betty's smile was a somewhat enigmatic one.

"That," she proclaimed, "should prove a singularly pleasant pastime, studying the nature of a singularly attractive young woman. Even John Caver seems to find it rather interesting. He's been keeping Westbrook open, of course, just for her convenience. And he's been coming out at least twice a week and trying to cheer her up. He bought snowshoes, last week after that five-inch snowfall, and the two of them went trudging around the park lawns pretending they were trail-breaking in Ontario."

She wondered, when she came to a stop, why Somer's face should cloud so perceptibly. If a wound was there, she decided to probe it.

"Mr. Caver was saying that Joan is feeling much better."

"Yes; she called me up on long-distance last night. She's coming back to the city to-morrow."

Betty's face hardened.

"For her winter's amusement?"

Somer's brow puckered at the unexpected acidity of that question.

"She really felt worse over all this than you imagine."

"Don't you think she deserved to?"

Somer's shrug was a dismissive one.

"Let's not harp back to that horror," he cried, estranged from his habitual calm. And the watchful Betty was not ignorant of the Indian-summer sort of misery shadowing his face.

"Would you mind telling me," she abruptly inquired, "just why you want to talk to Mary?"

"That," he responded, "is not an easy question to answer."

"But you must have some knowledge as to whether it's for her eventual happiness or your own."

Somer's smile was a restricted one.

"I'm afraid I'll have to be selfish enough to say that it's for my own."

Betty's prolonged study of his face was a cogitative one.

"Then I'll have to tell you," she averred, "that I've grown very fond of this girl. And I intend to fight for her future as much as any of the rest of you."

"Are you sincere in that?" he demanded, the mask suddenly gone from his face.

"Absolutely," was the prompt reply.

"Then you'll be doing her the greatest possible kindness," he proclaimed, "you'll be doing us both the greatest possible kindness, if you'll persuade her to see me."

"When?" asked the thoughtful-eyed Betty as she reached for her gloves.

"Whenever she is willing. But I must be alone with her, remember, when we talk together."

The bird-like Miss Wilder hesitated, however, before that newer sternness in his voice.

"There's something else," she ventured with an answering solemnity, "that we both ought to remember. You must bear in

mind, no matter what your own feelings are, that Mary stands at a very critical point in her career. She's at the crossroads of all her life. She's on the Great Divide where, at any moment, one decisive step can carry her half a world east or half a world west. And I'll never forgive you, Allan Somer, if anything you say or do should drive her to a wrong decision."

Their glances locked, for a moment of silence.

"It's to prevent wrong decisions," he finally averred, "that I'm asking this favor."

CHAPTER XVI

Two days later, when Somer sat in the oppressively spacious library at Westbrook, waiting for Aurora Mary to come down, he was conscious of a conflict of feelings that left him with an unwelcome sense of strain. For in that encounter, after all, were involved issues more extensive than he was willing to admit. The mere thought of them even drove him to pacing impatiently back and forth as he waited for the door to open and the familiar cloudy eyes to interrogate his own, as they would be sure to do. But she was taking her time, he observed, about making her appearance. And he wondered, as he resumed his pacing, if that should be interpreted as a signal of apprehension or a betrayal of opposition. Yet nothing, he grimly determined, would divert him from this wretchedly final task of tracking down the truth.

Then he stopped, in his restless turn about the room, before a Florentine writing-table where his own photograph stood in its heavy frame, his own half-smiling and hopelessly self-satisfied face above the military-looking and high-collared jacket of white duck he had worn at Managua and La Hacha. He had given that picture to Joan, two summers ago, two summers ago when life had seemed much simpler and more conquerable and he had prided himself on his ability to meet all emergencies as they came. But time brought its changes. And life wasn't as simple as men in their hours of worldly conquest imagine.

The afterglow of that paling thought was still in his mind as he heard the door open. It vanished, like tropical light, as he swung about to see Aurora Mary standing arrested under the heavily-fluted lintel.

She was in a tailored gown of dark cloth, oddly uncomplicated in line and fold, and it made her look both paler and frailer than he had expected. Her eyes, exceptionally clear and at the same time shadowed, remained on his face as she reached out and closed the door behind her. And it came home to him, with a renewed sense of misery, that she was an incontestably beautiful woman.

"You wanted to see me?" she said, still standing close to the door.

He did not answer that question as he advanced slowly toward her. She was making, he saw, no move to meet him half-way. And he wondered, in his passionate hunger for signs and portents, as to the inner meaning of that aloofness.

"Are you feeling better?" he asked in a gentler tone than he had intended.

"I'm all right," was her unparticipating reply. And its brusqueness made his thoughts go back, at a bound, to Trail-End Camp. It carried the tone of the frontier.

"Would you mind," he said as he placed a high-backed Italian chair for her, facing the light, "having me talk to you for a few minutes?"

"About what?" she questioned as she crossed slowly to the waiting chair. And Somer shifted his own chair along the dark-wooded table so as to be more directly before her.

"About Trail-End, to begin with. It may surprise you to learn that I've just bought that camp from John Caver."

He had the satisfaction of seeing astonishment, and something more than astonishment, on her face.

"Have you been up there?" was her abrupt inquiry.

He smiled at that but quickly sobered again.

"Not since we were there together," was his quietly abstracted answer. And her hands moved restlessly in her lap before she spoke again.

"Why did you buy it?"

"For one thing, Caver said it had too many unpleasant memories. And when he gave me to understand that he wanted to get rid of it I very promptly took it off his hands."

"I see." But her eyes remained impenetrable.

"Now, would you mind telling me, Mrs. Moyne"—and she looked up sharply at that appellative—"why those memories

should be so unpleasant?"

She met his gaze squarely.

"Why not ask Mr. Caver?"

"Perhaps I have," he conceded.

"Then why bother to pry into my personal affairs?" she questioned, with her first touch of open hostility.

"Are you averse to answering a few simple questions?" he asked in a slightly sharpened voice.

"Of course not." And the mute appeal of her uplifted eyes made him regret his asperity of a moment before.

"And you'll remember I'm asking them out of something more than mere curiosity, out of something quite opposed to any wish to make you unhappy?"

She smiled at that, a trifle wintrily.

"This sounds rather like a court-room scene," she ventured as she frowned against the light beating on her face. "But why are you asking them?"

"Because there's something that has got to be put straight between you and me, Mary Moyne. It simply can't go on like this. And the sooner it's cleared up the better for both of us."

"I didn't know," she said with a defensive wintriness of tone, "that our trails were so tangled up together."

If he winced, at that, it was only for a moment. And a humbler light was in his eyes as he turned back to her.

"I'm afraid we're not getting off to a very good start. And you're right in implying I haven't either the privilege or the power to cross-examine you. But I *do* want to lay a ghost or two that keeps stalking between us."

"I'm afraid I don't quite understand," she ventured out of the silence following that proclamation.

"Then let's begin with Martie," he said with an achieved quietness of tone. But she looked up sharply, for the second time, and he could see that her pallor had increased.

"Can't we let the dead sleep in peace?" was her reproving cry. And it held him for a moment, frowning down at the Clytie in gold on the table-end.

"We can't interfere with the dead," he acknowledged. "But it's the living we've got to think of at a time like this."

She moved in her chair, but met his gaze without reservation.

"What is it you wish to ask?" she quietly inquired.

He paused for a moment, as though pondering two possible lines of action.

"Would you mind telling me how old Martie might have been?" he asked with a newer gentleness in his voice. It brought her eyes back to his face, but her expression remained an emotionless one.

"If he were alive to-day?" she questioned. And he nodded.

"Between five and six months old."

"When was he born?"

She frowned over this, looking down at her hands.

"The second week in June," she finally answered.

"Do you know the exact date?"

"I can't be sure. I—I wasn't thinking much about dates just then."

"Of course not," he conceded. "But you can tell me where he was born?"

"In the main lodge at Trail-End."

"Who was there at the time?"

Still again he could detect the habitual pucker of the dusky brow.

"Would you mind drawing that curtain a little?" she asked. "The strong light rather bothers me."

He got up from his chair and crossed to the window and did as she asked, without speaking. Then he reseated himself.

"Who was there at the time?" he repeated.

"Kippewa Kate was there, and Indian Joe, and a Chippewa 'breed known as Faubert."

"I mean with you at the actual *accouchment*—at the birth of the baby?"

"I had Kippewa Kate to help me. She had done that sort of thing quite often, in different camps up there."

A crinkling of nerve-ends, brief and vague, sped through his body as he sat obviously picturing a scene that brought a touch of horror to his heart. But, a moment later, he was himself again.

"Was anybody in camp at that time?" he continued with a resumption of his earlier impersonal note.

"No."

"Was John Caver there?" he abruptly demanded.

"Of course not." And he frowned over that, for something in her voice compelled him to believe her.

"Was Joan Caver there?"

"No."

She stooped, as she spoke, to pick up the petal of a tea-rose that had fallen from the vivid-colored flower-cluster in the table-end vase.

"And you had no doctor?"

She could afford to smile, almost pityingly, at his continued blind gropings.

"You seem to forget that Trail-End is pretty well up in the wilderness. The nearest doctor would be at least a hundred and thirty miles away."

"Was that birth registered?"

"How do you mean 'registered'?" she asked, plainly puzzled.

"It's a rule of every civilized country to keep a record of its vital statistics, its births and deaths—and also its marriages."

She smiled a trifle wanly.

"Then we can't be very civilized up in my country, for I know of a good many births where the parents didn't bother much about such things."

His deepening frown relaxed at her use of the word "parents." He held her glance for a moment before putting the next question.

"Where was the child's father at the time?"

"I don't know," she said. But Somer was not unconscious of the shadow that overswept her face.

"Who was his father?"

She waited her time, but her eyes did not waver.

"I must decline to answer that," was her quiet reply.

"Do you *know* who was the father of this child?" he flung out at her. But still she kept herself well under control.

"I regard that question as insulting."

He colored a little, before her quietness.

"Of course," he conceded. "And I'm going to withdraw it. But would it be fair for me to ask if you were married to this man, to the father of your child?"

Her eyes were once more impenetrable.

"It might be fair enough to ask it, but it wouldn't do you much good."

"Because you'd refuse to answer?"

"I'd refuse to answer."

He sat silent a moment, meagerly triumphant.

"Then I assume my question is already answered," he said as he swung back to her.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that if you were openly and honorably married there'd be no need to conceal the fact."

She essayed no immediate answer to that. But she surprised him by rising slowly to her feet. Her color had come back and he could see the fires of hostility burning luminous in her eyes.

"Why am I being put in a witness-box like this?" she demanded.

"You are not in a witness-box," he contended. "But I was hoping you would help me out of a very great difficulty. I really wanted to be in a position to protect you, when the occasion arose."

"By parading my past mistakes before the world!" was her embittered comment.

"No, by knowing what that mistake was," he corrected.

She seemed surer of herself by this time.

"Then why didn't you go up to that new camp of yours and sleuth down the facts you're so in need of?" she indignantly demanded.

"That, I'm afraid, would seem too much like snooping."

"Then what do you call *this*?"

Somer shook his head, almost wearily.

"This isn't getting us anywhere," he pointed out with achieved patience. "And it isn't quite fair. I've tried to be a friend of yours, Mary, I've——"

"Do you call *this* friendship?" was her quick inquiry.

"No," he said as he turned away. "It's more like surgery. It's like cutting out something tainted and corrupted, something that can't keep on eating away the happiness of more lives than your own. And I intend to do it, whether you help me or not."

She sank back in her chair, bewildered by the newer sternness that showed on his face.

"What do you want me to do?" she asked, almost listlessly.

"Simply answer a question or two—and help me out of this hell of perplexity. Could you do that for my sake, if not for your own?"

"What d'you want to know?" she inquired, still façaded behind her frown of obduracy.

"Does Joan know who Martie's father is?"

She had not braced herself, apparently, for that; and it struck with a sense of shock.

"Why should she?" countered the frowning Aurora Mary.

"Why shouldn't she?" he cried. "She was there at Trail-End when this child was born; she was there when——"

"No, no; you're mistaken there. I told you she wasn't at Trail-End when this child was born."

He brooded over this for a dark moment or two.

"You said Martie was born during the second week in June?" he resumed, speaking slowly and distinctly.

"Yes; it was the eleventh of June. I'm quite sure of that."

"And Joan was not there?"

"I've already told you twice she wasn't there," repeated the girl in the high-backed chair. "What are you trying to trap me into?"

Somer's face hardened as he swung about on her.

"I'm not trying to trap you into anything. I'm not doing it, for the simple reason that you've already trapped yourself. I mean by this that you haven't told the truth. I know, from Joan's own letter to me, that she left New York for Trail-End on the twenty-first of May. I know that she was at Trail-End on the twenty-fourth. And I know that she remained there until the day before Indian Joe met me at Duck Landing in September. Why have you lied about it?"

She looked at him out of obdurate but unhumiliated eyes. She faced him with a gaze that was both embittered and uncapitulating. He seemed, of a sudden, very remote from her, remote and meager and inconsequential.

"Why have you lied?" he repeated with an intensity that sent a horripilation of nerve-ends through her tired body.

But she faced him without flinching, immured in her shell of obduracy. She sat cradled in her unassailable silence, watching the threat, the almost foolish threat, of his indignation. And they were still sitting there, futilely combative, confronting each other with colorless faces, when the door unexpectedly opened and Joan Caver stood on its threshold, staring in at them.

She was in voluminous dark furs that accentuated the pallor of her thin and close-chiseled face. About her poised figure was a sense of glitter, not entirely due to the burnished metal that shone from her hat-buckle and bracelets and throw-clasp sparkling with glacier-tinted emeralds. But her smile was resolute as she studied the two arrested figures, one of which she altogether ignored when she spoke.

