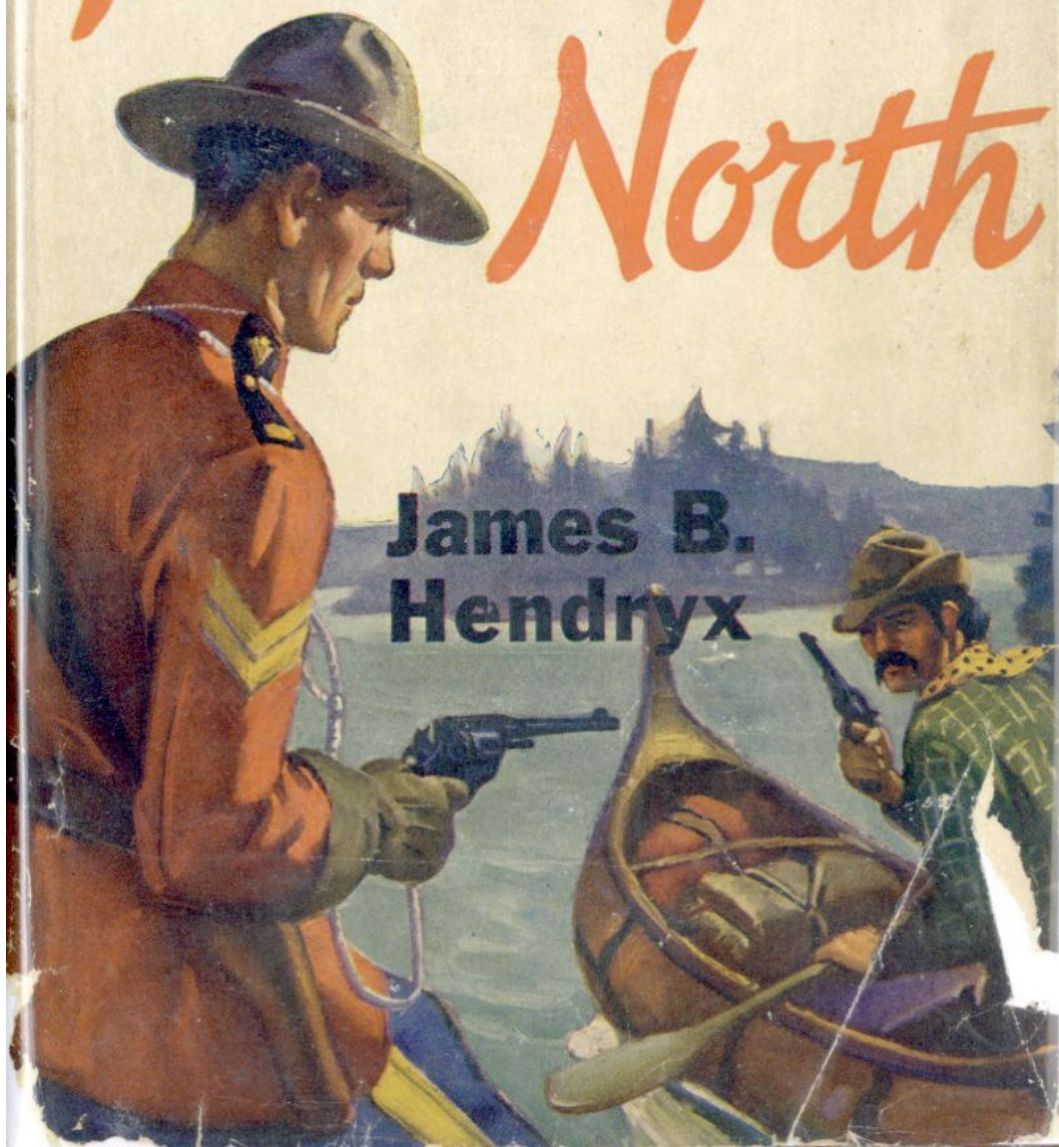


Corporal Downey finds that poker can be played with guns for cards and timberland for chips

Blood of the North

**James B.
Hendryx**



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By
JAMES B. HENDRYX

WHEN Angus Murchie, son of a Scotch father and an Indian mother, came to the trading post run by his father, the old Scot told him that treacherous Jacques Larue, a rival trader and a whisky smuggler, had tried to murder him and would probably try again. Knowing the wild blood that flowed in young Angus' veins, Colin Murchie made his son promise that even if Larue succeeded, Angus would not kill him personally, but would help the law seek vengeance. Angus reluctantly agreed.

The next day the old man was shot down in cold blood by Larue, and Angus, true to his word, had to hold his fire.

Corporal Downey of the Mounted took charge, and Larue was tried in Edmonton. The murderer won an acquittal. The jury preferred a white man's word to that of Angus, a half-breed. Outside the courtroom, Angus told the sneering Larue that no amount of lying could save him from paying the penalty for his crime. Downey saw the leer die from the man's eyes and a flash of fear replace it before Larue hurried away.

Larue returned to the North, but terror clung to him. Demoniactal laughter echoed in the stillness around his campfire. Guns disappeared. Food and whisky caches were destroyed. His Indians, afraid, deserted him. Great black eyes watched him out of the night. He couldn't sleep.

How Angus creates a psychological world of horror to destroy the murderer is a tale of revenge you will long remember.

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1012 Walnut St., Philadelphia

Books by
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BLOOD OF THE NORTH

JAMES B. HENDRYX



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Blood of the North

I

A Friendship Is Shattered

THE deep voice of Duncan McPherson, the factor at Fort Chipewyan, boomed a welcome to the big man who stood framed in the doorway of the trading room:

“Come in, Colin Murchie! An’ how’s things on the Ptarmigan? ’Tis a long time I’ve na seen ye.”

“Aye, ’tis three year, come fall,” replied the other, advancing into the room and seating himself on the counter. “I mind ’twas at the mission of Father Giroux I seen ye last. ’Twas the last year Angus was i’ the school.”

“Aye, an’ the last for my Jean too. The next year I put her in a convent in Montreal.”

“Losh, Duncan McPherson! An’ why wad ye be lockin’ the lass in a convent, when she’d one day make a gude wife for some mon i’ the ootlands? Time’ll come when Angus’ll be wantin’ a wife, mayhap.”

“Aye, an’ Jean could go further an’ fare worse. But ’tis na that she wad take the veil an’ become a sister or what not. ’Tis only that she can get education beyont what they teach at the mission.”

“An’ what gude will it do when she gets it? Father Giroux is a fine mon. No better ever set foot i’ the ootlands. But, havin’ book learnin’ himsel’, he thinks ithers should ha’ it also. He’s be’n wantin’ Angus should go to some university in Montreal or Toronto.”

“He’s a likely lad, young Angus. For two year, the noo, I ha’ watched him come an’ go on the river. This year McDonald made him boss scowman for the brigade. He’s worth only two men on a portage—an’ only five in a fight. A gude head on strong shoulders. Ye may weel be proud o’ him, Colin Murchie. But mebbe ye’re na doin’ the best for the lad by holdin’ him here i’ the ootlands.”

“I’m na holdin’ him. He’ll be twenty-one an’ his ain mon, come August. When he returns from down-river I’ll be offerin’ him a full pardnership on the Ptarmigan. If he wants to go to a college he’s welcome. ’Tis my job to fit him for the life o’ a fur trader, an’ to that end I ha’ kep’ him i’ the bush an’ on the rivers.”

A cackling laugh issued from the tobacco-stained white beard of an oldster who had sat unnoticed in a chair tilted back against a row of barrels. "Fur trader—hell! Whyn't he go prospectin'? Y'u s'pose I'd waste my time tradin' sugar an' tea an' blankets to the damn Injuns fer a lot of stinkin' pelts when any day I'm liable to strike the mother lode?"

"Foosh, ye crackpot!" exclaimed McPherson with a contemptuous glance at the oldster. "Ye talk o' wastin' yer time—how many years ha' ye be'n peckin' about amongst the rocks? An' what ha' ye got to show for it?"

"Y'u won't be callin' me crackpot when I strike the mother lode," retorted the old man in a high, brittle voice. "Better'n fifty year I be'n huntin' it—an' now I know where it's at. Couple o' months, now, an' I'll be into the gold, right where she starts. I've panned plenty of placer stuff, an' I know where I can pan more. But I wouldn't stop to fool with it. It ain't nothin' but float. It's the mother lode I'm after. I've found ile, too—long before the Tar Sands Company knowed they was ile in the country. I know a place where it squdges out of the mud on the edge of a slough. But I wouldn't fool with that neither. It's dirty an' sticky an' it stinks. Gold's bright an' it's clean."

"Ye make light o' ile an' placer gold an' fur," retorted McPherson, "an' yet ye fetched in a few pelts to trade fer what little grub'll run ye a couple o' months at the most. An' I took pity on ye, or I couldn't ha' gi' ye that much."

"Shore I fetched in some pelts to trade fer grub. I've traded placer gold fer it too. A man's got to eat an' keep goin' till he strikes the mother lode, ain't he? You jest wait a couple of months, now, an' I'll be into it; an' then I'll sell out fer millions—millions, I say—an' it'll all be mine to do as I dang please with. You know what I'm goin' to do when I get all them millions? I'm goin' to git to hell outa this damn country, an' I ain't never goin' to paddle no canoe agin—an' I ain't never goin' to drive no dogs, neither. Nussir, I ain't a-goin' to ride on nothin' littler'n a steamboat. An' I'm a-goin' to drive horses. I'm a-goin' to New York, an' London, an' Paris, an' I'm a-goin' to buy me a phaeton, er mebbe even a barouche, an' a harness all trimmed with silver, er mebbe gold. An' I'll hire me a nigger all dressed up in a blue suit with brass buttons on it, er mebbe a red suit, an' I'll let him drive when I git tired. An' I'll git me a shave an' a white suit, an' another one too. An' I'll ride up an' down the streets, an' all the folks'll look, an' the wimmin too, an' they'll say, 'There goes Old Man Winnie, that found the mother lode.' An' if I want to I'll hire me a hack an' make the feller go wherever I tell him to, an' I'll set inside an' look out the winder."

Colin Murchie grinned tolerantly. "A phaeton, he says, er a barouche! God above us! He'll ha' to do his shoppin' in some museum."

"Aye," said McPherson, "but ye'll remember, Colin, he ain't be'n oot the bush i' fifty year."

"Ye're damn right, I ain't," piped the oldster, "but I'm a-goin' out this year—shore. An' when I hit them big towns the folks is all goin' to take notice!"

"I ha' na doot ye're right," grinned McPherson and turned to Murchie. "How about a wee bit tipple, Colin? Do na tell me ye're na dry."

"I wad na tell ye a thing like thot an' expect ye to believe me. Fetch oot the jug, an' I'll gi' the lie to the thought."

Old Man Winnie rose from his chair with alacrity and approached the counter as McPherson produced a jug and three glasses.

Murchie raised a glass well filled with the amber liquor. "Here's to yer gude health, Duncan," he said. "Ye're holdin' up weel, fer an auld mon."

"Auld mon! Look at the gray in yer ain beard, Colin Murchie, befoor ye talk of ithers gittin' auld!"

"Humph! 'Tis only a white hair here an' yon. I'm as gude a mon as I iver was."

"Aye—mebbe. An' I'd be better if onct I could get rid of the damn gout."

"'Tis a sign o' age an' high livin'," opined Murchie. "An' ye had a tradin' post of yer ain, Duncan, ye'd ha' na time to get the gout."

"Ye're an aulder mon than me, an' ought to know," countered McPherson. "But as fer high livin', losh, mon, I handle ten times the fur ye do in a year's time!"

"Aye—mebbe. But on the fur I handle on the Ptarmigan the profits is mine."

"An' the losses too—don't fergit the losses, Colin."

"I ha' na met wi' ony losses yet. Though I'll admit that the last few years has be'n bad."

"It's the damn free traders," opined McPherson.

"I'm a free trader mysel'," reminded Murchie.

"Aye, but ya ha' yer ain post, an' ye refuse to trade liquor. I was thinkin' more o' the hooch runners, like Jacques Larue."

At the name Old Man Winnie chuckled. "He, he, he. I don't blame ya fer not likin' Jacques Larue. He's be'n over on Lake o' the Wind."

“Lake o’ the Wind!” cried both traders in unison.

“Shore—that’s where I located the mother lode—in them high hills on the west side.”

“The Lake o’ the Wind Injuns’ll na be tradin’ wi’ Jacques Larue,” opined McPherson. “Auld Miqua’ll fetch his fur here, an’ the ithers’ll follow.”

“Fetch his fur here!” cried Murchie. “Ha, ha—ye poor gillie! Miqua an’ his band will trade wi’ me this winter. Ye’ll wait an’ see!”

“Y’u’ll both wait long to see Miqua agin,” taunted Old Man Winnie, a knowing leer in his watery eyes. “An’ y’u’ll be gittin’ no fur off’n the Lake o’ the Wind Injuns, neither. Jacques Larue has got their fur a’ready.”

“What d’ye mean?” demanded Murchie, scowling at the old prospector. “Has yon whusky-peddlin’ spawn o’ the devil be’n tamperin’ wi’ the Lake o’ the Wind natives? Speak oot what ye know, if anything, instead o’ standin’ theer chucklin’ like the silly dolt ye are!”

“He, he, he! Miqua’s dead, an’ his Injuns has traded with Jacques Larue.”

“Dead!”

“Shore he’s dead. They drowned him. I seen ’em do it. They didn’t know I seen ’em. I was up in the rocks on the west side—where the mother lode is——”

“Damn yer mither lode!” cried McPherson. “Tell us aboot Miqua! Ye said ye seen ’em drown him. Who done it—an’ why?”

“It was Paul Blind Man an’ the Big Bear done it. When Miqua went out to lift his net they paddled clost an’ tipped his canoe over, an’ then they paddled ashore an’ left Miqua out there to drown. Larue was waitin’ fer ’em in the bush at the edge of the lake, an’ when they come ashore Miqua had quit splashin’ around an’ had sunk—an’ Larue give ’em a jug. Then he hung round an’ traded an’ got their fur, an’ they was all drunk.”

“Mon, kin ye swear it?” demanded Murchie.

“Shore. I kin swear the mother lode’s in them rocks on the west side. There’s a quartz outcrop there——”

“Foosh wi’ yer mither lodes an’ yer outcrops! Ye daftie! Kin ye na swear Larue was waitin’ fer ’em an’ gi’ ’em a jug?”

“You don’t believe the mother lode’s in them rocks, eh? I’ll show you! You won’t be callin’ me no daftie a couple of months from now. You wait an’ see.”

McPherson's Indian cook thrust her head into the room to announce supper, and the three adjourned to the dining room, where, all through the meal, both traders tried in vain to extract further information from the oldster, whose warped brain refused to be diverted from its one and only thought—the mother lode. Piqued at the persistent questioning of the two, when the meal was finished, Old Man Winnie retired sullenly to his tent, leaving the Scots to argue and bicker far into the night over the jug.

Next morning Corporal Downey arrived on a routine patrol from up-river and listened while the two repeated the tale Old Man Winnie had told them the night before. The officer nodded thoughtfully.

“It ain't the first murder I've suspected Larue of havin' a hand in,” he said. “But so far I've never be'n able to get proof. We know he's be'n peddlin' hooch fer years, but we've never be'n able to make the charge stick. He's smart, all right, but there ain't no man smart enough to keep on committin' crimes forever. He's bound to slip up sometime—an' maybe this is the time. I'll have a talk with Old Man Winnie, an' then I'll swing around by Lake o' the Wind. The men from this detachment can't handle it, what with Sergeant Blake laid up with a broken leg, an' Constable Jones with the flu.”

An hour's patient questioning failed to elicit any further information from the oldster, who rambled on about the mother lode and what he would do with the millions he was going to receive from the sale of it. Finally Downey gave it up, and when he pulled out for Lake o' the Wind, Old Man Winnie accompanied him.

Left to themselves, the two old Scots resumed their tippling and arguing. Opening the iron safe, McPherson withdrew a single silver fox skin which he handed to Murchie for inspection.

“'Tis one I wad na trust i' the fur loft wi' the rest,” he confided. “An' how wad ye like to ha' a solid pack like thot one, Colin Murchie?”

The big man fondled the pelt with the reverence of one who knows fur, holding it this way and that to catch the tiny glints of light that flashed from the beautifully silvered hairs. “Wheer'd ye git the likes o' this?” he asked as he gently stroked the fur with his fingers.

“From Wahteno, the Yellowknife.”

“Wahteno! D'ye mean ye traded wi' Wahteno when weel ye know he's owin' me debt he has na paid the past two year? 'Tis a fine friend ye are, McPherson, after me refusin' a dozen different times to trade wi' the Chipewyans when I knowed they owed ye debt! I sent 'em here to trade.”

“I just took the one peltie,” explained McPherson, striving to mollify the irate trader. “He had ither fur. I sent him to ye wi’ the rest.”

“But ye took the pick! Ye took a pelt the like o’ which a trader handles mebbe it’s the onct in a lifetime—an’ ye left me the ruck! An’ he never even come to me wi’ that. His debt’s na paid the yet!”

“Thot’s na fault o’ mine,” defended McPherson. “I told him to go to ye. He left here wi’ his fur—though I did hear, later, that he traded it to Jacques Larue for whusky.”

“Aye, the worthless, no-’count scut! But thot does na clear yer skirts, Duncan McPherson! Ye traded wi’ an Injun ye knowed was in debt to me!”

“Listen, Colin——”

“Do na ‘Colin’ me! To the likes o’ ye I’m Mither Murchie!”

“’Twas but the one pelt—an’ ’twas by way o’ getting back at ye for the time ye stopped an Injun on the river when ye weel knew he was headin’ fer here to trade—an’ ye traded him oot o’ a pelt as gude as this one. D’ye mind that time, Colin Murchie?”

“Aye, but ’twas na a like case, an’ weel ye know it! Thot Injun was a Swampy Cree. He was na in yer debt an’ was like to trade anywheer. ’Twas fair tradin’.”

“’Twas na owerly fair—an’ him headin’ fer here—an’ ye know it.”

“’Twas fair enough. ’Twas na onderhanded trick like ye played on me. ’Tis little better than a thief ye are, Duncan McPherson! I’m done wi’ ye! D’ye hear? I’m done wi’ ye fer all time!” With which wrathful denunciation the big man slammed the pelt onto the counter and strode from the room. Nor did he give so much as a backward glance as he righted his canoe and, stepping into it, headed down-river.

II

Corporal Downey Investigates

DROPPING down the Rivière-des-Rochers for a short distance below Fort Chipewyan, Old Man Winnie, who had volunteered to guide Corporal Downey into the Lake o' the Wind country, headed up a snye, or false channel, and so into a small nameless river whose ascent was an alternation of interminable windings through flat spruce swamps, and short rough portages where the water plunged over rock dikes or dashed in seething fury against the rocks of the numerous rapids.

On the afternoon of the second day they left the river and proceeded by a series of small lakes and portages toward a long line of hills that showed blue-gray in the distance. It was in these hills, the oldster assured Downey, he had at last found the mother lode.

"How do you know it's the mother lode?" asked the officer as they stretched out beside the fire in the evening.

"How do I know it? Cripes, I seen it! A vein of quartz damn near two foot thick, an' she outcrops purty high up, right on the west shore of the Lake o' the Wind."

"But you've prospected a long time. You must of run onto plenty of quartz outcroppings before."

"Shore I have—dozens of 'em—mebbe hundreds. But they wasn't none of 'em the mother lode."

"How do you know this one is?"

"It stands to reason, that's how! Cripes, the mother lode's bound to be someplace, ain't it? An' if it ain't nowheres else it must be there. I got some of it shot down. But it's slow work, drillin' all alone. I figger she dips, back in the hill a ways. An' that's where I'll strike it. I kin shoot into there in a couple of months time—if my giant holds out."

"What if it don't hold out?"

"I'll git some more then. Hell, I be'n shootin' veins an' gittin' more giant fer better'n fifty year. I'd ort to know how to go at it."

"You sure ought," agreed Downey. "But if you had a pardner it wouldn't be so slow."

“What—me work like a dog, an’ starve an’ freeze fer fifty year, an’ then, jest when I’ve found the mother lode, take on some pardner to divide up all them millions with! You must think I’m crazy!”

“Ain’t you never thought you had the mother lode before?”

“Oh, shore, plenty of times—mebbe a hundred er more. But I was wrong them times. That’s how I know I’m right this time. It stands to reason a man can’t be wrong only so many times, an’ then he’s bound to be right. An’ it stands to reason that he’s bound to find the mother lode the last time he tries—’cause when he finds it he ain’t a-goin’ to try no more. Well, this here’s the last time I’ve tried, ain’t it? So it’s bound to be the mother lode.”

“*Good night!*” breathed Corporal Downey. “Don’t you never get discouraged?”

“Who—me? Cripes, I should say not! If I’d of got discouraged I wouldn’t never of found the mother lode, would I? Hell, I knowed I’d strike it sometime if I kep’ on huntin’. An’ I was right. A man don’t want to be in no hurry if he’s huntin’ the mother lode.”

“I guess that’s right,” agreed Downey. “An’ you was there by this outcrop when you seen Miqua git drowned?”

“Shore I was. I’d jest finished drillin’ a hole an’ I set down fer to take a smoke an’ I looked down to the lake an’ seen Miqua tendin’ his net. Then I seen this other canoe shove out from shore an’ paddle over to Miqua, an’ I seen it was Paul Blind Man an’ the Big Bear in it, an’ I thought it was funny if they’d be helpin’ Miqua.”

“Why?”

“’Cause Miqua was a kind of chief of that band of Crees, an’ the others mostly done like he said. I was down to their camp the day before, which it’s on a p’int a little ways north of my camp, an’ that was the day Larue come along an’ wanted to trade ’em some lickfer fer fur. But Miqua told ’em not to trade with Larue—not fer his lickfer, nor his other stuff neither.”

“Larue had some other trade goods along, did he?”

“Yeah, but it wasn’t nothin’ but junk, like most of them free traders sells. An’ Miqua told Larue if he sold any lickfer to anyone in the camp he’d tell the police. An’ Larue said he wouldn’t—but he sold some to Paul Blind Man an’ the Big Bear jest the same.”

“Did you see him sell it?”

“No, but they was both kind of drunk that day, an’ next mornin’ I heard ’em quarrelin’ with Miqua.”

“That was the day Miqua was drowned?”

“Yeah. It was ’long about noon they done it.”

“How many natives were camped on the point?”

“Oh, mebbe fifty, sixty, countin’ the young’uns. I never counted ’em.”

“Now you say you seen Paul Blind Man an’ the Big Bear paddle out to Miqua where he was lookin’ at his net. What happened then?”

“Well, like I said, I was settin’ there takin’ a smoke an’ a-watchin’ Miqua tendin’ his net, an’ I seen this canoe shove off from shore——”

“From the camp of the Injuns?”

“No, from down the other way—south of where I was settin’. An’ when I seen who was in it I thought it was funny if they’d be helpin’ Miqua with his net. So I kep’ on a-watchin’ ’em, an’ I seen ’em paddle right up agin his canoe, an’ Paul Blind Man give Miqua a shove, an’ the Big Bear reached out an’ tipped his canoe over, an’ then they paddled away as fast as they could—back where they come from. Miqua, he splattered around a-grabbin’ at the canoe, but it seemed like he couldn’t git hold of it, an’ pretty soon he sunk. An’ jest then I seen Larue standin’ on a rock watchin’ Miqua too. An’ then the two in the canoe landed where Larue was, an’ I seen him pass ’em a jug.”

“If you seen all that so plain, how was it the Injuns couldn’t see it from the camp?”

“ ’Count of an island bein’ in the road. Miqua had his net set in behind the island—south of it—an’ the camp lays north. They couldn’t see nothin’ from the camp—couldn’t even see them two shove off from shore, an’ couldn’t see Larue where he stood on that flat rock. I guess that’s why they went there—Larue prob’ly figgered it out.”

“Do the other Injuns suspect Miqua was murdered?”

“No. Leastwise, I don’t figger they do. They can’t none of ’em talk English except Paul Blind Man an’ the Big Bear—they both worked on the river. Miqua, he could talk a little, an’ his woman, too, but the rest of ’em can’t talk nothin’ but Injun.”

“When did they find out that Miqua was dead?”

“Well, they was an offshore wind an’ pretty quick Miqua’s canoe drifted around the p’int of the island, headin’ out in the lake. An’ I guess some of them in the camp seen it driftin’ along upside down, ’cause all to onct they was all hollerin’ an’ runnin’ up an’ down an’ p’intin’ at it, an’ then a lot of canoes shoved off an’ paddled out there, an’ after while they come back fetchin’ Miqua’s canoe with ’em.”

“Did you go down to the camp?”

“Oh, shore; they was all raisin’ hell down there an’ howlin’ an’ hollerin’, so I went down.”

“Did you talk to Miqua’s wife? Does she think it was an accident?”

“Yeah—what little she kin talk. They all think it was an accident. If she don’t she never let on.”

“Did Paul Blind Man and the Big Bear come back to the camp?”

“In a little while they did. An’ Larue too. They claimed they was down to Larue’s camp, an’ they heard the rookus, so they come up to find out what was the matter.”

“Did they find Miqua’s body?”

“Yeah, the next day they did—when they went out an’ lifted Miqua’s net they found him ketched in it. So they fetched him ashore an’ buried him there on the p’int.”

“How long ago did this happen?”

“’Bout a week. I was low on grub, an’ I hit out fer Chipewyan the day they found him—an’ it took me three days to fetch the fort, an’ I stayed there two days, an’ this is two days we be’n comin’ in.”

“Was Larue still on Lake o’ the Wind when you left?”

“Shore he was. Hell, he’ll stay there till he gits all their fur. He had the most of it ’fore I come away. When they knowed Miqua was dead they begun to trade with Larue, fer lickin’ an’ goods. Paul Blind Man an’ the Big Bear, they’re the bosses now—an’ they don’t give a damn about the rest of the Injuns, jest so they git all the lickin’ they want.”

Corporal Downey sat for a long time staring into the little fire. Finally he spoke: “If Larue’s still on Lake o’ the Wind I’ve got a chance of gittin’ him cold fer sellin’ liquor to Injuns, an’ havin’ liquor in possession in prohibited territory. The murder’ll be harder. Anyways, I’ve got a corpus delicti.”

“You’ve got a which?”

“I’ll have Miqua’s body where I kin produce it, to show that he’s dead.”

“Cripes, anyone with any sense would know he was dead if he laid out there in the lake all night ketched in a fish net!”

“That’s right,” grinned Downey. “Mebbe even a jury could figure that out. Of course Larue an’ them Injuns, Paul Blind Man an’ the Big Bear, ain’t goin’ to talk—an’ what talkin’ they do will be lies. The case will rest squarely on your testimony.”

“On my which?”

“On what you tell the judge an’ the jury at the trial. If you go down there to Edmonton an’ tell ’em jest what you’ve told me there’s a good chance

that the jury will believe you.”

“But I ain’t goin’ to Edmonton. I ain’t got no time to. I want to git into the mother lode before snow flies. I’m kinda tired of winterin’ in this damn country. I’m a-goin’ to New York an’ London an’ Paris, an’ begin spendin’ my money. I ain’t so young as I use’ to be no more; an’ what with all them millions I’ll have, I won’t never git ’em spent onlest I hurry up an’ git at it.”

“That’s right,” Downey tactfully agreed, “but Miqua was a friend of yours, wasn’t he?”

“Oh, shore, Miqua was all right.”

“Well, wouldn’t you like to see his murderers hanged?”

“Yeah, it would look all right. I’d kinda like to see it.”

“Wouldn’t you like to help hang ’em?”

“Oh, shore, I’d help—if I was there, an’ the ones that hung ’em was shorthanded.”

“I mean, wouldn’t you be willin’ to go on the witness stand in court an’ tell what you seen?”

“Nope—I ain’t got no time to fool around with no courts. I’m too busy.”

Downey smiled tolerantly. “Listen, Winnie, when the time comes all I want you to do is to come down to Edmonton an’ tell ’em what you told me about seein’ them two Injuns tip Miqua’s canoe over an’ leave him there to drown, an’ that Larue stood there lookin’ on an’ then passed ’em a jug. Will you do that, as a favor to me?”

The old man pondered the proposition. Finally he spoke: “You’re a good fella, Downey—everyone knows that—an’ I wouldn’t mind doin’ you a good turn. But it’s like this: I got to stick right here till I git into the mother lode. It won’t only be a couple of months—er mebbe three. After I sell out an’ git my millions an’ git out of this damn country, so I won’t never have to come back here no more, then I’ll go to court fer you an’ tell ’em jest what I seen. But long as I’ve got to stay in this country I ain’t goin’ to talk no more than a fish. ’Cause Larue an’ them two Injuns would do me like they done Miqua—an’ don’t you fergit it!”

“But if I arrest the three of ’em an’ hold ’em in jail till the trial, an’ then they git convicted an’ hanged, they couldn’t never do nothin’ to you.”

“No, mebbe not,” agreed the oldster. “But you got to remember that there’s goin’ to be three of them claimin’ they didn’t kill Miqua to only me claimin’ they did—an’ s’pose the damn-fool jury would believe them three? They’d git turned loose an’ they’d hit right back here to Lake o’ the Wind—an’ then where’d I be at? Nussir. I’ve worked long an’ hard to find the

mother lode, an' I figger I'd be a damn fool to go an' git killed jest when I'd found it. The best I kin do is jest like I said—when I git my millions, so I don't have to come back here no more, then I'll go to court an' tell 'em what I seen."

"Of course," replied Downey, "you know I could arrest you an' hold you in the Fort Saskatchewan jail till the trial, as a material witness?"

"Nope. I ain't done nothin' but mind my own business, an' you can't put a man in jail fer that. But even if you did, it wouldn't do you no good, 'cause I'd be mad an' I wouldn't tell 'em a damn thing—less'n it was a bunch of lies, so them three would figger I was on their side."

"I guess," said Corporal Downey with a wry grin, "my murder case would fall through. But I'm goin' on in there an' try to pin some kind of a liquor charge on Larue."