"Could I see you for a minute or two, Allan?" she quietly inquired.

Somer rose slowly and abstractedly to his feet, not unlike a man too abruptly awakened. His glance, as he looked at her, was unparticipating.

"If you don't mind waiting a little," he said with a gesture not far from one of irritation.

"But it's rather important," proclaimed Joan as she advanced with a cool determination all her own into the room. She even smiled with mock-approval as Aurora Mary rose slowly from her chair, intently studying as she did so, the barricaded small face between its enfolding furs. And the three of them stood silent, for a full moment, a triangle of arrested and unpredictable emotions.

It was Somer who was the first to speak. His voice, as he did so, was unexpectedly hard.

"This," he said with a gesture that included the cloudy-eyed woman by the armchair, "is equally important."

Joan's laugh was brief and mirthless.

"I'm sorry, of course, to interrupt your confidences. But they may not appear so important after I've said what I came here to say."

Somer's face, as he turned to her, lost none of its austerity.

"Is it anything that can't be said before her?" he demanded with a movement toward Aurora Mary.

Joan's repeated laugh was again mirthless and a trifle meretricious.

"No," was her cool-noted response. "Your wolf woman may as well be in on the news. I'm sorry to take her pedestal away from her, but I'm a little tired of all this play-acting. And things can't go on like this much longer."

"What are you talking about?" asked Somer, puzzled by the slowly rising note of passion from the girl in the engulfing dark furs.

"I'm talking about Martie," she said with deliberated slowness, "and the fact that I happen to be his mother."

Somer, without speaking, reached for the chair-arm behind him and sank slowly down, clinging to that arm as a stunned prize-fighter clings to a ring-rope. And his eyes shone dark from his colorless face as he studied the equally colorless face of the girl confronting him.

"Then you——" he began and as abruptly broke off again.

Joan could see the vague shudder that went through his body. She even took a deep breath, as though bracing herself against the seismic forces that gave birth to his movement of horror.

"It sounds rather dreadful, doesn't it?" she said with a forlorn lightness of tone that still had a quaver in it. "Instead of a spot on my lungs, I merely had a peach-stain on my reputation, you see."

She sobered, suddenly, before the accumulating abhorrence on his face. There was a new throatiness in her voice as she flung aside her shielding flippancies and turned back to him.

"I told you, Allan, that you should never have gone away, that you should never have left me. I told you I needed you, terribly—and I seem to have been right. It was Ronnie Atwater. We——But what's the use of going into that now?"

She came to a stop, slowly unbuttoning the heavy dark coat, unbuttoning it with fingers that shook a little as they moved above the luxuriously enveloping black fur.

Neither of them, in that moment of soul nakedness, glanced once at the quiescent Aurora Mary, who sat back in her chair with eyes so narrowed they looked half closed.

"No," Somer was saying in an oddly deadened and impersonal tone, "I can't see that even that makes much difference. It doesn't seem to change anything. It doesn't *explain* anything."

"Explain what?" demanded Joan, startled by the granitic lines of his face.

"The appalling fact that you didn't and couldn't love your own child," was his ominously quiet reply.

"If it had been *yours*," cried Joan, reckless-eyed, "I might have."

"But it was yours," he persisted, unmoved by that final plea. His gaze turned, for the first time, in the direction of Aurora Mary. "What I can't understand is all this—this deception. Great God, what a tissue of lies!"

Joan shrugged, with a forlorn smile flickering about her thin lips.

"You should feel flattered," she quietly averred, "that we worked so hard for you."

He winced at that, as though it were a whip-lash in his face.

"I'm not thinking about myself," he contended. "I'm trying to understand how a woman, a civilized woman, could do a thing like this and ever hope to justify herself. I simply can't fathom it."

He was scarcely conscious of her movement as she slowly and deliberately took the ring from the third finger of her left hand and placed it on the dark-wooded table.

"Then about all I can say, Allan, is that you'll have to be more of a realist. You'll have to learn to take women as they are and not as you'd like them to be. For you're rather old-fashioned, in that respect."

She said it lightly enough, but in her voice as she spoke was an exceptional note of wistfulness.

"Is that all you have to say," he grimly exacted, "at a time like this?"

"There's only one other thing that seems worth remembering," she half wearily replied. "I loved you."

"But you couldn't even trust me?" he said with a quick and unaccountable flush.

"Aren't you proving I couldn't afford that luxury?" she asked, smiling a little at his incomprehension. "And aren't you forgetting that you had a hand in this rather awful mess? It may not matter much now, but Martie might have been alive to-day if you and father hadn't sent him in to the city, if you hadn't tried to hide him away"—and she showed by her quick and contemptuous glance at Aurora Mary how she was still conscious of that third figure's presence before them—"just to hold this woman here where you wanted her."

He recoiled, apparently more at the scorn in the "this woman" than at the charge in general, embittered as the voice making it had gradually become. And he must have become more acutely conscious of Aurora Mary's presence there, for he not only turned and stared at her, but continued to stare at her with a slow hardening of his already harried eyes. Even Joan, harvesting the significance of that glance, knew better than to move.

"What am I to do?" he asked in a singularly helpless voice. And the girl confronting him seemed to gain confidence from his lack of confidence. Her quick glance at Aurora Mary's face and her equally quick garnering of what she saw written there seemed to contribute still further to her assurance of some final escape, if not some final victory. She could even afford to make her gesture, as she smilingly drew on her glove, a valedictory one.

"You'll have to do," Joan said in a voice slightly huskier than before, "just what you had to do from the first. You'll have to choose between me and your wolf woman from Trail-End."

"Wait," cried Somer, conscious of her quick movement toward the door. But she refused to wait. She did not turn or speak, in fact, until she once more stood under the fluted lintel.

"I'm sorry, Allan," she flung back at him, "but you'll simply have to pick your liar!" And with that she turned and hurried away. A moment later they could hear the whine and purr of her engine and the diminuendo grind of her flying tires on the driveway gravel.

CHAPTER XVII

Allan Somer sat stunned as he heard the sound of Joan's car die away along the winding drive bordered by its denuded shrubbery. And he felt equally denuded as he sat there struggling to reorganize a world suddenly fallen into chaos. He even seemed oblivious, at first, of the woman in the high-backed Italian chair.

But Aurora Mary's movement, as she rose to her feet, brought his preoccupied glance sluing slowly about to her face. His jaw hardened as he stared at her. It hardened so perceptibly that an answering hostility broke through the listless weariness of her eyes as she stood meeting that unrelenting long stare.

"You're a good actress," he said with a new and unlooked for bitterness. To that, however, Aurora Mary ventured no response. She merely stood studying him, studying him with slightly commiserative eyes which in no way added to his happiness. Her very silence, in fact, seemed to goad him on to a new extremity of unrestraint.

"It must have been hard!" he cried, surrendering to an incendiary note of mockery.

"What?" was her curt inquiry.

"Keeping up a rôle so long," he as curtly responded. "Playing both ends against the middle and fooling us to the finish."

Still again she chose silence, knowing as she did that reason had small place in that tumbling flume-way of revolt.

"And now I hope you're satisfied," he cried out of the corroding mental misery that left him untouched by the momentary humility in her eyes. It was no time for finesse and fine phrases. And he had no intention, in that mood of savage disillusionment, to throw pearls before swine. A wayward exasperation even crept through him at the discovery that he was unable to hurt her as he had intended.

"I'm sorry this happened," she was able to say in a singularly quiet and collected voice. For she had been through too much, that day, to experience any sustained emotional response to his scorn. She felt strangely denuded and blackened and scarred, like pinelands over which a forest-fire had swept.

"Isn't it what you wanted?" he was cruel enough to demand, hardening, man-like before her promise of impassivity. Yet she was anything but impassive. For she, too, had been silently accumulating her reserves of bitterness.

"No, it's not what I wanted," she answered, her voice unnaturally low. He was disappointing her, bitterly. He was emerging from his hilltop glamour into mere man. And she had been blind enough to expect better things of him.

"How am I to know that's not another lie?" he challenged, surrendering to the tug of his slowly reviving passion.

She persisted in her effort to remain calm. He was not himself; allowances, she inwardly repeated, had to be made for him.

"Why should it be a lie?" she questioned.

"For the simple reason, I suppose, that once a liar as a rule means always a liar," he said with a wearied bitterness that brought a red light dancing before her eyes. "And all that rescue stuff," he went on with eviscerating scorn, "all that poppycock about saving John Caver from a watery grave—that's another sheaf in your harvest of lies. You never saved Caver any more than you saved me. And you know it. It was only another leaf on your buried trap-jaws, the jaws you set and waited for me to step into."

She turned slowly toward him and as slowly crossed over to where he stood. She was no longer lovely, with that grim hardening of her full-lipped mouth and that unnatural glow in the eyes that stood out in the unnaturally pallid face. But she still kept a grip on herself.

"Is that your idea of me?" she asked with a note of forbearance that made him laugh. And that abrupt harsh laugh of derision brought a slow flush to her face.

"A liar?" he abandonedly repeated. "You're worse than a mere liar. And I could even forgive that, if all your lying hadn't been to trick and dupe *me*. I might overlook your being an accomplice to all this rotten double-dealing if I could forget it wasn't aimed at *me*. But I was the goat. You made yourself a living lie to me from the moment I clapped eyes on you.

You were ready and willing to hamstring me for life, to tie me up in the meanest trap that a man of honor could face. You were ready, for your own selfish ends, to build up a deadfall up there in your wilderness camp, and I was to be the poor pawing brute you were willing to see crushed under that mass of deceit. You hadn't even the pride to keep your own name clean."

"I loved Martie," she said with a simple-minded wistfulness that brought a sound from his throat dangerously close to a snort.

"Loved Martie?" he mocked, still in the blinding clutch of his self-pity. "You mean you needed another woman's child to feather your nest, to reach your own carefully thought out ends. And you stooped to a cold-blooded bargain in deceit that's cheapened and tainted even the people I've wanted to respect."

"Then how about Joan?" she was primitive enough to demand.

He looked at her with an entirely new scorn in his eyes.

"Yes, it would be like you," he all but barked, "to drag Joan Caver back into it! But she at least took off the mask. And if she used the privileges of one class to shelter the customs of another, it doesn't in any way excuse *you*. It still leaves you an accomplice to all this rotten double-dealing, a cold-blooded and calculating accomplice who was willing to soil her own name and revel in bastardy, provided she was paid the price. And for the woman who does that there is only one name."

"One name?" she echoed, her squared underlip quivering like a hurt child's.

"Yes, one name," he repeated, his face now paper-white with passion. And he flung the abhorrent word at her in all its uncompromising Anglo-Saxon brutality.

Her reaction to that epithet was unreasoned and instinctive. The dykes of forbearance could no longer hold back the sullenly accumulated floods behind them. She struck him squarely and soundly on the face with her clenched hand.

And his first feeling, as the knowledge of that blow was telegraphed back to his brain, was one of neither resentment nor rage. He almost welcomed it. It seemed a vindication of all his earlier violence, a proof that savagery could be met only with savagery. But before he could articulate that feeling to his own satisfaction, the blow was repeated. It was repeated with unexpected promptness and vigor, jarring his bony frame from head to heels and stunning him a little with the weight of muscle and sinew behind it.

But behind the actual pain that shot through his body was still a half-amused tolerance at the thought of her ineffectual resort to force. She was only a woman; and no woman had a right to expect victory from any combat degraded to mere physical assault. They weren't built for such things. Yet her clenched and firm-corded fist, as it struck for the third time, came into stinging contact with his lip, and he was conscious of the disturbing taste of blood in his mouth. It was about time, he concluded, that the one-sided farce should end.

"Will you take that back?" she was gasping as she leaned toward him with blind fury on her face. He caught at her upraised arm, for his predominating feeling was still merely to defend himself from a tiger-cat in petticoats suddenly given over to madness. But she was too quick for him. The upraised arm circled and fore-shortened and the tightened knuckles on the end of it came into violent collision with his slightly relaxed jaw-bone, throwing his head up and back and exposing a throat into which she sank a hammer-like left hand that made breathing a matter of pain.

"Will you take that back?" she repeated, pressing in on him as he fell back, step by step, for the purpose of catching his breath again.

"Why should I?" he challenged, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. It came away red, and the sight of his own blood maculating cuff and hand-back brought an animalizing tingle of anger through his body.

He no longer retreated, but stood his ground and waited for her next blow, which he parried with his extended arm. He caught her by the throat, with that arm still extended, and thrust her determinedly back until she was bent over the heavy table-edge. His clasp was loose, and he had no intention of choking her, for there was still some shred of chivalry in his restricted efforts to protect his own person. There was even a trace of masculine condescension in his mirthless smile as they stood face to face. He could still gaze at her with the slightly pitying tolerance of the lordlier male for the female

who stood below him in stature and strength.

But that one-sided smile of his seemed to lash her into a new fury, for she suddenly writhed and twisted away from his grasp, bringing her dark bobbed head violently against the ledge of his chin-bone and throwing him off a balance already precarious. So he fell away from her for the second time, intent now on eluding the blows which she was flailing out at him. He fended off those blows as best he could, still without the heart really to strike back at her.

But deference, he saw, could go too far. And flesh could stand only so much of this flailing fury. So he watched her with a narrowed eye and as she once more swung at his face and fell short he straightened his arms against her heaving shoulders, clutched them, and thrust her back with all the force that he could command. It sent her staggering and falling over a teakwood tabouret burdened with a small litter of Moorish bronzes. These fell clattering about her with a cacophonous crash as they went down together.