"Shore, you go ahead an' do that—but don't git me mixed up in it. I don't know nothin' about nothin'. But I do know that Larue would kill a man that helped the police git him on a licker case jest as quick as he would fer murder. I ain't even goin' along with you to Lake o' the Wind. Larue might be there an' he might figger I fetched you in; an' if he's gone Paul Blind Man an' the Big Bear would be there, an' they'd figger the same way. I'm goin' to stay out here along this crick an' hunt me some meat. They's too many Injuns huntin' around the lake, an' the moose is all scairt. You kin git along without me now. You can't miss the lake—it lays jest behind that highest peak. If Larue's gone an' you want to foller him, go down to the end of that deep bay on the south side of the lake an' portage acrost the ridge—you'll find a trail there—an' that lets you onto Fishin' River, that empties into Lake Athabasca. That's the way Larue come in, an' it's prob'ly the way he'll go out with his fur. I'm goin' to hang around here three, four days, an' when I git back there I'll tell them Injuns I never even seen you."

The following morning as Corporal Downey pulled out for Lake o' the Wind the oldster thrust out his hand. "Well, so long, Corp'ral, an' good luck. An' don't fergit—you kin count on me. Jest as soon as I git my millions fer the mother lode you holler. I'll be in New York er London er Paris, but I'll come hell a-whoopin', an' we'll hang them three damn cusses so high the crows can't find 'em."

"All right," grinned Downey, shaking the talonlike hand. "I won't ferget. I'll be countin' on you."

III

Angus Murchie Makes a Promise

EARLY in August young Angus Murchie stepped ashore in front of his father's trading post on the Ptarmigan, drew his canoe from the water, overturned it, and straightened up to allow his gaze to rest for a moment on the flag that floated proudly from its staff. In letters of white blazoned against a crimson field he read the single word:

MURCHIE

Then his gaze shifted to the canyon a few yards upstream where the Ptarmigan thundered down through a rock-studded gorge in a smother of seething white water that dashed spray high against the sides and sent a gauzy column of mist rising higher even than the towering rock walls.

As the late afternoon sunlight, striking aslant the column of mist, resolved into rainbow colors, the lad's heart swelled almost to bursting within his breast. This was home! Always there had been the rainbow in the column of rising mist—always the roar of the rapid. And always the rough, frowning rock walls and the dark green vista of spruce with its spires like spear points reaching into the sky. And always the nearer, more comforting sound as the released water purred softly past the landing, its surface flecked and splotted with the foam of the roaring rapid. And the flag; and the long, low, log trading post, with the living quarters in the rear—all just as it had been since he could first remember.

Home—but there was one void that never would be filled. The lad swallowed the growing lump in his throat and instinctively his eyes raised to the sodded mound that showed on the verge of the transverse rock dike—the grave of his Indian mother, sleeping her eternal sleep high above the roar of her river. Then they shifted to the gnarled bole of the banksian tree that stood within arm's reach of him, close beside the river. It was in the shade of this tree that she used to sit during the long warm hours of summer, her deft fingers plying her needle in the fashioning of garments or in stitching beads in bright patterns on his tiny moccasins and soft fawn-skin leggings. And it was here he used to run to her when play had tired his wee body, and she would lay aside her needlework and gather him into her lap and croon softly

to him until his eyes grew heavy with sleep, and the rainbow mist and the mighty roar of the rapid and the soft crooning voice blended into oblivion.

He turned at the sound of a deep, booming voice, to see Colin Murchie standing in the door of the trading room. “Welcome home, lad! I was afeared ye’d na be makin’ it in time.”

“Father Giroux told me you hoped I’d be here by the seventh. So when I got to McMurray I quit the outfit and came on here. This is the sixth, isn’t it?”

“Aye, ’tis the sixth. But I hope ye di’ na leave um shorthanded by quittin’. A mon should stay wi’ a job till it’s done.”

“No, I told McDonald you wanted me by the seventh, and he let me go.”

“Duncan McPherson told me McDonald had made ye boss scowman,” said the older man, a touch of pride in his voice.

“Yes, he doubled my wages and wanted me to promise to take the brigade down next summer.”

“An’ did ye promise him?”

“No, I told him I’d talk with you first. I didn’t know but what you had other plans.”

“Aye, I ha’ ither plans, lad. But ye’ll na be obligated by ’em. D’ye ken why I wanted ye here on the seventh?”

“No. I couldn’t figure it out. But I knew you must have a good reason.”

“Aye, a gude reason indeed. But come, let’s fetch chairs an’ sit here i’ the shade o’ the tree—yer mither’s tree, I call it. ’Twas here she used to sit an’ sew. She loved to hear the roar o’ the rapids. It spoke to her, she said. But what it told her I never knew.”

Seated in the shade of the banksian, both filled their pipes. The older man spoke. “So ye di’ na ken why I wanted ye here on the seventh? D’ye na rec’lect ’tis yer birthday?”

“Why, so it is! I never gave it a thought—so many birthdays have passed unnoticed.”

“Aye, but they was birthdays o’ na account. Although had yer mither stayed wi’ us, she’d no doot ha’ took account o’ them a’. I rec’lect the first three—the only ones she lived to see. Theer was presents for ye, an’ a cake wi’ wee candles. She was proud o’ her little mon—an’ she’d be prouder still o’ the mon ye are the noo.”

The younger man slanted the other a glance. He knew his father as a hard man, a God-fearing man, a man of stern and unbending justice. Had he, the boy wondered, a softer side? Aloud he said with a deprecatory smile:

"I don't know as there's so much to be proud of."

"Theer's mony a thing ye don't know that yer betters does," retorted Colin harshly. "I'm na mon to be maunderin' idle praise. But tomorrow, lad, ye'll be yer ain mon, an' 'tis weel ye take stock o' yersel'. Ye're the best mon on the river, or McDonald would na ha' made ye boss scowman. Ye're not owerly fond o' the jug, nor ha' I heard that ye run after lewd wimmin. Ye've lived amongst the Injuns, the people o' yer mither—I 'tended to thot—an' ye kin outtrap an' outtrail an' outshoot an' outpaddle ony one o' them. An' Father Giroux tells me ye've the finest brain i' yer head he's run acrost i' fifty year o' teachin'. An' ye've a clear sense o' justice—I've 'tended to thot too. As ye stand today I'd pit ye agin ony mon i' the North. So much stands to yer credit.

"But ye ha' faults that are glarin'—an' a glarin' fault is a credit to na mon. Ye're na God fearin'. Ye gamble at times wi' cards. Ye scoff at the accepted order o' things. An' ye've a pride that goeth before a fall, as the Gude Book says. An' ony one o' them may be the rock ye'll crash on. An' besides a' thot ye're stubborn as ony mule—which last might be a fault or a virtue. So theer ye are—as fair an assay as auld Saint Peter himsel' could make—the gude o' ye, along o' the bad. An takin' ye as ye are, I'm offerin' ye a pardnership i' the tradin' post o' Murchie. Tomorrow we'll fix up the papers, an' 'tis then we'll be changin' the flag. Now tell me the news o' the rivers."

"Well, they've got a new hospital at Aklavik. Pederson, the French Company trader at Norman, came on up-river with us on a sixty-day leave."

"Pederson, eh—he's a gude mon, if a Swede. I wad na trust a Swede owerly far, but Pederson's a' right. The mon knows fur too."

"A constable of the Mounted died at Fort Wrigley—Jackson, his name was. He died of pneumonia."

"Doubtless some rookie, er he'd o' kep' his feet dry."

"Oh yes—Duncan McPherson has be'n transferred from Fort Chipewyan to Good Hope, on the Mackenzie."

"An' gude riddance to bad rubbish, I'd say!" growled the old man.

"What!" The other regarded him in surprise. "Why, Dad, I thought McPherson was your best friend!"

"Aye, an' I thought so too—till I found oot different. A mon ne'er knows who's his friend till he's had the chanct to prove um. I dropped in on him at Chipewyan awhile back fer a bit o' a visit, an' didn't the brazen scut show me a silver fox pelt the like o' which a mon sees but seldom, if ever. 'Twas so fine a pelt he kep' it locked i' the safe. He wad na trust it i' the fur loft.

An' he boasted—boasted an' bragged, mind ye—that he'd got it off Wahteno, the Yellowknife—an' him knowin' a' the time that Wahteno was in debt to me!"

"But maybe he thought that Wahteno had other fur that would cover the debt."

"It makes na difference what he thought! Weel he knew that time an' agin I've turned Chipewyans away from my door an' refused to trade wi' 'em because I knew they stood in debt to McPherson. I di' na pick oot the best o' theer fur an' send 'em to Chipewyan wi' the leavin's. I told him to his face he was as gude as a thief an' I'd ha' na more to do wi' him as long as I lived. Mebbe, the noo, the company'll send some mon to Chipewyan who has some regard for the common ethics o' trade."

Young Angus shook his head. "I didn't hear who the company sent to Chipewyan," he said. "But it's too bad you two quarreled. Why, I can remember when I was just a little shaver, you used to take me down to Chipewyan and we'd stay there for days at a time. You and old Duncan would talk and argue by the hour over the jug, till anyone who didn't know would think you mortal enemies instead of old friends. And Jean and I would play around the drying racks and swing on the net reels, and set the puppies fighting, and play games with the Indian children—there were always lots of Indians camped at Chipewyan in the summertime. Jean could run faster than I with those long legs of hers. I can see her now with her braids flopping about her ears as she ran."

"Aye, aye, lad," said Colin, his eyes on the sky line of seared spruce spires. "An' times was when Duncan wad come here to the Ptarmigan an' 'twad be my jug we'd be emptyin' an' fillin' agin from the keg. We was lonely, them years—each havin' lost his woman—an' each left wi' a bairn on his hands. I mind the time Duncan fetched the lass up here an' our talk run us into the dark, what wi' Duncan holdin' oot fer the Catholics an' me for the Presbyterians. An' the two o' ye was missin' when we took thought o' ye. An' we hunted a' night along the river wi' lanterns, fearin' ye'd fell into the canyon. An' i' the mornin' when 'twas light an' we come back to start oot in anither direction, here come the two o' ye creepin' oot the kennel, an' Jezebel, the fiercest bitch I iver owned, fawnin' on ye an' lickin' yer faces—an' her so savage I never let her off the chain the while I owned her. I had to shoot her at last for manglin' the leg o' a native. Ye'd got tired an' crawled in beside her the nicht. It goes to show ye canna tell aboot a bitch. But ye may be sure that both Duncan an' me held our breath till the both o' ye was beyont the reach o' her chain, an' then we went in the hoose an' emptied the jug on't—an' ye may weel believe we was needin' it."

The younger man nodded. "I think I can just remember that—I have a dim recollection of Jean and me sleeping in the kennel with a dog. I'm sorry you quarreled with McPherson. It seems such a little thing to break up a lifelong friendship. I think you'll be missing him."

"I will na say I'll na be missin' him. I cud owerlook his stubborn an' bigoted defense o' Popery. But I canna owerlook his beatin' me oot o' a pelt the like o' that one. Time was when Duncan McPherson was honest an' ethical as ony mon. But he's slippin', lad. That's likely why the company sent him doon-river to trade wi' the Hares an' the Loucheux."

"It's cold and bleak at Good Hope," said Angus. "A hell of a place for a girl—only sixteen miles south of the Circle, a dreary, wind-swept stretch with the Ramparts just above and the river wide as a lake below. It will be different from Chipewyan or the mission of Father Giroux."

"Aye," agreed the inflexible old Scot. "But Duncan should o' thought o' thot. 'Tis likely what the Gude Book means wheer it says, 'The sins o' the fathers shall be visited upon the children.' He should na ha' stooped to sharp practice."

"Speaking of sharp practice," observed Angus, "Jacques Larue is on the river with an outfit of trade goods. He was at Fort McMurray when we got there. Corporal Downey and a couple of constables went through his outfit, but they didn't find anything out of the way. He was whining about the police persecuting him."

"Aye, the dirty, murderin' whusky-peddlin' hellhound! 'Twad na be persecutin' him owermuch an' they'd heave him i' the river wi' a stone to his neck! Corporal Downey kens he's be'n sellin' liquor to the natives fer years, but Larue's cunnin' an' wiley, an' the police ha' na yet caught him wi' the evidence the law demands for conviction. An' Downey knows, too, he murdered Miqua, on Lake o' the Wind."

"Murdered him?"

"Aye—as gude as. 'Twas Paul Blind Mon an' the Big Bear done the actual killin'—they paddled oot an' tipped ower Miqua's canoe whilst he was liftin' his net. But 'twas Larue's doin'. He paid fer the job wi' a jug o' whusky."

"An' you say Downey knows that? Why don't he arrest him then?"

"Knowin' is one thing, lad, an' provin' is anither. The law demands proof for conviction. Ye know Auld Mon Winnie, the auld crackpot that's be'n runnin' hither an' yon i' the ootlands fer goin' on more years than a mon kin remember, pratin' o' the mither lode—weel, he set amongst the rocks on the shore o' Lake o' the Wind an' seen Paul Blind Mon an' the Big

Bear drown Miqua, an' he seen Larue stand theer on a rock an' watch 'em do it, an' he seen him pay 'em off wi' a jug."

"But why should Larue want Miqua killed? And why would Paul Blind Man and the Big Bear kill him? And why didn't Old Man Winnie report the matter to the police?"

"Losh, ye're fuller o' questions than a nut is o' meat! But I'll tell ye the why to um all. Larue wanted Miqua oot the way because Miqua wad na let the Lake o' the Wind Injuns trade theer fur for Larue's whusky. Paul Blind Mon and the Big Bear wanted him oot the way because they wanted whusky, an' wi' Miqua gone they'll ha' theer ain way wi' the Lake o' the Wind band. An' Auld Mon Winnie did report the murder to Downey. He told me an' Duncan McPherson aboot it first, i' the tradin' room at Chipewyan, an' the next day Downey come, an' he told him. An' Downey went wi' Winnie to Lake o' the Wind to investigate the matter, but 'tis na likely he found the evidence he'd need—for ye say Larue's still free to come an' go—even darin' to show up at the McMurray police post. Ye see, lad, it takes more than the word o' a fey auld crackpot like Winnie to convict a mon o' murder."

"There is no justice in that," opined the younger man, frowning. "If Downey knows he's guilty the law should kill him off. It seems that the law is a clumsy tool for the working of justice."

"An' who are ye to be settin' theer makin' light o' the law? D'ye na ken thot the law is the bulwark o' civilization?"

A cynical smile twitched the corners of the other's lips. "But suppose that one is not overly impressed with civilization? Is it, then, a crime to hold lightly its bulwark?"

Old Colin stared at his son aghast. He scowled, and when he spoke his brain fumbled for words to express his outraged disapproval. "What? Why—why—civilization is the—the—why, wi'oot civilization the world would revert to savagery!"

"Well, what of it? I have lived a good deal among the so-called savages—among the Indians—the people of my mother. I have found them honest and generous—a simple folk, self-sufficient and happy as long as they remain aloof from—civilization."

"But, lad, they're heathen! They ha' strange beliefs an' they know naught o' heaven or hell!"

"So what?"

"Why, they're na Christians—they've na seen the light!"

“Maybe not, but their morals, I have observed, are good in direct ratio with their ability to avoid contact with—civilization.”

Colin Murchie’s brow lowered like a thundercloud, and he smote his palm with a hairy fist. “Yer ain mither was a product o’ this civilization ye wad make light o’! A gude Christian, she was—though a Catholic! An’ a finer woman ne’er drew the breath o’ life!”

The younger man nodded. “She was the exception that proves the rule—a senseless and vapid saying when analyzed—but it conveys the idea. Stop and think. You have lived in the North for many years. You have known many Indians. You have had dealings with them. You speak several of their languages. Tell me now—would you rather deal with the Indians of the rivers or with those of the back country who have had little or no contact with civilization?”

“Why—weel—I wad rather trade wi’ the natives o’ the back country. But——”

“Why?”

“They’ll pay their debt. They ha’ na learned——”

“They have not learned the skulduggery and the craftiness and the crookedness of civilization. Isn’t that right? Stop and think—run over in your mind the Indians you know that have had close contact with this civilization that so impresses you. How many of them, among all those you know, would you trust, as you would trust any one of the back-country Indians?”

“ ’Tis because they learn an’ take up wi’ the vices o’ civilization rather than its virtues.”

“So? But there are no missions or schools in the country for the teaching of these vices. Yet scattered all along the length of the rivers are missions for the teaching of Christianity. It would seem, then, that this Christianity had failed of its purpose—that another bulwark of civilization is as futile as the law. You yourself must admit that contact with Christianity and civilization has worked more harm than good among the natives—witness the Indians of the rivers. And you must admit that the law is not very efficient in the working of justice—witness Jacques Larue.”

“Aye, but the hand o’ God will lay heavy on him someday. The ways o’ the Lord are mysterious ways an’ canna always be fathomed by the mind o’ mon.”

“You’re just like all the rest of ’em, Dad,” smiled the younger man. “You can’t be pinned down when you’re confronted with the facts. Instead of

facing them you take refuge behind vague generalities and threadbare platitudes.”

“I warned ye o’ yer faults!” exclaimed Colin. “I told ye ye was na God fearin’. An’ that ye scoffed at the accepted order o’ things! Foosh wi’ yer heresies an’ yer mockery! I’ll na argue wi’ ye. Ye’re more stubborn even than Duncan McPherson, who at least had the fear o’ God i’ his heart—though a Catholic. Wheer was Larue headin’ wi’ his shoddy gudes an’ his whusky?”

“He had no liquor with him—at least the police couldn’t find any. He’s probably got a cache somewhere that he can run to when he wants it. He was heading down-river with his goods—he had that Dog Rib breed with him—Bat Lemoyne.”

“Aye, a crafty scut, but na so smart as Larue.”

“McDonald slipped me the word that Larue had threatened to trade in this territory—bragged that he would run you out of the North.”

“Aye,” said the older man heavily. “He’s made the like threat befoor. He covets the trade o’ the Yellowknives an’ the Dog Ribs o’ the Burntwood country. He tried to murder me onct. Doobtless he’ll try it agin—an’, lad, if he succeeds I’m askin’ ye to promise me that ye’ll take na private revenge. Ye’ll help the law, but ye’ll let the law punish him.”

“But if——”

“Ha’ done wi’ yer ‘buts’ an’ yer ‘ifs’!” thundered the old Scot wrathfully. “Wad ye be shakin’ yer ‘buts’ an’ yer ‘ifs’ i’ the face o’ God? ‘Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.’ An’ the law is the tool o’ God i’ the hand o’ mon!” He paused suddenly, his eyes on the younger man’s face. When he resumed, his voice had lost all harshness. “I do na want to seem hard on ye, lad. But I know ye, e’en better than ye know yersel’, an’ weel I ken the blood that flows i’ yer veins. ’Tis the blood o’ chieftains—o’ Scottish chiefs an’ Injun. ’Tis na blood to trifle wi’—a wild an’ a haughty blood, that ill brooks a wrong. ’Tis a blood that, onless curbed by a cool brain, wad crash through to an end wi’oot heed to means—be they bold deeds or trickery. I’d rest easy, lad, an’ I had yer promise.”

After a long moment of silence Angus slowly nodded his head. “All right,” he said shortly. “I promise. No matter what happens, I will not kill Larue. And I’ll help the law to seek vengeance.”

IV

A Shot from the Ridge

At the conclusion of breakfast the following morning Colin Murchie reached to the floor beside his chair and, raising a heavy iron box to the table, unlocked it with a key and threw back the lid. Lifting a paper from the box, he laid it aside.

“My will,” he said, “leavin’ a’ my property to you in case o’ death.” A thick packet of documents following the will. “Stocks an’ bonds,” he explained, “an’ the book showin’ cash on hand i’ the bank i’ Edmonton. I ha’ invested, here an’ yon, in ventures thot looked sound to me. Theer’s stock i’ the Tar Sands Company, for it may weel be, lad, thot the future o’ this country lies in oil. An’ theer’s deeds to spruce lands an’ what not. Years ago David Gaunt pointed oot the wisdom o’ pickin’ up likely tracts o’ spruce. Time’ll come, he said, when ’twill prove a profitable investment—pulpwood, he called it. They use it i’ the makin’ o’ paper. An’ I ha’ vast respect for David Gaunt’s opinion. He’s a mon that’s got rich by cashin’ in on what he knows o’ the ootlands. Ye’re twenty-one year auld the day, lad. We’re pardners the noo, an’ the half o’ a’ this is yours. Theer’ll be time to go into that later.”

“But, Dad, I haven’t earned——”

“Ha’ done wi’ yer talk till I’ve had my say oot! Ye say ye ha’ na earned it. But I’m tellin’ ye thot if ye’d na earned it not one dollar o’ it wad ye got. Why d’ye think I sent ye, time an’ again, to live amongst the Injuns? D’ye think I done it to get rid o’ ye? Or, mayhap, because I thought ’twad be an easy an’ comfortable life for ye? I did na! I done it wi’ an eye on the future. I done it so ye’d learn to live i’ the bush when occasion demanded, an’ learn summat o’ hardship an’ privation. But mostly so ye’d learn the language o’ the natives an’ theer ways. So ye’d ha’ onderstandin’ o’ theer needs an’ requirements, o’ theer limitations an’ theer virtues. Because knowledge o’ these things, lad, will make for fair dealin’. For twenty-six year the post o’ Murchie has stood for honesty an’ justice i’ the land, an’ I’m minded that when I pass on I’ll be leavin’ it i’ better hands than mine—i’ the hands o’ one who wi’ wisdom an’ onderstandin’ will carry on the tradition o’ the post.

“An’ why d’ye think I sent ye to the mission? ’Twas na because I wanted ye to learn to be a Catholic—though I’m tellin’ ye, the noo, thot if a’ Catholics are like Father Giroux I can see sma’ reason fer Presbyterians or anyone else to be railin’ agin’ ’em. Yon priest has done more gude i’ the country than ony ten men thot ever come into it. Personally,” he added, and Angus caught just the suspicion of a twinkle in the stern eyes, “I ha’ na fault to find wi’ the Catholics, but such matter o’ doctrine made a fine subject to argue an’ wrangle by the hour ower wi’ Duncan McPherson, who was both stubborn an’ contentious i’ the matter o’ his convictions. Na, lad, ’twas na for the matter o’ religion I sent ye theer; an’ had it be’n, I can see, the noo, that the time wad be’n wasted. It was to gi’ ye book learnin’ beyont what I ever had. An’ Father Giroux tells me ye’re the best student he’s seen in a’ his years o’ teachin’. He wants ye should go to the provinces—to some college or university or what not. That is as you will. Theer is money enough an’ to spare, an’ ye’re so minded. An’ the pardnership still stands, whether or no.

“An’ why d’ye think I sent ye to work on the river? So ye’d become like the worthless scum that takes the brigade doon i’ the summer an’ hangs around the saloons an’ brothels o’ the railroad towns a’ winter? No, no, it was to harden ye, lad—to gi’ ye a taste o’ backbreakin’ toil. To teach ye to hold up yer end amongst rough men an’ bad—an’ so ye’d learn the river.

“’Twas a’ done, lad, so ye’d learn the North—so when the time come ye’d be a fit mon to cope wi’ the North, to meet wi’ the wisdom o’ experience, the problems thot will confront ye. ’Tis a hard schoolin’ ye’ve had, lad, an’ purposely hard. ’Tis thus ye ha’ earned yer pardnership.

“’Tis time, the noo, ye should make yer decision. Will ye go to the provinces to seek education beyont what ye got at the mission? Or will ye stay on i’ the North wi’ me?”

The answer came without hesitation: “I’m staying here—in the North. The provinces have nothing for me. I care nothing for further education. It can do me no good, save to more deeply impress upon my mind a fact I already know—that the civilization, of which it is a product, is a man-made monster which, when it has succeeded in destroying all the little peoples of the earth, under the justification of necessary expansion, will turn upon itself and devour itself in its own insatiate greed. The World War was but the first of many world wars—the beginning of the end. And then will be slowly builded another civilization, which will be not one whit better than the last. There have been many civilizations, and greed has devoured them all.”

“’Tis a dour picture ye paint,” said the older man, frowning. “An’ I believed as ye do, I’d na care to keep on livin’ i’ the world.”

“And neither would I if I had to live amid the insensate thing that is civilization. That’s why I am staying here in the North. There is little here to tempt its far-reaching tentacles. It may be it will pass us by.”

“It is as I have wished,” said Colin, “thot ye work here wi’ me.” Pausing, he reached into the box and lifted out a packet. As he removed the wrapping of oiled silk the younger man caught a glimpse of shimmering crimson. Colin was on his feet now, holding by two of its corners a new flag upon which was blazoned in letters of white the legend:

MURCHIE
AND
SON

“’Tis na common flag, this. ’Tis a flag for grand occasions, a flag o’ silk. Yer mither made it—’broidered the letters, stitch by stitch. Hours on end she’d sit in the shade o’ yon tree listenin’ to the voice o’ the rapids, an’ in winter, theer beside the fireplace wi’ the flames roarin’ up the chimney, whilst I read aloud from some book.” He paused and when he continued a moment later his voice was a bit husky. “An’ times I’d look up, an’ her fingers wad be stilled, an’ her eyes restin’ on ye curled up asleep at her feet on the bearskin, wi’ mebbe a puppy er two curled beside ye.

“Aye, she was proud o’ ye, laddie, an’ she looked forward to this day when the new flag should be run to the top o’ the pole, but ’twas the will o’ God she ne’er was to see it. She was a fine woman, an’ proud o’ the Murchie flag as I mysel’—for ’tis a flag that is as honorable i’ the ootlands as the flag o’ the Company itsel’.

“An’ this new flag, lad—we’ll keep it floatin’ as proud as the auld. An’ when I’m gone ’twill be a charge on ye to see thot it remains honored an’ unsullied. We’ll plant it on the ridge, lad—in a rock cleft close by the grave where yer mither sleeps high above the roar o’ the rapids. She loved that sound, e’en as she loved to watch the colors in the rainbow mists that rise high above it—the mists, lad, thot keep her grave green i’ the summer an’ cover it wi’ a new shroud o’ pure white each day o’ the long cold months o’ the winter. An’ ’tis theer beside her ye’ll be layin’ me when the time comes, an’ the flag will float above us—a fittin’ monument to both.”

He returned the papers to the strongbox, turned the key and carried it to an inner room. When he returned he picked up a keen ax from the corner by the fireplace. “I’ll go cut the new pole, lad. ’Tis a stick I’ve long had my eye on—slim an’ straight as a die for a gude sixty foot wi’oot limb or blemish. I

can fall it almost where we want it, an' whilst ye stay here an' clean up the dishes I'll peel the pole an' rough-shape the butt to the crevice."

Left to himself, Angus proceeded with the household duties, washing the dishes in scalding water, drying them and returning them to their shelves. He smiled as the realization dawned on him that he had a real affection for the stern, austere man who was his father. Always he had respected him; at times he had feared him, but he had never loved him—had never suspected that beneath that cold, hard exterior lay a softer, even a sentimental nature. He was conscious of a deep admiration for this man who in his loneliness had deliberately sent his son away from him to face hardship and danger—for that son's own good—that he might become a better man. He had lived among the Indians, among the Yellowknives, the people of his mother, and among the Dog Ribs, long enough to know, and unconsciously to accept, the natives' appraisal of Colin Murchie. It was an impersonal appraisal. He would not cheat and he would allow no man to cheat him. He would pay full value for fur whether he bought it from an Indian or from a white man. Unlike the other free traders, he would sell no whisky. In the tents of the Indians he listened to tales of his father's dealings with natives—of natives that had been carried on his books for two and even for three years when ill luck had dogged their footsteps; and of others who had been driven from the country by Murchie in reprisal for a wrong. And the verdict was that Colin Murchie was just. He was a good man in the North.

As he returned the dishpan to its peg behind the stove and hung the dish towel on the wire above the stove to dry Angus realized that he was proud to be this man's son. He, too, would be a good man in the North. He would be just.

As he took the broom from its corner he heard above the dull roar of the rapid a sharp crack. Colin had felled the tree for the flagpole, yet—that was not the sound of a falling tree: it was a sharper, a more explosive sound. He stepped to the door and glanced toward the ridge. The spruce tree lay along the ridge, its partially peeled trunk gleaming white in the sunlight, its top protruding over the wall of the canyon. But across the trunk lay a curiously huddled, crumpled figure . . . the figure of a man clad in a checked shirt of red and black . . . the figure of Colin Murchie! A slight movement caught his eye at the edge of the scrub on the ridge crest beyond the opposite wall of the canyon. Drawing swiftly back from the doorway, Angus dashed across the room, seized the rifle from the rack of caribou horns above the huge fireplace, jacked a cartridge into the chamber and again leaped to the doorway. A man was standing in full view on the bare crest of the ridge a hundred yards distant and, rifle in hand, was gazing fixedly across the

canyon at the figure crumpled across the pole. Throwing up his rifle, Angus brought the sights to bear on the man's chest. At a hundred yards he couldn't miss. Just as his finger was about to squeeze the trigger the man turned his face toward him—the face of Jacques Larue! The finger relaxed on the trigger as his own words seared his brain, “No matter what happens, I will not kill Larue”—and at the same instant the man leaped backward and disappeared into the bush.

Dropping the rifle to the floor, Angus dashed across the tiny clearing and clambered up the steep ascent to the ridge. There, just beyond the grave of his mother, the huddled figure moved slightly. The next moment Angus was on his knees beside it, raising the head in his arms. Blood stained the shirt front and felt warm and wet and sticky to his hand as he gazed into the bearded face. The eyelids fluttered open, and the lips moved. “Ye’ll na be needin’ the new flag, laddie,” said the man in a voice hardly above a whisper. “Put it back i’ the box. The auld one will do—just MURCHIE.” Bloody foam surged from the lips, muffling the words. Hurriedly Angus wiped it away and bent closer. “’Twas Larue . . . he got me . . . but . . . lad . . . ye’ll remember . . . yer . . . promise?”

“Yes, Dad, I’ll remember——” He halted abruptly and for a long moment knelt there staring into the bearded face. Colin Murchie was dead.

V

Jacques Larue Makes a Mistake

AFTER the inspection of his trade goods at Fort McMurray, Jacques Larue and his satellite, Bat Lemoyne, continued on down the river. They passed Fort Chipewyan and dropped down the Slave to a point some twenty miles above the mouth of the Ptarmigan, where they cached the goods and canoes and struck inland to contact the band of Dog Ribs that inhabited the lake country at the source of the Burntwood River. Arriving at the summer camp of the Indians, the head man informed him that the band had agreed to trade this year with Murchie on the Ptarmigan. After hours of futile argument, backed up by many promises which he had no intention of fulfilling, had finally convinced Larue that the band was not to be shaken from its decision, he retired with Lemoyne to their camp on the shore of a small lake.