But she was on her feet again with catlike and incredible quickness. That fall, obviously, had increased her anger, for her spring toward him was like the spring of a catamount. He could see, by the flare from her eyes, that she had gone berserk, that she was no longer in control of herself, that she was, to all practical purposes, a mad-woman. And from a mad-woman it was his plain and natural duty to protect himself. So there was no longer the old forbearing look on his face as he watched her, every move and every moment, parrying her blows with his lean long arms. And when he saw his chance he let one long arm encircle her body, pinning her flailing hands close to her side. Then he shifted his clasp to her shoulders, lifting her clear of the floor and shaking her, in his contemptuous rage, as a terrier shakes a rag. He shook her until her teeth clicked together, shook her humiliatingly, shook her until she gasped with an ignominious new helplessness. And when she sagged in his clutch, dazed and helpless, he flung her away from him. He flung her off with all his force, as though half ashamed of what he had done to her, as though some newer mood of revulsion prompted him to be rid of her and her termagancy for all time. He sent her catapulting against a Gothic side-chair, a delicate structure of carved mahogany with finely canaliculated uprights supporting its open fan-back, with serpentine crowning-rails and voluted ears and cabriole legs carved at the knees with scrolling acanthus leafage and terminating in ball-and-claw feet. It was a chair suggestive of richness and retreat, of quietude and peace, as was so much of the furniture in that capacious and crowded room with its prevailing mellow tones and its clustered mementoes from the far corners of the world. But it was not made for the usages now confronting it, and it crushed and crumpled together under the weight of the body hurled so forcefully against it.

Somer thought, at first, that the woman was stunned by her fall, that his way was clear for escape from that absurd and odious conflict. But her tardiness in rising to her feet, he soon saw, was due to a clear-cut device of her own. For her outstretched hand, as she lay there, was wrenching free from the mass of splintered mahogany one of the cabriole fore-legs with the acanthus-leafage carving at its knee. Before his dazed mind could determine any possible use for any such fragment of furniture, she was on her feet again. And he was no longer in doubt as to her intent in possessing herself of that curved and polished club. It was meant for him.

He remembered, even as he saw the free back-swing of her rounded arm, how he had watched her wield a wood-ax, as they once fought a forest-fire together up beyond Trail-End Camp, how he had marveled at the power and precision of her strokes. And she had lost none of that power, he found, for her first blow would surely have cracked his skull had he not flung up a shielding arm and taken the force of it on a wrist-bone that burned with quick arrows of pain. She even struck a second blow, before he could close in on her, a blow that fell obliquely on his moist forehead and made him realize that she was indeed no longer to be trifled with. He lunged at her, with a guttural cry of anger, caught the chair-leg as she swung it back, and with an entirely new savagery in his movements twisted it from her grasp. But even as he tossed the weapon over his shoulder, to a far corner of the room, she was clawing and tearing at his throat. He could hear the rend of linen as his collar and shirt-front ripped away. And her chair-leg must have cut a small vein in his temple, for the blood was now running down his face, half-blinding him, staining his neck and wetting his sagging coat-collar and making him rather horrible to look at.

But this in no way deterred his opponent. It seemed, in fact, to add to her fighting fury, to paganize her and carry her completely back to barbarity. She was beating at his face and breast with her open hands, breathing in quick gasps, her canine white teeth showing almost wolf-like between her panting lips. And he could see a stain of blood, either hers or his own, on the straining white column of her throat.

"The wolf woman!" he gasped aloud, contemptuously, as she clutched at him with her left hand and struck at his face with her right hand, once more clenched tight.

"Take back your dirty lie!" she mumbled as she swung about and struck still again. And Somer's jaw tightened with a newer desperation, for an increasing numbness of body and brain told him this sort of thing could not go on indefinitely. It had to end, and end quickly. And it was no time for half measures. She had youth, he mistily remembered, and the advantages of youth. And she had a trick of weaving in that implied experience, experience, probably, with mackinawed camp rowdies and lumber-jacks in jocose warfare about a grub-shack. And only the tactics of the grub-shack could be applied to her. If he couldn't shake her to her senses he could at least tie her up, tie her up with a twist of tapestry, with a lamp-cord, with a strand of curtain material, but tie and hobble and truss her up, as exasperated cowboys truss up an outlaw mustang. And once so tied, she could be left to philosophize over the problem of how seldom physical combat finally settled a moral issue.

But his enemy, at the moment, was not surrendering to philosophy. As she wove in again, dealing him a blow over the heart that radiated an acute nausea up and down his entire torso, he caught her by her tangled dark hair and jerked her stumblingly in against his shoulder. Before she could recover herself he had her by either wrist. And he made sure of his grasp on them. He not only clamped his fingers close about those flesh-covered tubes of bone, but he forced the twitching arms slowly forward, twisting them until her body quivered and he vaguely wondered if her arms would snap like pipe-stems. That brought her face closer to his, so close that he could feel the heat of her breath, oddly animal-like, on his moist skin. But it disheartened him a little, as he stared into the opaque eyes still confronting him, to see that they were still uncapitulating, still unconquered. So he increased the pressure, increased it until he could see her breath quicken and a tremor speed through her body.

"You coward!" she gasped, amazing him by the intensity of the hate which he could read on the upturned face. Yet he had loved her once. He could admit that now, from the exiling heights of his animosity. And she had not always hated him. There was a time when her eyes had brightened and her voice had softened as he had leaned over her, vaguely hungering for the casual touch of her hand. There was a time when he would have been willing to pour a pure and unselfish compassion over her, to cherish her and fight for her. And now his one object was to hurt her, to break her on his wheel of pain. And her one object in life, even as she lay momentarily quiescent, panting against his shoulder, was to conquer and crush him. She might, in her madness, even kill him.

That thought disturbed him, as he read the cold hate in the glance which she directed toward his bloodstained face. It was an unexpectedly assizing glance, the sort of glance a big-game hunter might direct toward a wounded quarry over-tenaciously clinging to life. And behind it was a reviving light of intelligence which warned him that he must still be watchful, that she was as full of tricks as a cat, that she was by no means through with him.

He was still nursing that thought, in fact, when she exploded into sudden action. Her hands were free again, even before he could read her intention. He assumed, at first, that she was going to start once more clawing and striking him. But he was wrong in this, for she astounded him by passing a lithe arm about his body, by clasping him in a grip which, under different circumstances, might have been accepted as the appropriative embrace of abandoned affection. She was hugging him. But at the same time she was in some artful way insinuating her slender leg between his, interlocking her ankle with his ankle, so that when she suddenly swayed back from the hips and thrust forward again with all her strength he had no way of stepping back and holding his balance. She even croaked, exultantly, as he fell heavily to the floor. But he reached for her instinctively as he went, and the weight of her body on his, as they struck the waxed parquetry together, brought a grunt from his thudded thorax. He could feel her knees tighten against his ribs and her fingers groping frantically for a hold, a hold on anything.

He tried to throw her off, to struggle and fight his way free of her. But she clung like a leech. They rolled completely over, in that uncouth scrimmage, upsetting a metal reading-lamp as they went. They crashed into a delicate-legged writing-desk, which went over with an antiphonal clatter of silver and glass. They twisted and writhed and gyrated against a Florentine cabinet that toppled before their violence and sprayed the floor with triangles of glass. And inappositely, as he struggled in the midst of the fallen treasures from its shelves, there came back to Somer's mind a phrase he had once heard on Joan's lips, her brief but bitterly apt reference to "a bull in a china-shop." And that was what this unreasoning wolf woman had been all along, that was what she was proving herself to be, an uncouth intruder in the midst of delicacies which she could never understand or respect, a destroyer of all those more fragile things which make life worth living.

But she would not destroy him, Somer decided with a new access of determination. Anything like that would be an

affront to all manhood. And any further moderation of effort, on the basis of sex, might be suicide. For she was a *mænad* now, lost to everything that was human in a race once called a reasoning one. She had her two hands clutched in his matted hair, beating his head against the hardwood floor, her chin wet with drooling saliva as she threw the last of her strength into those sharp convulsions of hate. But two could play at that game, he dizzily decided, and he caught a great breath and gathered all the force of his spent body to fling her aside. There must be no more compromise, no further concession of the strong to the weak.

But it came home to him, of a sudden, that she could no longer be regarded as the weak. Her strength was incredible. She had not softened before the soft living for which she had so cunningly angled and maneuvered. She had once wrangled, up on the Little Winiska, a half-tamed moose, wrangled it to the laughter of lumber-jacks and camp-idlers. She had carried her birch-bark placidly over a three-mile portage. Between sunup and sundown she had blithely covered her thirty miles of broken trail. And the strength of those early days still abided in cord and sinew, just as the iron of her will held a valorous edge from those earlier days of adventure.

Yet the thought of defeat at the hands of a woman could still sting him out of his widening lassitude of weariness. He writhed and turned and half twisted her body so that his hand could reach her throat. He clutched that throbbing white column of flesh until he could see her face darken as they rolled over and over, still grimly locked together. They rolled under the looming dark library table like two embattled bears under a cave-roof. They were unconscious of the great thud as their seismic struggles turned over that massive oblong of polished and laden wood. But the sound must have been heard in remoter quarters, for as they still fought about the devastated room the door was opened and a man-servant, white-faced and wide-eyed, stared in at the scene and a moment later scuttled off, with a squeak like that of a rat behind a wainscoting.

Yet they fought on until their bodies trembled and shuddered from overstrain, until their over-taxed lungs could no longer feed air to their fatigue-poisoned blood, until the woman's breath was coming in dry sobs and the man's throaty sounds were those of utter exhaustion. They could no longer strike; they could no longer move. They could merely lie there in a torpor of helplessness, one body against the other, gathering venom and strength for another outburst.

Yet as they lay there, so odiously close together, Somer once more dazedly remembered the odd fact, the incredible fact, that he had in some purblind and perverted way cared for this woman who had done such things to him, that it had once been his hope to guard and cherish this dusky body that he was now so intent on crushing.

But she was no longer lovely to look upon. He could see that as he cast a blurred eye over her body. She was back where she belonged, once more the bush-rat's daughter. For she was half naked, by this time, her abraded bare shoulders festooned with rags, one rounded breast uncovered, her arms reddened and streaked with blood. Somer, too, was a thing of shreds and tatters, his lean neck runneled with red, his lips slowly dripping red, his face blotched with a thickening scarlet paste that darkened as it coagulated along his swollen jaw-line. His eyes were half blinded by commingling sweat and blood. But they too, as he lay there waiting for his strength to return, were unconquered.

And his extremity brought him a new wariness, for he knew now that he could never escape through the mere use of muscle, through the exercise of that manly strength which could no longer be regarded as any too manly. She had fought like a wolf, with the wolf's disregard of fair play and honesty. And honesty, because of that, would be wasted on her. Yet every fiber of his being instinctively revolted at the thought of brutally and deliberately striking her in the face. He already had the strength for that. But not the will. Still again he glanced dully at the drawn face, so close to his own. It impressed him as pathetically unprotected and unarmored against the blows of a mallet-like fist. She lay so passive, in fact, that he began to feel she was already unconscious. She looked gray and deathlike, with her dark lashes drooping across her colorless cheek. He even felt a wayward pity for her as he noticed the bruised flesh of her throat and shoulders. And he began to suspect that he would have to abandon his earlier thought of saving her from murder, as the drowning are kept from struggling, by subduing her by one deliberated lethal blow. It would be almost better to crawl away, better to put his pride in his pocket and escape, while the chance of escape was before him, than to nurse through life the corroding memory of so unknighly a *coup*.

But even that qualified victory of evasion was denied him. For she must have felt the secret stiffening of his muscles preparatory to action. She must, in some way, have anticipated his intention, since, with a small and animal-like cry of hostility, she once more flung herself on him. The quickness of her movement startled him. And the bitterness of her attack as she once more struck at his battered face promptly ended his belated moment of mercifulness. They were on their knees by this time, and he was pawing and clutching at her writhing body, seeking to close in on her, to draw her

close in a strangle-hold that would take the force from her flailing fists. Then he grunted aloud, exultantly, for he knew that he had her at last in chancery. He had her where he wanted her, where he could bend her back until a neck vertebra snapped and her tigerish madness would come to a stop. And it was no time for mercy.

But his own grim impulse came to an abrupt stop, for a new and unexpected sense of agony telegraphed itself to his brain and he realized, a moment later, that she had his thumb in her mouth, that her wolfish white teeth were clamped on protesting flesh and bone. He twisted about and staggered to his feet, lifting her clear of the floor where she still clung to him by claw and fang, clung like a wildcat as he carried her to the overturned table-edge. His half-formulated intention was to bend and force her over that sharp barrier, to break her over it, if need be, as a stick is broken over one's knee.

But for the second time she was too quick for him. Her clamped jaw released his thumb at the same moment that she twisted and writhed free of his clutch. She staggered, half tumbling, to the table-end, where she swayed dizzily and dropped to her knees. He thought at first, that she was forlornly intent on escape, that she was crawling away from him. He failed to fathom the motive behind that movement until he saw her bloodstained hand reaching out for the Clytie in gold, the fallen Clytie still holding a conch ink-well to her burnished breast. He wondered, in that moment of silence, just why his enemy's hand should clutch at it so hungrily. He even wondered at the faint purring sound that filled the darkening room, puzzled by that wavering drone, until he realized it came from the fallen telephone transmitter lying beside the oblong ink-blot on the rumpled Kazan rug. And he wondered, as he saw the glitter of the uplifted gold in the half-light, why she, a mere woman, a woman shaken and unstrung, could ever hope to send a missile like that targeting against his body. Then all wonder went out in a coruscation of starry lights that sank like falling rocket-sparks into a pit of darkness.

He slumped forward, like a clouted rabbit, and lay without moving on the rumpled rug.