“Mebbe-so dat bes’ we go back to Athabasca an’ trade wit’ Swampy Cree,” suggested Lemoyne.

Larue, in a sullen rage, vetoed the idea. “Not by a damn sight! These Dog Ribs have got better fur and more of it than any of the Swampy Crees, and I’m going to get it! At least I’ll get the pick of it—they can take the rough fur to Murchie. I wouldn’t handle it anyway. In the morning you hit back to the river and start packing the goods to this camp. I’m striking south to the shore of Lake Athabasca where Donovan and his gang should have my liquor cached by this time—seven good kegs of it; three times that many when I get it cut for the trade.

“If Downey and his damn constables at McMurray had known that Donovan’s men, even as they checked over our outfit, were shoving up the Gaudet to the lake with those seven kegs, he’d never have given us a clean bill. A man’s got to be smart, Lemoyne: even if they should run onto Donovan they couldn’t connect me with the liquor. I’d say I knew nothing about it—and leave Donovan holding the bag.

“I’ll take a keg out of the cache and pack it here, and believe me, when these natives get a few drinks in ’em they’ll forget all about their promise to trade with Murchie.”

After Lemoyne had departed the following morning Larue, instead of striking immediately southward, sat beside his little fire and sipped tea as his

cunning brain toyed with an idea. He remembered that young Angus Murchie had been at McMurray with McDonald as he and Lemoyne were passing police inspection. He knew that for the past two years Angus had worked on the river in the summer and trapped with the Indians in the winter. He reasoned, therefore, that the lad could not get along with old Colin; possibly he hated him even as he, Larue, hated him—and feared him. Larue's hatred of the old Scot was based on the fact that never had he been able to horn in on the trade of those of the Yellowknives and the Dog Ribs and Slavis who traded with Murchie. Good trappers, these Indians of the back country whose trade would be worth much money to any one who could hold it—and Murchie was holding it against the Company and against the fly-by-night free traders who peddled cheap trade goods and watered liquor. And he feared him because he knew that Murchie would turn him in to the police the moment he could secure evidence that would convict him of selling liquor to the Indians, and well Larue knew that that moment might come at any time, for Murchie had contacts with the natives known to no one but himself.

Larue's hatred flamed into a consuming rage at thought that now these Burntwood River natives, with whom he himself had traded for the past two years, would this year trade with Murchie.

"Damn Murchie!" he rasped aloud. "If I only hadn't missed him that time on the Cascade portage! He suspected it was I who fired that shot, but he never could prove it. If I could only . . ." He paused suddenly and stared into the little flames over the rim of his teacup. With Murchie out of the way Angus would inherit the trading post on the Ptarmigan. Was it not possible that he and Angus could form, if not a regular partnership, at least some sort of an alliance? It was not probable that the younger man would take the same firm stand against selling liquor that his father had taken, and with the Murchie post's established trade, what might they not accomplish! Larue's eyes brightened with greed. Murchie was alone at his post on the Ptarmigan, only one day's journey to the northward. It should be easy. . . . And this time he would not miss. . . .

Rising to his feet, he made up a light pack and, taking his rifle, struck out to the northward. He camped that night on a small creek that flowed into the Ptarmigan just below the long transverse ridge or dike that reached from rim to rim of the broad valley, and through which the river broke in a welter of high-flung spray.

In the morning he followed the ridge which he knew would take him to the canyon, only a few yards above the Murchie post. He could lie on the ridge and if there were no Indians about could wait for a chance to pot

Murchie as he stepped from his doorway. The plan was simple—and safe. There would be no witnesses, no telltale tracks or fingerprints. He would not approach nearer than the top of the ridge on the opposite side of the river—and the ridge crest was solid rock, would leave no tracks, even there. And he would take care not to leave the ejected shell where the police could find it—he had read of how a man had recently been convicted because the ejector of his gun left certain tiny scratches or marks upon the empty shell that could have been made by no other gun. He had read also that the police had a new method of microphotography whereby they could state, and even prove to the satisfaction of a court, that a certain bullet had been fired from a certain gun and no other. The police were getting smart, but they were not the only smart ones. He, Jacques Larue, was smarter than all the police—smarter, even than Corporal Downey, whom all evildoers feared. Had he not been outwitting Downey for the past several years? And he would outwit him again. For if Downey should suspect him and should investigate the shooting and even succeed in finding the bullet that killed Murchie, he would have his trouble for his pains—for he, Larue, would be carrying another rifle, and the one with which he had shot Murchie would be sunk deep in the muck of some bog. Yes, a man had to be smart to live nowadays, eh bien?

Larue trod the spruce-timbered ridge swiftly in a high state of elation at the safety of his scheme and the thought of the enormous profits to be derived from his trade with Murchie's Indians.

As the roar of the rapids sounded in his ears he slowed his pace and proceeded with caution. As he neared the canyon the sound of a crashing tree reached his ears above the dull voice of the river, and he threaded his way among the spruce trunks with the stealth of an Indian.

The crest of the ridge was bare of timber for some ten yards back from the verge of the canyon, and, squatting in the edge of the scrub, Larue peered across this open space at a man who stood beside a tall spruce tree which he had just felled. His heartbeats quickened as he recognized Murchie—not fifty yards away on the opposite side of the canyon that cut the ridge in two. Even as he looked the man stooped over the prostrate tree trunk and, working with a short grip on his ax helve, began to peel the bark from the trunk.

Gripping his rifle nervously, Larue curbed his impatience, drew back into the scrub and worked his way to a point from which he obtained a view of the log trading post and the clearing that surrounded it. Presently he breathed a sigh of satisfaction. The post was deserted. No tent was pitched

in the clearing, no Indians were loafing about in the shade of the building or the banksian tree. Murchie was alone at the post. And at fifty yards . . .

Slipping stealthily back to his former position, Larue watched gloatingly for several minutes as the man worked at his peeling. Then, resting his rifle barrel in the crotch of a tree, he took deliberate aim at the man's broad chest and pressed the trigger. Without a sound Murchie pitched forward across the tree trunk, and Larue jacked another cartridge into the chamber, remembering to retrieve the empty shell, which he tossed into the canyon.

Then, rifle ready for another shot, he stepped boldly out into the open and peered searchingly at the figure that lay crumpled across the log. But the figure lay very still, and Larue's glance swept again to the trading post. The next instant, with a cry of terror, he leaped back into the shelter of the scrub. His brain reeled, and the blood seemed suddenly to have turned to ice within his veins—for there, in the doorway of the trading room, he had recognized the face of Angus Murchie peering at him over the barrel of a leveled rifle. Gone was the sense of security and elation as abysmal terror lent wings to the feet that carried him swiftly back along the ridge. The sweat of exertion mingled with the cold sweat of horror as he ran on and on. One second more and the finger of Angus Murchie would have pressed the trigger, and he, Jacques Larue, would have pitched forward upon the rock—a grotesque, crumpled thing like that other grotesque, crumpled figure that lay across the tree trunk beyond the canyon.

When finally his pace slowed through sheer exhaustion a new fear assailed him—the fear that Angus Murchie would overtake him and avenge the murder of his father. He knew that Angus was counted one of the best men on the river—both as to his ability as a scowman and also in the quick, brutal fights that were of almost daily occurrence on the brigade. And he had no doubt of the youth's ability in the bush; his long sojourns among the Indians of the back country would assure that. On and on he pushed with many a backward glance, half expecting, always fearing that the next instant he would feel the sharp, searing stab of a bullet.

As night approached he breathed easier but pushed on by the light of the full moon. Later he made a fireless camp in the heart of an almost impenetrable thicket.

As the darkness alleviated the fear of immediate danger, so it enhanced the fear of an almost inevitable reckoning to come. His carefully laid plan had gone awry. There had been an eyewitness to his shooting of Murchie. He knew that when Angus failed to overtake him he would report the matter to the police, and he knew that there was not one chance in a thousand that he could elude the long arm of the law. Corporal Downey had repeatedly

warned him that someday he would get him—that no man could keep on defying the law forever. That someday he would make the mistake that would trap him. And he had replied to these warnings, sometimes with an insolent laugh and again with an air of injured innocence and a protest against police persecution.

And now he had made that mistake—just as Downey had predicted he would. And Downey himself would take the trail, and the result would be inevitable. For no one knew better than Larue the futility of trying to evade the police in the outlands. In the cities a man could efface his identity amid the teeming thousands of his kind, but in the outlands, where his casual appearance at a trading post or in the remotest camp of the natives would be a matter of comment—never.

And a man must show himself to live, for he must eat. Given sufficient food, or a fish net and a supply of cartridges for the procuring of food, it was conceivable that he could live for a long time without contact with his kind. But nets rot or are carried away by the current, and no supply of cartridges is inexhaustible; it would be only a matter of time. . . . The law is inexorable. . . . The police never forget.

But in his present plight Larue knew that he must show himself very shortly: he had only a few days stock of provisions and only a few cartridges, and he had no canoe. He dared not strike out for the river and contact Bat Lemoyne, for tomorrow Angus Murchie would be spreading the news of his father's murder along the river, and the hand of every man would be against him. And he dared not show himself among the Yellowknives, nor the Slavis, nor the Dog Ribs, for these were friends of Murchie, and when the police came they would surely set them on his trail and even help them follow that trail. Even the Dog Ribs of the Burntwood who had previously traded with him could not be trusted, since they had now promised to trade with Murchie.

Tossing restlessly in his blanket, Larue cursed aloud. Why had he made that mistake? Why had he stepped out onto that bare rock when he could just as well have remained concealed in the scrub? His sense of security had dulled his sense of cunning—and he had made the mistake that Corporal Downey had predicted he would make.

Damn Downey! Larue remembered that the prediction had not been made in the spirit of boasting or vaunting. The young officer had merely stated that someday he would make the mistake that would trap him, as though it were a thing inevitable, a thing that could not be avoided—almost as though it were a fact already accomplished. And now it was a fact.

Larue shuddered at thought of a noose being tightened about his neck—he, Jacques Larue, who loved to live, who had found keen zest and exhilaration in outwitting the Mounted, and zest and exhilaration in the spending of his ill-gotten gains in the gay night life of the cities, standing on a scaffold while men who spoke tersely but in solemn, even kindly, tones were arranging that inexorable noose and drawing a black cap over his head and down over his eyes—the black cap that would shut out the sunlight for the last time, and then . . .

God damn them all! Damn the law, with its policemen, its judges and its hangmen! What chance did a man have with the hand of every man against him? Corporal Downey had almost arrested him only a short time ago—almost, but not quite—for the killing of Miqua, the Swampy Cree. Had Paul Blind Man and the Big Bear weakened under Downey's questioning and told what they knew of that drowning . . . Ah, that was it—Paul Blind Man and the Big Bear! There was a chance to once again outwit the law! Why had he not thought of those two? By traveling fast he could reach Lake o' the Wind in two days—and then . . .

A sense of assurance, almost of elation, supplanted the abject terror that had gripped him, and after a time he slept.

VI

The Alibi

DAYLIGHT found him striking rapidly southward. Avoiding the Burntwood band, he swung to the southeastward, and toward evening of the second day he arrived at Lake o' the Wind. Proceeding at once to Paul Blind Man's cabin, a miserable windowless affair of spruce poles and mud, he paused in the open doorway and peered into the interior, where a fat, slovenly squaw was stirring a pot over a warped sheet-iron stove. A figure that had been lying on a pile of robes in a corner of the hovel rose to a sitting posture and stared at the intruder. Then, recognizing Larue, he gained his feet, shuffled to the door and extended his hand.

"Bo' jou', Paul. Glad to see me, eh?"

The Indian regarded him impassively. "You got hooch?"

"Sure—there'll be plenty of time to talk about hooch. First I want to talk to you and the Big Bear. Alone," he added with a meaning glance toward the woman.

Without turning his head the Indian spat out a guttural command, and the woman turned from the stove, waddled past the two and disappeared. A few moments later the Big Bear joined them, and the three seated themselves upon the ground.

Larue tendered tobacco, and when the pipes were going he spoke: "You remember the drowning of Miqua and the part you two played in it. And you remember that I gave you a jug of whisky, as I promised?"

Paul Blind Man said nothing.

"Too mooch water," the Big Bear grunted.

"Water, yes," replied Larue. "As I have told you, it is not good to drink the whisky straight. It is too strong for the stomach, and it burns the throat. You have seen white men drink whisky, and you have seen that most of them—those who know—put much water in the glass with their whisky."

"W'ite mans put water in free. Injun pay for water," said Paul Blind Man.

Larue shrugged. "I only put water in the whisky I sold you because I knew it was not good for you to drink it straight. It is part of my business to

look out for your health. If I sold you strong liquor, and you drank it, and it should kill you, then I would lose trade. A dead man cannot trap, and he has no fur to sell. But let us forget that part. If you desire to buy the whisky straight, I will sell it to you—but it will cost a little more—and you must put the water in before you drink it.”

“You got w’isky?” asked the Big Bear.

“Yes, plenty of it. I have none right here with me, but I have plenty on the big lake. The day after tomorrow you can get it. But it is of the killing of Miqua I would speak first. You remember the policeman, Corporal Downey, came here and asked you many questions. And you told him you knew nothing of the death of Miqua, except that he went out in his canoe to lift his net, and the canoe was seen sometime later by the people of the village, floating upside down, and later the body of Miqua was found caught in the net. It is well that you stuck to your story and that you told him I had traded you no liquor. Corporal Downey questioned me too. He followed me from here and overtook me on Lake Athabasca when Bat and I were heading south with the fur. He asked me many questions too, and he tried to make me think that you two had told the truth—that you had admitted you killed Miqua, and that I hired you to do it. He did not say this in so many words, for in such matters Downey is a fool—he will not lie to a man, even though by lying he might gain his end. But I denied that I knew anything about the death of Miqua, and so finally Downey gave it up and went away. But if I had told him what I know, then he would have come back here and arrested you two and taken you to the jail in Fort Saskatchewan, and you would have been tried before the judge, and they would have hanged you with a rope and have killed you for killing Miqua, for that is the white man’s law.”

Larue paused and he noted that the two exchanged glances. “De poliss hang you too,” the Big Bear stated. “C’p’l Downey, he say, mebbe-so dey hang you for git us to keel Miqua an’ only mak’ us stay on de jail ’long tam, for do lak you say.”

“Ho, he did, eh? How could you prove I hired you? The law demands proof. I could have said you lied. Even if you’d shown him the jug I gave you I could have said I traded it to you for fur—and I had the fur to back up the statement. Of course I’d have been arrested on the liquor charge, but after a short time in jail I would have been free again. Downey was only bluffing; he was playing us one against the other. But it didn’t work—we all stuck to our story.”

“An’ now you com’ back an’ want our fur,” said Paul Blind Man, frowning. “You say you no tell Downey, we no git hang. You say we tell Downey, you no git hang, cause we no kin prove, but we git hang for sure.

So now you com' an' you say 'Gi' me you fur. You no gi' me, I tell Downey you keel Miqua, an' you git hang, eh'?"

Larue laughed into the two scowling faces. "So that's why you think I'm here, is it? You think I would double-cross you? You believe that I would demand that you give me your fur to keep my mouth shut? I am sorry, my friends, that you have so poor an opinion of me. I want your fur, yes. But I am willing to pay you for it—and pay well.

"The reason I have come to you now is because I need your help—and for this help I will pay you well. I will pay you each a jug of whisky—strong whisky, not cut like the trade whisky is cut with water. Each of you will get a jug, and each jug will make three jugs of the kind you buy when you add the water to it—one cup whisky, two cups water. That makes six jugs, and six jugs will last a long time."

"How mooch work we got to do?" queried the Big Bear.

"I'm 'fraid for keel more man. Nex' tam mebbe-so de poliss ketch. Mebbe-so som' wan talk," said Paul Blind Man suspiciously.

"There is no work to do," said Larue. "And there is no man to be killed. All I want you to do is to tell Corporal Downey, or any police that come here and ask you, that I came here two days before the full of the moon and stayed with you until the second day after the full of the moon. You can remember that, can't you? I came here two days *before* the full of the moon—that was night before last—and stayed here with you till two days *after* the full of the moon."

He paused, and when both Indians nodded their understanding he continued: "You know Colin Murchie, who has a post down on the Ptarmigan. You know that he's an independent trader, the same as I am—and you know that he will sell no liquor to the Indians. He drinks liquor himself but he says the Indians shall have no liquor. That is not right. You like liquor the same as the white men like it; yet the police and men like Murchie say you cannot have liquor. They are not friends of the Indians. They do everything they can to keep you from getting liquor. They come into your country and they take your fur, but they will sell you no liquor. I am a friend of the Indians. I sell them liquor because I believe they have as much right to drink liquor as the white man has. I continually risk danger of arrest by the police, merely so I can bring liquor to you people who like it. Is that not true?"

Both Indians nodded agreement. "We no lak Murchie. He no sell hooch. We no trade wit' Murchie."

“Just so. But if someone who would sell you hooch should get Murchie’s post—me, for instance—then you would trade there, because you could come and buy hooch whenever you wanted it and not have to depend on my getting through with a batch whenever I can. Sometimes many months must pass between my trips. That is because I must run the liquor into the country without the police knowing it, and that is hard, because they are always watching the rivers. Would you not like to trade at a post where you could get liquor whenever you wanted it?”

“Yes,” replied Paul Blind Man. “But no post sell hooch. De company no sell, Murchie no sell. Slavin have post, wan tam, on de beeg lak’, sell hooch—but de poliss ketch an’ put heem een de jail.”

“Yes, I know Slavin. He was a fool. He was not smart. To sell hooch and get away with it a man must be smart. I am smart. I will not be caught.

“Two days ago, the day of the full moon, I went to the post of Murchie and killed him. I did this because I am a friend of the Indians and I believe a man who would refuse to sell liquor to them should die—so I shot him as he stood upon the high ridge just above the post. After I had shot him I stepped out upon the rock, for I, too, was upon the ridge. When I saw that Murchie was indeed dead I looked down at the post, and then I stepped back quickly into the bush. For there, standing in the doorway of the trading room, was Angus Murchie, the old man’s son, and he was looking at me over the barrel of his rifle. Had I not moved quickly I, too, would have been shot—and the Indians would have lost a great friend. So I came quickly away from there and I came straight to you, because I know you are my friends. I know you do not want the police to hang me for killing Murchie—for who, then, would sell you liquor?”

Paul Blind Man interrupted: “We no want you to git hang. But Angus, she tell de poliss she see you shoot Murchie. Mebbe-so de poliss b’lieve Angus mor’ most dey b’lieve Injun.”

“Listen!” exclaimed Larue. “The police won’t believe Angus. Angus is not even an Indian. He’s nothing but a damn breed! His mother was a Yellowknife. If you do as I say, and stick to your story, the police will have to believe you. For they know that all breeds will lie. Besides that, there are two of you and only one of him. And my lawyer will show the judge and the jury that Angus could not have stood in the doorway of the trading room and tell one man from another because of the mist that rises from the canyon. He will admit that Angus may have seen someone there who looked like me but that he cannot say for sure that it was I. And after you have told the judge and the jury that I came here two days before the full of the moon and stayed here for four days, then they will know that the man Angus saw on the ridge

was not I but some other. For they will believe that I was here on Lake o' the Wind at the time Murchie was shot—and a man cannot be two places at once. He cannot be at Murchie's post on the day of the full moon and be on Lake o' the Wind on that day also—because two hard days journey lies between the two places.”

The Big Bear nodded agreement. “Dat is so. For two jug strong w'isky we say you com' here two day before de full moon an' stay four day.”

Paul Blind Man shook his head somberly. “Las' year I'm work on de riv', on de brigade. I'm know Angus Murch'. She work on de brigade too. She damn good mans. She fight lak hell. Me, I'm t'ink you keel she fadder; she keel you sure. She no queet till you ees dead.”

“The hell he won't!” exclaimed Larue. “He couldn't kill me there on the ridge—and he'll never kill me, because he'll never get another chance. I'm a better man than he is. He could not follow me because I am too fast for him. And when my trial is over and the police turn me loose, then I will come back down the river and will watch my chance and I will kill Angus too. And that time there will be none to see me do it. Then I will buy the trading post of Murchie from the public administrator, for I will offer more for it than any other will pay. And then you can buy your liquor when you want it, for I will keep a cache of it at the post.”

Paul Blind Man seemed far from satisfied. He shifted uneasily. “W'en Angus fin' out we say you here de day of de full moon, she know dat Goddam lie—an' mebbe-so she keel us too.”

“But I tell you I'll kill Angus before he has a chance to kill you or me or anyone!”

“Mebbe-so heem keel you firs'.”

Larue leaned forward, frowning. “You listen to me,” he said in a low, hard voice. “I'm offering you two jugs of strong liquor to tell the police and the judge and the jury that I was here for four days at the time of the full of the moon. If you do this, and stick to your story, so that I am turned loose, I will give you two more jugs of strong liquor as soon as I get back into the North. That will make four jugs of strong liquor, or twelve jugs of good trade liquor. But if you do not tell them this, or if you let the police bluff you into saying that I was not here at the time of the full moon, then they will hang me. But before they hang me I will tell them what I know of the death of Miqua, and I will tell them the truth—that I hired you two to drown him as he lifted his net. I will not be afraid to tell them the truth because they can only hang me once, anyway. If they hang me for killing Murchie they cannot hang me for killing Miqua too. If you do not say the words that I have told

you to say, and save me from being hanged, then I will say the words that will hang you. And we will all three hang together in the yard of the Fort Saskatchewan jail.”

Both Indians were silent for a moment, then Paul Blind Man nodded. “We say you com’ two day before de full moon an’ stay four day. You wan’ we say you trade?”

“No, the police might run onto Bat and check the goods, and then they’d know I still have the goods I passed McMurray with. No, tell them I came to see if you had any fur to trade, and when I found you had none I went on to the big lake to see the Crees at Cracking Stone Point. When I reach the lake I will take the two jugs I promised you out of my cache and take them to the mouth of Fishing Creek and bury them at the foot of the rock that stands alone on the west bank of the creek. You can go there and get them.”

The Big Bear looked skeptical. “S’pose mebbe-so you no bury de jug? S’pose mebbe-so you forgit?”

Larue laughed. “Do you think I would forget to pay you when my life depends on what you will say? The liquor will be at the foot of the stone. Now I will go and talk to some of the people and ask them about their fur. It will be well if many people see me here. Then when the police come they will remember that I was on Lake o’ the Wind at about the time of the full of the moon. Tomorrow I will go on to the big lake, and tomorrow night I will cache your liquor at the foot of the stone.”

VII

At the Mission of Father Giroux

GENTLY ANGUS MURCHIE lowered his father's head to the rock and, rising to his feet, descended to the trading post, from whence he returned a few minutes later carrying a new blanket and a spade.

The surface of the rock ridge was broken and irregular, and in the pits and crevices of the native rock, soil had found lodgment in various depths. It was in these soil pockets that the spruce and banksian trees that timbered the ridge had taken root, and it was in one of them, also, that Colin Murchie had found sufficient depth of earth to provide a grave for his wife, that she might lie forever within sound of the rapids she loved.

Working grimly but rapidly, Angus dug a new grave close beside the other, and when, at a depth of four feet, he struck solid rock he wrapped the body of his father in the blanket, lowered it into the grave and mounded the earth over it. For a long time he stood with uncovered head gazing down at the two mounds, his lips set in a grim, hard line. Then the lips moved and words came in a hard, level tone: "I have promised that I will not kill Larue. Yet Larue shall pay. The law demands a life for a life. We shall see what the law will do."

Then he turned abruptly away, picked up his father's ax and the spade, and descended to the post. A half-hour later he locked the doors, carried a light pack and his rifle to his canoe and headed down the river. Hour after hour he paddled, forcing the light craft swiftly along the still, deep stretches, racing through white-water rapids, carrying around falls and those rapids whose turbulence demanded a portage.

The sun sank behind distant ridges, and just as the long twilight deepened to dusk the moon rose, bathing the valley of the Ptarmigan in soft radiance. All through the night he held to the work and at dawn paused on a portage to boil a pail of tea and wolf down a quantity of cold meat and bannocks. Midmorning found him on the Slave, forging upstream for Fort Chipewyan, eighty miles to the southward. Holding close to the shore to take advantage of backwaters and eddies, he camped late in the afternoon at the mouth of a small creek for a short rest and another meal of boiled tea, bannocks and cold meat.

Fresh tracks in the mud on the bank of the creek a few yards back from the river attracted his attention as he collected wood. When he had his fire going he followed the tracks a short distance up the creek and came upon two canoes and a cache of tarpaulin-covered goods concealed in the bush. Raising a corner of the canvas, Angus' eyes suddenly hardened. He had seen those pieces before; he had watched Corporal Downey and a constable at Fort McMurray break them open and examine them, one by one—the trade goods of Jacques Larue!

Letting the tarp fall back into place, he explored further and, on a wet sand bar a little distance beyond, found two sets of tracks leading on up the creek. "So Lemoyne was with Larue when he murdered my father, eh?" he muttered grimly as he stood staring down at the tracks. "Well, I didn't promise not to kill Lemoyne."

Abruptly he returned to his fire, ate his meal, and for a long time he sat, his eyes on the rifle that lay across his pack. Finally he shook his head slowly. "No. A promise is a promise, in the spirit as in the letter. Only one man fired that shot. That man was Larue. If I find out later that Lemoyne had a hand in the killing, then he, too, shall pay."

Returning the pack and the rifle to the canoe, he shoved off and at midnight beached his canoe at the mission of Father Giroux. Warily he ascended the short steep slope from the landing, where several canoes lay overturned on the beach. Glancing across the broad, level playground, he saw that a light burned in the window of the priest's house.

Seated before the open fire in the little living room of Father Giroux, glasses and pipes in their hands and a pitcher of the native berry wine between them, Corporal Downey and the old priest discussed at random the affairs of the lakes and the rivers. A warm friendship existed between these two, a friendship born of mutual respect and understanding, for each had the welfare of the lean, lone land at heart, and each in his own way worked for its betterment.

The screened door of the tiny porch opened and closed, and a knock drew their eyes to the door, which opened in response to the priest's invitation to enter.

"Angus Murchie!" exclaimed the good priest as a young man stepped into the room. "It was only a few days ago that you stopped in on your way down-river. Did you not go to your father's post on the Ptarmigan? I remember he was anxious that you be there on the seventh, and that was—let's see, it still lacks five minutes of midnight—that was yesterday. Come, draw up a chair, my son. You look weary."

"I reached there on the afternoon of the sixth. Yes, I was there on the seventh——"

"You was at Murchie's post yesterday an' you're here today!" exclaimed Corporal Downey. "Good Lord, no wonder you're tired! You must have got an early start yesterday—an' even at that I wouldn't want to have to do it."

"It was nearly noon when I left the post," Angus replied. "The moon was full last night, and I traveled all night and all day today and only just reached here. I am tired. I was going to ask Father for a bed until morning and then push on to Chipewyan—to the police. I am very lucky to find you here."

"Why do you want the police?"

"To report the murder of my father——"

"The murder of your father!" exclaimed Father Giroux. "My son, do you mean that Colin Murchie is dead?"

"Yes, he is dead. Jacques Larue shot him."

"Jacques Larue!" cried Downey. "You mean you seen him shoot him?"

"I did not actually see him fire the shot. But I saw him standing there on the ridge not ten seconds after the shot was fired. He stepped from the edge of the bush and stood with his rifle ready, waiting to see whether my father would move."

"An' where was your father?"

"He was lying where he fell, crumpled over the pole he was peeling—on the ridge, just across the canyon from Larue."

"How far from where Larue was standin'?"

"Forty yards, maybe—certainly not more than fifty."

"An' it was in broad daylight?"

"Yes, about half-past nine in the morning."

"An' where was you when you seen him?"

"I saw him from the trading-room door."

Father Giroux, who had stepped momentarily from the room, returned with a goblet which he filled from the pitcher and handed to Angus. "Drink this, my son; it is not a heady wine and it will give you strength."

"Yeah," agreed Downey, "travelin' like you've be'n, you sure need it. Now s'pose you start at the beginnin' an' tell me the whole story. I knew Colin Murchie well, an' if he's be'n murdered I'll stay on the job till I hang the man that done it. But I want to know all the facts you can tell me. Take your time an' don't leave out nothin' you can think of that would have a bearin' on the case. This policin' is funny business—sometimes a little thing

that don't look to be of no importance whatever turns out to be the very item that cracks the case wide open. Now you say you was standin' in the tradin'-room door when you seen Larue standin' there on the ridge with his rifle ready in case your father should move. Is that right?"

"Yes."

"An' did your father move?"

"No, he did not move. He was shot through the chest."

"What happened then?"

"Larue turned and looked down toward the post, and I suppose he saw me, for he leaped back into the scrub an' disappeared."

"Did you follow him?"

"No. I dropped the rifle and hurried to my father."

"The rifle? How come you was standin' there in the door with a rifle?"

"My father had gone to the ridge to cut and peel a new flagpole. I was to join him there after I had done the house chores. I had finished the dishes and picked up the broom to sweep the floor when I heard a sharp crack. It sounded different than a falling tree—a sharper sound—like the sound of a shot. So I stepped to the doorway and glanced up toward the ridge. I saw my father lying across the tree trunk that he had partially peeled. Then I caught a movement across the canyon and I stepped back into the room and got the rifle and ran again to the door. It was then I saw the man standing there in full view on the rock looking across at my father. I drew a bead on him and was about to pull the trigger when he turned and looked down at the post and I saw it was Jacques Larue—so I did not press the trigger. He evidently saw me there in the doorway with my rifle on him, and he leaped quickly back into the bush."

Corporal Downey's brow drew into a puzzled frown. "You say that when you seen this man was Jacques Larue you didn't pull the trigger. Do you mean if it had be'n someone else you'd have shot?"

"Yes. If anyone else had shot my father I would have killed him where he stood. I am a good shot. I would not have missed."

Downey's frown deepened. "It don't make sense," he said. "Why would you want to protect Jacques Larue? I happen to know that your father despised him. An' if you do want to protect him, how is it that you was tearin' out the bone tryin' to get to the police to report him?"

"I did not kill Larue because I had promised my father only the day before that I would not kill him. I happened to mention that I had seen him at McMurray when you and Constable Ames were going through his outfit.

And my father said that Larue had once tried to kill him and would doubtless try it again. And he asked me to promise that if he should kill him I would not take private revenge—that I would let the law seek vengeance. I remembered that promise in time to avoid killing him.” The young man paused and met the officer’s gaze squarely. “My father,” he said, “believed that the law would work justice.”