When John Caver came into the room, with Betty Wilder and a bevy of frightened servants at his heels, Aurora Mary neither spoke nor looked up at them. She was bending over the prostrate Somer, her body shaking with quick dry sobs. And while Caver's astonished eyes were absorbing that scene of devastation, the uncouthly ragged figure with the white and blood-streaked shoulders stooped still lower and kissed her fallen enemy on his swollen and battered cheek.

CHAPTER XVIII

Somer, with his head propped high to make him more comfortable for reading, heard the repeated knock on his door and grimly disregarded it. He suspected it was Gail, coming with flowers again, with more of her confounded sepulchral white flowers, as though it were a funeral. All he asked for was quiet, quiet to let the healing forces of Time take the last ache from both his body and his soul. It annoyed him not a little, accordingly, to find so primary a wish ignored. And his frown was deep as the door swung slowly open and Betty Wilder stepped into the room.

She stopped half-way to the day-bed where he lounged on his shoulder-blades and studied him without pity and also without humor. Then, with a shrug of suspended judgment, she sank in a chair and reached for one of his cigarettes.

"How're you getting along?" she casually inquired, ignoring his failure to hand her a light and airily reaching over to his littered pipe-tray to appropriate a match.

"I'm all right," was his somber retort.

She subjected his face to a more pointed inspection.

"It'll be as good as ever," she cheerfully proclaimed, "as soon as those stitch-marks go away."

He failed to participate in her optimism.

"Who sent you here?" he curtly demanded.

"It's almost two weeks now, isn't it?" she observed, following her own line of thought.

"Who sent you here?" he once more demanded.

"I came, O king, of my own free will. And it's only incidentally that I wish to inquire why you've refused to see Aurora Mary."

"Why should I?" he said out of the silence that prolonged between them.

"Out of gratitude, if nothing else," asserted the cool-eyed Betty. "You see, she's been rather generous about all this."

"Rather generous?" challenged Somer, his head promptly up from the pillow.

"Undoubtedly," was the unperturbed answer. "She seems to have screwed everything down in a tight little coffin of silence and buried it under a neat little mound of forgetfulness. She's even ready to forgive you, I imagine."

"To forgive *me!*" he croaked, with his curt ironic laugh. But Betty's eye remained a disturbingly commiserative one.

"My dear man, there's one thing you must remember, whatever your misunderstanding with Mary and whatever preceded your—er—your encounter. It's the simple fact that men simply *don't fight* women."

"I wasn't fighting a woman," contended the none too happy Somer.

"What was it, then?"

"A she-wolf," was his laconic reply.

She looked him over with an acquiescing eye.

"Apparently," she murmured. The next moment, however, saw her quite sober again. "But you've won," she enigmatically announced.

"In what way?" he questioned.

"Poor Mary's pretty well licked, if that's any satisfaction to you. I fancy you've knocked about the last of the fight out of her—the last of that particular kind of fight, at any rate."

He turned testily away. That movement plainly enough proclaimed that all talk of fighting was repugnant to him.

"I'm not interested in that woman," he curtly announced.

Betty's smile was a restricted one.

"Well, I am," she retorted with unexpected spirit. "And I'm going to see her through this or die in the effort. We have, in fact, hitched up and taken an apartment together. And I intend to see that she gets her share of happiness."

Somer turned and studied, with a somber eye, the bird-like figure of Betty Wilder, the teacher and friend of Mary.

"Your new apartment-mate seems to have a genius all her own for eliciting help from others," he none too graciously announced.

"On the contrary," amended his visitor, "she seems quite determined to travel her own road in her own way. She's flatly refused to take anything further from John Caver and she's insisting on the annulment of those adoption papers of his. From last week forward, in fact, she's earning her own living."

"Not as a professional house-wrecker?" was Somer's grim suggestion.

"No, along much more peaceful paths," conceded the unsmiling Betty, "though the beginning of it all had every aspect of another pitched battle. You see, she rather threw a bombshell into Zaban's Fifth Avenue fur-shop by proclaiming that their silver-fox was a fake, was nothing more than common fox with badger-hairs sewn into it. You can't fool her on furs. She was even claiming that their Russian leopard was nothing but dyed rabbit-skin, when little Davey Zaban walked indignantly up to her and inquired just what she knew about furs. He may run the niftiest fur-store on the Avenue but he couldn't high-hat Aurora Mary. Before she got through with him he was shrewdly suggesting that she capitalize her knowledge of North American pelts and go on his pay-roll."

"And that's what she did?" demanded the man on the day-bed.

"That's what she did," repeated Betty.

Somer waved away the cigarette-smoke that was drifting about his indignant head.

"You mean she's sorting skins in a fur-shop?" he asked with an entirely fabricated unconcern.

"I'd express it as being smothered in mink and ermine!" retorted the equally unconcerned Betty.

"Do you mean she's a mannikin?" demanded Somer, coming out of his shell.

"Not exactly," explained Betty. "But Zaban wants to turn her into what is known to the trade, I believe, as a bell-ringer. He likes her lines. And he's going to have her parade his prize cloaks in the smarter restaurants and the——"

"A sort of sandwich-man in petticoats!" interrupted the morose-eyed Somer.

"But along the fringes of splendor," amended Betty, "that every woman craves to explore."

She had the satisfaction of observing his sharp movement of resentment.

"That's a rotten trade for a healthy-minded girl, playing bally-hoo to a fat-paunched peddler of cat-skins!"

"Some of those cat-skins, old dear, could set you back several thousand dollars. But it's not the furs and the fur-shop that I'm worrying over," continued Betty as she dusted the ashes off her own natty sables. "It's that solemn-eyed little Zaban. She seems to have hypnotized him. They make me think of Trilby and Svengali together. She's so superb and he's so small. And if he ever tries to satisfy that absurd craving of hers for grandeur, it's going to lead to trouble."

Somer turned to her with a slightly contemptuous eye.

"If she's that sort," he demanded, "why worry over her?"

"But she's not that sort," maintained Betty, "though she did rather disturb me yesterday by saying she intended to see a night club or two."

"Like the rest of the yokels!" interpolated the other.

"No," said the thoughtful-eyed Betty Wilder, "for entirely different reasons. You see, Martie was about her only anchorage. That poor little tot gave her mind something to center on. He kept her preoccupied and consoled her in her loneliness—for, whatever she had or did, she *was* lonely. Why, even now she keeps hearing a baby crying in the night and struggles and fights in her sleep to get to him. And that's something we can't sneer away."

Somer winced but remained silent.

"You know," continued the meditative Betty, "outsiders usually come to this city of ours for some form of self-expression. I mean they generally want to learn to sing or paint or write or blaze out their own private road to power. But Aurora Mary never seemed to want any of this. I don't yet understand what she really did want. Perhaps she doesn't know herself. It may have been Martie, and it may not. It may have been simply to see the other side of the fence. But we've pretty well taken everything away from her and now she's just naturally going to concentrate on herself. I don't mean she'll go native again and slump into aboriginal sloppiness and start eating peanuts all over the place. But she's only human, and she'll naturally do what other city women do. She'll fill up the blank with clothes and beauty-parlors and hair-dressers and theaters and all the other second-hand make-believe."

"Are you blaming her?" asked Somer.

"No, I'm not blaming her," asserted Betty. "But what I'm trying to make plain is that the girl is in a dangerous mood, no matter how she may be pretending to be perfectly happy."

Somer remained silent for a moment or two.

"Does she know that Joan sailed for Paris on Saturday?" he finally inquired.

"If she does, she's said nothing about it. But there are certain things, naturally, we can't expect her to be very vocal about. She's asked, in fact, to start her own French lessons next week. She also wanted to study music. But after hearing her perform on that old accordion she's so inordinately fond of, I've done what I can to discourage that side of her education."

Still again a silence prolonged itself between them.

"And what part am I to play in all these plans for Aurora Mary's future?" was Somer's somewhat acidulated inquiry.

"That's for you to answer, not me," asserted the quiet-eyed Betty, as she got up from her chair. "But I'd hate to see an ardent little devil like Davey Zaban get the girl mixed up on the traffic rules in general. By the way, is it true you're going back to Central America?"

"It is not," answered Somer. "I should be busy now on my synthetic pectin that's being taken over by the United Cannery. Instead of being pounded into a jelly I should have my machinery pounding out jelly."

"And where," asked Betty, "do you propose being over Christmas?"

"Back in my quarters at the Centurian Club," he curtly acknowledged.

"That," she ruminated aloud, "doesn't sound like a very happy holiday."

"Perhaps I don't deserve one," he said with a reluctant smile that wiped out much of his earlier truculence. And his visitor stood studying him with a sort of half-grudging affection.

"I don't think you do," she admitted. "But you might remember that one of the side-doors to happiness is trying to make somebody else happier."

"Thanks," he responded, still non-committal.

"And," she continued as she turned to draw on her gloves, "please don't entirely overlook the fate of Belshazzar, who failed to mark the difference between a mural decoration and a death-warrant!"

"What does that mean?" he called after her.

But she passed out through the open door without answering him.

CHAPTER XIX

It had been a green Christmas, with an ensuing week of exceptional mildness for the latitude of New York. There was no snow on the ground and the delusive and spring-like mildness weighed on Aurora Mary's spirits as she stepped down to the car where John Caver awaited her.

She noticed the gardenia in his button-hole and the staid alacrity with which he alighted and helped her into her seat and tucked a fur-lined rug about her knees.

"I like to escape like this now and then," he explained as he seated himself beside her and, swinging into Park Avenue, headed northward through the glimmering holiday traffic. But it was Joan's car he was in, she remembered as she glanced down at the lemon-colored open speedster with the intricate tangle of levers beside her knee, Joan's car with a brand-new fender. And her spirits darkened, ponderably, under the shadowing wing of the past. It was only women who felt such things, she concluded. Men were different. They were more practical-minded and impervious to the foolishly groping and ghostly hands of the past.

"I suppose you've seen all this before?" said Caver, as he swung westward into Central Park with a serrated gray line of roofs above the tangle of tree tops and latticed twigs silhouetted black against the purple-misted afternoon light.

"What was it you wanted to talk to me about?" she countered, instead of answering his question.

"I wanted to tell you that your adoption papers are finally annulled. And I also want you to know that I'm losing a daughter."

"You mean Joan?" she asked, impressed by his solemnity.

"No, I mean you," he said with a side-glance at the dusky oval of her cheek. "But it seems to include Joan as well. I had a cable from her yesterday telling me she was going to marry Owen De Witt next Wednesday."

Aurora Mary did not speak again until they had left the park well behind them and were turning northward along the undulating mellow vistas of Riverside Drive.

"I wish Joan had—had talked to me. Everything seemed to get so muddled up. And she went through so much."

Caver remained silent for a minute or two.

"We all did, I imagine," he finally averred. And a newer mood of silence fell over them both as they sped on through unexplored parts of the city and faced the panoramic beauty of the Bronx River Parkway and a little later along Eastern Boulevard turned into the Country Club Road and sat meditative and subdued before the faintly misted loveliness of Eastchester Bay. Caver was even able to smile again.

"You see, it's not all ugliness down here," he quietly proclaimed. "It would always be worth coming a few miles to see the sun swing up over that bay."

If she remained silent, it was because she was thinking of other vistas and other waterways.

"It's wonderful," she acknowledged at last, with an unexpected wistfulness in her voice.

"But it doesn't make you happy?" he questioned.

"It makes me lonesome," she said with a glance back at the citted hills. "It's all so settled and crowded and finished and so full of history I don't know anything about. It makes me feel small and unimportant and homeless. And it leaves me kind of lonesome for my own country. I used to think Trail-End was lonely. But there can be a terrible loneliness about city life."

He marveled, as he looked at her with the kindly and discerning eye of maturity, that a mere change of the outer shell, a mere alteration of raiment and poise, could be so suggestive of some deeper change. It even brought a feeling of estrangement which he resented. She seemed, in her close-fitting helmet turban and her modish coat of plucked beaver trimmed with Arctic otter, oddly urbanized. She impressed him as unexpectedly restrained and impersonal. This was not the Aurora Mary he had known of old. It was a different woman, different in note and bearing. Yet, under that altered

shell, she was the same, with the same vivid but cloudy gaze, the same habitual brow-pucker, the same full and vital lips, the same slightly imperious aura born of some abundant inner strength.

"Are you happy in your work?" he abruptly asked her.

"Not very," she belatedly admitted.

"What's wrong?" he questioned, his eyes on the glimmering instrument-board before him.

"I don't really know."

He sat silent, conscious of the warmth of the body beside him. And there was a new gentleness in his voice when he spoke again.

"You know, you saved a rather empty life when you pulled me out of the water up there at Trail-End last summer. You _____"

He stopped abruptly.

"And I've never been grateful enough," she admitted, conscious of his hesitation, "for all you've done for me."

"It's not what I've wanted to do."

"But it's been so much more than I deserved."

He listened, for a moment, to a chickadee twittering about a denuded wild-plum thicket.

"Then I wonder," he said with the faintest quiver in his habitually steady voice, "if you'd be willing to keep that life from being an empty one?"

She turned to him, frankly puzzled.

"In what way?" she asked.

"By marrying me," he quietly explained as his glance steadied and locked with the bewildered woman at his side. So long and steadily did she gaze at him, with her bewilderment slowly merging into mournfulness, that he moved and smiled defensively. But it was a rueful smile.

"I couldn't," she said with frontier candor.

He nodded, nodded with apparent understanding. Then he watched the chickadee as it flew away in the waning afternoon sunlight.

"Is it another man?" he finally asked her.

"Yes," she admitted, after a moment of hesitation.

"Is it that Zaban chap you're going about with?" he found courage to inquire.

"No."

His retarded smile was one of enlightenment.

"Then it's Allan Somer."

To that conclusion she neither openly assented nor dissented. But her face eventually betrayed her. The unworded reply came in the dusky flood of color that crept up to the base of the smooth wide forehead partly hidden by the gray felt turban.

"Has he seen you lately?" asked Caver, his face quite sober again.

"No."

"Why?"

"Because I wouldn't let him."

"But he wanted to?"

"Yes, after refusing to see *me*, after——But that's all over now."

"But why should Allan ever think that Zaban intended to marry you?"

"Zaban *did* ask me to marry him," she said with a returning surge of color.

"And you couldn't."

Aurora Mary moved her head from side to side.

"He's kind, and there's a great many things I like in him. But I sometimes get the feeling I'm being smothered when he's anywhere close to me. I try to earn what he pays me. But I don't think I could stand being swamped in clothes. And clothes, of course, would always come first with him. He'd always want his wife to be what the shop girls call a 'regatta rib.'"

Caver, with his restrained smile, held her in his mind's eye as he had first seen her at Trail-End, in oil-stained khaki and moosehide moccasins and battered old Stetson.

"Isn't that the sort of thing you wanted?" he suggested. "Or have you reached the rainbow's end?"

She turned to him, as he started up his engine, with a touch of her older wistfulness.

"Women don't seem to get what they want," she hesitatingly proclaimed, "or to want what they get. Why is it?"

But it was a question which Caver found himself unable to answer. It was a question for which Aurora Mary herself could frame no satisfactory reply as she sat, the next night, at the table which David Zaban had reserved for the New Year's Eve revels at the Cornucopia. The Cornucopia, she knew, was the mode of the moment, the fashionable meeting-place of the elect. Its cover-charges were discriminative, its head-waiter was astutely eclectic, and to have a ring-side table at the big night of the year, Zaban had spaciously explained to her, was to sit in the final circle of urban sophistication.

But the scene, to Aurora Mary, was not as glamorous as she had expected. She was not in the mood for merrymaking. The crescendo flow of gaiety, with its masks and costumes, its confetti and streamers and noise-machines, its floating balloons and fantastically kicking slippered feet, its half-hidden bottles and its drifting haze of smoke, impressed her as factitious and artificial, as too sedulously organized. She had a deep-rooted distaste for drinking, having beheld it as a child in its darkest and coarsest aspects. She felt small need for stimulation, since she still found intoxication enough in the movement and coloring of crowds. And splendor such as that which confronted her, even splendor so obviously commercialized and meretricious, could still excite something dormant in the core of her ancestral simplicity. She had a wayward hunger to feel the press of bodies about her, to lose herself in that ever-flowing eddy of life. But that eddy, she was beginning to find, could circle about with a threat of monotony. They all seemed very much the same, these restaurants and night clubs to which Zaban had been introducing her, the same saxaphonic jazz, the same painted hostesses and Orientalized cigarette-girls, the same obese old men confronting skeletonized young women with eyes as hard as their jewels, the same heavy odor of cigarette-smoke and French perfume and hot-house flowers and floor-dust and juniper flavoring-oils and heated bodies. Often, in her girlhood, she had speculated about such things, had dreamed of them as children dream of fairyland, had woven herself into the highly colored tapestry of their gracious and knightly promise.

But it was only their remoteness that had made them magical. And having covered that dream-misted trail, she realized it was bastioned on rock as hard as the rock of her native Laurentians and skirted morasses as sour as any bogland in her northern wilderness. The initial excitement that she wrung from such scenes already had its inevitable reaction of depression, of vague nostalgia which the orchestrated "blues" of the dance-music sharpened into pain as she sat staring at her short-statured partner with the singularly deep and soulful eyes.

He seemed very far away from her, even as he smiled companionably across the narrow island of napery stippled with

its glistening silver and glass. He was like a toad, she concluded, a quiescent and kindly toad with a corpulent body and an incomparably lovely eye.

"Shall we dance?" Zaban was asking her, apparently conscious of the *ennui* that was taking the earlier glow out of her own deep-hooded eyes.

She was about to tell him that she was too tired to dance. But she abruptly changed her mind and rose as abruptly from the table. For across the crowded room so fantastically splashed with color she caught sight of Allan Somer and Betty Wilder as they shouldered their way through the crowd. Yet at the same moment she resented the manner in which her heart leaped into her throat and a tingle of nerve-ends eddied through her body. For she was conscious, as she sedately danced with her sedate-eyed partner, that the newcomers had crossed to Zaban's table and were awaiting her return. She could see Allan Somer as his eyes followed her about the floor. She knew that when the music stopped they would once more be confronting each other, standing face to face. And the thought of that meeting with all that it might portend made her heart skip a beat and race on again.

Yet no outer sign of that inner tension manifested itself as the two oddly diverse couples converged and greeted one another after the manner of their kind. Zaban was neither a boor nor a bore, and he nursed none of the suspicions of artifice nibbling at the heart of his partner. He even asked Miss Wilder to dance, as the music struck up again. And Betty, with a quick glance at Somer, averred that she'd love to dance.

The maelstrom of commingling couples carried them away and swallowed them up. And Aurora Mary knew, as she turned and looked at the gaunt and solemn-eyed man confronting her, that she was alone with Allan Somer.

Her first impression was that he looked older and thinner than before, with an absence of the color that had once given a belated air of boyishness to his bony face. Her second impression was that he had no intention of making things easier for her, as she sat, hoping against hope, if not for some word of contrition, at least for some warmer note in his voice and glance.

But his eyes were hard as he studied her across the table. And he was proclaiming to himself, in morose triumph, that some equal process of induration had taken place in her. He concluded, as he observed how she was resorting to the use of make-up for the first time, that the sclerotic processes of city life had already got under way. They had done something to her once Ishmaelitish eyebrows, mysteriously attenuating them until the arching thin line gave her a touch of the supercilious. He remembered, as he noticed how the once dusky tone of the skin was fading to an ivory creaminess, how Betty Wilder had described her as taking to bath-salts and expressing a preference for prickly-pear salads. She was surrendering to the agents of urban uplift. They had even conspired to give her a false air of fragility, a delusive sense of sophistication. She was slowly but surely conforming. She was making herself one of the mob. Yet there must be something still naively childlike about her, he told himself, or she would never be in that particular place under those particular circumstances. He even frowned heavily as his eye followed the rotund figure of David Zaban along the fringe of the dancing-floor. That was the type of man, he remembered with an acrid smile, who was spoken of as a "heavy sugar daddy."

"You shouldn't dance with a man like Zaban," he said with an abruptness a trifle surprising to his own ears.

"Because I dance so badly?" she parried with a smile abstracted enough to make him feel uncouth.

"No," he replied. "Because it makes you look ridiculous."

It was cruel, but he could see no reason why it should be otherwise.

"You mean I'm so much taller?" she ventured with the quiet tolerance of her newer manner. And she seemed, at that moment, very far away from him. He even wondered if this was the same girl who had once carried a red deer across her shoulders, who as a child had once slept in a wolf's den?

"That's one reason," he curtly resumed. And he could see the morosely-hooded eyes studying him as he evaded her glance.

"We can't all be sky-scrapers," she observed, in no way resentful of the proprietary note in Somer's voice.

"Then we shouldn't go on parade with one-story shacks," he retorted with self-defensive roughness. For, with all the

alterations that time had brought to her, with all that had come between them, there was still something about this luminous-eyed woman that had the power to bring a wayward ache to his heart.

"Then why don't *you* ask me to dance with you?" she demanded with a simple-mindedness that brought a frown of perplexity to his face.

"What good would it do?" And he had the satisfaction of seeing her first flash of resentment.

"None whatever," she agreed, recovering herself. But her hands tightened, under the table-edge, for she knew that he still hated her, that he would never again ask to understand her, that they would go on for all time at cross-purposes, the one hurting and being hurt by the other.

Even Somer, as he sat so moodily studying her, watching the shadowy eyes with the oddly opalescent light in their pupils, watching the pulsing ivory throat that widened into the ampler bosom, watching the faint shadow under her cheek-bone that lent an unfamiliar touch of pathos to her face, knew that invisible barriers had been built up between them. Yet she had stirred him, in her time, as no other woman had done. She had, in her frontier helplessness, built up strange impulses of tenderness that could not be lightly forgotten.

"Let's dance!" he said with an abruptness that was almost a command.

She waited for a moment, before assenting, though she paled a little as she rose with a feminine sustained leisure from her chair. She was conscious of Somer's contemptuous glance at the over-ornate cloak which she over-languidly draped over the chair-back. She was equally conscious of a slight stiffening of muscles in his body as she slipped her hand through his linked forearm and waited in the smoke and din and babel of voices for the orchestra to strike up again. Even as they began to dance she was impressed with the coldness of his face, as though the clasp of her arm had chilled him, depressed him with associative memories of pain. He was not happy in those steps designed for happiness, and he danced neither badly nor well. He was conscious enough of her body, close to his own, of the vitality of the unrelaxed high-waisted figure in his clasp, of the vigor of the rhythm-swayed muscles. But still again the ghostly hand of memory reached out and chilled his spirit.

"You don't like dancing with me?" she said, looking up at him in the jostling crowd that was growing thicker and more turbulent with the approach of midnight.

"Are either of us in the mood for it?" he countered.

"We seem to be in the place for it," answered Aurora Mary, her smile a condoning one. For he was still going through his steps, mechanically, almost patiently, with no sense of joy in that medium of release that was bringing song to the lips of his fellow-dancers. And it made him feel ridiculous, more than ridiculous. It was foolish and futile. He stopped short, in fact, while the music was still blaring about them, and looked with a new solemnity into her luminous but slightly veiled eyes.

"What is it?" she asked, arrested by the Hamlet-like moroseness of his stare.

"Can't I take you out of this?" was his unexpected cry.

She misunderstood the meaning of that cry, feeling, as she did, that he had been testing her, like a coin, on the hard counter of his emotions and had found the resultant ring not altogether to his liking. And he was not yet the master of her destiny.

"I'm perfectly happy," she perversely proclaimed.

"Are you sure of that?" he demanded, trying to shelter her from the circling elbows and shoulders about them.

"Quite sure," was her uncapitulating answer. And he stood silent until she quietly suggested: "Hadn't you better take me back to my table?"

He said "Very well" in a voice so listless that it failed to reach her ears. He was mystified by the mounting noise, growing shriller as it mounted, until he remembered it must be the midnight hour, the turn of the year. When, in the midst of that rout punctuated by the popping of corks and balloons, the clinking of glasses, the cries and cheers rising above the throb of the music, the remoter blare of horns, he instinctively sought to shield her from that bedlam of shouting and

shifting bodies and pelting showers of confetti, the lights suddenly went out.

It was the custom, he recalled, on the stroke of twelve. But his mind, at the moment, was conscious of only one fact, the fact that Aurora Mary was there in his arms, in the darkness, and that all about him were the sounds of friendly greetings, of lovers kissing, of lips seeking happy lips. But it meant nothing to either of them, he remembered with his embittered smile. It was merely an ironic accentuation of their estrangement, a muddied reflex dating back to a mad encounter in a crowded and mellow-toned library. He even felt, as the lights came on again and disclosed that Dionysian midnight scene in its bald and unsavory details, that there was something degrading in such rowdiness, that it betrayed men and women into an animality as unreasoning as it was revolting. And he had had enough of it.

Somer's face was austere as he led Aurora Mary back to her table.

"So you can stand for this sort of thing?" he brusquely inquired.

"I adore it," was her womanly wayward answer.

"Then I'll have to leave you to your Eden," he announced, disturbed by his own revived impulse toward savagery.

Aurora Mary, smiling defensively, watched him as he bowed and backed away and disappeared through the crowd. Then her smile went out, like a lamp turned off. She felt wordlessly alone in the world. The orchestra struck up *Wishin' For You*, one of the negroid musical hits of the moment. The beat of those "blues," rhythmically plaintive, aboriginally wistful, seemed like her misery made vocal. They translated the vague and secret unhappiness of her soul into sound. They orchestrated her unutterable loneliness, her sense of desertion. And the tears suddenly welled from her tired eyes as she sat in the midst of the glamour for which she had given so much, of which she had expected so much.

When Zaban returned to her table she could see him only through a blurring mist. It made him look gnome-like. There were little rainbow irises about his gold shirt-studs and the two gold rings on his fingers. And they were fat fingers.

"What's wrong?" he demanded, arrested by the wan and rain-washed face of his most promising "bell-ringer."

"Take me home," commanded Aurora Mary.

"But we haven't had supper yet," complained the perplexed Zaban. And supper, obviously, meant a great deal to him.

"Take me home," repeated Aurora Mary, struggling in vain to swallow the lump in her throat.

"Why, don't you like it?" asked the perturbed Zaban, absently brushing the confetti from his attenuated hair.

"Like it?" she cried with the sudden flare-up of a spirit which he had never before seen in her. "*I hate the God-forsaken hole!*"



CHAPTER XX

It was spring in the city. Striped awnings and window-boxes appeared on the Avenue and the sound of the riveters high in the iron skeleton of a new sky-scraper was as lyrical as bobolinks above a clover meadow. A soft and balmy breeze wandered up from the bay and a daffodil-yellow wash of sunlight filled the parks where old men read papers and smoke-stunted trees broke once more into sickly leafage. The barrel organs were out again and the strawberry peddlers were once more yodelling their wares along the side-streets bastioned in blue shadows, where the cliff-dwellers still again thought of Coney Island and the Berkshires, of Seabright and Southampton, of Ocean Beach and Newport. It was spring again, with the old unrest tangled up with the old desires, with the ancient ecstasy shot through with the ancient discontent.