Something, a slight emphasis, perhaps, on the word “father,” caused the officer to ask, “An’ you—what do you believe?”

Angus shrugged. “It is known to the law that for years Larue has been selling whisky to the Indians—yet Larue is still selling whisky to the Indians. It is also known to the law that he instigated the death of Miqua, at the hands of Paul Blind Man and the Big Bear, on Lake o’ the Wind. It would seem to me that in these matters the law has not worked justice.”

“You’ve got to have evidence to convict a man in a court of law,” Downey replied. “We’ll get Larue yet for peddlin’ liquor. I’m doubtin’ we’ll ever convict him of murderin’ Miqua. I know he done it, all right, but knowin’ it ain’t enough—I’d have to prove it to convict him.”

Again the younger man shrugged. “Had the law worked justice my father would not have been murdered,” he said simply.

The officer flushed slightly. “It looks like we’ll have the evidence in this case, anyway,” he said. “Whoever killed Colin Murchie will pay for it with his life.”

Angus nodded. “Yes. Larue killed my father. I promised that I would help the law. Larue shall pay.” There was a deadly certainty in the voice that caused Downey to regard him searchingly.

“Let’s get back to the case,” he said. “You say you hurried to your father—was he dead when you got there?”

“No, he lived for maybe half a minute. I raised his head on my arm. He opened his eyes and said: ‘You’ll not be needing the new flag now. . . . The old one will do—just MURCHIE. It was Larue got me, lad. You’ll remember your promise?’ Blood gushed from his mouth, and I wiped it away as best I could. I told him I’d remember, but I don’t think he heard. He was dead.”

“What did you do then?”

“I brought a spade and a blanket from the post and dug a grave there on the ridge beside the grave of my mother and wrapped him in the blanket and buried him. It was there he wished to be buried. Then I locked up the post and came here.”

Downey nodded, and for several moments he sat in silence, staring into the fire. "I'm jest tryin' to get the picture," he said at length. "Now how far is it from the door of the post, where you was, to the place where Larue was standin' when you seen him?"

"Just about a hundred yards."

"An' you say he was on the other side of the canyon from the post."

"Yes."

"I've be'n to the post several times, an' as I rec'lect it there's quite a considerable mist risin' out of the canyon all the time. Did you see Larue through this mist?"

"No, I had a clear view of him. The wind was from the west that morning, blowing up the river, and it swept the mist on up the canyon. There was no mist rising above the walls. If you will return with me to the post I can show you exactly how everything happened."

"I'll get up to the post before I'm through with the case," Downey replied. "But first I'm goin' after Larue. If he killed Murchie an' knows you seen him, he may hit for the outside. I'll drop down to Chipewyan an' have Sergeant Blake keep an eye on the river, an' I'll hit back along the south side of the lake an' watch the Gaudet."

"I found Larue's cache of trade goods this afternoon," said Angus. "I camped for supper at the mouth of a creek about twenty miles up from the mouth of the Ptarmigan and found his canoes and his goods cached there. Both he and Lemoyne had struck off up the creek afoot. I saw their tracks in the sand."

"H-u-u-m," said Downey, pinching his nether lip between thumb and forefinger. "Larue struck off up the Ptarmigan, if that's where you seen him. But that don't account for Lemoyne. If Larue intended to shoot Murchie he would have too much sense to take a witness along—especially a man like Lemoyne, who wouldn't hesitate to hold it over him if he seen any profit in it. Where would Lemoyne be headin' for, leavin' the outfit where they did?"

"Well," Angus replied, "he could strike just a little north of east, and about three days back he'd contact the Burntwood River Indians. I know that Larue has traded with them before. But my father mentioned that this year they had promised to trade with him. Or he could strike southeast and reach the Lake o' the Wind band. They trade with Larue too."

Downey nodded. "An' in any case either Lemoyne or Larue or both of 'em will return to that cache. If Father Giroux can send someone up to Chipewyan with a note to Sergeant Blake I'll slip down an' wait at that cache till one of 'em shows up."

"I can go on up to Chipewyan for you," offered Angus. "I promised I would help the law."

"You'll get the chance to help before we're through with this case," Downey replied. "I'd rather you'd go back to the post and wait till I come there or send word to you. But keep your eyes open—Larue might try to rub you out, too, so there wouldn't be a witness to the murder."

"I can send a man to Chipewyan," said the priest. "He will start at dawn. And now I think that Angus had better get some sleep. He has had many hours of hard work and he looks worn out."

"That's right," Downey agreed. "I'll roll in too. I'll be headin' down for that cache at daylight."

The kindly old priest turned to Angus. "You will find a bed in the dormitory, my son. Corporal Downey can sleep here in the spare room. Good night. I shall see you in the morning."

After the door had closed behind Angus, Corporal Downey sat for a long time watching the flames flow smoothly up the chimney. Finally he raised his eyes to the thin, ascetic face of the priest, with its aquiline nose and high forehead framed by the long silvery hair. "I've known Colin Murchie ever since I've been on the river," he said. "I didn't know he was married. I've seen this young man for the past couple of years workin' with the brigade. I heard his name was Murchie. I figured he was maybe a catch brat of Murchie's, out of some back-country squaw. He's a breed, ain't he?"

"Yes, Angus is a métis. But he is not a bastard. I myself married Colin Murchie and the boy's mother two years before he was born. She was a granddaughter of old Pekwatakobi, the last great chief of the Yellowknives in the days before the Dog Ribs conquered them. She was a student here at the mission—a good student and a fine character. She made a good wife for Colin Murchie and a good mother for the boy, although she died when he was only three or four."

"How is it I never seen him around the post when I've been there? Couldn't him and the old man get along?"

"It is not that they could not get along," Father Giroux explained, holding a match to the bowl of his long-stemmed pipe. "Since the death of his wife the one object and aim of Colin Murchie's life was to bring up his son to be a good man in the North. To that end he left him here at the mission when he was hardly more than a baby, and instructed me to educate him to the best of my ability. I early learned that the boy had an exceptionally fine brain. I can truthfully say that in all the fifty years of my teaching I have never encountered its equal. It is too bad that he will not

continue his education at one of the higher seats of learning. With his mind he would go far in any walk of life.”

“Don’t want to, eh?”

“No. He holds little but scorn for the thing we call civilization. He is a deep student of history, having read everything here in my library, and he has me send for other weighty tomes, which he eagerly devours. It is his thesis that all civilization is but the evolution of greed. He points with scorn to the numerous civilizations that have toppled because of this greed; and I must say that in the face of his arguments one is hard put to deny it. It is the same with religion. Angus is not an atheist. He is an agnostic—a realist. Holding, as he does, that all religion is theoretical philosophy, he repudiates religion because it is not founded on fact. To be religious one must have faith. He has not faith. Therefore he is nonreligious.”

“You’re gettin’ in too deep for me,” grinned Corporal Downey. “Policin’ is more in my line. But even when the kid was at school, wouldn’t there be vacations when he could have gone back to the post?”

“Yes, but again Colin had an eye to the lad’s training. When he was not here at the mission his father sent him to live among the Yellowknives, the people of his mother. It is a hard life, the life of the Indians of the back country. But Colin Murchie was a hard man, and he determined that his son should be hard also. The Yellowknives taught him their language. They taught him to hunt and to trap and to suffer privation and hardship of all kinds without complaining.

“Then for the past two summers Colin sent him to work on the river, where the work is hard and the temptations are great.” The priest paused and sipped at his wine. “I have known Colin Murchie for many years. I know that his whole life was wrapped up in that boy. It has been revealed to me in many ways, unsuspected by Colin, that beneath his hard exterior he had a softer side. And it was this softer side that he himself feared. He was afraid that if he kept the boy with him he would favor him and in countless ways would ease his path and make him that much less of a man. You can believe me, my friend, when I tell you that never a day passed when the boy was away from him that Colin Murchie did not miss him—did not long to have him at his side. Yet so strong and so indomitable was his will that he held rigidly to the course he had mapped out, because he believed it was best for the boy.”

“Mightn’t it be that he’s be’n too tough on the kid? That, in tryin’ to make a man of him, he taught him to hate him?”

“No. Angus had a vast respect and admiration for his father. I do not know that he actually loved him, in the commonly accepted definition of filial love, but he certainly did not hate him—quite the reverse.”

“Talkin’ with him, anyone would think he was all white.”

A peculiar smile hovered on the sensitive lips of the priest. “Or—all red,” he said.

“What!”

“During the long years I have labored in the outlands I have noted a peculiar phenomenon for which I can offer no biological reason, nor can I conceive of any explanation for it. It is that the French blood and the Indian blood seem to blend perfectly; while the Scotch blood never blends with the Indian. It mixes but does not blend. Mix alcohol and water, and you have a perfect blend—a liquid that is neither the one nor the other. Mix oil and water, and you have no blend—merely a mixture, half oil, half water. And each ingredient will find its own level—the water beneath, the oil above. Your French métis is a true métis, a mixture of the bloods and a mixture of the characteristics of the two races. Your Scotch métis is in reality no métis at all—he is at times all white man, at other times all Indian.”

“H-u-u-u-m, an interestin’ fact, Father—if it is a fact. An’ certainly worth knowin’.”

“I do not state it as a fact, merely as a theory based on observation.”

“You’ve had a lot more experience than I have an’ a lot better chance to observe, bein’ able to watch ’em from the time they’re kids. Take this Angus now—ain’t it jest possible that he went Injun up there at the post, an’ shot Colin himself, an’ is tryin’ to put the finger on Larue because he knows that Larue is already in bad with the police?”

“No,” smiled the priest. “Not a chance in the world. I wondered if that thought were not playing in the back of your mind. You may dismiss it. I have known Angus intimately ever since he was a baby. I have seen him many times in his white personality and many times in his red. I have watched him closely and I know that in either personality his most distinctive characteristic is his sense of justice. Time and again, here at the mission, his outraged sense of justice has brought his wrath upon the head of the offender.” The good father paused and smiled. “There were times when he had to be taken to task for his swift and militant remedial measures. Black eyes and bloody noses when the white man was in the ascendancy. Cunning, patient reprisals when the Indian blood was up. Upon investigation I would always find that he had a good reason for his act; the hard task was

to teach him to refer the reprisal to the proper authority instead of taking the matter into his own hands.”

“Quick tempered, eh?”

“On the contrary, in all the years I have known him I have never known him to lose his temper. At all times he holds himself under perfect control. You may rest assured that he did not kill his father. Had he done so he might conceivably have fled to escape punishment, but he would never have sought to place the blame on the shoulders of another. His sense of justice is too deep rooted for that.”

“I s’pose you’re right, Father. There ain’t no man’s opinion I’ve got more respect for. You know more about the North an’ the folks that lives in it than I’ll ever know. There’s one thing I meant to ask him about an’ forgot. I wonder what the old man meant—what he said about the flag jest before he died—that Angus wouldn’t be needin’ the new one, that the old one would do—jest MURCHIE, or somethin’ like that?”

“I think I can explain that. Colin left word with me here early in the summer that if I saw Angus to tell him to be at the post on August seventh if it was possible. He told me that the seventh was the lad’s birthday—that he would be twenty-one years old—and that he was on that day taking him into partnership. Years ago, he told me, when Angus was but a baby, his mother embroidered the name of the firm that was to be when the boy came of age—MURCHIE AND SON—on a field of crimson silk. That flag was to have been raised above the post that day. It was for that Colin was cutting and peeling the pole. It is too bad that Colin could not have lived to see it.”

“I’ll say it is!” agreed Downey heartily. “An’ if that damn Larue—beggin’ your pardon, Father—killed him, you bet he’ll pay!”

VIII

On the Trail of Larue

CORPORAL DOWNEY rose to his feet as Bat Lemoyne stepped from the scrub. He had been reclining for hours with his back to the pile of tarpaulin-covered pieces at the cache near the mouth of the creek.

The half-breed's eyes flashed at sight of the uniform, and his lips twisted into a sneering grin. "Ha, C'p'l Downey, eh? W'at you t'ink—mebbe-so we pick oop some booze dis side Fort McMurray? Mebbe-so so you no look ver' good, dat tam, an' we got som' you miss, eh?"

"Where's Larue?" asked the officer gruffly, ignoring the insolence.

The crafty Lemoyne had no intention of disclosing the whereabouts of his employer. As compensation for his services he received much, or little, according to the success or failure of a trading trip, and he knew that Larue expected to return to the Burntwood with a keg of liquor. Also he knew that if Downey should come upon Larue with this liquor in possession he himself could not hope to evade the clutches of the law.

The insolent grin widened. "Larue gon' Lak' o' de Win'."

"Lake o' the Wind, eh?" repeated Downey skeptically. "An' where you be'n since you cached these goods here?"

"Me, I'm gon' to de Burntwood."

"I've checked up on these pieces," Downey said, "an' you've got everything here that we passed through at McMurray. What did you an' Larue go into the back country for if you didn't take no trade goods?"

The breed shrugged: "Lak' o' de Win', de Burntwood ver' mooch far. Dat bes' we go firs' an' fin' out de people got som' fur to trade. Too mooch hard work pack de goods in; den mebbe-so de people ain' got no fur, an' we mus' got to pack de goods back."

"Have the Burntwood Injuns got fur?"

Lemoyne frowned. "Oui, got fur. But no goin' trade wit' Larue. Say dey trade wit' Murchie. Larue, she be mad lak hell w'en she fin' dat out."

"Yeah," Downey replied, "an' now I s'pose he'll be knockin' their chief off like he knocked off Miqua down on Lake o' the Wind."

The man shrugged. "I'm ain' know nuttin' 'bout dat."

"The hell you don't!" snapped Downey. "I s'pose you don' know nothin' about him knockin' Murchie off, neither?"

"Murchie!" cried Lemoyne in a voice that left no doubt in the mind of the officer that his surprise was genuine. "W'at you mean—knock hoff Murchie? Larue go sout'. Murchie liv' nort'—on Ptarmigan."

"What did he go to Lake o' the Wind for?" the officer demanded. "Didn't he get all the fur that band had in June, when he hired Paul Blind Man an' the Big Bear to drown Miqua?"

"I'm ain' know nuttin' 'bout dat," reiterated the breed. "Larue say Miqua git drown'. She say dat w'at you call de haccident. Miqua got de bad luck."

"I'll say he had," Downey agreed. "But about that fur—Larue got it all, didn't he?"

"Non. Git som'. Plent' mor' he no git. Miqua don' wan' de people trade wit' Larue. W'en Miqua die som' trade wit' Larue, but som' do lak Miqua say. Larue t'ink dis tam mebbe-so dey forgit w'at Miqua say. Mebbe-so dey trade wit' heem now. He gon' fin' out."

"Listen," Downey said, glaring into the dark eyes of the breed, "an' get this straight: Larue might have hit out for Lake o' the Wind, but he didn't go straight there—by a damn sight! He swung north—to the Ptarmigan. An' he shot Murchie there at his post. An' he's goin' to hang for it. In the meantime he's a fugitive from justice. Every policeman in the North is on the watch for him, an' we'll get him—there ain't a chance in the world that we won't. An' we'll pick up anyone that helps him in any way—an' that means you! It means that if you try to hunt him up or talk to him, or tip him off that we're huntin' him, or help him in any way whatever, we'll throw you in the Fort Saskatchewan jail, an' you'll stay there till the maggots carry you out the keyhole! Do you git it?"

"Oui. I'm t'ink mebbe-so you no lak I'm help Larue no mor'. Me, I ain't t'ink Larue keel Murchie. But I no wan' git t'row in de jail. I no help um."

When Downey struck out for Lake o' the Wind, Lemoyne, little guessing that his lie had put the officer squarely on Larue's trail, proceeded to size up his own situation. If, as Downey had said, Larue had swung north and killed Murchie before striking south the Burntwood Indians would learn of it in a very short time and, they being friendly with Murchie, the half-breed shuddered at thought of what might happen to one who had been there in Larue's company only a short time before, should they once get their hands on him. Manifestly he could not carry out Larue's orders and pack the goods to the Burntwood country. Also he shuddered at thought of what Corporal Downey would do when he found out that he had lied to him.

Then there was the matter of the cache—if Larue had killed Murchie he might show up at any moment and force Lemoyne to help him get out of the country. It did not take the astute breed but a moment to realize that such eventuality would place him between the devil and the deep blue sea: should he refuse, he had no doubt that Larue would kill him on the spot without batting an eye, and should he accede, then he had the police to reckon with. There were many policemen between that cache and the railroad, and—what was it Downey had said about the maggots carrying him out the keyhole of the Fort Saskatchewan jail?

Seated on the canvas-covered goods, Lemoyne felt sorry for himself. In casting about for a solution of his problem he suddenly remembered a brother-in-law who lived a short distance up the Peace River. Surely this brother-in-law, the husband of his oldest sister, would need help this fall in putting up fish for his dogs. To be sure, he remembered with a slight twinge of embarrassment that upon his last visit to this family he had stolen four dollars and a good pair of dog-skin gloves. But what was four dollars and a pair of dog-skin gloves among kinfolk? If his brother-in-law insisted, he could even make restitution. That was it—he would visit his brother-in-law and he would take from the cache enough goods to pay for his theft, and maybe a little more, so that he could make a small present to his sister and his brother-in-law and the children.

Having made his decision, Lemoyne acted quickly, lest Larue show up and interfere with his plan. As he removed the tarpaulin another idea struck him. Even though Larue should return after he had gone, he could foresee trouble ahead. Larue would be angry because he had disobeyed orders, and he would take a canoe to go up-river in, and then when the police caught him Downey would say that he, Lemoyne, helped him because Downey had seen him there with the goods and the canoes. It would be better to move the whole cache to some other place. Should Larue return he could doubtless find another canoe—pick one up from someone along the river—but it would be a canoe that the police could not connect with him.

If Larue could not find a canoe before the police found him—Lemoyne shrugged—well, that would be Larue's hard luck. And if the police should hang Larue for the murder of Murchie, then the goods in the cache would naturally revert to him, because no one but himself would know where the new cache was located. Whereas, if Larue were not hanged, and should be turned loose, he could explain to Larue later that he had recached the goods because the police knew where they were, and he, Lemoyne, feared they would set a man to watch them so that he could arrest Larue when he returned to the cache for a canoe. Larue would then praise him for his

thoughtfulness and maybe give him a present over and above his wages. Voilà! The world is not such a bad place to live—if one has sharp wits and a brother-in-law!

An hour later the breed was proceeding slowly up-river, paddling one heavily laden canoe and towing another behind him.

On the third day after leaving Lemoyne at the cache on the Slave, Corporal Downey paused in the doorway of Paul Blind Man's hovel on Lake o' the Wind and called the Indian outside.

"Where's Larue?" he demanded abruptly.

The man appeared slightly befuddled, and Downey detected the odor of liquor on his breath. "Gon' Crackin' Stone Point."

"What's he doin' at Crackin' Stone Point? There's no village there."

"Beeg Camp Cree. Put oop feesh."

"What's he doin'—sellin' 'em hooch?"

The man shrugged. "Me, I ain' know 'bout dat. Say she gon' fin' out dey got fur."

"He stopped here an' sold you some hooch, all right. You're half soused right now."

"No sell no hooch. No got. Com' from nort'. Got light pack, no hooch. You wan' look?" The man motioned toward the interior of the shack, and Downey shook his head.

"No, you wouldn't have it in there anyhow. You're lyin' like hell, though, about him not sellin' you the hooch. If he didn't fetch any in with him he prob'ly had some cached somewheres around here from last June. You say he come from the north, eh? When was that?"

"'Bout fi', seex day 'go. Nex' night comes de full moon."

"You lie!" Downey snapped. "Come clean now, or you're goin' to find yourself in a hell of a lot of trouble. Larue was on the Ptarmigan, at Murchie's post, on the day of the full moon. When did he get here?"

"Larue no kin be on Ptarmigan w'en de moon full," averred the Indian. "She com' wan day, stay all night wit' de Beeg Bear, nex' day try to buy som' fur. No kin do. Dat night de moon, she full, an' me an' Larue an' de Beeg Bear, we go ketch feesh on de lak'."

Corporal Downey flushed angrily. "You're a damn liar, Blind Man! You're lyin' now, the same as you lied about drownin' Miqua! You an' the Big Bear both! Larue paid you for that—an' he paid you to lie about it—an' he's payin' you now to lie about the time he was here! Your mention of the full of the moon was too damn pat. Larue told you what to say, an' he paid

you in hooch for sayin' it. An' he'll pay you some more when you say it on the witness stand. But you can't get away with it. Angus Murchie saw Larue just after he shot his father on the ridge just back of the post, an' it was the day of the full of the moon! He'll tell about that on the witness stand. Then where'll your story be—yours an' the Big Bear's? The judge an' the jury will believe a white man before they'll believe a couple of Injuns whose reputations is shady at best."

The Indian shrugged. "Mebbe-so dem no b'lieve. De Beeg Bear say same t'ing—Larue here two day befor' de full moon, stay wan day mor'. Go 'way nex' day after dat. Ees two mans say dat, me an' de Beeg Bear. An' Larue say dat too. Angus Murch', she only wan mans. She ain' no w'ite mans, neider. She no tell de trut'. She Goddam breed, lak Lemoyne."

"He's a breed, all right," growled Downey. "But he ain't like Lemoyne. An' he ain't a damn liar like you an' the Big Bear, neither. You'll stick to your story, I can see that. But someday, Blind Man, you're goin' to get what's comin' to you—you an' the Big Bear both. If the law don't catch up with you somethin' else will. It's a thing called justice, Blind Man, an' it means that someday you've got to pay."

Seeking out the Big Bear, Downey met with no better success than he'd had with Paul Blind Man. Both Indians stuck stubbornly to their story, which no amount of bluffing nor threatening on Downey's part could change one iota.

Other Indians in the band corroborated the fact that Larue had appeared in the camp several days before, but were hazy as to the exact day he came or went. He could find no one who would state positively that Larue was not on Lake o' the Wind on the night of the full moon.

Buying a canoe, he paddled across the lake to the Fishing Creek portage, determined to follow Larue and arrest him despite his substantiated alibi. If, as the Indian had told him, Larue had gone to Cracking Stone Point it was possible he could get him on a liquor charge that would hold him until the police could produce further evidence. If not, the officer knew he would be forced into a speedy murder trial, the outcome of which would be doubtful indeed if the Indians succeeded in preserving their story unshaken throughout the crown prosecutor's cross-examination. And well he knew that the story of the Crown's witness, Angus Murchie, would be held up to ridicule by an astute defense lawyer, who would establish the fact that he was a half-breed and then, with sneers and with ridicule, both expressed and implied, would poison the minds of the jurymen against him—a feat easy enough to accomplish in Edmonton, where the drunken and worthless half-breeds of the river were wont to collect during the winter to spend their

summer's earnings in debauchery. No man of the jury would believe that any half-breed would hold to a promise to uphold the law. The fact that Colin Murchie was a stern, hard man and that Angus, during the years of his boyhood, had lived almost never at the post with his father would be used to indicate that the lad hated the older man, had shot him during a quarrel and was trying to shoulder the act onto Larue. Of course there would be Father Giroux as a character witness, but—Corporal Downey had had experiences with juries before.

Rounding the point at the entrance to the bay at the end of which the Fishing Creek portage began, Downey saw another canoe coming toward him around another point only a few yards distant. The occupant of the other craft paused a moment, his paddle in mid-air, then began furiously to back-paddle. Corporal Downey redoubled his own efforts at the paddle as the other canoe receded around the point. A few minutes later he reached the point, and as his canoe shot around it he was greeted with a sharp, terse command:

“Stick ’em up! Quick—or I’ll drill you!”

Dropping his paddle, the officer reached into the air just as a man covering him with a rifle rose from behind a rock on the shore. Downey saw at a glance that the man was Jacques Larue, that his canoe lay dripping where it had been hastily beached, and that a keg, evidently full, floated low in the water, only a few feet out in the lake. For a long moment he sat motionless while the malevolent eyes of Larue glared at him over the leveled barrel of the rifle.

IX

Corporal Downey Makes an Arrest

ONLY for an instant did Larue hold the rifle leveled. Lowering it, he stepped forward with a laugh: "Oh ho! It is Corporal Downey, of the police! A thousand pardons, Corporal! The sun, as you see, was shining directly into my eyes, and as you rounded the point I thought it was—was one who has already threatened my life."

"Angus Murchie, maybe?" suggested the officer, picking up his paddle from across the thwarts.

"Angus Murchie!" exclaimed Larue in well-feigned surprise. "You mean the son of old Colin Murchie, down on the Ptarmigan? That breed that works on the scows?"

"Yeah," replied Downey dryly, "he's the one I mean." With a couple of strokes of the paddle he brought the canoe alongside the keg that was slowly drifting out into the lake, the little wavelets lapping over its rounded side, which scarcely showed above the surface of the water. Reaching down, he grasped the keg by the chime and, paddling with the other hand, slowly towed it ashore and rolled it out onto the beach as Larue looked on, a sarcastic grin on his thin lips.

"And what have you there, Downey?" he asked. "As I live, it's a keg! You will pardon my surprise. One does not expect to see a policeman traveling about the back country with a keg!"

"I sure as hell can't say the same for you," Downey retorted. "Your game's up, Larue. You might as well come clean. Where's your cache?"

"My cache? It is over on the Slave, a few miles below the mission of Father Giroux. I am sure you will find no liquor in it. You yourself passed the goods through at Fort McMurray."

"I didn't pass that through," replied Downey, pointing to the keg.

"No, I had no liquor."

"Where'd you get this?"

"This what?"

"This keg of liquor that I just fished out of the lake."

“Ha, ha! That is a good one, Corporal. Surely you jest! But I suppose that even a policeman must have his little joke.”

“You won’t be callin’ it a joke by the time I get through with you, Larue. You backed around that point when you seen me, an’ dumped the keg overboard.”

“That is indeed interesting—if true. But can you prove it, Corporal? Did you see me dump the keg?”

“No, but it was floatin’ right where you throwed it out of your canoe.”

“That I threw the keg out of my canoe is mere conjecture,” Larue retorted with a malicious grin. “Even if it were true you could not prove it. Consider the facts, Downey. You find a keg, which you surmise to contain liquor, floating in a lake. And because you happen to find me upon the shore of that lake you accuse me of having placed the keg in the lake. I swear to you that I never laid eyes on that keg until you rolled it out upon the shore.”

“And you’ll swear you didn’t murder Colin Murchie, too, I s’pose?”

“Murder Colin Murchie!” cried the man. “Do you mean to tell me that Colin Murchie is dead—murdered? I am sorry to hear that. I cannot truthfully say that Murchie was a friend of mine. We have been, at times, in competition for the trade of the natives. But I will say this for Murchie—he was always square, and he never, to my knowledge, traded liquor to the Indians. He was not like that damned Slavin that you arrested a few years back on Lake Athabasca. But surely, Corporal, you do not suspect me of having killed Colin Murchie?”

“I don’t suspect you, Larue,” replied the officer in a cold, level voice. “I know damn well you done it. There was an eyewitness to that shootin’.”

“An eyewitness! And he says I killed Colin Murchie? Then all I have to say is that he is a liar, or else he is mistaken. When and where did this alleged killing take place?”

“You know all about it, Larue. But if it’ll fresh up your memory any I’ll tell you that you shot Murchie on the forenoon of the seventh, on the ridge just back of his post, on the Ptarmigan.”

“The seventh? That does not mean much to me. One quickly loses track of the days of the week and the months, here in the back country. I have no idea of what this day is, so I cannot tell you where I was upon the seventh.”

“I can tell you where you was—you was on the ridge back of Murchie’s post, on the opposite side of the river, on the forenoon of the seventh. The moon was full that night, if that’s any help to you. Today is the thirteenth.”

“Ah, on the day before the full of the moon, eh? You are sure of that, Corporal? That Colin Murchie was shot at his post on the day before the full of the moon?”

“Yes, I’m sure of that.”

“I am glad, for that lets me out of the picture. I have witnesses to prove that I was far from the Ptarmigan on the day before the full of the moon. At least two natives can swear that I was right here on Lake o’ the Wind on that day. In fact I was here the day before that, and I did not leave here until the second day after the full of the moon.”

“Yeah, Paul Blind Man an’ the Big Bear. That’s the story they told me at first.”

Did a flicker of fear flash for an instant in the man’s eyes? the officer wondered. If so, it was gone, and he was laughing. “Most certainly they told you that at first—and at the last also. They could have told you nothing else, for why should they lie?”

“They’re lying for liquor—that’s why. Prob’ly for this keg you threwed in the lake. Maybe when they don’t get their pay they’ll change their story, Larue.”

“Still pretending to think that keg belonged to me, eh? If you are so sure of it, why don’t you arrest me for having liquor in possession in prohibited territory, and take your case before a jury?”

“I couldn’t get a conviction under the circumstances,” Downey replied, “any more than I could have got a conviction for the murder of Miqua, last June. I know you’re guilty of both crimes, but I can’t prove it.”

“The murder of Miqua! Miqua was accidentally drowned while lifting his net. I know, because I happened to be here on the lake at the time.”

“Yeah, just like you was at Murchie’s post when he was killed. But they wasn’t accidental deaths, neither one of ’em. You hired Paul Blind Man an’ the Big Bear to drown Miqua an’ paid ’em off in whisky, an’ you shot Murchie yourself.”

Again the sneering smile twisted Larue’s lips. “You’re a great policeman, aren’t you, Corporal? You know so many things about me, yet you can prove none of them.”

“I’ll see you hanged yet, Larue,” Downey replied. “Don’t forget, there was an eyewitness to the Murchie killin’.”

“Ah yes, I believe you mentioned an eyewitness. And could your eyewitness, by any chance, be Angus Murchie? I remember that his was the first name you mentioned.”

“You know it was Angus. You looked down from the ridge an’ seen him standin’ in the door.”

“So that’s his story, is it? And are you so sanguine of success that you actually expect to convict a white man, who has no criminal record whatever, of a murder on the testimony of a breed scowman? And a breed, at that, who has every reason in the world to hate Murchie, who, though well endowed with this world’s goods, has never let the boy live in comfort at the post, but ever since he was a little lad has driven him forth to live, now among the Indians, and again among the degenerate scum of the rivers? Am I to understand that you are actually going to arrest me for this murder? Or is it just another one of those things you know—and are not able to prove?”