Some touch of that seasonal unrest weighed on Aurora Mary's spirit as she turned into Forty-second Street and breasted the afternoon tideway of city toilers already milling toward their terminal and its train-sheds of escape. And a new trouble crept into her eyes as she turned north and caught the echoing strains of *La Paloma* ground out by an itinerant street-piano. It took her thoughts back to the boat-landing at Trail-End, to ruffled water in the lonely northern twilight, to the pines that brought the sunset near and the piled cordwood against which she used to lean when she played that same blithely sorrowful air on her bellows-accordion, with Pancake's nose between her knees and the green and gold of the afterglow so peacefully deepening into night. And the exile who first said it was right: you die a little, when you go away.

She sighed, without knowing it, as she picked her course along that golden-moated canyon of commotion. But the cloudy light remained in her eyes as she turned into the office-building where Allan Somer had so impersonally promised to give her an audience. And an unnatural grimness hovered about her full-lipped mouth as she stepped into the metal-walled elevator and was shot upward, for, as she had feared, it was still not easy for her to put her pride in her pocket and ask favors of her enemies.

She had hoped to be brusque and businesslike, and she had welcomed the thought that she and Somer were to talk together in those new quarters of his, surrounded by the impersonal apparatus of an impersonal profession. But she found the office to be unexpectedly luxurious in its appointments and she discovered her own heart-beats to be disappointingly rapid.

He, too, was stirred by the sight of her as she stood before him in the modified north light from the metal-sashed windows. She seemed even paler and thinner than of old, and the faint shadow under the ivory cheek-bone was not without its spiritualizing effect. But all the earlier sense of vital and wistful womanhood, of softness shielded in strength, was still there. He even resented that latent power of hers to move him beyond his wishes, and, man-like, found shelter behind a barricade of formality ironically deferential.

"Your new offices look very appealing," she ventured as she sank into the chair which he had placed for her.

"Yes, applied science is proving almost disgustingly profitable," he admitted with his impersonal smile. "It rather makes me feel like a robber."

"But you're happy in your work," she reminded him, ill at ease before his sustained air of remoteness. And again he smiled his wintry smile.

"It's our biggest adventure," he deliberately proclaimed.

She nodded, unconscious, apparently, of any barb in that proclamation.

"That's what I wanted to speak to you about," she went on in an achieved evenness of tone. "I was wondering if it was possible for me to get my old job back."

He looked up sharply at that.

"What job?" he questioned.

"As camp-manager up at Trail-End," explained Aurora Mary.

It came to him with a sense of shock, but he managed to conceal his surprise behind a mask of indifference.

"Tired of the city?" he casually inquired. But he was grudgingly admitting to himself, at the moment, that the hooded eyes watching him were like woodland pools in their depths. That, of course, was part of her equipment, her screened artillery for bombarding her way on to her own undisclosed ends. Yet, all things considered, she had not done as much with it as she might. She should have given them the good old Cinderella story with a new flourish or two, the bush-rat's daughter who fought her way into the Four Hundred. But the antique plot had rather fallen apart. She had, in fact, made a sorry mess of it, cheating herself out of happiness at both ends of the game.

"So you're tired of us all?" he meditatively repeated.

"I'm tired of disappointments," Aurora Mary announced, with her first show of spirit. And he winced at that, as though its only application were a personal one.

"And you're abandoning the hell-bent for culture stuff?" he was cruel enough to inquire in his morose effort at retaliation.

He failed, however, to awaken her out of her estranging mood of apathy.

"I've been thinking a good deal about Trail-End, lately," she admitted. And the wistfulness of her voice brought a pang of regret to his aching heart.

"I've been thinking a great deal about Trail-End myself," he said with a salvaging sense of briskness. "I want to make quite a number of changes up there. And I don't see why you couldn't manage them as well as anybody else."

"Thanks," she said with unlooked-for humility. And he almost wished there had been more of the old belligerency in her tone.

"It—it will be lonely up there," he ventured out of the none too comfortable silence that fell between them.

"That's what I want," she quietly acknowledged.

"You mean you're tired of agglutinated humanity?" he asked as he turned to his shrilling telephone, curtly answered its call, and hung up the receiver again. But Aurora Mary proffered no reply to that question. She had no wish, obviously, to subtilize her emotions. And the continued cool detachment of her glance, with its suggestion of silent reproof, did not add to his happiness.

"This is, of course, strictly business," he said with a sheltering hardness of the voice as he turned back to the matter in hand. But after expounding his newer ideas as to camp management and outlining his proposed changes at Trail-End and wishing her much happiness in her work, he realized as he stood shaking hands with her beside his opened office door that it was an arrangement not as unqualifiedly commercial as he had imagined.

For, once she had gone, he stood immured in a sense of inadequacy. He was prompted to call her back. He even started after her. But the knowledge that she would not listen to him, that he would only flounder in deeper inadequacies, held him arrested on the way.

He went slowly back to his desk, oppressed by the emptiness of the room, oppressed by the abysmal emptiness of all life, as he sat thinking of Trail-End and how the wayward impulses of the heart can so hopelessly tangle up the destinies of man.

Somer thought a great deal about Trail-End, in fact, during the days that ensued. He solemnly and laboriously worked out plans for camp alterations and decided on ever-amplifying improvements. They must have a pressure-tank and running water in the main lodge and a Delco lighting system and more comfortable furniture. They must have books and music and pictures there, for life, even with these minor consolations of the mind, can be a lonely affair. And they would have to get rid of that odoriferous and inadequate old kicker-tub and supplant it with a specially built light-draught motor-boat suitable for northern waters, preferably a cabin-cruiser done in cypress and mahogany and with velour-cushioned club-chairs and an electric grill in the galley.

But he did slightly more, in the days that followed, than merely think and plan. As though in belated and clumsy efforts at amendment he sent boxes of delicacies up to Trail-End, some of them fitting and some of them foolish. He sent fruits out of season, which were ruined in rough handling, and ridiculously fragile cartons of bonbons which fared ill in the freight-wagons that lumbered from the rail-head up to Duck Landing. He sent absurdly fine scatter rugs and blankets and

bed linen. He sent prints and drapes and new cutlery and silverware, followed by a case of intricate and undecipherable kitchen utensils over which Indian Joe and Kippewa Kate speculated and debated for many a stormy day.

But it was all strictly business. He was merely, in his own cool-minded and scientific manner, improving a property much in need of improvement. No message and no name went attached to this merchandise. It may have disappointed him a little when its receipt was duly acknowledged in the curt and uncouth script of Indian Joe. But that was about all he deserved. And pride interposed, time and time again, when he felt tempted to write to his new camp-manager inquiring as to the newer conditions at Trail-End. It would still be cold in the North, he knew, for spring came late to the Pakishan and the Little Winiska. There would be an open fire, of an evening, in the fireplace of the main lodge, and the sun would be going down green and gold behind the receding black ridges of the pinelands, where the snow would still be in the hill-clefts and the ice would still be in the lakes and a far-off wolf-howl would sound forlornly across the deepening twilight. There would still be a razor-blade keenness to the night air and a sense of loneliness in the widening northern solitude. It would be good, at a time like that, to know the consolations of warmth and shelter. And before the open fire in the rug-strewn lodge there would be a woman sitting. She would be sewing, as likely as not, sewing quietly by lamplight, and the enfolding radiance of lamp and blazing birchwood would show the dusky oval of her face as she came to the end of her seam and sat motionless, thinking of the million-throated city that she had seen and known and shut out of her life.

When his office was unexpectedly invaded by Betty Wilder, one humid April afternoon with the promise of showers in the air, Somer regarded her with a slightly diffident and lack-luster eye.

"You look a bit seedy," announced his visitor. "Are you working too hard?"

"Just about one-half as hard as I should be," proclaimed Somer as he held a light for her cigarette, whereupon Betty subjected him to a second and more pointed scrutiny.

"Why don't you follow the crowd and try a change," she casually suggested. "John Caver's sailing on Saturday to join Joan at Cannes. The Rhinelanders are off to Asheville, and I'm shutting up shop for six or seven weeks with the Brownings at Santa Barbara. So practically everybody of importance seems to be leaving town."

Somer stared with an abstracted eye over the minaretted roofs of the city.

"I may swing down to Port Limon next month," he indifferently acknowledged. And again the bird-like eyes of Betty studied his half-averted face.

"I should think," she spaciously suggested, "that one would rather go north at this time of year."

"To do what?" demanded Somer.

"Oh, camping and fishing and all that sort of thing," explained the imperturbable Betty.

"The North has no appeal for me," proclaimed the moody man of science. And the astute Miss Wilder, to all appearances, was ready enough to let the matter rest. It wasn't until she rose to go that she again stepped out of the narrow path of the impersonal.

"By the way, I had a wonderful letter from Mary this week," she announced as she paused to repin a clump of hot-house violets to her jacket-front.

"What Mary?" demanded Somer. It was clumsy dissembling, but she let it pass without comment.

"*Our* Mary, of course; Aurora Mary," explained Betty. "She seems to have fitted back into the old niche again, for she writes me that she's happy at her work and wants to start a school for the little Nitchies up on the Pakishan."

"What are Nitchies?" Somer curtly inquired.

"Nitchie, I understand, is the north-woods name for the noble red man. But isn't it wonderful to think of that girl getting the torch in her hand and so unselfishly wanting to pass it on? And before summer's over I'll bet Aurora Mary will be mothering half a dozen little copper-colored papooses and reading history books to the half-breed children!"

Somer's movement in his chair was a restive one.

"It's nice," he non-committally observed, "to know that she's happy."

"It is," admitted Betty, only momentarily arrested by the note of bitterness in his voice. "And one of the things that made her that way was to go back and find her old dog Pancake still alive. Pancake's devotion, she says, is the only unselfish love she has ever had in her life." She paused, as though perplexed by the abrupt hardening of her companion's face. "She had Rusty, of course, but they took Rusty away from her before they could have much in common. And, for that matter, I'm afraid we all took something away from her that we can never bring back."

Somer got up from his chair and crossed to the window.

"I'd prefer not talking about those things," he said over his shoulder.

"Of course," she blithely agreed. "And I must be trotting along."

Yet Betty Wilder's vague smile of triumph, as she went down in the elevator, would have been less touched with uncertainty had she been able to study the face of the man left pacing so restlessly back and forth between his imprisoning office walls. He stopped once at the open window and stared out over the huddled roofs and towers of the city, half in shadow and half in sunlight. Then he resumed his pacing, his hands thrust deep in his pockets. His gaze was still abstracted as he seated himself at his desk.

He sat, for a full minute, without moving. Then he took a deeper breath, as the morose light flickered and went out in his eyes, and pushed the mother-of-pearl call-button beside him.

"Morrow," he said as his secretary stepped into the room, "can you come back after dinner to-night?"

"Of course, sir," said Morrow.

"We've got to organize things to carry on for a month or two. I think we can get about everything in shape by midnight."

"Then you're going south, sir, after all?" questioned Morrow.

Somer looked at him with unseeing eyes.

"On the contrary," he finally proclaimed, "I'm going north. And I'm going as soon as I can get my things packed!"

CHAPTER XXI

Spring comes late to the north country, but it comes with a lyrical abandon unknown to more southerly latitudes. It comes like release after imprisonment, like song after silence, vocal with the music of many waters, clamorous with bird-calls, passionately intent on amending its arrears of muted life. It comes with a pageantry all its own, with a burgeoning of leaf and blossom both tumultuous and tender, with blue-domed skies arching high over softening valley-slopes and singing rivers and lowland thickets smelling of buds.

It was the smells of the sun-steeped woodlands that most impressed Allan Somer as he waited for his camp-manager on the rough-timbered wharf at Duck Landing. On the faint breeze brushing his face was the all-pervading smell of balsam. But through that again he could sniff the vague pungence of wood-smoke, and commingled with it the musky odor of reed-grown river-shallows. Then he detected the sharper perfume of sun-bleached rock-moss, which was lost, a moment later, in the sappy and seminal smell of bursting buds. Above this floated a thinner and softer fragrance, the fragrance of early wood-flowers and unfolding tree-blossoms. And above and beyond it all brooded a wider and subtler aroma, the ozonic aroma of sun-washed northern air.

It came to him with an arresting sense of familiarity, of half-forgotten history repeating itself. And it seemed doubly familiar as he beheld the battered old kicker-boat heading into the harbor and made out the dusky figure of Aurora Mary in the stern-seat. He watched that figure closely as the refracted light played strange tricks with the approaching craft, distorting and magnifying it into uncouthness only to halo it the next moment with an opalescent aura of splendor. He could see, as the bark of the engine suddenly ceased and the boat came circling up to the landing-dock, that the woman at the tiller was once more in her khaki hunting-suit. Her skin had darkened a shade or two since he had last seen her and a trace of the old frontier defiance seemed to lie about the lines of her close-muscled shoulder as she weaved adroitly in to the dock-edge. But the eye that met his was a barricaded one and her manner, as she greeted him, was restrained. He had hoped against hope to find some sort of welcome in that dusky face under the close-cropped hair, as dark as a crow's wing. And to find so little there chilled him into a self-defensive silence. He waited for her to speak.

"Where's the dunnage?" she asked with frank matter-of-factness.

"I couldn't wait for it," he curtly admitted. And a moment later he regretted that admission. It said so much more than he had intended to say. But Aurora Mary was stooping, with no great show of concern, over her gas-engine.

"I'm sorry to be late," she said as he stepped unsteadily though soberly abroad, "but this kicker keeps giving me trouble."

He looked at it with a morose eye. And he let his gaze, as they pushed off into deeper water, extend to all corners of the war-scarred craft.