“Yes,” replied the officer shortly, “I’m arrestin’ you. Talk all you want, but it’s my duty to warn you that anything you say may be used against you.”

“And where are you taking me?”

“To Fort Saskatchewan. They’ll hold you there till the trial. Stick out your hands an’ I’ll slip these bracelets on, an’ we’ll be startin’ as soon as I smash that keg.”

X

Jacques Larue Is Acquitted

LARUE was tried in Edmonton, a month after his arrest, for the murder of Colin Murchie. The Crown based its case solely on the testimony of Angus Murchie, who told a concise, straightforward story on the stand that seemed to impress the jury of one barber, one laborer, a teamster and three merchants.

Larue's lawyer, a barrister noted throughout the province for his astute defense of criminal cases, began his cross-examination in a confidential, almost a fatherly tone:

"Now—ah—Angus, you are the son of Colin Murchie, the man who died of a gunshot wound on the ridge a short distance back of his trading post on the Ptarmigan River. We are willing to admit that Colin Murchie died at the time, and in the manner, and on the spot indicated on the diagram submitted by the Crown. Is that right—you are Colin Murchie's son?"

"Yes."

"And your mother—is she living?"

"No."

"When did she die?"

"About eighteen years ago. When I was three years old."

"Ah yes, when you were three. And have you lived at the post with your father since her death?"

"I call my father's post 'home,' yes."

"Ah yes, you call the post 'home'—but have you lived there continuously since the death of your mother?"

"No, I have lived part of the time at the mission of Father Giroux, on the Slave, and part of the time among the Indians—the people of my mother."

"Ah, your mother was an Indian?"

"Yes, she was a Yellowknife."

"And part of this time you have worked on the river as a scowman?"

"Yes."

"You are, then, a half-breed scowman?"

The crown prosecutor was upon his feet, addressing the judge: "I object to that question, your honor! it was obviously framed to poison the minds of the jury against this witness."

"Objection sustained."

"Very well," smiled the barrister, "I will withdraw the question. Let's see, where were we? Ah yes—your mother was an Indian, and you have lived among the Indians and among the scowmen of the river. Now tell me—did you live thus, away from the trading post, from choice; or were you forced to do so?"

An objection by the Crown caused the wording of this question to be changed, but it was allowed in its altered form.

Angus smiled slightly. "As I was under four years old when I was placed in the mission I really do not remember whether the choice was mine or my father's."

The barrister frowned, and the judge rapped for order as a titter swept the spectators. "And how long did you live at this mission?" he asked.

"Off and on for about fifteen years."

"'Off and on'? What do you mean by 'off and on'?"

"I mean exactly what I say."

"That part of this time you lived at this mission and part of it you lived elsewhere?" frowned the barrister.

"That is right."

"And during these fifteen years, where did you live when you were not living at the mission?"

"Among the Yellowknives."

"Now did you go of your own accord to live with these Indians, or were you sent to them, or taken to them, by another?"

"At first, when I was younger, my father would come to the mission and get me and take me to the Yellowknives. Later, after I was older, I went by myself."

"A hard life, isn't it—living among Indians?"

"No."

"You mean you liked it? You enjoyed living among savages?"

"Thoroughly."

"And I suppose," continued the barrister with just the trace of a sneer in his voice, "that you enjoyed living among the scowmen of the river too."

"Very much indeed."

“Did you live among the Indians in winter or in summer?”

“Both.”

“In tepees or tents, or whatever they call their hovels?”

“Yes.”

“It’s bitter cold in the Yellowknife country in winter, isn’t it?”

“It is cold in winter, yes. Forty or fifty, sometimes sixty below.”

“And you sit there and expect us to believe that you enjoyed the hardship of living in such temperatures, under such conditions?”

“I do not recall any hardship. Yes, I enjoyed it.”

“And you bore no ill will toward your father for forcing you to live under such conditions?”

“On the contrary, I admired him for it. I knew that he——”

“Never mind what you knew,” interrupted the barrister. “We will now turn to the diagram which the Crown has so thoughtfully offered in evidence. This point marked A is the spot where Colin Murchie was shot and where he died?”

“Yes.”

“And it is on a rock ridge that rises ninety-four feet above the level of the flat on which the trading post stands?”

“The ridge is about a hundred feet high. I never measured it.”

“The point marked B, on the ridge, but on the opposite side of the canyon through which the river flows, is the spot where you allege you saw Larue standing with a rifle in his hand, after hearing a shot while you were in the house?”

“Yes, I saw Larue standing there.”

“The spot marked C is the doorway where you stood when you saw Larue standing at the point B?”

“Yes.”

“According to this chart, or diagram, points A and B are fifty-two yards apart. Is that right?”

“I suppose so. I did not measure the distance. I would say about fifty yards.”

“And points B, where Larue is alleged to have stood, and C, where you say you stood, are one hundred and seven yards apart?”

“About a hundred yards, yes.”

“And points A, where Murchie died, and C, where you stood, are seventy-one yards apart?”

“About that, I should say.”

“Very good. Now, calling your attention to the chart, the line of vision from points C and B would cross the canyon, would it not? That is, one standing at point C would have to look directly across the lower end of the canyon, here [*points*] to see anyone standing at point B, one hundred and seven yards distant?”

“Yes.”

“And one standing at point B would have to look directly across the center of the canyon to see a man standing at point A, fifty-two yards distant?”

“Yes.”

“But one standing at point C would not have to look across the canyon to see a man standing at point A, seventy-one yards distant?”

“No.”

“Very good. Now you say that you heard this shot and saw a man standing on the ridge at point B, with a rifle in his hand, looking toward the point A where Murchie lay crumpled across the log or pole he was peeling?”

“Yes.”

“This was between nine and ten in the forenoon of August seventh?”

“That is right.”

“And you say that after looking at the fallen man the other turned his face toward you, and you recognized him as Jacques Larue, the defendant here in this action?”

“Yes.”

“You say that you saw him over the barrel of a rifle that you had trained on him?”

“Yes.”

“You could have shot him then and there?”

“Easily.”

“But you didn’t shoot him. Er—why was it—what was the reason you gave for not shooting the man who had just murdered your father?”

“I did not shoot him because I had promised my father that in the event Larue should kill him I would not take private revenge. I promised him that I would help the law but that I would let the law take vengeance.”

“Ah yes. You have great respect for the law, haven’t you?”

“No. But my father had. I promised because he asked me to.”

“You said that the man on the ridge evidently saw you a moment after you saw him, and leaped back into the bush and disappeared, and that you then dropped your rifle to the floor and ran to where your father lay on top of the ridge?”

“I ran to the foot of the ridge, and from there I climbed the steep trail to the top.”

“You said, I believe, that your father had been shot through the chest—that the bullet passed entirely through his body?”

“Yes.”

“Yet he very conveniently lived long enough for you to recognize his killer, drop your rifle, run across the clearing and climb a steep, ninety-four-foot rock ridge, and he retained consciousness and the strength to name the man who shot him—is that right?”

An objection by the Crown caused the question to be reframed, leaving out the words “very conveniently.”

“That is right,” Angus answered.

“Quite remarkable,” commented the barrister as he fumbled for a moment among some papers on the table and, producing some photographs, turned to the court. “If your honor pleases I should like to introduce at this point four photographs. Appended to them are affidavits of authenticity. They were taken by a photographer I accompanied to the scene. Each pair was taken between nine and ten in the forenoon—but on different days. The photographer stood in the doorway at the point C. This one, marked 1, shows the utter impossibility of a person standing at point C seeing another standing at point B, because of the density of the mist that rises at all times from the turbulent water racing through this gorge or canyon. At the proper time I shall introduce witnesses who have visited the spot on numerous occasions, extending over a long period of years, and who will testify that this mist is never absent from the canyon and that at all times it rises high above the rock walls. The photograph marked 2 was also taken at point C and shows that a clear and unobstructed view of point A is obtainable from point C. Those marked 3 and 4 are the same, except that they were taken on another day, three days later than the first pair, in order to show that the condition of the mist does not change.”

Larue took the stand in his own defense and came through the barrage of cross-examination by the crown prosecutor with his story unshaken, as did his two alibi witnesses, Paul Blind Man and the Big Bear.

Father Giroux and McDonald were introduced by the Crown as character witnesses for Angus. But the value of their testimony was doubtful, for the

defense barrister skillfully drew from them admissions that Angus Murchie was quick to resent an injustice and swift to retaliate—admissions that he lost no time in turning to his account in summing up to the jury, by pointing out that, the witness's statements to the contrary notwithstanding, no youth in the world would willingly forego living in comfort at a trading post that he might live in discomfort among savages. He opined that Angus undoubtedly hated his father for forcing him into such mode of life and that he had both a reason and the opportunity to shoot Murchie that morning himself.

Also, in his summing up, he stressed the impossibility of anyone standing in the doorway of the post and seeing, much less recognizing, anyone standing at the point Angus had said he saw Larue standing; and the impossibility of anyone standing where Larue was alleged to have stood and seeing, much less shooting, anyone standing where Murchie had fallen.

He ridiculed Angus' statement, made in the course of his redirect testimony, that a wind was blowing that morning strong enough to drive the mist up through the canyon before it reached the rims of the walls. He ridiculed the thought that Angus, who admitted he had no respect for the law, would forbear to kill his father's murderer because of a promise to uphold the law. And he wound up by asking the jury whether, in the face of his client's unshaken alibi, they would convict a white man on the evidence of a half-breed scowman?

The jury would not and did not. Without leaving their seats they turned in a verdict of acquittal.

XI

Grand Hotel

WITH the jury's verdict of "not guilty" ringing in his ears, Angus Murchie walked out of the courtroom and onto the street. He had proceeded but a short distance when he was overtaken by Corporal Downey.

"I'm sorry the way things turned out," said the officer. "I know you told the truth on the stand. So does the crown prosecutor an' so does Father Giroux—an' I've got my own good guess that the judge feels the same way about it. But you can't ever tell about a jury."

The younger man's eyes met his in a cold stare, from out a face as expressionless as a mask. "Your law has failed to work justice," he said, and Corporal Downey experienced a sense of shock, for instead of the rich, mellow voice, vibrant with life, that was the voice of Angus Murchie, the words fell from the finely chiseled lips in the flat, toneless voice of an Indian. Gazing into the velvet-black pools that were Angus Murchie's eyes, it seemed to Downey that he had suddenly receded into some illimitable depth, some far-distant past. The hair prickled at the base of his skull, for he seemed to be standing in a world of naked, primal things—a world that knew no civilization, because civilization had not yet come. An automobile glided silently around a near-by corner, and its horn blared a vicious warning to an urchin playing in the street. A truck laden with empty milk cans rumbled past, and Downey suddenly became aware of the solid sidewalk of Edmonton beneath his feet, and of the solid buildings all about him. The words of Father Giroux flashed into his brain: "At times he is all Indian."

"The case fell through because Larue an' them two Injuns stuck to their lie," he explained lamely. "It's too bad we couldn't have worked up a good chain of circumstances. Witnesses can set there an' lie like hell, but circumstances can't lie."

Again words issued tonelessly from between the other's lips: "Your law has failed. Jacques Larue murdered my father. He shall pay."

There was something of deadly certainty in those words. Downey said: "I warned him a man generally gets what's comin' to him in the long run. I told him I'd be there at the finish."

"Yes," replied the toneless voice, "you will be here at the finish."

“Be *here*! Good God, you don’t mean you’ll try to kill him right here in front of me—for revenge? Don’t try it! You can’t get away with it. He ain’t worth it.”

“No revenge. Only justice. I promised my father I would not kill him in revenge. Your law will deal with him.”

“But,” replied Downey, a puzzled look in his eye, “you just said the law has failed—an’ I guess you’re right. This time it sure failed to work justice.”

“The law is not yet through. I also promised my father that I would help the law take vengeance.”

“You can’t help the law now. The case is closed. The law says a man’s life can’t be placed in jeopardy twice for the same offense.”

“Is that the law? Then the law is in truth a clumsy tool for the working of justice. Larue shot my father. I saw him standing there with his rifle in his hand a moment after he had shot him. No other could have done it. I told the truth. Larue and his Indians lied. The law ignored the truth and believed the lie. There is no justice in that.

“Those two Indians have blood on their hands and blood on their souls. They murdered Miqua, but the law cannot prove it. Above and beyond your law is a justice that demands that the guilty shall pay.

“You have told me that circumstances cannot lie. The next time Jacques Larue stands before your court there will be circumstances——” The speaker broke off shortly, and Downey noted that the black eyes hardened with a glint of steel as they focused beyond him. Turning, he saw Jacques Larue approaching upon the sidewalk. He flushed as he caught the insolent leer with which the mocking eyes of the trader were regarding him.

“Good luck, Downey,” Larue said. “I hope you get the man that killed Colin Murchie.”

Before the officer could reply Angus stepped directly before the man, barring his way. Downey’s muscles tautened, his eyes were upon Angus Murchie’s hands. But the hands remained at the younger man’s sides; he made no move to draw a weapon. Then he spoke, in that curious flat monotone, his black eyes meeting Larue’s in a steady, expressionless stare:

“Corporal Downey will get the man who murdered Colin Murchie,” said the voice. “You are that man. You killed my father. You lied. Your Indians lied. They will go back into the North. When they again go out of the North—then shall you pay.”

Once again Corporal Downey sensed the slight prickling at the roots of his hair. The toneless words seemed somehow fraught with a deadly menace. Once again it seemed that he stood in a world of primal things—a

world of unguessed terrors that lurked deep in the unfathomable depths of those velvet-black eyes.

Jacques Larue sensed it also. As Angus stepped aside to allow him to pass Downey noted that the insolent leer had died from the man's eyes and that his lips had lost their mockery. He paused for a moment, his lips moving as though to speak, but no words came, and abruptly he hurried on and disappeared around a corner.

An hour later, in the lobby of the hotel, Angus was greeted by David Gaunt, an old friend of his father. "Hello, boy! I just heard that Larue was acquitted of Colin's murder. Too damn bad. But the law will catch up with him sometime. A man can't go on forever spittin' in the face of the blind goddess. What you goin' to do now—run Colin's post? By the way, did he ever buy that pulpwood tract I told him to—below that long dike, across the river from the post?"

"Yes, he picked up that tract and, I believe, some more beyond it. He mentioned it the day he was killed. He told me that Duncan McPherson had bought a like tract. Said you had advised him to pick it up."

"You bet I did! It'll make him—you, now—and McPherson, too, a pile of money sometime." The man paused abruptly, drew out his watch and glanced at it. "I want to talk to you about that. Got an engagement in just five minutes. Tell you what you do: meet me here in an hour an' a half—that'll be six-thirty—an' have supper with me. They call it dinner here, but to hell with 'em. After that we'll go to the show. I'll leave word at the desk for 'em to get us a couple of tickets. It's a war play an' they say it's good—had a long run in New York. I've got to be movin'. See you later."

The next moment he was gone, and Angus stood smiling after the man his father had told him had got rich cashing in on what he knew of the outlands. "And someday I may get rich cashing in on what I know of them too," he muttered and, buying an evening paper, he settled comfortably into a chair.

Gaunt appeared promptly on time and led the way to a table for two beside a window that gave a view of the street. They ordered, and for ten minutes Gaunt talked pulpwood, while Angus listened, asking a question now and then and receiving a ready answer.

As the waiter appeared with the food Gaunt noticed the lad's gaze riveted upon the window. Glancing out, he saw Jacques Larue passing along the sidewalk accompanied by a flashy and rather notorious woman of the town. As they were about to turn in at the entrance to the hotel he saw Larue glance up at the window, halt abruptly and fix his gaze upon Angus; then he

turned, grasped the woman by the arm and hustled her into a taxi. Gaunt's glance shifted again to Angus, who was still staring out through the window. He leaned forward across the table and spoke abruptly:

"Listen, boy, don't you kill Larue for murderin' your father! He's afraid you will. I saw it in his eyes. But don't do it. You'd only get in trouble. An' the law will pick him up one of these days."

Angus smiled. "I do not intend to seek private revenge. I promised my father I would let the law deal with him. As you say, the law will pick him up one of these days. It will not be long."

"That's better," said Gaunt. "I wouldn't have mentioned it, but I didn't like the look in your eye as you watched him there on the sidewalk. But, about this pulpwood—whenever you get ready to work it, if you find you can't swing it yourself, get in touch with me. It'll take a lot of capital, but you've got the wood there, an' you've got the power. Whatever you do, don't let go of it cheap. Hello—there's Downey!" He beckoned, and the young officer stepped over and paused beside the table. "Draw up a chair and join us," he invited. "We can make room here."

"No thanks, I've had supper. Got to get back to headquarters; the inspector and I've got a lot of stuff to go over."

The officer remained for several minutes chatting with the two about this and that, then moved on. As he passed out through the lobby he smiled at the recollection that Angus Murchie had spoken in his own richly resonant voice, and again the words of Father Giroux flashed into his brain: "Sometimes he is all white man."

Later, in the theater, when the lights went up as the curtain descended on the first act, Gaunt once again followed the gaze of the black eyes and saw Larue and the woman seated in a box close against the stage. The woman slowly swept the audience with a pair of mother-of-pearl opera glasses. The glasses paused abruptly and the woman leaned over and whispered to Larue, who snatched the glass from her hand and trained it on Angus. He lowered it in a moment and, handing it back, allowed his gaze to travel about the room. David Gaunt noted that never for so much as an instant did the black eyes beside him waver from Larue's face. He noted also that Larue's glance jerked back to meet that level stare, despite his obvious effort to focus it elsewhere. The man drew out a handkerchief and passed it lightly across his brow and nervously returned it to his pocket. Then, abruptly, and without a word to the woman at his side, he reached for his hat and disappeared from the box. The woman with a glance of surprise half rose as though to follow, then settled back into her seat as the lights went out for the second act. As

they went up at the next curtain Gaunt noted that the woman occupied the box alone. He glanced at Angus, whose interest was evidently centered upon the curtain.

“Keep an eye out for Larue,” he cautioned. “He’s afraid of you. He’s scared stiff that you’ll knock him off. A scared man is a dangerous one. He may try to beat you to it. Watch out for him—he ain’t the kind that’ll come out in the open.”

Angus smiled. “I’m not afraid of him,” he replied. “He’ll have no chance to harm me.”

Later that evening, after David Gaunt had gone to his room, Angus settled himself in a comfortable chair and idly watched the people who passed to and fro through the lobby or stood about conversing in small groups. A beautiful girl of perhaps twenty stood with an older woman near the corner of the cigarette stand, and unconsciously his eyes took in every detail of her trim and expensively clothed figure, from the small, daintily shod feet to the little hat perched at a jaunty angle atop her bobbed hair. He had seen women like this on his occasional visits to the city, and more and more of late his thoughts had lingered on them as the scows drifted lazily down the river. They were the women of another world than his own, the women of civilization—of the civilization he scorned. Yet in his heart he knew he did not scorn these women. They awakened an interest in him such as had never been awakened by the women of the outlands, the squaws of the back country, with their gaudy, shapeless garments, the angular, sharp-spoken wives of the traders, and the fat, slovenly sluts of the scowmen. As he looked the girl turned her face toward him, their eyes met and held for a moment, and the girl looked away. Angus was aware of a strange stirring within him—an indefinable restlessness. He tried to focus his attention on the comings and goings of the people who milled about the lobby, but his eyes returned to the girl. They had moved closer now, evidently waiting for someone, for at frequent intervals the older woman would raise a pair of glasses mounted upon a handle and sweep the lobby with a searching glance.

Again his eyes met the girl’s glance, and this time the red lips smiled slightly. She turned and spoke to the older woman, and Angus caught her closing words. “. . . at the theater this evening with Mr Gaunt. If I could see him I’d get him to introduce us.”

The older woman turned at her words, raised the lorgnette, and though Angus looked away he was aware of her intent scrutiny. Then her words reached his ears: “Grace, I’m ashamed of you! Handsome, yes—but nothing

but a half-breed! Probably some poor outlander David Gaunt brought in to see the city.”

The woman had said: “nothing but a half-breed.” A blackness seemed to rise within his brain—a blackness that obscured all beauty, like the blackness of a thundercloud blotting out the light of the sun. Once before, this day, he had heard his parentage sneered at—when Larue’s lawyer had wound up his tirade to the jury by asking them if they would convict a white man on the word of a half-breed scowman. But that was different. The lawyer was paid to discredit him before the jury, and he had coupled reference to his ancestry with his occupation. Angus well knew the reputation of the scowmen in Edmonton, be they white men, half-breeds or Indians—a rough lot who flaunted their vices unashamed.

So civilization—at least, the women of civilization—looked down upon a man whose blood was a mixture of the white and the red? The men evidently did not. Father Giroux, David Gaunt, Corporal Downey and other men with whom he had come in contact, the crown prosecutor, the judge—these men had without exception treated him as an equal. But the women . . . Again his eyes flashed toward the cigarette counter, but the two women were gone.

Anger blazed in his brain: the lightning accompanying the black thundercloud. Who were these women to look with scorn upon a man of mixed blood? Strip the expensive garments from them and clothe them in brogans, cotton stockings and shapeless dresses of drugget or cheap squaw cloth, and they would appear no whit better than any squaw in the dominion—nor nearly so efficient as the laziest of them.

Always Angus’ ancestry had been a matter of pride to him. While his recollection of his mother was nebulous and hazy, yet he knew from men like Father Giroux and McPherson and his father that she had been a fine woman by any standard of measurement. She was the daughter of a chief and the granddaughter of a great chief. And the people of his father—did not the Murchies come of a long line of chieftains in Scotland?

His anger cooled. He even smiled, if a trifle bitterly, as his glance swept the room with a flash of his old pride. Who were these people? Who, in all that room, could show ancestry such as his? Few at most. Probably none. Resentment smoldered deep within his soul, and he was conscious of a deep-seated scorn for them all—and for the civilization of which they were the puppets.

Abruptly he rose from his chair and walked to the desk. The room clerk on duty greeted him with professional urbanity.

“Good evening, Mr Murchie. Want your key?”

“No. My bill.”

The man looked astounded. Only the day before, as Angus had awaited the dinner hour, this man had engaged him in conversation and had noted particularly the pleasing, resonant quality of his voice. Now his words had fallen in the flat, toneless voice of an Indian. A second glance assured the clerk that the other was not drunk. “You mean . . . you’re checking out?”

“Yes.”

“Is—er—anything wrong? Anything the management can do——”

“No.” The rude interruption cut the speech off abruptly, and the clerk was aware that as he looked into this man’s eyes he seemed to be gazing into illimitable, mysterious depths of velvet blackness. He turned away and returned a moment later with the bill.

XII

Larue Celebrates His Acquittal

ANGER flamed in the heart of Jacques Larue as he hastened from the spot where Angus Murchie stood talking with Corporal Downey. He had seen the two standing there on the sidewalk, and as he had approached them he framed the jibe which, though aimed directly at the officer, would strike them both deeply: "Good luck. . . . I hope you get the man that killed Colin Murchie." But the jibe had rebounded and got under his own skin. Angus Murchie's flat, toneless words: "You are that man," had turned his anticipated satisfaction to ashes. Worse, there had been deadly menace in the words that followed: "Your Indians lied. They will go back into the North. When they again go out of the North—then shall you pay." And it had been not only the words—there had been something unutterably horrible, an indefinable portent of doom in those eyes. The black eyes had not blazed with fury, they had held no hint, even, of a cold rage. With rage or fury one could cope—could fight or flee. But one could neither fight nor could he flee from a terror he could not define.

Larue turned the corner and hastened on. In the middle of the block he turned sharply, glanced behind him and proceeded. It had seemed that, even after he had rounded the corner, the black eyes were still upon him.

Turning in at his boardinghouse, he ascended the stairs and entered his room, turning the key in the lock. He frowned at his image in the mirror above the cheap dresser as he realized that never before had he turned the key in the lock from the inside. Damn Angus Murchie! God, anyone hearing him speak, there on the sidewalk, would have thought he was all Injun! What did he mean about the Injuns again going out of the North? They had never been in Edmonton before, never been really out of the North. Athabasca Landing had been the limit of their southward range when they worked on the scows. And they probably would never go out again. What could Murchie have meant then? Did the fool think there could be another trial? Did he intend to dig up further evidence? Didn't he know that a man cannot have his life placed in jeopardy more than once for the same crime? He must know that. If not, Downey would soon tell him. But why, then, would Paul Blind Man and the Big Bear again go out of the North? And how could their going affect him, Jacques Larue, who had just been

acquitted of the murder of Colin Murchie? The frown in the mirror changed to a smile of smug satisfaction; a shrewd brain and a smart lawyer—that's all it takes to defeat the law!

But the smile faded as the words, fraught, somehow, with strange portent, kept recurring to his mind, and with the words the look in the unplumbed depths of those velvety, sinister eyes. He cursed aloud and began to change into his best clothing. He would forget Angus Murchie—his words, and his eyes and everything about him—in a night of gaiety to celebrate his acquittal!

Calling a taxi, he motored to a notorious house on the outskirts of the city. Later, in company with one of its inmates, he was about to enter the doorway of the city's swankiest hotel to start the evening off with a bang when, happening to glance up into the window, he found himself staring squarely into those unfathomable black eyes. Angus Murchie was seated at a table in the dining room! God, those eyes! He could not eat nor drink with those eyes upon him, let alone indulge in gaiety!

Grasping his companion by the arm, he hustled her into a taxi and gave the address of a restaurant further down the street. In the cab the girl quarreled with him violently, accusing him of being a piker who never intended to take her to the swell hotel in the first place.

Larue pacified her as best he could without going into an explanation that would hold himself up to ridicule. What did a damned tart know about the horrors of an unexplained threat or the terrors of sinister, menacing eyes? Later, in the restaurant, after numerous drinks had in a measure cleared the atmosphere, he suggested they go to the theater.

"And set up in nigger heaven, eh?" she retorted, glancing disdainfully about the restaurant.

"I'll get a box," boasted Larue with a grandiose flourish of his cigarette. "I'll bet you never saw a show from a box before."

"I'll say I didn't! You cheap skate! Tell me you'll take me to the hotel—an' you bring me to this dump! Then expect me to go to a show an' set on a box! I wouldn't go to no show with a guy that's too damn tight to pay fer seats!"

"Listen," said Larue, grinning. "A box seat is the most expensive seat in the house. You are practically right on the stage."

"Oh yeah? Well, come on, let's go. I'll believe you when I see you pay fer them tickets."

When the lights flashed up for the first-act curtain the girl picked up the opera glasses she had rented for twenty-five cents at the door, and from her

point of vantage in the box swept the faces of the audience. Presently she lowered the glasses and turned to Larue.

“There’s that guy that testified against you at your trial—Murchie, or whatever his name is. Good-lookin’ kid, ain’t he? Wish he’d come up an’ see me sometime.”

“Where?” exclaimed Larue gruffly, snatching the glasses from her hand.

“Down there beside the old guy with the eagle nose, fifth row by the aisle. Gee, look at them black eyes—makes you feel kinda creepy. He ain’t took ’em off of us since I first seen him.”

Larue raised the glasses and focused them on Angus Murchie’s face, but he saw only the eyes, black and unfathomable, staring straight into his own. He lowered the glasses. The theater suddenly felt uncomfortably hot. Sweat stood on his forehead in tiny beads and, wiping it away with his handkerchief, he reached suddenly for his hat and fled from the building.

He returned to his lodgings in a cold fury. His evening had been thoroughly and effectively ruined. Not only that, but even in his furious mood he realized that when his rage cooled there would still remain in his heart a deadly terror. In vain he told himself over and over again that Angus Murchie’s words meant nothing—that they were the idle vapping of a defeated man. In vain he tried to rid his memory of those menacing black eyes.

He went to bed; but sleep would not come. “When they again go out of the North—then shall you pay”—the words repeated themselves in his brain with the monotony of a dirge, and eyes of a deeper blackness seemed staring at him from out the blackness of his room.

After an hour of tortured tossing he dressed and began the rounds of the cheap dives in search of Paul Blind Man and the Big Bear. He would hire them both and keep them with him. He would fire Lemoyne and employ these two to do his work in the outlands—and he would take good care that their work should never take them “out of the North.”

Toward morning he found an Indian who told him that the two had started for Athabasca Landing with a freighter soon after the trial ended. They had not remained to taste of the fleshpots of Edmonton.

Larue killed time playing écarté with the proprietor of a low dive with a greasy pack of cards. When the stores opened he bought trade goods enough to load a freight canoe to augment the supply in his cache on the Slave, and added a revolver and many rounds of ammunition to his outfit. He had never before owned a revolver, had never felt the need of one. But now—if Angus Murchie should forget his promise to his father and seek private revenge he

would be ready for him. Then, too, there were Paul Blind Man and the Big Bear. He would follow them, overtake them and hire them. But if they had other plans, if they should refuse to work for him, or should they hire out to him and, after a time, decide to quit, so that he could no longer dictate or keep watch over their movements—well, a couple of well-placed shots with the revolver and he could rest assured that they would never “again go out of the North.”

XIII

Into the North

IT was well past noon when the freight outfit, with Larue and his goods and supplies in the wagon, headed northward over the ninety miles of rolling hills and muddy lowlands that was the trail to Athabasca Landing, head of river navigation of the three mighty rivers that form the great trade artery to the Arctic Sea.

At the landing he learned that Paul Blind Man and the Big Bear had gone down-river in a canoe the day before. Buying a freight canoe, he hired an Indian and struck out after them. Ten days later, at Fort McMurray, he learned through an Indian who knew them that Paul Blind Man and the Big Bear had left three days before, heading by canoe up the Clearwater.

Larue frowned and was conscious of a feeling of uneasiness. Why had they headed up the Clearwater when their obvious course would have been to proceed on down the Athabasca to the lake, follow its northern shore to Fishing Creek, then cross the portage to Lake o' the Wind, and home? True, they could reach Lake Athabasca by heading up the Clearwater, either by way of the Gaudet or the MacFarlane, or the Cree rivers. Larue himself often used these routes in order to run liquor into the country, rather than take a chance on the big river. But it was a roundabout way at best, with many portages between small lakes and around falls and rapids, a harder, little-known route, and he was almost certain that the two Indians were running in no liquor. Persistent questioning of the Indian who had furnished the information as to their route elicited no reason for their abandonment of the big river, and Larue's uneasiness increased as he sought to rid his thoughts of those sinister black eyes and the words of the veiled threat, "When they again go out of the North—then shall you pay."