"It's about time," he announced, "that we scrapped this disreputable old tub."

She nodded as she seated herself beside the tiller-stick, facing him over the muffled *putt-putt* of the engine.

"It even smells bad," he proclaimed as he looked about for a dry spot for his feet.

"Yes," she acknowledged, "there seems to be a leak in the feed-pipe, and the engine keeps missing, and it often takes half an hour on a cold morning to get started. But I'm rather fond of the old thing."

"Why?" he curtly inquired.

"Because so much of my life seems mixed up with it," she said with her first perceptible emergence from the impersonal.

"Well, there may be less sentiment about a cabin-cruiser, but there'll be a blamed sight more comfort."

The hardness of his tone brought a quick glance from the deep-hooded eyes, but she ventured no answer to his assertion. She seemed intent, in fact, on picking her course and watching her recalcitrant engine. And even Somer, as they plowed on over the sun-mirroring water, seemed touched into a newer mood of quietness. But it was a quietness shot through with a sense of frustration and tinged with the souring thought of his own inadequacy. He had thought a great deal, on his way north, of this trip up through the tangled waterways that led to Trail-End. He had never openly acknowledged what he had expected of it. But he had looked for something a little different from this. He was once more alone with Aurora Mary, alone in a waste of quiet beauty, yet they seemed as far apart as the poles. And it was his own pride, his own

purblind and foolish pride, that loomed like a wall of granite between them.

But he noticed, as he looked at the woman in the stern-seat, an aura of pathos about the solitary figure confronting him. She seemed oddly alone against that rough and wide-flung background. She impressed him, for all her paraded air of self-reliance, as in need of protection and companionship. She could never be as free as she pretended to be. And this frontier wildness of life could never completely fill her horizon. She was not, after all, an Indian, and she could never live like an Indian. She had had her glimpse of other ways, her vision of other things, and, whether she willed it or not, they would never be forgotten. They had left their mark on her. He could see that, even through the thin disguise of her Indianizing costume and the quiet backwoods bravado which now rode less lightly on her khaki-clad shoulders.

She colored duskily when she looked up and found him so intently studying her face. Having found that unexpected breach in the wall, he determined to make it wider.

"You feel I shouldn't have come up here?" he said with a challenging new directness.

It was her turn to study his face. He even shifted a little under the sustained candor of her glance.

"I can't see that my feelings count much," she averred, still unrelenting. They hadn't, he remembered, entirely killed her spirit.

"But you intend to remain my camp-manager?" he demanded as they debouched into the more open waters of the lake. Her brow puckered against the strong light as she peered ahead for her landmarks.

"That," she eventually replied, "is for you to decide."

To that assertion, apparently, he found no ready retort, for he sat morosely thoughtful as they throbbed on over the lake-water that rippled and lilted so musically against their tilted bow-timbers. Then he reached into his pocket and moodily took out his pipe and tobacco-pouch. He had just packed the bowl and leisurely searched for a match when Aurora Mary looked sharply up at him.

"Don't smoke!" was her quick command.

He smiled, still leisurely, at the preemptoriness of that command. It was like her, of course, to relapse into the uncouth, to climb back to her tawdry little throne of authority. But there were limits beyond which he could not be coerced. And his smile was still a leisured one as he looked down for a surface sufficiently rough to strike a light. The girl in the stern-seat started to say something, even as his match-end rasped against the seat-edge. But her intention never flowered into actual speech. For even as he struck his match a puff of flame, a puff almost strong enough to be a blast, leaped from the boat-floor up into his face. It smote him like a blow, sending him back over the cross-seat, where he lay stunned.

Aurora Mary, as she saw that curtain of flame shut out their world, knew only too well what had happened. It was the gasoline from the leaking feed-pipe, pooled between the worn boat-ribs, seeping about the floor-boards. It had taken fire from that fatal match-stroke.

It was burning now, with the fury of a furnace, in wavering tongues of pale red crowned with their drifting plumes of darker smoke. And somewhere in their midst lay Allan Somer with the flames licking about his helpless body.

She did not hesitate, for she knew that no man could live long in the midst of those greedy tongues. She caught a vague glimpse of him, through the smoke and flames, and with her crooked arm sheltering her face leaped to his side. She had no time to choose her manner of escape. All she could do was to fling him overboard, fling him stunned and choking into the open lake and leap after him.

The water, still numbingly cold, not only quenched the fire creeping about her khaki jacket but also cleared her brain. She came up alert and watchful, searching for that companioning body in its scorched sodden clothing. But she could get no glimpse of it.

Her heart was tightening in a second wave of terror when she saw Somer slowly emerge to the surface, struggling feebly and ineffectually as he gagged and gasped for air. She was beside him, in three strong strokes, with one outstretched hand holding him up as his dazed eyes cleared and his frenzied hands ceased their foolish clutching at her retreating body. She held him there, at arm's length, in an attitude oddly disdainful, treading water as she waited for him to catch

his breath again.

"We must swim for shore," she told him as he blinked with bloodshot eyes at the burning pyre so close above them.

But he was having difficulty, she could see, in moving, and his forehead, from which the eyebrows were scorched away, frowned at the remoteness of the broken shore-line. It seemed a hopeless distance away.

"No, no—the boat," he gasped, "when it burns out."

"It's no use," she told him. "It will blow up, as soon as the heat gets to the gas-tank. We can't even stay near it."

He glanced hungrily toward that high-floating boat-hull, still intact, for all the cauldron of flame that nested within its timbers.

"It's no use," she repeated. "It'll burn to the water's edge. We've got to swim for it."

He stared toward the shore again and then his gaze sought hers.

"I—I don't believe I can manage," he said in a singularly thinned voice.

"It's all right," she quietly assured him, changing her stroke from left to right. "I can help you."

"It's not—not fair to you," he contended. And he even made a futile effort to pull away from her.

"I can manage," she called out almost sternly. And again his eyes sought hers.

"I don't seem able to swim much," he complained, frowning over his helplessness.

"I'll do it, for both of us," she proclaimed with a touch of imperiousness. She was already drawing him slowly away from the burning wreck. "Rest one hand," she commanded, "on my shoulder."

He surrendered to her will. He surrendered, knowing he had no choice in the matter. Life, he remembered, had the habit of humbling one in the midst of one's pride. He was leaning on a woman, to save himself from a watery grave. He was clinging to a woman, to keep his nose above that chilling blue-green surface that could so easily swallow him up. But the difference between that nose being a mere half-inch above water or a mere half-inch below water was the difference between life and death. He was conscious, as he felt the slow and measured strokes of the body sustaining him, of something more than the strength of that supple machine tarpaulined in scorched khaki. Above and beyond its mere animal endurance was valor, was incorruptible courage, was the crowning gift of mercy. And yet he had sneered at her, he remembered, because in different waters and under different circumstances she had saved the life of John Caver. He had scoffed cheaply at her mock-heroics, had deliberately wounded her with his charges of circuitous self-seeking. And now she was paying him back, in the bitterest coin that could ring on the counter of shame. These same slow-heaving shoulders, on which he was now so glad to rest a numb and helpless hand, were the same shoulders that he had hurled so disdainfully away from him. And he had done his brutal best, in the blind rage of his affronted manhood, to break those same arms that were now battling for his right to breathe, stroke by steady stroke.

Then all thought on the matter ended abruptly. A roar of sound echoed over the quiet water and by half turning his head he could see, through a burst of smoke and flame, charred bits of timber rocketing up into the air. It was the boat blowing up, as the woman beside him had foretold. He could see, as he looked back for the second time, that it was gone, gone completely. And an acuter sense of loneliness swept through him as he stared at the empty lake-surface. He and this woman beside him, in that emptiness, were the only things afloat. But the charred shoulder on which he leaned continued to forge forward, stroke by deliberate stroke.

He wondered, for the first time, if they had a fighting chance. And the question repeated itself to his stunned brain as he steadied himself and blinked up at the shore-line, dark-wooded against the robin-egg blue of the sky. It looked abysmally far away, that serrated sky-line with the pointed spruce along the receding blue ridges. It looked unattainable. And he had no way of helping.

"Just a moment, while I rest," he heard the parted lips so close beside him suddenly gasp. And it came home to him for the first time, as she shifted her position and trod water and gulped in deeper lungfuls of air, that it was costing her more than she pretended. He could see fatigue in her gray-shadowed face and a quickened fall and rise of the wet shoulders.

But her eyes were still resolute.

"Let me try it alone," he cried, wounded by the unfairness of it all. If he had only a bit of driftwood, even an oar, he could still keep afloat and give her that fighting chance of which he was now robbing her. But they were surrounded by nothing but water. And he knew, after still another futile effort, that he could bring her no help.

"It's no use," she even warned him. But he sheered grimly off from her, and made yet another effort, a feeble and floundering effort that ended in failure and a strangle of water in his throat. He was glad enough to feel her hand under his chin, holding him up until he could get his bearings and the breath of life back in his body again.

"You must trust to me," she was telling him. She was swimming on her back, as she spoke, swimming low and supporting him by her two hands clutched under his arms, in a clasp oddly maternal. But it was not so easy, in that position, and the effort soon told on her.

"Try the old way," she gasped, as she turned and made sure he was still beside her.

"I'm not worth it," he said with the abandonment of utter defeat. "Let me go. For God's sake, let me go!"

Her frown was almost an angry one.

"We'll make it," she pantingly contended. "Keep still."

He found himself convulsed by a chill that seemed to drain and dry up the last drop of red blood in his body. But the woman in khaki swam on. The shore seemed nearer. It was nearer, and yet it remained dishearteningly remote.

"You can save yourself," he told her, wondering at the numbness that was taking even the power of suffering from his useless carcass. "Don't bother—bother about me."

He spoke in little more than a whisper, but she must have heard him, for she shifted and turned and clutched a loose fold of his coat-shoulder. She held him that way, swimming with one hand, held him grimly, almost defiantly.

"Don't you want to live?" he said in thin and tremulous complaint as they forged on, stroke by feeble stroke.

"*Not without you!*" she answered in the final candor of a final extremity.

It seemed momentous, to his dulled brain, but he could not entirely satisfy himself as to the source of its importance. She didn't want to live without him. Yet she had fought him, at one time, had almost tried to kill him. Such things as that don't mix. There was something wrong, somewhere. But he hadn't the strength to work it out.

He thought, a moment later, that she was crying. But it was merely her quickened breath coming from her half-opened lips in broken and blubbing rhythm, in a monotonously repeated *blub-blub, blub-blub* of sound as her starved lungs fought for the air no longer coming to them. Then he mistily concluded that she was abandoning him, that she was doing the sensible thing and saving herself. But her abrupt change of position was due to other causes, for she was closer beside him, half-way out of the water, with her two arms about his inert body. He realized, at that, that she was standing upright, that her feet were finally on solid ground.

He knew, as he felt her half carrying and half dragging him ashore, that she had won her battle, that the pleasant blue sky above them and the soft and balsam-scented air about them was not to be shut off from their faces by those icy and engulfing waters. They were saved. They were to come back to life and breathe sweet air and tread firm ground again. And he was equally conscious that he should feel some glow of triumph at this unexpected victory. But that exultation had not the power to rise from the cold numbness of a body so abused. He could only shiver and quake, foolishly, as she staggered up the broken rock with him.

They fell together, like spineless things, on a lichened slope slightly warmed by the sun over head. They lay there, panting, side by side. Somer could neither stop nor control the absurd tremor in his limbs, but his mind cleared and he became more acutely conscious of his own helplessness as he made an effort to rise to his feet. For Aurora Mary was already standing above him, staring with a puckered brow along the broken shore-line that lay between them and Trail-End Camp.

"Can you make it?" she asked. She was stooping over him, helping him in his struggle to rise.

"Yes," he quavered, "I'll make it." But the wires seemed down between his wakened brain and his still torpid body.

"It'll be better," she told him, "if you can keep moving. We can't have a fire until we get to camp."

"I'll make it," he grimly proclaimed. He tried desperately, but it was useless. He went over, limp as a meal sack.

"It's all right," the quiet-voiced woman beside him was saying. "I'll carry you in."

He fought against that, at first, but she overbore him. And a wave of shame went through him as he felt the firm-muscled arms take him up, as he felt the lithe young shoulders steady themselves under his weight. He was ashamed of his weakness, confronted by her strength. His helplessness was a humiliation, an affront to all manhood. And he knew other and deeper sources of shame which he had small wish to explore. He even noticed, when she put him down to rest, that her color had come back, that her cheeks glowed, that her healthy young body was warm from exertion.

"I think I can walk now," he maintained.

"You don't need to," she told him. "The camp's just over the hill there."

"Then I'll crawl to it," he persisted when his floundering efforts to keep on his feet merely brought him to his knees. And he started forward on all fours, tremulously grim, wondering why his face should feel stiff, like a mask, and each arm-movement should bring a dry pain to his hand-backs. But those uncouth and bear-like movements brought her to his side with a coo of pity.

"You can't do that," she cried, the sternness of her voice unedged by the softening light in her eyes. "I'll manage all right."

He felt absurdly childlike as those appropriative arms once more took possession of him and the steadying shoulders once more balanced him on the forward-bent back, the back so fantastically festooned with its scorched and tattered khaki. He felt equally childlike when, a few minutes later, his wet clothing was stripped from him and he was rolled in warm blankets and hot drinks were poured down his unprotesting throat. And when he was put to bed in the white-curtained sleeping-room of the main lodge Aurora Mary rubbed olive-oil on the scorched skin of his face and hands, and buried him under still more blankets and prepared to leave him drowsily content with life again.

"Are you trying to cook me?" he complained with a quavering effort at humor.