Having little wish to remain at McMurray, where Angus Murchie might show up at any moment on his way back to the Ptarmigan, Larue headed up the Clearwater, which flows through one of the most beautiful and impressive valleys in the world, with its wide lowlands flanked by high parallel ridges. But Larue gave little thought to the beauty of the scenery. Hour after hour he and his Indian labored against the current.

At the Methye portage he learned that the two Indians had passed three days before, headed on up the Clearwater.

At Swan Lake a family of Indians told of two Swampy Crees who had, three or four days before, portaged across to a lake that was the headwater of one of the forks of the Gaudet.

With the passing of the days of hard work Larue's uneasiness subsided. If he was not overtaking the two Indians, at least he knew they were ahead of him—they were not going “out of the North,” but were forging steadily farther and farther into the North. Whole days passed without the words of Murchie's threat ringing in his ears, and he could sleep of nights without waking in terror at thought of those menacing black eyes.

They portaged to the nameless lake and arrived on its shore in the evening of a night of silent, dripping gray fog. Pitching the small A tent, they built a fire and prepared supper. So thick was the fog that even at the fireside the figures showed as grotesque yellow blurs. The meal over, Larue lay back on his blanket in the doorway of the tent, while the Indian sat close beside the fire, occasionally feeding it with sticks of wood. For the first time since that last day of his trial Larue felt a sense of security and well-being. He had a good cache of liquor on hand on the north shore of Lake Athabasca—six kegs left after Downey had smashed the one he was packing to the Burntwood band. And he had a cache of trade goods on the Slave. Colin Murchie was dead, and now, by the judicious doling out here and there of presents of liquor, he could gradually get the trade of the Dog Ribs of the Burntwood and the Slavis to the northward. Angus Murchie would probably retain the trade of the Yellowknives, as they were the people of his mother and he had lived among them for years.

Larue smiled. For the first time since his trial he was thinking of Angus Murchie as a man, a trader, a competitor—not as a pair of menacing, sinister eyes and a flat, toneless voice that spoke a prophecy of doom. “I was nervous and wrought up over the trial,” he muttered to himself. “He got my goat, as the saying goes. His eyes are but the dark eyes of any Indian, and his words were a mere idle threat.”

His small fortune, sadly depleted by the expenses of his trial, would soon become a large fortune, now that Colin Murchie was out of the way. He would establish liquor routes up the Cree and the MacFarlane and the Gaudet, so that if the police should from time to time knock off one of the shipments, two others would go through. And he would arrange it so that, no matter whether they were knocked off or not, his name could never be linked up with the contraband liquor. He would establish posts here and there in strategic positions and gradually sap the trade from the Company

and the French Company and the independent traders. Who knows—in a few years he, Jacques Larue, might be the tsar of the vast fur empire that is the North!

If Angus Murchie opposed him, so much the worse for Angus Murchie. He was nothing but a man—a damned breed, at that—once one got out from under the spell of those unfathomable black eyes and that flat, toneless voice. “When they again go out of the North—then shall you pay.” The words drummed upon his brain. “Damn Murchie!” he growled viciously. “Why should those empty words intrude upon pleasant thoughts? They mean nothing. But even if they do they are futile, for I shall see to it that neither of those two ever ‘again go out of the North.’”

Hardly had the muttered words left his lips than the thick, velvet silence of the dripping night was shattered by a peal of demoniacal laughter that rose and quavered on the still air until it finally ceased in a crescendo of sardonic mockery.

Jacques Larue’s eyes widened in sheer horror. Each hair of his head seemed to prickle and stand upon its end. Cold sweat sprang out upon his brow in tiny beads. The terrible laughter had seemed to emanate from nowhere, neither from the dripping blackness of the bush nor from the stygian pall of fog that lay heavy upon the still waters of the lake. It had seemed to come from neither near nor far, nor from the left nor the right, nor from the earth beneath nor the heavens overhead—it had been an all-pervading discord of horror, a monster brought forth of the foul, dank night, a mocking challenge to his brief moment of grandeur.

Beside the little fire the Indian groveled upon the ground, crossing himself and gibbering snatches of forgotten prayers.

The sight threw Larue into unreasoning rage. He cursed the man senselessly, the words issuing from between trembling lips: “God damn you! It was a loon!”

“No,” croaked the Indian and continued to claw at the ground in a frenzy of fear, as though he would dig himself in like a badger.

Still cursing, Larue stumbled to the fire and threw on more wood so that the flame blazed higher and a shower of red sparks shot upward to be swallowed in the fog.

All through the heavy night they lay, one on either side of the fire, straining their ears against the silence—dreading to hear again that peal of horrible laughter.

When the supply of firewood dwindled Larue hacked limbs from the trunk of a fallen spruce that lay at the outer rim of the firelight. The Indian

refused to move. He lay as one dead beside the fire.

Gray daylight finally filtered through the heavy blanket of fog, and, kicking the Indian to his feet, Larue thrust the tea pail into his hand and pushed him toward the lake, only a few feet distant. As the man turned from the water's edge with the pail of water the maniacal laughter of a loon sounded from close in shore, and with a shriek of terror the Indian leaped for the fire, caught his foot on a rock fragment and sprawled upon his belly. The pail struck the sloping rock and rolled down into the water with a tinny clatter, and again from out upon the still water came the maniacal laughter of a loon.

Larue fished the pail from the lake and set it upon the fire. "You fool!" he cried contemptuously. "I told you it was a loon!"

The Indian answered nothing but huddled more closely to the fire.

By the time breakfast was over the fog had thinned a bit, but neither Larue nor the Indian made any move to break camp. There was something ominous, sinister in the opaque gray silence that brooded over the lake, and in the heart of each lurked the dread of some unnamed, mysterious disaster.

Larue got out his revolver and ammunition and, fastening the top of a beef tin against the bole of a poplar tree, he practiced with his new gun, shooting round after round at the mark. Tiring of this, he carried the gun to the tent and, because he had not slept during the night, he threw himself down upon his blankets to catch a short nap while waiting for the fog to lift.

When Larue awoke the sun was low in the west. The day was bright and clear, and he stepped from the tent, calling loudly to the Indian. Why hadn't the fool waked him when the fog lifted? Damn him—you could never trust an Indian! They should be across the lake and well on their way down the tributary to the Gaudet by this time. Where was the fool anyway?

A quick survey of the outfit showed that some of the grub was gone from the pack; so was the Indian's blanket. Foot tracks in the mud of a low spot a few yards back on the portage showed that the Indian had departed in haste.

Cursing like a madman, Larue returned to the camp and glanced toward the setting sun. Too late now to break camp and continue the journey. A good ten miles of paddling lay between him and the mouth of the river.

Larue shuddered at thought of spending another night at that spot—and alone. Not that the Indian had been any great help in allaying his terror, but at least he had been there. The presence of even a dog would afford some sense of companionship. A dog would bristle up and growl and show fight—or would he, in the face of that demoniacal laughter? At another sound,

yes. At the snapping of a twig or the clatter of a dislodged stone or the sound of a footstep or at the sound of a human voice, but not at the eerie, unnatural frenzy of sound. No, a dog would do as the Indian had done, and lie whimpering and puling in terror beside the fire. And again Larue cursed aloud, for in his heart he knew that the dog's terror and the Indian's terror were no whit greater than his own.

The remaining hours of daylight Larue spent in collecting and piling within hand's reach a great quantity of firewood—enough to last throughout the night.

Darkness fell and with it the return of the fog—not the heavy, dripping fog of the night before, but a nebulous curtain of gray vapor that crept closer and closer, eddying and billowing in the light breeze that ruffled the surface of the lake in tiny ripples, shutting off the view of distant headlands. Overhead the stars winked in silent brilliance.

As the fog closed about him and the darkness deepened Larue became obsessed with the feeling that eyes were upon him—not the fiery, red-green shine of beasts' eyes that glare at one now and then at the outer edge of the circle of the firelight, but black, unfathomable eyes that did not show at all, but in whose depths lurked a mysterious blackness, blacker even than the blackness of the night.

Hours passed—tense, soul-torturing hours, during which, his nerves at the shrieking point, Larue waited for a repetition of last night's horrible laughter. The fog, fanned by the light breeze, brushed his cheek with the clammy touch of a dead hand. He gripped his revolver until his fingers stiffened about the butt. He was the center of a vast void whose profound silence was broken only by the soft whispering of the tiny wavelets lapping against the rocks. And somewhere out in the void, watching him through black, unfathomable eyes, gloating, mocking at his terror, hovered the *thing*.

He drew out his watch and held its dial to the firelight, his fingers shaking so that it was with difficulty he could see the hands. Midnight. He moistened his dry lips with his tongue. If the *thing* intended to strike it would strike now. Surely midnight was the accepted time for manifestations and deeds dark and mysterious. Larue gripped his revolver tighter and waited, nerves tingling, muscles tense. Seconds passed. Minutes. He could hear the faint ticking of his watch in the pocket of his shirt. Gradually the man's muscles relaxed, and his chin dropped lower and lower toward his chest.

Suddenly he was awake—his own muffled shriek drowned in the peal of hideous, mocking laughter that emanated from nowhere, rose to its hellish

crescendo and ceased as abruptly as it had begun, leaving Larue gibbering, groveling beside the fire as the Indian had groveled, digging into the lean soil with his bare hand. In his other hand the pistol went off as his finger convulsively squeezed the trigger, scattering live coals upon his blankets.

The odor of burning wool brought him to his senses, and he shook the coals from the blankets and tossed more wood on the fire. Well, it had happened—the thing for which he had waited. The laughter had sounded only once last night, probably would sound no more tonight. If it did Larue knew that he would not again suffer the abysmal terror he had just been through. He realized that his nerves must have been keyed to the snapping point. He had heard of men who had been crazed by fear, had scoffed at tales of lone men driven to madness by the imagined terrors of the illimitable solitudes. As he sat staring into the fire, the sweat of terror drying on his forehead, he knew he would scoff no more at these tales. He must strive to preserve his own sanity. Over and over in his brain the words of Angus Murchie repeated themselves with the unending monotony of waves breaking upon a beach: “When they again go out of the North—then shall you pay.” He groped for his cartridges and replaced the empty shell in the cylinder of his revolver with a loaded one.

“They shall never ‘again go out of the North,’ ” he muttered grimly—and resumed his silent vigil.

XIV

Larue Abandons the Trail

At daylight Larue broke camp, loaded his canoe and paddled across the lake. Skirting the opposite shore, he found an Indian family camped at the mouth of the river. Paul Blind Man and the Big Bear had, they said, passed on down the river several days before. They were on their way to Lake o' the Wind, north of Lake Athabasca.

Larue did some profitable trading and pushed on down the river, the Indians telling him that there were many families encamped on the river between there and Lake Athabasca.

He made fairly good time on the water but was delayed by the numerous portages. The nineteen-foot freight canoe was heavy, and the transfer of his goods required many trips.

That night he camped beside a family of Indians at the head of the third portage. He slept fitfully, waking up at frequent intervals, half expecting a repetition of the horrid laughter of the past two nights. But he heard no laughter, and in the morning he traded to advantage with the natives but refused to sell the revolver he kept ready to hand, thrust beneath the lashing of his blankets. Paul Blind Man and the Big Bear had passed over the portage nearly a week before. Larue realized that he was losing ground, but what difference? The two were ahead of him, heading for Lake o' the Wind. They would stay there too—would be busy putting up fish for the winter. What difference if he were a month behind. They would not go “out of the North.” He hired the natives to help him portage his outfit and proceeded on his way.

Day after day he pushed northward, down the Gaudet, trading with the natives, promising them whisky the next time he came that way. At a long portage known as the Split Rock he learned from the Indians who were camped there that Paul Blind Man and the Big Bear had left the river and gone to a lake some fifteen miles to the eastward to work for two white trappers who had hired them to help put up fish. The white men had come into the country quite late, and they could not put up fish enough alone to last themselves and their dogs through the winter, so they had offered good wages. The lake, the natives explained, could be reached by shoving up a

small river which emptied into the Gaudet about three miles below the portage. Among the several families encamped near the Split Rock Rapids he got rid of the last of his trade goods, and that night he lay in his tent and considered the immediate future.

The news that the two Indians he was seeking had deviated from their course to Lake o' the Wind had at first displeased him. But, thinking the matter over, he decided perhaps it was better after all. He could leave his fur here for a few days in care of the natives, trade his heavy freight canoe for a lighter one, slip up the river to the lake and engage Paul Blind Man and the Big Bear to work for him as soon as they finished their work for the two trappers. He would instruct them to go at once to Lake o' the Wind and wait for him there. Then he could return to the Split Rock, pick up his furs and, instead of taking them on up the Gaudet and farther into the North, could load them into his light canoe, hire an Indian helper, and hurry back to Fort McMurray and on down the Athabasca and the Slave to his cache. Then he would fire Lemoyne on some pretext or other, pack a load of goods to Lake o' the Wind, and Paul Blind Man and the Big Bear could help him pack the rest of it in on dog sleds after the snow came. The fur from this trip could be shipped to Edmonton from McMurray, thus saving much time and labor and expense. And from McMurray, also, he could order more trade goods to be shipped to him at some point on the Slave. Things were breaking all right for him.

In the hard work of the river trail and the business of trading, the horrible laughter of those two nights on the lake were all but forgotten; there had been no further laughter nor any untoward happening to mar the even tenor of his way. He was a fool. That trial had unhinged his nerves. For years he had traveled the North, and the North was the same as it had always been. He could snap his fingers at his foolish terror, now that his nerves had regained their normal composure. That laughter was doubtless the laughter of a loon, distorted, perhaps, by the fog or some peculiar acoustics of the lake. And so he dismissed the matter from his mind—but deep within his heart he knew that the laughter was not the laughter of a loon.

It was late the next evening when he pushed his light canoe out into the broad waters of the lake at the head of the small river. A cabin of newly peeled logs on a near-by point caught his eye, and he paddled across to it.

“Yes,” one of the trappers admitted in reply to his inquiry, “we hired a couple of Injuns named Paul Blind Man an’ the Big Bear, to help put up fish. What of it? Ain’t they all right? Is there anything against ’em?”

“No, no!” Larue assured him. “They are both good men—very good men. I came here because I wish to see them—to hire them to work for me

after they have finished with your work. I am an independent trader, and I can use them all winter in the country to the northward of Lake Athabasca. I was seeking them upon the river, and some Indians told me they had come here.”

“Okay—ye’re welcome to ’em when we git through with ’em. Glad to hear they’re good men. We’re so damn busy with the camp here that we can’t stand over ’em every minute, like you’ve got to with most of the damn Injuns. We stuck ’em in an old abandoned shack on an island about ten mile up the lake. The fishin’s good there, an’ we aim to put in a fish cache on the island that’ll be handier’n what it would be here, bein’ as we figger on trappin’ mostly to the east.”

“Ten miles, you say? Then I’ll camp here for the night and go on to their camp in the morning. I won’t take up much of their time. My affairs with them can be arranged very quickly.”

“Okay, help yerself. You’ll have to sleep outside, though. We ain’t got no more room’n we need in the shack.”

“I have my own tent,” Larue replied. “I’ll set it up here in the clearing.”

As he lifted his outfit from the canoe and drew the light craft from the water the man pointed to the revolver under the lashing of the pack. “Don’t see many pistols in this country,” he said. “What’s the big idea? ’Fraid someone’s goin’ to hold you up er somethin’?”

Larue laughed. “No, not exactly. You see, sometimes in my trading I handle a few kegs of liquor. And at times the natives get a bit too much of it aboard, and to prevent them from becoming—er—troublesome, I find the pistol is of great value. Then, also, there are the police.”

“Oh, tough guy, eh? Well, every man to his own game. Personal, me an’ my pardner here, we don’t hold with tradin’ hooch to the Injuns. Figger they’re better off without it. It ain’t none of our business what anyone else does, though—that’s up to the Mounted. Guess you must be the guy them two Injuns was talkin’ about t’other day—got a cache of hooch up on Lake Athabasca. Name’s Larue, ain’t it?”

“Yes, I am Jacques Larue, and I have a cache of liquor on the lake. But they shouldn’t have spoken of it. I must warn them to be careful.”

“Don’t mind us. We believe in folks mindin’ their own business.”

When Larue broke camp the following morning he found that his revolver was missing. He remembered distinctly placing it within easy reach of his hand against the end wall of the tent, but it was nowhere to be found, although search of the ground revealed no tracks, as of one squatting outside the tent to reach under the canvas.

The door to the trappers' cabin was closed, and there was no sign of movement within. Larue thought of awakening them and accusing them of the theft but decided not to, as there were two of them—both husky-looking individuals. Moreover, if they had the gun they would keep it despite anything he could do. Best to say nothing and swallow the loss. It did not really matter. He had his rifle if there were any shooting to be done. When he got to McMurray he could report the theft to Downey. Larue smiled thinly at thought of the police, for once, working to his advantage.

Throwing the outfit into the canoe, he headed up the lake in the direction of the island with the abandoned shack which the man said the two Indians were occupying.

Reaching the island about noon, he landed and made his way to the shack, a tumbled-down affair of poles and mud, the sagging roof of which he could see through the sparse growth of aspen and willow. Pausing at the door, he peered inside, and when his eyes became accustomed to the gloom he made out the blankets of the two on the rude pole bunks. There were dishes on the table, and two packsacks of gear on the floor near the head of the bunks. There was also a box of food, and a gill net evidently freshly repaired. Outside were several other nets in boxes, ready for setting. On the newly erected drying racks were some ten or a dozen percors of fish.

He called again and again but received no answer. The rocky island was not large, comprising scarcely a dozen acres, and anyone on it would certainly be within sound of his voice.

No boat was in sight, so Larue concluded the two had gone off to set nets. He could see no boat on the water, but the lake here was thickly dotted with islands and its shoreline broken by many outreaching points, so no great stretch of open water was visible from the island.

Larue got out his tea pail, lighted a fire and boiled a portion of tea. The two Indians were probably busy with their nets behind one of the islands or in some deep bay. He prepared his midday meal, ate it and then drowsed for an hour or two in the warm sunshine. The feel of autumn was in the air, the willows and aspens were losing their leaves, and warm days were becoming fewer and farther between.

Late in the afternoon he shoved off his canoe, threw out a troll, hooked a gray trout and boiled it for supper. The sun sank behind the low hills to the westward, and still the two Indians did not come. Nor had they put in an appearance when darkness settled over the lake.

Picking up his blankets, Larue stepped into the shack, but after a survey by the light of a candle he found on the table he decided to sleep out of

doors. The interior was filthy with the accumulated dirt of years, and a damp, musty smell pervaded it. The night was clear, and he spread his blankets without bothering to pitch his tent.

Daylight came—and still no Indians. Why hadn't they returned to the island? Where the devil could they be? Winter was approaching. The days were getting shorter, and Larue wanted to reach the Slave before the freeze-up. He could make it yet, with luck. But each day would count. He had no time to lose hanging around waiting for a couple of lazy Indians to show up.

By the time he had finished his breakfast he had made up his mind not to wait. He would leave word with the trappers to tell the Indians to go to Lake o' the Wind and wait for him there. He would tell them to instruct the two not to go out on the trap lines but to wait for him in the village, and he would give them a winter's work. He must get to the cache on the Slave before the freeze-up, or there was no telling where Lemoyne would move it to. And he had no wish to travel hither and yon with a dog outfit hunting Lemoyne and his outfit of trade goods.

Shortly after noon he showed up again at the cabin of the two white trappers.

"Thought you wasn't goin' to take up none of them Injuns' time?" growled one of the men. "We ain't payin' 'em good wages to set around all day and chaw the fat with every hooch runner that happens along."

"I took up none of their time," Larue replied. "In fact I have not seen them."

"Ain't seen 'em! Cripes, couldn't you find that island I told you they was on?"

"Yes, I found the island without trouble. Their things were there—their blankets and grub and their gear. There were some nets, too, in boxes, all ready to be put out, but the Indians were not there. There was no boat, either. I reached the island about noon yesterday, and I remained there until after I had my breakfast this morning, and they did not show up." Larue paused and noted that the two exchanged glances.

"You say their stuff was all there in the shack, an' there was some nets there too—how many nets?"

"There was one inside the shack, I remember. I think they had been repairing it. Outside, in the boxes, there were three or four more."

"They had a batch of 'em out then. We took a dozen nets down when we put 'em on the island. Did they have any fish on the racks?"

"Yes, ten or a dozen percers."

"It's jest like I said—you can't trust a damn Injun. They're prob'ly off along the shore somewheres visitin' amongst them others. There's quite a few Injuns camped along in them bays, t'other end of the lake. Much obliged fer wisin' us up. I'll slip up there this afternoon an' put a bug in their ear. They'd ort to have twenty percers dryin' by now."

"I'm in a hurry to reach the Slave, where I've got an outfit of trade goods," said Larue. "I didn't dare waste any more time waiting for those two to show up. When you see them will you tell them to go on to Lake o' the Wind when they're through here, and wait for me there? Tell 'em not to lay any trap lines—that I'll give 'em work all winter at good wages."

"Shore, I'll tell 'em," promised the man. "An' if they don't quit their kihootin' around amongst them other Injuns they're goin' to be on their way damn sudden."

Dropping down the small river, Larue camped that night at its confluence with the Gaudet. And when he awoke in the morning he was startled to see his revolver lying within easy reach of his hand against the end wall of the tent—in exactly the position it had lain the night it disappeared. As before, a thorough search of the ground about the tent failed to turn up any tracks. The one who took it probably became conscience stricken, he decided, and when I didn't unload my stuff from the canoe on my return from the island he had no chance to return it, so he followed me clear down here. "A conscience must be a miserable thing," he muttered aloud with a wry grin. "A man has trouble enough without one. At that I'm sorry he bothered to return the gun. It would have put Downey to considerable inconvenience to investigate that complaint." And thus he dismissed the matter from his mind.

At Split Rock Rapids he hired a young Indian to help him back to Fort McMurray with his fur. The light canoe would serve for the trip, as Larue's pack of fur was only a fraction of the weight and bulk of his trade goods, having been selected with a keen eye to value from offerings of many pelts.

Arriving at the lake which was the source of the tributary to the Gaudet down which he had come, the two paddled across, reaching the opposite shore just as the sun was setting. Deftly the young Indian, who was paddling the stern, swung the canoe ashore, and as Larue stepped out onto the rocks sudden horror gripped him. The Indian had landed at the spot of his former encampment! As the other stepped ashore Larue waved him back.

"We won't camp here," he said. "We'll go on across the portage and camp on Swan Lake."

The Indian shook his head: "No. Camp here. Carry 'cross tomor'. Too mooch mud. No kin fin' de trail."

"Damn you, get back in that canoe an' shove along to the portage!" cried Larue, advancing menacingly upon the lad.

"No. Portage no place to camp. Too mooch wet—too mooch mud. Good rock here, plent' wood."

"I tell you we're going on across the portage, dark or no dark, mud or no mud! I wouldn't camp on this damned lake if the portage were twice as muddy and the night twice as dark. Get back in the canoe, and I'll shove off."

The Indian made no move to obey. He stood staring into Larue's flushed face with expressionless black eyes. The eyes reminded Larue of the eyes of Angus Murchie, and with an animal-like snarl of rage he leaped forward and struck out with his fist. The blow landed on the lad's jaw, knocking him down. Instantly he was on his feet, a stone the size of a baseball in his hand. As Larue lunged toward him for another blow the lad hurled the stone, and Larue crashed forward onto his face and lay very still.

It was black night when Larue came to. For a long time he lay there conscious only of exquisite pain. His head ached as though it were about to burst. He tried to think where he was, tried to rise from the hard rock that seemed to dig into his flesh in a dozen places, but his muscles, stiff from the night chill, refused to function.

Finally, with increasing consciousness, he remembered that the Indian had landed at the place of his former encampment, remembered that he had ordered him to move on, to make the carry to Swan Lake, and that the Indian had refused. He remembered that he struck him and knocked him down and that he was about to strike him again—and there memory ceased. He knew only that he was lying there, chilled to the bone, with the rocks digging into his flesh. With a mighty effort he heaved himself to his hands and knees. He suddenly became very dizzy—and very sick.

When the paroxysm was over, his head cleared, and he rose stiffly to his feet. Staggering to the canoe, he lifted his outfit from it and drew the craft free of the water. The Indian was nowhere to be seen, and with all the speed possible his stiffened fingers closed about the helve of his light ax and, making his way to the fallen spruce tree, just visible in the starlight, he reached it and hacked off some dry branches.

A few moments later he was hovering over a fire that grew momentarily brighter as he added more fuel. As the grateful heat drove the chill from his body stark terror gripped him. Stumbling to his duffel, he dragged it to the

fire and set a pail of tea aboil. He spread his blankets close beside the fire and lay back on them, gripping his revolver. The tea pail boiled, and with shaking hands he poured a cup of the scalding liquid. Black, unfathomable eyes seemed peering at him from the outer dark, and he heaped more wood on the flames, driving the eyes back with the increased circle of his firelight. As the hot tea warmed him a drowsiness crept over him, and in sheer terror he fought off sleep.

Then it came—the thing he dreaded to hear—that peal of horrid, demoniacal laughter! Louder and wilder and more eerie it rose to its awful crescendo and ceased, leaving the man bathed in clammy sweat, groveling beside his fire.

XV

Angus Visits McMurray

CORPORAL DOWNEY looked up from the papers that littered his flat-topped desk in the police detachment at Fort McMurray, to greet the figure that had darkened the doorway.

“Hello, Angus! Come in an’ set down. What you doin’ way up here? How’s things on the Ptarmigan?”

The black eyes of the younger man met his own from a face as expressionless as a face of stone. All Injun, thought Downey as the other’s moccasins padded softly on the wooden floor. Standing directly before the desk, Angus spoke, and the officer was not at all surprised that the voice that addressed him was the flat, toneless voice of an Indian.

“I do not know how things are on the Ptarmigan. I have not been to the Ptarmigan. I have been on the trail of Jacques Larue.”

“What do you mean—on the trail of Jacques Larue?” Downey asked, eyeing the other sharply. “Good God, you don’t mean you’ve—killed him!”

“No. I promised my father I would not kill him. I have kept that promise. And I promised him that I would help the law take vengeance. I have kept that promise also.”

“Yeah,” Downey agreed, “I know. You done all you could. Like I told you back there in Edmonton, I believe you told the truth on the stand, an’ so does the crown prosecutor an’ Father Giroux an’ everyone else that knows you. It wasn’t your fault the jury believed Larue and them two damn Injuns.”

“Larue lied. And the two Indians lied. Now the two Indians are dead. And when the law has its way with Larue he will be dead also.”

“What do you mean?” cried Downey. “That Larue killed them Injuns? Can you prove it?”

A cynical smile twisted the mobile lips, and the unfathomable black eyes met Downey’s gaze squarely. “It has been demonstrated in your court of law that *I* can prove nothing. I sat upon your witness stand and told the truth. Larue and those Indians sat upon the same stand and lied. The jury ignored the truth and believed the lies. Moreover, it has been shown that a jury will

not convict a white man upon the testimony of a half-breed. Why that should be, I do not know. At least it seems to be a postulate so generally accepted that the lawyer for the defense based his final appeal to the jury upon it.” He paused and added ironically, “And yet one sometimes hears these courts of law referred to in all seriousness as ‘courts of justice.’ ”

“Yeah, even the police get a laugh out of that. But most times we don’t feel much like laughin’—after workin’ day an’ night to build up what looks like an open-an’-shut case, an’ then have it throwed out of court on some technicality that ain’t got no bearin’ whatever on the merits of the case; or else have a fool jury turn in a verdict contrary to all evidence, an’ common sense to boot.”

“The jury,” observed Angus, “seems to be the weak link in the administration of justice.”

“Why wouldn’t it be?” growled Downey. “It’s the part with the weak head! The judges are smart men. They’ve spent years studyin’ the law, an’ they know the law. An’ they’ve spent years studyin’ people, an’ they know people. They can pretty well tell, through years of observation, when a witness is lyin’ an’ when he’s tellin’ the truth. An’ they’ve learned by experience to sift out the truth from circumstances an’ happenin’s. The judges have got trained brains—they can think. But look at the jury! They can’t think; because they ain’t got nothin’ to think with. They ain’t even average citizens—’cause the only ones that sets on ’em is the ones that’s too damn dumb to think up an excuse to be excused. Or else they’re planted in there by some lawyer for the purpose of acquittin’ his client or hangin’ the jury, regardless of evidence. An’ they’re the ones that’s got the final say. That’s the law.”

“A clumsy tool, indeed, for the working of justice.”

“Yeah, but it’s the only tool we’ve got, so we have to use it.”

“It seems that civilization has a long way to go, yet, on the road to Utopia.”

“Utopia? I don’t get you. Where in hell’s that?”

“Who knows?”

Corporal Downey sat for several moments regarding his visitor curiously. “You’re a queer one, Angus,” he said at length. “You talk like an Injun, yet what you say would set a damn smart white man thinkin’. But about them two Injuns. You say they’re dead? How do you know that?”

“I have seen them lying side by side on an island in a lake.”

“What lake?”

"I do not know the name of the lake. There are many lakes that have no names."

"Where'bouts is this lake?"

"It lies fifteen miles to the eastward of the Gaudet."

"What killed 'em?"

"Bullets—from the pistol of Jacques Larue."

"Did you see him fire the shots?"

Again the cynical smile played about the corners of Angus Murchie's lips. "What difference if I saw or did not see? Do not forget that I am a half-breed. Nor that I saw Larue standing there on the rock that day, only a few seconds after he had murdered my father. Yet the jury believed that he was at that time many miles away, upon Lake o' the Wind, with Paul Blind Man and the Big Bear. We know that a certain witness will tell the truth upon the stand and that other witnesses will lie. And we have seen that the jury will disregard the truth and believe the lies. But you yourself told me that circumstances cannot lie. I have been upon the trail of Jacques Larue."

"But," said Downey, frowning, "why would Larue kill them two? They done what he hired 'em to do. They alibied him. He wouldn't have no motive."

"No? Think back to the day of his acquittal—when he stood facing me there on the sidewalk in Edmonton. Do you not remember that I told him that his two Indians would go back into the North and that when they again went out of the North—then should he pay? And do you not remember that my words struck terror to his very soul? That he tried to speak, that his lips moved, and that no words came, and that his face turned as white as a face of marble, and that he hastened away from that spot as though to rid himself of some horror?"

Downey nodded slowly, his eyes on the face of the half-breed. "Yes," he said as he recollected with a slight shudder that the words, and the look in the black eyes that accompanied them, had caused the hair to prickle at the back of his own scalp, "I remember that."