"This is the best I can do toward an Indian sweat-tent," she explained as she piled on another Hudson-Bay four-pointer. "And you must try to sleep."

Yet she could not have left him for long, nor could she have gone far from his side, since even through his troubled sleep he had vague memories of her hovering about his bed or listening with an intently inclined ear to his thickened respiration. And when he wakened, later on, with a tightened chest and a clearly defined trouble in breathing, she placed an ample mustard-plaster over his ribs where the knife-blade of pain seemed to strike the deepest.

He never knew, when it was all over, whether he had had pneumonia or merely "a bad chest cold," as Aurora Mary lightly and valorously insisted on terming it. But he did know that for two weeks and more he was a very sick and helpless man. He also knew that Aurora Mary was close at his side, day by day, and that it was only grudgingly the rotund Kippewa Kate and the swarthy Indian Joe were permitted their trivial intrusions on those ministrations of mercy which his nurse regarded as peculiarly her own.

It was one day when he was strong enough to sit up against a bank of teal-feather pillows that he shamelessly asked for a mirror and fell to studying his own face.

"My eyebrows are coming back," he triumphantly announced.

Aurora Mary looked up from her sewing, which she had carried to a chair by the open window.

"And in a week," she solemnly averred, "you'll be as good as ever."

"That's not saying very much," he moodily acknowledged. He sat studying the dusky face bent over its sewing. He could see the siphonizing shadow under the half-turned cheek-bone, the womanly soft line of the rounded chin, the ivory purity of the throat in the revealing side-light, the full-bosomed opulent young body with its inalienable aura of vitality.

And the moment, to the watching man, became memorial. It was about the best, he felt, that life could offer, that shadowy breathing figure so companionably close to him.

"I can't see why you bother about me like this," he proclaimed, with a new wonder in his heart.

"I've a blot to wipe out," she surprised him by saying.

"What blot?" he demanded.

"If you don't know," she announced with her old-time frontier frankness, "it's foolish for me to explain."

He sat looking at her for a full minute of silence. And he found it an easy enough thing to do.

"I rather fancy I'm the bird with a blot or two to wipe out," he said with an effort at levity.

"You're talking too much," she said with equally defensive solemnity.

"I want my pillows straightened," he dissemblingly announced out of the ensuing silence.

She crossed to his bed and attended to the pillows, frowning impersonally as she did so.

"I believe," he said as he adroitly captured her hand, "that you were born to mother the whole wide world."

Her frown was still an impersonal one as she released the captured hand and turned back to her sewing-chair.

"Weren't you?" he insisted, to cover his momentary sense of defeat.

"I'd rather mother *you*," was her unexpected retort. And she picked up her sewing and left him alone to brood over that somewhat inexplicable and enigmatic assertion.



CHAPTER XXII

June, in the Northland, gives only a brief period of darkness to its summer nights. Dawn comes close on the heels of midnight and day merges reluctantly into dusk and dusk once more circles upon the flank of midnight. And at no time is the darkness unqualified and complete.

It had seemed an incredibly long day to Somer. Early that morning Aurora Mary and Indian Joe had set out, by canoe, for Duck Landing, to bring up the supplies awaiting them there. It meant countless hours of hard paddling, and Somer had been outspoken enough in opposing the trip. But Aurora Mary had been equally firm in pointing out that they could not live comfortably without camp supplies, that it was her business to manage Trail-End and see that none of her charges died of slow starvation. She was off, in fact, two full hours before Somer was out of bed, and he stood persuaded, as the long and lonely forenoon wore away, that he was dying of a starvation which no corded bales in a canoe-bottom could ever assuage.

He essayed an hour or two of fishing, in the afternoon, but finally abandoned the hooking and landing of black bass as a murderous and empty pastime. Then he roamed restless and ill at ease about the camp, deciding on ambitious new alterations, a better landing-wharf, a subduing coat for the whitewashed walls, a power-plant at the Pakishan Falls, just over the hill, even a telephone connection, eventually, with the rail-head. And something more efficient than Kippewa Kate as a chef, he decided as he ate his desolate and silent and entirely savorless evening meal.

When, an hour later, he wandered disconsolately down to the boat-landing, he found Pancake crouched there, poignantly motionless and patient, with his dim eyes turned to the open water before him. He too was waiting for Aurora Mary. He too was suffering from the same wordless hunger that gnawed at Somer's heart. That old Malemute, he knew, would neither move nor eat until his mistress came back.

Somer lighted his pipe and sat watching the sun go down behind the dark fringe of the pinelands. But his old restiveness returned, and the immobility of the grizzled wolf-dog with the watching black face between the unmoving fore-paws impressed him as a silent reproof. He resented the patience of that four-footed rival. It sent him, in the end, wandering morosely along the shore-line toward the shadow-hung Point Lefevre, where the dark-plumed gloom of the spruce-grove abruptly brightened into a scattering of white birches, like a complaining child suddenly turning to laughter. For it seemed less desolate there, where the companionable white boles leaned like slender-waisted dryads over the amber-green water shot through with widening arcs of amethyst.

He sat down on a rock-shelf cushioned with moss, watching the afterglow that merged into the pallid green of the North, listening to the sound of the loons and the leap of an occasional fish. There was just enough movement in the air, the balmy and balsam-scented air that should have brought peace to his soul, to keep the young birch leaves alive in a timorously intermittent whisper. There would be a moon, he remembered, some time before midnight, a laggard moon slipping into its last quarter, and the afterglow would be gone and the silver would turn into gold and the slow-wheeling northern stars would still further sadden him with their immensity. He wondered at that growing sense of defenselessness which had the habit of coming to him, of late, in his hours of loneliness. He would never, he knew, make a good hermit. He was not fashioned for solitude. He was, after all, too much a son of the city. And cities, in some way, had the trick of leaving their children too vulnerable to the denuding sword-points of silence.

Somer was still sitting there, moodily watching the opal-misted water darken into a monotone of steel-blue, when he became conscious of a gray-cloaked figure moving toward him. He saw, at a second glance, that it was Aurora Mary. And his pulse quickened, disturbingly, as she came closer. But even when she stood beside him he neither moved nor spoke.

"Should you be out so late?" she asked. And the sober sweetness of her voice, above the awakened whispering of the birch leaves, sent a thrill through his body.

He even laughed a little, at the concern in her voice, for she carried a rug over her arm and he knew it was meant for him.

"Why shouldn't I?" he demanded, resisting the impulse to seize the hand half covered by the trailing blanket-fringe.

"You're not strong," she reminded him. And he laughed, for the second time, at that perpetuated legend of helplessness so

dear to the maternal-hearted. But it was a kindly laugh, for he knew an answering impulse to surround her, in some forlorn way, by the love and softness that had been denied her.

"I'm as strong as an ox," he protested. "And I'm going to sit out here until the moon comes up."

She essayed no answer to that, but linked her arm about the slender white bole of a birch, gazing eastward where a faint crown of gold showed above the black line of the spruce-tops. Her relaxed body made a silhouette against the silver-spangled water beyond the Point.

"There's the moon now," she said in a voice oddly hushed. "The Indians used to call it the Moon of Many Flowers."

He sat silent, watching the misted gold float higher and fill the murmurous summer night with its mild and etherealizing effulgence. That, he told himself, was how love should come into one's life, with the same dark sweet feeling, the same releasing sense of witchery, the same promise of beauty never entirely discerned and never entirely found. It was the world's demand for tenderness, the lark above the ruins, a little cry for light along those shadowy paths man walks but once. It should bring eloquence, and lyric release, and the power to express what lay clamoring behind the bars of the flesh. But life, he knew, was not that simple. And the deeper currents of feeling were not given to sound. It seemed wrong, he felt, that man, who could trace that path but once, must grope so much of the way both silent and alone. For neither mortal love nor sympathy nor pity could bridge the abyss of his essential loneliness of soul. Across the chasm, now and then, an echo. Through the fog, once or twice, the clasp of a friendly hand. But little more.

The woman standing so close to him, so motionless beside the leaning white birch, must have known the same ghostly call for companionship, for Somer could see a new wistfulness about her mistily radiant face and a new languor about the cogitative dark eyes. She had been cheated out of her human share of happiness. She had, he remembered, a tremendous need for tenderness. There were still colossal amends to be made somewhere along that line. He himself had hurt her and made life harder for her. And the time had come for a balancing of that troubled ledger of pride and longing.

Some unseen water-fowl, disturbed in its sleep along the rustling shore-reeds, broke the mesmeric silence with its brief complaint and was still again.

"I'd like to talk to you," Somer said with a new and quiet-noted humility.

There was still abstraction in the misty face turned so slowly toward him.

"About what?" asked Aurora Mary. But she still remained standing beside the birch tree.

"I've been doing a good deal of thinking, these last few days," said the man on the rock-shelf, "and I've just wakened up to what a rotter I've been. It's no wonder I made you hate me."

Her movement, as she looked down at him, was abrupt.

"Hate you?" she echoed, oddly perplexed.

"You do, don't you?" he persisted. He could not see his way clearly. She was, he remembered, both proud and unpredictable, like a high-spirited hunter badly-broken and abused, craving understanding, perhaps, but intractable in the wrong hands. And time alone could bring her comprehension.

"No, I don't hate you," she said with unexpected candor, "or I wouldn't be here."

He rose to his feet, at that, with an abruptness that added to her perplexity. He stood above her, looking down into her vaguely bewildered face.

"Then I'm glad you're still here," he said, none too conscious of the actual words he spoke. But there was a rising vibrato of emotion in his voice that brought a newer alarm to her eyes.

"You must be honest with me," she warned him almost roughly. And he could see, as he took her hand, some growing sense of desperation drain the color out of her face.

He did not answer her in words. But he lifted her hand, her brown and work-hardened hand that could still seem timorous and womanly, and placed it against his side, where his heart was beating with such betraying wildness. He

could see her breath deepen, and catch, and deepen again, and the earlier small frown of perplexity fade from her face.

"Oh, my dear, my dear," he cried with sudden abandon, "I love you. I've loved you in some blind and groping way from the first day I saw you."

She neither moved nor spoke. But her free hand went up to his shoulder and clung there in a childlike gesture of helplessness.

"I love you," he was saying still again as his arms closed about her. "I love you so deeply I can't quite put it into words. But I can give you all that's left of my life, to wipe out those earlier mistakes, to try to make you happier."

She searched his face, a new perplexity in her eyes.

"You'd marry me?" she questioned, fighting to the last, apparently, against some impulse of capitulation.

"I can't be happy without you," he said with his appropriative arms tightening about her. And he could feel the small and abandoned shiver that sped through her body as she suddenly relaxed and went limp on his shoulder.

"I love you," she whispered up to him in the moonlight. "I always have." And her arms closed with a shameless new hunger about his neck.

The moon was higher when they looked up at the far-off call of a wolf across the northern night. It came to them faintly, but it seemed to awaken something ancestral in the listening woman's heart, to chill the too keen and abundant rapture in her singing body.

"I—I won't be easy to live with," she warned the man at her side.

"I'll take my chance on that," he replied, acutely conscious of the passionate brown fingers thrust deep in his hair.

"I'm a hell-cat," she quaveringly averred.

"With a heart of gold," he contended. "And I'm not all meekness myself, remember."

"But you could never tame me," she valorously persisted.

"Life will do that for us," he amended. "And I've always liked that streak of wildness in you. It may make up for all my New England smugness."

"You'll have to be terribly patient with me," she continued as she nestled closer in his arms.

"That's easy," he murmured with his lips against the dusky ivory cheek. "It's always easy when you're incurably in love with a person."

"But you can't love anything that's three-quarters timber wolf," she dolorously reminded him.

"And one quarter angel," he answered as he stroked the crisp hair as dark as a crow's wing.

"Does it mean we'd have to leave Trail-End?" she asked out of the silence that had fallen over them.

"No," he told her, "we'll come back to Trail-End every summer. And we'll always live where we can have elbow-room. And every now and then, when we're tired of the city, we'll go to some far-away corner of the world and you can shoot guanacos in the Andes or black leopards in the Himalayas and have the Sunday papers showing you with an express rifle across your arm and your foot on a rhinoceros and——"

But she shook her head at that, with an arresting hand across his murmuring lips.

"That's not what I want, at all," she told him with an abrupt new intensity.

"Then what must it be?" he indolently inquired, not so conscious of his words as he was of the narcotizing warm body so close to his own.

"I want something, somebody, to take the place of my lost Martie," she said with a feminine soft fierceness that brought

him up short, sending the indolent quiet smile from his face.

But it was only for a moment. The shadow fell, and passed, and left him, left him with a more poignant glamour along the moonlit lonely hills so crowded with their ghosts of yesterday and to-morrow.

"Of course," he whispered as he fell to stroking the hand that lay relaxed on his knee. "Of course."

His quietness must have disturbed her, for she turned on him with a new intensity, an intensity touched with wistfulness.

"But you do love me?" she demanded.

"More than life itself," he told her as he cupped the dusky oval of her face between his hands.

"Then kiss me," she commanded. And he caught his breath, contentedly, at the promise that lay in the fierceness of that cry.

THE END

BY ARTHUR STRINGER

THE DOOR OF DREAD
THE MAN WHO COULDN'T SLEEP
THE HOUSE OF INTRIGUE
TWIN TALES
THE PRAIRIE WIFE
THE PRAIRIE MOTHER
THE PRAIRIE CHILD
THE WIRE TAPPERS
PHANTOM WIRES
THE GUN RUNNER
THE DIAMOND THIEVES
LONELY O'MALLEY
EMPTY HANDS
POWER
IN BAD WITH SINBAD
WHITE HANDS

[The end of *The Wolf Woman* by Arthur Stringer]