"Is it not conceivable, then, that those words would prey upon his mind—would strike terror to his soul? And is it not also conceivable that he would take such measures as he thought would prevent them from ever again going out of the North? That would insure their silence?" He paused as Downey stared aghast into his inscrutable black eyes. "Well," he continued, "they are silent now—forever. They were bad men, those two. They murdered Miqua, and your law could not work justice. Yet it would seem that there is a stern justice above and beyond your law. For who can

say that those two have not now met justice—for the murder of Miqua, and for perjuring their souls on the witness stand—as they lie there side by side on the island with bullets from Jacques Larue’s pistol in their brains?”

“Good God,” breathed Downey, staring at the other in fascination. “You mean that you figured it all out as you stood there on the sidewalk—that your words would scare Larue into knockin’ them two off to keep ’em from goin’ out of the North again? But what did you mean? How could it affect Larue, even if they did go out of the North?”

“That,” replied Angus with a peculiar, enigmatical smile, “is what Larue wondered. It preyed upon his mind because he could not find the answer. A mind in which guilt lurks, Downey, is a mind in which fear lurks also. And fear of the unknown is the worst fear of all. A man will conceivably go to any length, even to the committing of murders, to rid himself forever of a fear of the unknown.”

“An’ you say you’ve be’n on Larue’s trail. Do you mean you’ve dug up the evidence that will convict him of them murders?”

Angus shrugged. “I do not know. It is your job to weigh the evidence, to correlate it and to judge of its value. I have been upon the trail of Larue. From midnight of the day of his acquittal until just a few hours ago I know where he has put in every moment of his time.”

“Can you swear to his movements on the stand?”

“I shall not take the stand. My part will be simply to point out, link by link, your chain of circumstances, and to put you in touch with those whose testimony will substantiate those circumstances. There will be many to take the stand—the keepers of low dives in Edmonton, the dealer who sold Larue goods and supplies, Indians, and two white trappers—honorable men, these—whose testimony your jury may possibly believe, even though they speak the truth. There is not a half-breed among them all.”

The bitter irony of the words was not lost upon Corporal Downey. “Go on,” he urged, “let’s hear about these circumstances.”

“Shortly after midnight of the day of his acquittal Jacques Larue left his boardinghouse in haste and began a tour of the dives that cater to the desires of Indians. In each he inquired the whereabouts of Paul Blind Man and the Big Bear. He seemed very anxious to find them. Finally, toward morning, he found in one of these dives an Indian who knew the two, and from him he learned that they had departed for Athabasca Landing immediately after the termination of the trial. Larue then played cards with the proprietor of this dive until the places of business opened for the day. Proceeding to a dealer

whose name I shall hand you, he bought an outfit of cheap trade goods and also a pistol, the number and the caliber of which also I shall hand you.

“In the afternoon he engaged a freighter, who hauled other goods also, to take him and his outfit to the landing. There he found that the two he sought had departed down-river in a canoe the day before. He bought a freight canoe, hired an Indian, whose name I shall hand you, to help him, and proceeded to follow.

“Here at McMurray he learned from an Indian whose name I shall hand you that the two he followed had made better time than he and had departed up the Clearwater. Larue and his Indian followed, inquiring of everyone they encountered after Paul Blind Man and the Big Bear. I shall hand you the names of each of those people. Also of the people on Swan Lake and the Gaudet and of two white trappers. I have the names in a book. I did not trust to memory.

“On Swan Lake he learned that the two had portaged across to a nameless lake which is the headwater of one of the tributaries to the Gaudet. Larue and his Indian helper also portaged. They camped that night on this nameless lake, and next day Larue’s Indian deserted. He told me a weird tale of a sound in the night that terrorized both him and Larue. Larue did not break camp that day. He practiced with his pistol for a time and then slept until late afternoon.

“The following morning he proceeded across the lake and inquired of an Indian family at the source of the river for Paul Blind Man and the Big Bear. They told him the two had gone on down the river, and Larue passed on. Along the river he traded with the natives, and always he inquired for the two he sought. Several of these natives wanted to buy his pistol, offering more than it was worth, but he refused to sell.

“At the Split Rock portage he traded the last of his goods, and there also he learned that Paul Blind Man and the Big Bear had hired out about a week before to help two white trappers put up fish on a lake that lay some fifteen miles to the eastward.

“Larue left the fur he had received in trade, with these Indians, traded his freight canoe for a light one and proceeded to this lake by way of a small river that flows from it and empties into the Gaudet some three miles below the Split Rock.

“He arrived at the lake in the evening and camped beside the cabin of the trappers. In the morning he broke camp and paddled eastward for a matter of ten miles and landed at midday upon an island. He remained on this island

overnight, leaving the following morning and returning the way he had come.

“After his departure I, too, landed upon this island. I saw a dilapidated shack in which were the belongings of two men. There were also some gill nets in boxes, and a dozen percors of fish drying on the racks. On the dirt floor of the cabin were the prints of hobnailed boots, of the pattern of those worn by Jacques Larue. And behind the cabin, several yards distant, near the farther end of the island, concealed in a thicket of willows, I saw Paul Blind Man and the Big Bear. They were dead. And in the head of each was the wound where a bullet had entered. So I came away from there and took up the trail of Larue. He returned to the camp of the trappers, stopped for a short time and pushed on.

“That night he camped at the mouth of the river where it flows into the Gaudet. And the next day he returned to Split Rock, hired a young Indian and, picking up his fur, headed back up the Gaudet. A few nights later this young Indian landed the canoe at the spot where Larue and his first Indian had landed. Shortly thereafter this lad also deserted Larue, and when I accosted him and asked him why he told me that Larue had hired him to help him to McMurray with his fur and that when he had landed the canoe at that place, which has been a recognized camping place of the Indians for countless years, Larue ordered him to push on across the portage. But, it being manifestly too late to negotiate the Swan Lake portage, which is one of mud and swamps, he again refused, whereat Larue struck him with his fist and knocked him down. He arose with a stone in his hand, and when Larue again lunged forward to strike him he hurled the stone into Larue’s face, and Larue fell down.

“Later that night Larue came to—for from my own camp I could see the glimmer of his fire. And in the morning he portaged to Swan Lake and is now upon the Clearwater. I followed until last night, when I slipped past him in the darkness in order to lay this information before you.”

“An’—where’s Larue now?” Downey asked.

“He should be showing up here at McMurray at any moment. Do you believe that such facts as I have related will be sufficient to place Larue once again before your courts?”

Downey nodded. “It’s as clear a case as I ever seen, provided you’ve got them names.”

“The names are here,” replied Angus, tossing a small notebook onto the desk. “And the date, and the hour, and the minute of each contact.”

The officer picked up the book and riffled the leaves with his thumb. Then he returned it to the desk. “No one but a white man, an’ a damn smart one, could have figured out what effect them words would have on Larue an’ what he would do—an’ no one but an Injun would have had the patience an’ the savvy to have tracked him down to his crime.”

“And will you now arrest Larue?”

For answer Corporal Downey arose, stepped to the door and called to a couple of constables who were busy overhauling the dog harness and sleds in anticipation of winter:

“Keep an eye on the Clearwater,” he ordered, “an’ when Jacques Larue shows up fetch him in.”

XVI

“Out of the North”

AN hour later the two constables appeared, with Larue walking between them. The free trader's glance rested for a moment on the face of Angus Murchie, then, without meeting the stare of the black eyes, flashed a questioning look at Downey.

The constables swung a pack-sack and a roll of blankets to the floor. “Here's his duffel an' his bedroll,” said Constable Ames. “He's got a tent an' a pack of fur. Shall we fetch them too?”

“Yes—better bring all the stuff in here,” Downey replied.

Larue smiled. “I am sure you will find nothing amiss with my packs,” he said, adding maliciously, “I can assure you that none of them contain even a very small keg. And my trading license, you will find that in perfect order.”

Rising from his chair, Downey crossed to the blanket roll and drew the pistol from beneath its lashing. “Packin' a revolver these days, eh?”

“It is no crime to own a revolver if one does not carry it upon his person,” retorted Larue.

“Or shoot someone with it. A couple of Injuns, for instance.”

The man laughed aloud—an insolent, sneering laugh. “Oh ho, so now I am supposed to have shot a couple of Indians! What a terrible fellow you must think me, Downey! First you accuse me of instigating the death of Miqua—though you admitted you could not prove it. Then you arrest me for the murder of Colin Murchie—and the jury showed you that you could not prove that. So now you intimate that I have shot a couple of Indians with my pistol.”

“Yeah. An' this time I'm goin' to prove it—even to the satisfaction of a jury.”

“Well, well, how very interesting! Truly, Downey, your officious interest in me—what with these accusations of murder and the many detentions on suspicion of running in liquor—is beginning to look like deliberate persecution. I must remind you that a citizen has some rights in this country—even against the mighty police. I am minded to file charges against you.”

"File an' be damned! In the meantime I'm filin' a murder charge against you. You're under arrest for the murder of Paul Blind Man an' the Big Bear, an' I'm warnin' you that anything you say may be used against you."

A burst of derisive laughter followed the announcement. "Ah, but, my dear Downey, this charge is truly amusing! I will admit that in each of the other cases you might have had some small ground for suspicion. But this is really too preposterous. I am afraid you are losing your grip. You are, as the saying is, slipping."

"If it's so amusin' you better get your fun out of it while you can," Downey retorted. "Because you're sure goin' to lay up in the Fort Saskatchewan jail pendin' an investigation."

"But, I tell you, this charge is a joke!"

"Call it a joke if you want to. You figure that if you can beat a charge of murderin' a white man with an eyewitness testifyin' against you, you can beat a charge of murderin' a couple of Injuns without no witness to it—an' maybe you can."

"But when I produce those two Injuns in court—what then?"

"That," replied Downey, "should be a perfect defense against a charge of murder—providin' they're alive when produced. You done it once an' saved your neck. Maybe you can do it again."

Angus Murchie, who had been a silent listener, stepped directly in front of Larue and fixed him with those inscrutable eyes. "Your Indians," he said in a flat, toneless voice, "*have gone out of the North.*"

A look of sudden horror supplanted the insolent mockery in the eyes that stared back into the black eyes of Angus Murchie. Larue's jaw sagged, the color drained slowly from his face, leaving it pasty white. Sweat sprang out upon his brow. His knees trembled violently, and he sank into a chair, seemingly unable to tear his fascinated gaze from those black eyes that held it in their level stare.

The flat, toneless voice was speaking again: "*And now shall you pay.*"

"Look," whispered Constable Ames to Constable Brock as they paused in the doorway with the remainder of the stuff from the canoe, "he's scairt stiff. I've seen a snake look at a frog like that—an' the frog too scairt to even croak."

"Yeah," whispered Constable Brock, "it gives me the creeps."

Larue's face worked convulsively. Spittle drooled from the corners of his sagging lips, and with trembling fingers he fumbled at the top button of his shirt. Then suddenly Angus laughed—a weird, eerie burst of demoniacal

laughter, the like of which none of the three officers had ever heard, a laugh that seemed, somehow, to emanate from nowhere, and rise to an all-pervading crescendo, and cease as suddenly as it had begun.

“An’,” whispered Constable Ames, “how about that fer givin’ a man the creeps?”

The sound goaded Larue to a frenzy of terror, and the words that stuck in his throat now poured out in a torrent: “It’s a lie! A lie, I tell you! A lie! He followed me! He hounded me day and night! Every moment he has been on my trail, yet I could never see him!”

“Collectin’ evidence,” said Downey, “that justice might be done.”

“That pistol,” gibbered Larue. “It is mine! I bought it in Edmonton! But
_____”

“What for?” interrupted Downey.

“Because I was afraid—after his threat!”

“What threat?”

“You yourself heard it—there on the sidewalk in Edmonton! He said, ‘When they again go out of the North—then shall you pay.’”

“Yeah,” Downey replied. “I heard him say that. But what did he mean by it? It don’t sound like no threat. It’s more like a prediction. So you was scairt an’ you bought the pistol to make sure them two Injuns would never go out of the North again, eh?”

“No! No! I lost the pistol! I did not have it when I was hunting for those two!”

“Oh, you admit you was huntin’ ’em, eh? What for?”

“To hire them! To try to persuade them never to go out of the North again!”

“It looks like you done so,” replied Downey dryly.

“But I tell you I never found them! I lost the pistol. It disappeared one night from my tent, where I had placed it within reach of my hand!”

“Here it is,” reminded Downey, raising the weapon from the desk.

“It was returned later—returned as mysteriously as it had disappeared!”

“Ain’t that somethin’!” exclaimed Downey as all three officers grinned broadly. “You’ll get the chanct to tell ’em all about it in court.”

“But no jury will believe it!”

“Well,” grinned the officer, “you couldn’t hardly blame ’em fer that. Neither do I. But cheer up, Larue—you’ll have time to think up a better one down in the Fort Saskatchewan jail.”

“But I tell you it is the truth!” cried the man, in a perfect frenzy of terror.

The flat, toneless voice of Angus Murchie answered him: “I, too, spoke the truth—as well you know. And the jury did not believe me.”

XVII

Evidence

ANGUS MURCHIE accompanied Corporal Downey into the back country on his search for evidence that would convict Jacques Larue of the murder of the two Indians, Paul Blind Man and the Big Bear.

On the Clearwater, a few miles above McMurray, they found, living with some relatives, the Indian who had accompanied Larue from Athabasca Landing to the camping place on the nameless lake beyond the Swan Lake portage. He told of Larue's anxiety to overtake the two Indians, and of his inquiring as to their whereabouts of everyone they had encountered. He told also of the peal of weird laughter that had so terrified Larue and himself in their camp on the nameless lake that neither had slept during the remainder of the night. In the morning, he said, Larue had practiced shooting with his pistol for a long time and had then gone to sleep; and he himself, being afraid to remain longer upon a lake where lurked so terrible a *tahmanawas*, had taken his blanket and some grub from the pack, and had left that place, nor did he ever want to see it again.

"A loon, probably; or possibly a wolf howled in the nighttime," suggested Angus.

"No!" cried the Indian emphatically. "No loon! No wolf! *Tahmanawas!* Mak' de hair ron roun' on de head! Mak' de blood freeze!"

"Yeah," Downey agreed, slanting a glance into the expressionless face of the half-breed, "a laugh that would curl the hair an' freeze the blood of the Devil himself."

At Methye portage, and along the Clearwater, and at Swan Lake, they found corroboration of the man's statement that Larue had inquired of everyone as to the direction taken by Paul Blind Man and the Big Bear.

At the camping place on the nameless lake Downey gathered up and preserved many empty pistol shells and several bullets that he dug from the bole of the aspen tree against which Larue had placed his target.

All down the Gaudet, Downey interviewed the natives with whom Larue had traded, and always they told him of the man's inquiry for the two Indians who had passed on down the river before him. Almost without exception, also, they told of seeing a pistol in the trader's possession. It was

a thing that impressed them—this short gun thrust beneath the lashing of his pack—for none had seen a pistol before, except in the holsters of the police.

On the lake to the eastward of the Gaudet, which Downey named Trapper's Lake, the white trappers told of Larue's visit.

"He got here one evenin'," said one of them, "travelin' light in a canoe, an' asked us did we know where he could find a couple of Injuns name of Paul Blind Man an' the Big Bear. We told him we'd hired 'em to put up fish an' that they was camped in an old shack on an island about ten mile up the lake. We told him how to locate the island, an' he camped here that night, claimin' he wouldn't take up much of their time, 'cause all he wanted was to hire 'em to work fer him after we got through with 'em."

"Did you see a revolver in Larue's possession?" Downey asked.

"Yeah," answered the other trapper. "An' when I asked him about it he claimed he had it in case the Injuns might git too full of hooch sometime an' start somethin'. He said he run in a batch of hooch now an' then."

"Yeah," cut in the other, "an' he said it might come in handy agin the police too."

Downey grinned. "I guess there ain't no police losin' any sleep over Larue's revolver. He didn't mention anything about its bein' stolen an' returned to him, did he?"

"No. We didn't talk to him no hell of a lot. He was gone when we got up next mornin', an' he didn't show up till noon the next day. He claimed he couldn't find them two Injuns. Claimed he found the island an' the shack with their stuff in it, all right—an' some nets, an' fish on the drying racks. He claimed the Injuns wasn't on the island, an' there was no boat, neither. He camped that night on the island, an' next mornin' they hadn't showed up yet, so he come away without seein' 'em."

"Did he seem excited or nervous?"

"He was in a hell of a hurry to be on his way. Claimed he wanted to git clean down on the Slave before the freeze-up. Told us to tell them two Injuns to wait fer him on Lake o' the Wind. We figgered the Injuns was puttin' in their time visitin' around amongst them others that's camped around the shore, so we went to the island that afternoon. We seen Larue's tracks in the sand an' in the shack, but the Injuns wasn't there, nor the boat, so we went to find 'em. We talked to every damn Injun along the lake, but we never found hide nor hair of them two. We found the boat, though, with some net boxes in it, layin' up agin' the shore on the north side of the lake where it had drifted. We figger mebbe they fell overboard an' got drowned. Them Injuns mostly can't swim none."

“Did you search the island carefully?”

“No. They wasn’t in the shack, an’ the boat was gone, so what was the use of searchin’ the island? Anyone would know they’d went off in the boat.”

And finally Downey talked with the young Indian who had accompanied Larue from Split Rock up the Gaudet to the nameless lake. This lad said that Larue had kept a pistol at all times stuck beneath the lashing of his pack, and that he had been in so great a hurry to reach the Clearwater that he had refused to camp at the camping place this side of the Swan Lake portage, even though night was approaching. He told how, when he had refused to start over the Swan Lake portage in the night because of the mud and the danger of becoming lost in the darkness, Larue had knocked him down, and how, in self-defense, he had knocked Larue out with a stone, as the man attacked him again.

On the day before the opening of the trial of Larue for the murder of the two Indians, Angus Murchie sat with Corporal Downey in the office of the crown prosecutor, who took occasion to compliment the officer upon his evidence.

“It is a beautifully prepared case, Corporal—the evidence is complete and conclusive. Despite anything the defense may have to offer, no shadow of doubt can remain in the minds of the jury that Larue murdered those two Indians to silence them. He was undoubtedly afraid of blackmail. Or he evidently did not know that, having been acquitted of the murder of Murchie, he could not have been tried again, even though the alibi witnesses should confess their perjury.”

Angus Murchie pointed to the array of exhibits upon the prosecutor’s desk: Larue’s revolver, his pacs with the peculiar pattern of the hobnails in the dirt floor of the shack on the island, the handful of empty shells, and the bullets collected at the spot where Larue had practiced with his pistol, the two empty shells found on the island near the bodies of Paul Blind Man and the Big Bear, the bullets removed from their skulls, photographs of those two bodies lying concealed side by side in the willow copse, and the pile of neatly folded depositions topped off by the report of the ballistics expert which showed that all of these bullets and shells had been fired from Larue’s pistol and could not possibly have been fired from any other.

He spoke, addressing the prosecutor, and to Corporal Downey it seemed that a subtle, sardonic irony was masked behind that flat, toneless voice. “Your law, now that it has what it demands—the evidence of mute things, of

circumstances, and words from many mouths—will it now see that justice is done?”

The prosecutor nodded. “Yes, this time the law will triumph. Larue will hang.”

“It was Angus that dug up the evidence,” said Downey.

“You are to be congratulated,” said the prosecutor, “both for that, and for forbearing to take personal revenge against the man who undoubtedly murdered your father. I believe that you told the truth upon the stand and that Larue was acquitted on perjured testimony.”

“Yes, I told the truth. I did not kill Larue, because I had promised my father that I would not kill him—that I would help the law seek vengeance. The law has had its help.”

Abruptly Angus left the room, and the prosecutor turned to Downey with a smile. “These half-breeds!” he exclaimed. “You know, when he was testifying at Larue’s trial for the murder of his father, both at the time of his direct testimony and as he stood up under the cross-examination of the defense, I thought he exhibited the intelligence and the poise of an educated white man. But when you come to know ’em you realize that they’re really as naïve and as simple minded as children.”

“Yeah?” drawled the corporal, slanting him a sidewise glance. “Well, maybe you know ’em better’n I do.”

XVIII

Jean McPherson

THE prediction of the crown prosecutor proved correct. Larue made a sorry witness in his own behalf—a ridiculous, almost a pitiful figure on the stand. He told a rambling, unconvincing story of weird laughter in the nighttime. His tale of the mysterious disappearance of his pistol, and its equally mysterious return, availed nothing against the Crown's array of exhibits and depositions. With the black eyes of Angus Murchie always upon him, his extreme nervousness bordered so closely upon hysteria that the judge repeatedly reprimanded him for furious, and at times, profane, outbursts of rage, directed at the crown prosecutor, at even his own lawyer, who endeavored unsuccessfully to have Angus excluded from the room. The jury returned a verdict of "guilty" in scarcely less time than the previous one had voted an acquittal.

The day following the close of the trial Angus and Corporal Downey headed northward with a sled stocked with provisions for the three-hundred-and-fifty-mile journey to Fort McMurray.

Snow lay deep over the Northland, and their progress was slow on the Athabasca, whose numerous falls and long stretches of white-water rapids necessitated long detours over trails not yet packed by winter travel.

At McMurray, Angus bought a dog outfit of his own and continued his northward journey. He made better time on the less turbulent stretch of river between McMurray and Lake Athabasca, stopping for a brief visit with the trader at McKay.

Stormbound for a day and a night at Chipewyan, his memory flashed back to the days when Duncan McPherson had been the factor there, and to the times when his father would pick him up at the mission, forty miles below, and bring him to the great trading post, where for days at a time he and Jean McPherson were free to romp and play as they saw fit, while the two old Scots argued endlessly over the jug. It was too bad that this friendship of years had been disrupted by so trivial a thing as one foxskin. And now Colin Murchie was dead and McPherson way off in a bleak post on the edge of the Arctic Circle. Idly he wondered what had become of Jean.

She must be grown up by this time. He wondered whether he would know her.

It was toward evening of the second day after leaving Chipewyan that he swung his dogs off the river and up the short, steep slope to the little plateau upon which stood the log buildings of the mission of Father Giroux.

The saintly old priest greeted him literally with open arms as he stood in the doorway, the keen wind of winter rippling his long silver hair. "Oh ho, it is Angus! Welcome home, my son! For you know that for many years this was the only home you knew!"

"Get back in the house, Father," laughed the younger man, "before you catch your death of cold. I'll be in after I have taken care of the dogs."

"There are boys to take care of your dogs. See—here they come now, pouring from the dormitory for a glimpse of the visitor. One would think they expected to see good Saint Nicholas himself with his reindeer—for only two days remain before Christmas. But as for my catching cold, you need have no fear. Fifty-one winters I have spent in the North, and never yet have I had a cold. The years have touched my hair with frost, but it is still long and thick, and warmer than any cap. And my soutane is of good warm wool."

At a word from the priest several of the larger boys took charge of the dogs, and Angus stepped into the warm living room, where the flames roared up the wide throat of the fireplace.

"I am truly glad to see you, my son," said the priest as Angus divested himself of his outer garments and stood with his back to the fire. "I have long been expecting you. I knew you would not return to the Ptarmigan without stopping to see me. And as the days lengthened into weeks, and the weeks into months, I feared that you had forsaken the outlands for good and all and had taken up your abode in the city."

Angus smiled. "You need have no fear of that, Father. I have seen enough of the city to last me the rest of my life. I could not come sooner. I have been busy."

"I know that you told the truth upon the witness stand and that Larue and his Indians perjured themselves under oath," ventured the good father. "It is too bad that a man like Jacques Larue should be allowed to roam at will and work his harm upon the natives. I am sorry the trial turned out as it did."

"Why?" asked Angus. "Justice has been done. And Larue will work no more harm."

"What! Did not Larue murder your father? And did not the law turn him loose?"

“Oh, the first trial! You did not know there has been another? And that Larue has been convicted of murder?”

“But how could they try a man twice for the same crime?”

“It was for another crime—for the murder of Paul Blind Man and the Big Bear, those two who swore falsely at the first trial. They are dead, and Jacques Larue has been convicted of their murder. That is why I said that justice has been done.”

Father Giroux eyed the speaker somberly. “Did you testify at this last trial?” he asked.

“No. Why should I testify? We have seen that the law gives no heed to my testimony. I am a half-breed. The law demands circumstances—and the words from many mouths. It demands the evidence of mute things that link a man up with the crime. It was Corporal Downey himself who told me that circumstances cannot lie. The law has had its circumstances. It has convicted Larue. I was merely a spectator. I wished to see that justice was done.”

“And now, my son, that justice has been meted out at the hands of the law, have you respect for the law?”

Angus laughed—a laugh, thought the priest, that was not good to hear. “For the officers of the law—the police, the judge, the prosecutor—yes. They are fine, upright men who strive to bring about justice. But for the law itself I have only contempt.”

The priest smiled tolerantly. “One who does not know you, hearing you speak, would think you a veritable philistine or a barbarian.”

Angus shrugged. “It is immaterial to me what they think. And if a philistine or a barbarian is one who is neither awed nor impressed by the majesty and might of this thing called civilization, with its bulwarks of law and religion, then I am proud to be thought a philistine and a barbarian—for that is what I am.” He paused and laughed lightly. “But enough of this, Father. You are much older and wiser than I. I do not wish to appear egotistical, but you and I will never see eye to eye in these matters.”

“Wisdom is not always the attribute of age, my son, nor is a man’s opinion the less valid because he is young. But tell me—are you now on your way to the Ptarmigan to open up the trading post? Many of the Indians have asked me whether or not you intended to carry on the business of your father.”

“Yes, it was my father’s dying wish that I keep the flag of MURCHIE flying over the post. Then, too, I may engage in the pulpwood business. I had dinner with David Gaunt one evening in Edmonton, and he mentioned that he had once advised my father to buy up a tract of spruce that lies in

below the ridge and across the river from the post. He wondered whether he had got the timber.”

“Pulpwood—ah yes, my son, pulpwood is David Gaunt’s hobby. His mills and his vast holdings of spruce have made him wealthy. He was telling me of this pulpwood one evening he spent with me here—and the vast demand for it in the manufacture of paper. It is his contention that the future of the North lies in its pulpwood. The fur will become scarcer and scarcer as civilization encroaches upon us. Oil and mineral deposits are restricted to certain favored localities and, at best, are exhaustible treasures. But the spruce and balsam forests reach from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and from the fertile belt to the Arctic barrens, and by wisely harvesting this natural crop the supply will be inexhaustible.”

Young Angus nodded, his eyes on the bearskin at his feet. “I suppose,” he said, a bitter cynicism in his tone, “that this encroachment of civilization upon us is inevitable. But David Gaunt is indeed an optimist to even hint that this crop of spruce and balsam will be conserved or wisely harvested. With the vast number of rivers to furnish water power, and other rivers to float out the wood that cannot be milled on the spot, the greed of this encroaching civilization will demand that this timber be cut and slashed and converted into paper at the earliest possible moment. So that those who are raping the country may themselves batten upon the loot. Where are the vast pine forests that once formed an almost unbroken stand in the States, between Maine and Minnesota?”

“It may be that we Canadians will profit by the folly of those in the States.”

Angus raised somber eyes to the eyes of the priest. “Where, then, is the pine of Quebec and Ontario? Do not think, Father, that we Canadians are one whit wiser or less greedy than our neighbors to the southward. We are not. Where in all history has any civilization ever profited by the follies of a preceding civilization? The advance of civilization is but a heaping of folly upon folly. The use of brains and sound judgment will ever remain the attribute of the few—inordinate greed is the foundation upon which civilization is builded, and will continue to be the slogan of its progress.”

“A gloomy prospect indeed, coming from one so young. It may be, my son, that the years will mellow your outlook. But you say David Gaunt asked whether Colin obtained this tract—did he obtain it?”

“Yes, he bought a tract of six thousand four hundred acres, and Duncan McPherson bought a like tract adjoining it. That was back in the days when they were fast friends.”

“Ah yes,” said the old priest, a note of sadness in his voice. “It is a pity that a friendship of long years standing should have terminated in bitter enmity. I never knew what caused the breach between them. Neither ever told me.”

“It was a trivial thing,” said Angus. “Merely that McPherson bought a fine foxskin from an Indian whom he knew was in debt to my father.”

“But in so doing he broke an inviolable custom of the North.”

“I know. I know. But to me it seems a great pity. Friendships are few. Among my earliest recollections are those trips to Chipewyan, playing with Jean McPherson, or sitting and listening to those two old men as they hobnobbed over the jug, drinking their liquor neat, by the half tumblerful, arguing endlessly over politics, religion or the probable price of fur ten years hence. It made no difference—any statement either would make about anything would be promptly denied by the other, and then they’d be at it, hammer and tongs. As I look back I believe that those were the happy moments of my father’s life—and I am glad for every one of them. As you know, he was a dour man. It might have been different had my mother lived. He loved her. I think he loved McPherson too. It is too bad they had to become enemies at the last.”

“Too bad indeed,” agreed the priest. “But inevitable, my son, with those two stubborn characters. Neither would yield an inch if he believed himself in the right. And now both are dead, and——”

“Dead!” exclaimed Angus. “Is McPherson dead? I had not heard of it.”

“Yes, I learned of his death when I returned from Edmonton at the close of Larue’s trial—the first trial, at which he was acquitted. And one of his ilk is responsible for McPherson’s death also. He was killed by a drunken Indian in a dispute over some fur. It seems that a hooch peddler has been operating for some time on the Mackenzie, but the police have not been able to catch him with liquor in his possession.”

“And another good man is dead because the law demands that the police must have certain specific evidence before they can rid the country of a bad man,” said Angus bitterly. “If a dog is known to be rabid he is killed on sight. The law does not demand that the police wait until the dog is caught attacking some helpless person before they kill him.”

“But the dog is a brute beast. A human being has a soul——”

“You are a believer in tangible evidence?” interrupted the younger man.

“Yes.”

“Where, then, is your tangible evidence that a human being has a soul? Has anyone seen a soul? Or heard one? Or felt or smelled or tasted one? Any

honorable person, I mean, whose word would be believed in court—not a half-breed, but a dive keeper or an Indian or perchance some white trapper. You know and I know and the police know that one hooch runner does more harm in the North in a year's time than all the rabid dogs that have ever been in the North—yet the rabid dog may be shot on sight and the known hooch runner is allowed to go free—because, theoretically, he has a soul. There is no sense in that. It is another folly of their mighty civilization.”

“I am afraid, my son,” replied the priest sadly, “that the death of your father has made you even more bitter than before.”

“My father was a fine man. He was an influence for good in the North. So was Duncan McPherson. They are both dead because the law has failed to allow its men, the police, to rid the country of its scourges. I tell you now, Father, the hooch runners will do well to cut a wide circle around the Ptarmigan. My promise included only Larue. But now that McPherson is dead, what is to become of Jean? I have not seen her in years. But I remember her well—a long-legged, gawky girl, whose hair, braided into pigtails, used to flop about her ears as she ran. She had a funny, uptilted nose, and her face was covered with brown freckles. She had good-looking teeth, though—and strong,” he added with a grin. “I remember she bit me once—it was here at the mission during my last year. I slapped her because she was teasing one of the younger children.”

A smile played about the sensitive lips of the aged priest. “And you have not seen her since those days at the mission?”

“No, I lived among the Yellowknives for a year after I left here, and then for two years I have worked on the river. But I never happened to see Jean. Somehow I always happened to miss her. Not that I ever sought the little vixen—I still carry the scar of her teeth on my wrist.”

“You did not see her,” said the priest, “because she was not upon the river. For three years she has been away at school—in a convent in Montreal. Upon the death of her father I sent for her to come here if she had no other plans. She will be a great help to Sister Agatha, as the mission is expanding.”

“You mean she has become a nun?”

“No, she did not take the veil. She was merely a student at the convent. I had hoped that she would be with us at Christmas, but Christmas is only two days away.”

“Ah yes—Christmas,” said Angus. “I remember what fun we used to have here at Christmas time—the singing of carols and hymns on Christmas Eve, the lighting of the tree, with its candles and its decorations, and on

Christmas Day the presents for even the smallest of us. It was great fun, Father. It is something that no one who experienced it will ever forget. There was solemnity—and gaiety too. And, you see, Father, I have not forgotten you at the Christmas time. Here is a present for you.” Reaching into his pocket, he withdrew a small canvas sack which thudded heavily upon the table top as he tossed it.

Untying the string, the priest emptied the sack onto the table and regarded the little pile of gold coins. “But, my son, this is much money. Are you sure you can spare it?”

“Yes, Father, I have more than I need. There are bonds and stocks in the strongbox, and much money in the bank in Edmonton. My father evidently had a good head for business.”

“This will go far toward building the new dormitory of which we are so sorely in need. Carlson, the superintendent of the Tar Sands Company, also gave me a liberal donation. He is a fine man, for though of the Lutheran faith he regularly contributes to my work here. Like you, he is a man who knows the North—and who holds ‘need’ above ‘creed.’ Our new dormitory is now assured.”

Angus smiled as his gaze lingered affectionately upon the devoted old priest with his fine features and his eyes shining with happiness. “I knew you would use the gold for the good of the mission, so I took care to bring something for your own personal use—some new books that I believe you will enjoy, and a few tins of good tobacco for your pipe. They are on the sled, together with a lot of Christmas tree ornaments, a hundred pounds of candy, and colored candles and an assortment of presents for the children—and a rosary for Sister Agatha.”

“If the boys could have known what your sled contains they would indeed have thought you were Saint Nicholas,” smiled Father Giroux. “You will remain here with us over Christmas, my son? It would be a drear and a bleak and melancholy Christmas for you on the Ptarmigan—alone with your thoughts. It will do your heart good, I am sure, to see the little faces light with the happiness you have brought into lives that have so little of happiness.”

“Yes, Father, I will remain over Christmas. I wouldn’t miss it for the world. For the past three years, in the camps of the Yellowknives, I have heard Christmas mentioned only as the time of the winter trading.”

“That is fine, my son. I am only sorry that Jean McPherson will not be here to share our pleasure. But come, sit here and fill your pipe, and tell me

about this pulpwood. You said that your father bought a tract of this spruce and that Duncan McPherson also purchased a like tract?"

"Yes, and not only that: my father owns the canyon—thousands of horse power can be generated there at not too great expense. I have the timber and I have the power, and there are countless thousands of acres of spruce lying back of the tract that can be picked up cheaply."

"I am glad for you, and I am doubly glad for Jean McPherson," said the priest. "For last year her father lost every cent he had in the world, in a worthless mining venture. At the time of his death he had only his pay as a factor."

"It may well be that the pulpwood will make her some money," said Angus. "That is if McPherson still retained title to the tract at the time of his death."

"That I do not know," Father Giroux replied. "But we will know when Jean arrives, for the public administrator sent a packet of papers here for delivery to Jean. It may be that this deed is among them."

The two talked until late into the night, and the following morning, amid much shouting and laughter and yelling at the dogs, the whole mission turned out to select and cut the Christmas tree, the smallest ones whose legs were too short to manage snowshoes riding the dog sleds and shouting gleefully as they rubbed each other's faces with snow.

In the afternoon the tree was erected in the classroom—a noble spruce, grown in the open, with a wide, thick spread of branches—and all set to work with a will, loading its branches with candles and wondrously colored balls and stars, and bags of candy.

A loud-shouted command sounded from without, an Indian dog musher threw open the door, and into the room stepped a vision of loveliness such as Angus Murchie had never seen. For a long moment the young woman paused in the doorway, while Angus, a coil of tinsel in his hand, allowed his eyes to travel from the shapely calves, encased in beaded fawn-skin leggings that showed below the hem of her short skirt of heavy cloth, to the throat that rose, ivory white, from the open collar of her flannel shirt. She was hatless, and a shaft of sunlight, striking aslant her hair, touched it with glints of gold.

Beside him he was aware that Father Giroux was descending hastily from the stepladder, the glittering star which he had been about to affix to the very tip of the tree still in his hand.

"Jean McPherson!" cried the old priest, his eyes beaming, as the girl advanced toward him in a free, easy stride, her beaded moccasins making no

sound upon the floor. "Ah, my daughter, welcome home! I had given up hope of having you with us for Christmas."

Jean McPherson! Angus Murchie stared in wonder at this beautiful girl with the bobbed hair and the clear complexion, its color heightened with the glow of the keen air, as he tried in vain to co-ordinate her with the gangling girl with the freckled face and the braided pigtails who had once curled up beside him and slept in a doghouse and later had bitten him to the bone when he slapped her. Why, she was more beautiful even than the girl beside the cigarette counter in the hotel who had smiled as their eyes met! And with the thought the black cloud rose and took possession of his brain, blotting out the light of the sun, obscuring all beauty. "Don't be a fool," an inner voice whispered, "you're nothing but a half-breed." And she, despite the clothing of the outlands—she is no whit different than that other, a finished product of the civilization that encroaches upon the wilderness and looks with scorn upon a man of mixed blood and bobs the hair of its women. . . . As though from far off Father Giroux was speaking. He heard his own name mentioned and was aware that the priest stood directly before him, the girl at his side. "And, Jean, this is Angus Murchie—surely you remember Angus."

Then the girl was speaking, and the sound of her voice was in his ears—a voice whose tone was rich and deep and throaty: "Indeed I do remember Angus! Why, we used to play together, at Chipewyan and at Uncle Colin's post on the Ptarmigan—and later here at the mission. That was before our fathers had quarreled. I am glad you are still here."

Angus Murchie's black eyes met the smiling eyes of blue with a blank, level stare, and the voice with which he spoke was flat and toneless and guttural. "I am not still here. I am going now. Good-by."

The next instant he strode from the room, looking neither to the right nor to the left, as the girl's eyes sought the eyes of the priest in hurt interrogation. "Why! He—he talked like an Indian!" she exclaimed.

The old priest nodded sorrowfully. "Yes, my daughter. At times he is all Indian. For the most part he is all white man. His blood is a mixture, not a blend. At times the Indian dominates. To have heard him speak just now, no one would have guessed that his is the keenest brain I have encountered in fifty years of teaching. He would be considered an educated man in any walk of life."

"But how could I have offended him? Surely he cannot seek to carry the foolish quarrel of our fathers into another generation!"

"No, it is not that. Only last night he told me that it was a great pity that the friendship of years had been broken by so trivial an affair."

“Then why did he leave so abruptly? Why should he hate me?”

“I do not believe that he hates you. We were speaking of you only last evening, and he mentioned that you two used to play together as children. I do not know what was in his mind. He appeared unutterably rude and uncouth—but it was the unstudied, abrupt rudeness of the Indian.”

“Studied or unstudied,” replied the girl, her blue eyes sparking, “he made it very plain that he wants nothing to do with me. And as for my part, I am perfectly satisfied to respect his wish.”

XIX

A Power Boat Heads North

ANGUS MURCHIE directed the stowing of the last of his freight pieces in the two big scows at Athabasca Landing. It was late June, and despite the fact that he had not returned to open the post on the Ptarmigan until Christmas he had enjoyed a good trade among the Slavis, the Dog Ribs and the Yellowknives who had formerly traded with his father.

With the help of some Indians he had brought the fur up-river and had shipped it from Edmonton, and now he was returning into the North with his supplies for the ensuing year. June is the spring trading month on the rivers, but Angus had sent word to the Indians that this year they must hold their furs till July, as by that time he would be back with the supplies to replenish the depleted stock at the post.

With the last of the pieces in place, the men returned to the shore, fires were lighted and the inevitable tea pails were hung over them. Waiting for his own pail to boil, Angus idly watched the rivermen, grouped three and four to the fire.

McDonald, with the Hudson's Bay brigade, had pulled out for the North a week before, taking the pick of the rivermen with him. Those who remained were a motley crew—a few whites, a few Indians, but for the most part Cree breeds, ambitionless men, content to laze the short summer through at the landing, where an occasional odd job sufficed their need for food and liquor, considering themselves lucky when they were hired for a long trip down-river with some independent scow outfit. But always there were more men hanging about at the landing than were needed for the scows.

Anxious as he was to get his freight to the Ptarmigan, six hundred miles to the northward, Angus said no word to hurry the men at the fires. With the outfit all ready save for casting off the lines and hauling in the planks, the men boiled tea, for that is the way of the North. The eighteen who had been engaged for the trip must rest, now that the scows were loaded, and must visit with those who were to be left behind. The fact that they had been doing nothing the livelong day through, since the break-up, but visiting among themselves cut no slightest figure. It is the custom that those who are

about to depart on a journey should visit with those who are to be left behind, so Angus sipped his tea and listened to the talk. . . . Pierre Dupré's woman had another baby, but it died because it would not nurse—and that is funny, too, because she is a woman that looks like she would have plenty of milk. Maybe it was the heat. Anyway, Dupré's had eight other ones, and the priest baptized it, so it wasn't so bad, and they could have another by March. . . . They say the railroad from Edmonton will surely come through to the landing. Some think it will go clear to Fort McMurray. Why would they want a railroad to Fort McMurray? A railroad to the landing would be a good thing, though. Did not Gus Stromberg get his freight outfit stuck in the mud four times last trip? And he has six good horses, too. But if they build the railroad to Fort McMurray, that would be bad. There would be no more scows. What could a man do if there were no more scows? But if they found oil on the river the railroad would probably go to Fort McMurray, because they could not track-line the oil up-river on scows. It would all leak out. . . .

Respectfully they appealed to Angus. He was a trader. He was rich. He should know about such things. True, he was a half-breed, like many of themselves, but—he was different. He had been to school for many years at the mission of Father Giroux, and when old Colin Murchie had been shot by Jacques Larue, Angus had inherited the trading post and much money. Besides that, he was a good riverman. Did not McDonald make him boss scowman? Did Angus think that the railroad would be built through to Fort McMurray?

Angus explained that if they found oil along the rivers in the quantity they hoped, then undoubtedly they would build a railroad to Fort McMurray. But that would not be for several years, and in the meantime there would still be scows upon the river.

Reassured, the rivermen guzzled their tea, until the thud of hooves and the creak of wheels and the rattle of harness chains focused the attention of all upon the head of the trail beside the warehouse. This must be the outfit of which Tommy Keith, the stage driver, had told them—the outfit that for six days had been fighting the mud of the Edmonton trail with eight horses and a big wagon, upon which was loaded some kind of a boat all covered over with canvas.

A few moments later the driver swung his leaders and brought the wagon to a stand at the head of the steep pitch to the river. Two men leaped from the seat beside the driver and began to remove the canvas covering from a boat the like of which had never been seen on the river. She was a trim craft, full thirty feet long by seven or eight in the beam. Her hull

gleamed with white paint except where the mud had splashed onto it below the edges of the canvas.

While one of the men, who seemed to be a workman of some sort, folded the canvas, the other stepped briskly toward the group of rivermen who were staring at the outfit with interest. He was a tallish man, smooth shaven save for a small black mustache whose ends were clipped off short before they reached the corners of his mouth. His clothing was obviously new and of good material, despite the fact that, from pacs to hat, it was spattered and smeared with mud. He spoke tersely, in a voice evidently accustomed to command and to having those commands obeyed:

“Look lively, men. I want to put this boat in the river.”

The rivermen, including Angus Murchie, had stepped closer and were regarding the craft with interest. The man with the funny mustache called to the driver:

“Get your horses out of the way now—doubletrees and all. If you try to back horses down this bank you’ll have the whole outfit in the river. We’ve got to let the wagon down by man power.”

The teamster complied and returned to contemplate the wagon. “You ain’t got men enough here to ease that load down that grade. She’ll git away from you.”

“I know my business!” snapped the other. “We’ll set a snubbing post, and with a few turns of a line around it three or four men can ease her into the river. I’ll get some spades and a line,” he added, starting for the warehouse.

As the man was about to pass him Angus spoke. “The ground is stony here, and the setting of a post will take time. Why not borrow a double block from the company agent and use the horses for an anchor?”

The man halted abruptly, glared at Angus for a moment, then shifted his glance to the wagon and the eight horses standing idly by. “You’re right,” he grunted. “I’ll get the tackle.”

The team was swung into position and the blocks rigged from the doubletrees to the end of the tongue. Two or three men payed out the line as the wagon backed slowly down the steep slope and into the river till the boat floated on an even keel. The lashings were then cast off and the wagon drawn from under her.

When the craft had been made fast to the bank the rivermen crowded close as the man who had folded the canvas now stepped aboard and, wrench in hand, began to busy himself about a small engine that was set amidship. A steel shaft slanted from this engine down through the stern of

the boat. And to the end of this shaft, below the water line, was fastened a small wheel with three fanlike blades. Power had come to the Athabasca.

Angus Murchie stared along with the others. He had read of gasoline launches, had often studied their pictures in magazines, but he had never seen one. He had believed them to be playthings of the idle rich. But here was one on the river. He regarded the craft with keen interest. Was this, he wondered, the beginning of the end of the time-honored scow?

Later, with the others who had helped, he gravely accepted his dollar from the hand of the curt-spoken one. And with the others he looked on as the two worked about the engine and poured gasoline from tins into a tank concealed beneath the planking of the forward deck. Other tins were stowed well forward. In silence Angus watched the water line as several rivermen carried supplies from the warehouse and stowed them aft.

The man with the clipped mustache stepped ashore to pay off the teamster. "It's a damned holdup!" he growled as the man named his price. "Six days to come ninety miles—and up to our knees in muck half the time, helping your damned horses yank the wagon through the mud! But I suppose I've got to pay it. Thank God, our troubles are over at last."

Aboard the launch, the mechanic tossed down his wrench. "All set, boss!" he called. "She's rarin' to go!"

"Are you going down-river in that?" asked Angus as the other was about to step aboard the launch.

"Of course. Why not?"

The tone was truculent, and Angus was conscious that a pair of gray-green eyes were boring into his own. He shrugged. "Nothing. I was wondering about the rapids. There are many rocks."

The man laughed nastily. "Listen here, fellow," he said, "you may think you know this river. You've probably been up and down it a dozen times—a hundred, for all I know. But I'll venture to say that I know more about the Athabasca right now than you ever will know—and I never saw the damned crick before. I'm not afraid of your rapids. I study a proposition before I go into it. Plenty of people have told me I'd never run the rapids in that launch—so many that I'm damned tired of hearing it. I know the channels through the Pelican and the Stony and the Joli Fou, and I know their depths. I know I've got to take the right-hand channel at the Grand. The Au Brule don't mean a thing to that boat. Then there's the Boiler—that's the worst of the lot—but I can run it. The Middle and the Long and the Rock won't bother me any. The Cascade will probably stop me, unless the water is high, but if it does I'll be less than twenty miles from Fort McMurray. I'll pick up a crew

there and lower her over the falls with lines. What do you think now—do I know your damned river?”

Angus smiled thinly. “Much better than I do,” he replied, “if you can take that boat through to the Cascade. If I were lucky enough to run her through the Pelican I know I’d wreck her at the Grand.”

The admission evidently tickled the man’s vanity. He smiled. “You bargemen are all right,” he admitted patronizingly. “Trouble is, you’ve stuck to your damned old scows because your fathers and their fathers used ’em before you. You have no imagination, no initiative. You’ve got to have someone step in and show you how to do the very thing that you and your kind have been doing for more than two hundred years. Hell, when my company decided to send me up North I jumped into the job with the idea of accomplishing things! No drifting along with the current for me—with a crew of half-soused scowmen tying up to the bank every three or four hours to boil tea! Speed—that’s what I put into a job. That’s what put me where I am.”

“Where are you?”

Was there a hint of veiled sarcasm behind the tone? The gray-green eyes narrowed and searched the face of the speaker to encounter a pair of utterly guileless black eyes. “I’m chief engineer for Northern Utilities, Limited,” he answered, turning on his heel, “and I have no more time to waste on breeds.”

Angus turned away also, a slow flush mounting to his cheeks. A moment later he watched with the others as, with a loud popping and sputtering, the boat moved away from the shore and headed down-river, a thin trail of blue smoke issuing from her exhaust. In what seemed an incredibly short space of time she disappeared around the bend, leaving the rivermen to stare into each other’s faces in awe too great for words.

One of the scowmen turned sadly to the others. “Ba Goss, I’m t’ink she git to Fort McMurray tomor’! De scow, she tak’ wan week. Pret’ queek no mor’ scow. De riv’, she gon’ to hell!”

Behind his back Angus Murchie smiled a bit grimly.

XX

Townsend Engages Passage

IN the evening of the third day thereafter Angus Murchie landed his two big scows at the head of the island at the Grand Rapids, and his crew began immediately to unload the pieces on the point of the ledge of rocks, for shipment on the tramway that runs the length of the island. A crude but very profitable little railway, this on Grand Island—merely a quarter of a mile of wooden rails overlaid with strap iron, over which is pushed a four-wheeled flatcar, piled high with the freight of the scows, which must be unloaded and run light down through the rock-ribbed eastern channel, where the river plunges northward in a riot of foaming white water for a fall of fifty-five feet in the quarter of a mile.

The storekeeper, who is also the agent of the railroad, collects two dollars and a half from the shipper for each ton of freight conveyed on the flatcar—the shipper doing his own loading and unloading, besides furnishing the man power to push the car the length of the island.

As the rivermen started out over the rails with the first carload Angus glanced beyond them, down the long lane of the right of way, to see two men walking toward him. They stepped aside to allow the car to pass, and Angus' lips tightened as he recognized the two who had left Athabasca Landing in the launch. He turned his back to watch the men who were unloading his scows. At the sound of a voice he faced about to encounter the gray-green eyes of the man who knew the river.

"Where's Murchie?" The words spat from between the man's lips like two shots from a pistol.

"Here."

The man swept the scows with a glance. "Where?"

"Right here. I am Murchie."

"You!" The man's eyes widened, and he shifted his feet uneasily. "You mean that you're the owner of this outfit?"

"Yes."

The studied evenness of the terse replies was disconcerting, and again the man shifted uneasily. He cleared his throat. "My name is Townsend—

Bradford Townsend. As I believe I explained to you, back there at the landing, I am chief engineer for Northern Utilities. I am here to make a general survey of the petroleum and bitumen fields—but more particularly to locate a power site.”

Angus glanced toward the river. “Plenty of power going to waste here,” he observed. “You shouldn’t have to look any farther.”

“Too much power. Too expensive to harness it. Someday, yes. But this country is not ready for a proposition like this—yet. What I have in mind is a good stiff fall through a narrow gorge, on a small river, not too far back from the point on the Slave where the Tar Sands Company have their holdings. They are going to put in a refinery and distillation plant, and we want to sell them their power—electricity, carried to them by means of a high line.”

“Then what are you doing here?”

Townsend was aware, as he had been aware once before, of an underlying sarcasm in the tone, though, as before, the black eyes looked guilelessly into his own. “Oh, come now, Murchie,” he said, “don’t rub it in. You’ve guessed before this that we wrecked the launch in the rapids—ran her onto the rocks and smashed her all to hell. Lucky to have got out with our lives.”

Angus nodded. “I didn’t have to guess,” he replied. “When I didn’t find you at the Pelican I knew I’d find you here—if you were lucky.”

The other flushed at the words, and something of the truculence of their first meeting crept into his voice. “If the damned river had been a foot higher we’d have made it. We hit a submerged rock in the lower chute.” He paused, and Angus nodded—a nod that somehow stung as no words could have stung the other’s vanity. Swallowing his rage as best he could, Townsend smiled a white-lipped smile. “I suppose I owe you an apology for insulting you the other day. The fact is my nerves were frazzled from fighting the mud on that damned trail from Edmonton for six days.”

“Insulting me?” Angus asked, fixing the other with his black eyes. “I recall no insult.”

“Why, I—er—called you a breed. There were so many about who were obviously breeds that I forgot that exposure to sun and wind can tan a man almost to the color of an Indian.”

The unwavering black eyes narrowed ever so slightly as Angus replied in a level voice: “I am a breed. My mother was an Indian. I do not consider that mention of the fact constitutes an insult.”

Bradford Townsend flushed to his hair roots under the steady gaze of the black eyes. Who was this man whose dress and color differed in no slightest particular from that of the rivermen who handled his freight, but who, without conscious efforts or obvious intent, was continually putting him, Brad Townsend, on the defensive? The storekeeper on the island had told him merely that Murchie was a trader who would doubtless give him passage down-river. Why hadn't the damned fool told him that Murchie was a breed? And, if he was a breed, where in the devil did he get his education, his poise? Anger blended with chagrin as the events of their two encounters swept the engineer's brain—Murchie's practical suggestion in a matter of simple engineering, his prediction that the launch would not get past the Grand Rapids, the skillfully veiled sarcasm with which he had replied to Townsend's boast of his knowledge of the river. And now the man's matter-of-fact statement that he knew he would find the two here, if they had been lucky, and his adroit ignoring of an obvious insult, which placed him, Brad Townsend, in a most awkward and humiliating position. With the force of a blow came the realization that this outlander, this half savage, in the matter of wits, had beaten him at every turn.

He met the situation with what grace he could summon. Seconds had passed—awkward seconds, during which the black eyes were upon him, gloating, Townsend guessed, over his discomfiture. "I hope you won't think me an utter cad, Murchie," he said. "As a matter of fact I resented your insinuation that I could not run the river in the launch. I know now that you were right. I thought I knew more than I knew—and I've paid for it." He paused, and Angus smiled.

"The things we learn by experience are longest remembered. It may be that the price you have paid is not overly high. Men have paid with their lives, in this country, for thinking they knew more than they did know."

The smile and the words put Townsend at ease. "Oh, I'm lucky, all right. My loss only runs into a couple of packs of belongings. The company owned the launch and the instruments. But about going on from here? Have you got room for us in your scows?"

"To the Tar Sands camp?"

"Yes—if you're going that far."

"I go beyond there. There will be room."

"What will you charge to take the two of us to the Tar Sands camp?"

"There will be no charge. I do not care to take advantage of another's misfortune."

“But I am not asking you to transport us free of charge. You will be put to some expense in the matter of meals. It is against the policy of my company to accept any gratuity or favor that might later prove embarrassing. I would lay myself open to censure should I deviate from that policy. I must insist upon paying for our passage.”

Angus shrugged. “Very well. You can doubtless arrange with the storekeeper for a canoe and a guide. There is an Indian camp not far below the island.”

Townsend stared in astonishment. “What do you mean? There is a lot of bad water between here and McMurray. Do you think I’d risk my life in a canoe when I nearly lost it in the launch?”

“A canoe is a proper craft for the river. The launch was not.”

“But are you refusing us passage on the scows?”

“If you insist on paying—yes. I care nothing for the policy of your company. It cannot dictate terms to me. I, too, have a policy—I make no charge for rendering what service I may to a victim of misadventure. I offered you transportation on my scows. If you do not care to avail yourself of the offer it is no concern of mine. If you do not care to travel in a canoe you can walk. It is only a matter of ninety miles to Fort McMurray.”

The flatcar returned for another load, and Angus turned away to direct the work. The mechanic who accompanied Townsend stepped close and spoke in an undertone.

“Take it from me, boss, he’s hard. An’ the hell of it is, he don’t look it—an’ that voice of his purrs along like a steel drill. You gotta remember, boss, that while a pick makes a lot of racket an’ throws a lot of sparks, it’s the drill that bores through. Believe me, there’s one guy you can’t buck. There’s glints in them black eyes—deep down.”

Bradford Townsend was a man whose training and position had accustomed him to having men jump to carry out his orders, a man who had commanded deference from all and sundry. But here was a man who quietly flouted him at every turn, who had placed him on the defensive and had rendered him ridiculous in the eyes of his mechanic. Resentment fanned the anger that rankled in his soul.

“Don’t be a fool, Shaffer!” he growled. “He’s nothing but a damned breed. Remember, he’s on his own stamping ground. But hell, I’ll know more about this country in a month than he’ll ever know. And when the chance comes I’ll show him up—and don’t you forget it!”

Behind the engineer’s back the mechanic grinned skeptically and spat juicily upon the strap-iron rail.

The flatcar started on another trip and, curbing his wrath, Townsend approached Angus. "How long will it take for the scows to reach the Tar Sands camp?" he asked. "Time is a matter of supreme importance to me. I want to locate a power site and proceed with the preliminary survey before the freeze-up. That's the reason I brought the launch—to save time."

Was there a hint of mockery in the black eyes, or did he only imagine it, as the other answered? "Time means nothing to the North. Today or tomorrow—what difference? What is not done today will be done tomorrow, or the day following, or next month, or next year. The North is not in a hurry. The scows must be run through the rapids and loaded. That will take two days—or three. At this stage of water there will be at least two other portages of freight between here and McMurray. We should reach there in a week or ten days. Between McMurray and the Tar Sands there is no bad water. Traverse of the lake will slow us up, but what of that? Eventually we shall reach the Slave. I should say we will reach the Tar Sands camp in three weeks—or four."

"But," objected Townsend, "this river has in many places an eight- or nine-mile current, and there are few really slow stretches. It seems that you ought to make better time than that—with the daylight practically continuous."

Angus smiled. "You have never traveled by scow? No? Then you have another thing to learn—patience. The rivermen do not hurry. When the spirit moves them they land and make tea. Also they go ashore and cook five meals a day. If we progress for three or four hours a day we are satisfied. The rest of the time is for eating and smoking and talk."

"But—hell, man! They could eat and smoke and talk right on the scows and keep moving all the time. A little system, a little organization, and look at the time you'd save!"

"It is not the custom," replied Angus simply. "You will also learn that in the North the saving of time is not counted a virtue."

Townsend shuffled nervously about while behind his back the mechanic grinned in malicious glee. Suddenly he blurted out: "Look here, Murchie—time is money to my company. You say it will take three or four weeks to reach the Tar Sands camp. The trip should be made in less than half that time, with any management at all. Call your men together and tell them I'll split a hundred dollars between them for every day they lop off of your three weeks estimate."

Angus shook his head. "No," he replied. "It would not be well to tamper with a routine that has been the established custom of the country for two

hundred and fifty years. I care nothing for your company nor for the value it sets upon time. I have offered you such transportation as I have. If you believe that you can reach your destination quicker, and decline the offer, I shall take no offense.”

“Oh, I’ll accept it!” exclaimed Townsend. “I wouldn’t risk my life in a canoe, in such water as this, if I never got there. I only thought——”

“There will be time for thinking on the scows,” reminded Angus. “I will tell my head man that you will accompany them.”

“But won’t you be with us?”

“No,” Angus answered. “I find that I must return to Edmonton. I shall overtake you before you reach the Tar Sands.”

XXI

The Scows Drift Northward

MUTTERING curses under his breath, Townsend led the way back to the store, followed by Shaffer, who was thoroughly enjoying the discomfiture of his boss. The prospect of drifting lazily down the river for three or four weeks was no ground for grouching on his part.

“Damned stupid ass!” exclaimed Townsend when they were well out of earshot. “He keeps that crew of worthless breeds and Indians, pays ’em and feeds ’em to do a job the way it’s been done for two hundred and fifty years, when the simple innovation of making them eat their meals and boil their tea on the scows would cut his expenses in half! No business in the world will stand that kind of mismanagement.”

“Well—mebbe,” admitted the mechanic. “But he seems to have done pretty good fer himself so far. The goods on them scows must of set him back several thousan’ dollars. He sure takes his time, but I’ll bet he gits where he’s goin’.”

The taunt jarred upon the engineer’s frayed nerves. He turned on the man angrily. “And, by God, we’d have got where we were going, too, if you’d speeded up that motor going down through that chute! The rudder wouldn’t take hold, and——”

“It ain’t my fault the rudder wouldn’t take holt. I had her wide open, an’ you know it! You can’t blame me fer wreckin’ the launch. When the storekeeper told us we better git a crew of Injuns to let her down through them rapids with a line I was fer it.”

“Yes—and lose a whole day!”

Shaffer shrugged. “You’re the boss,” he replied indifferently. “The company sure as hell ain’t payin’ me to do its thinkin’.”

Townsend stamped on into the store in wrathful silence.

When the flatcar returned for another load Angus called Louis Gauthier, a big breed who had predicted that the river had gone to hell, back at Athabasca Landing, as he had watched the power boat disappear around the bend. “What do you think about the pretty boat now?” Angus asked. “I guess the scows will stay on the river for a while, eh?”

The huge man grinned and, pulling off his cap, wiped his brow on a sweaty sleeve. “Ba Goss, you dam’ right! De smoke boat, she smash all to hell. Me, I’m t’ink dat dam’ good t’ing. No good, git in de hurry. W’en de Beeg God mak’ de riv’, ba Goss, she know how fas’ to mak’ her ron. W’en de mans com’ ’long an’ t’ink she know mor’ ’bout dat riv’ dan de Beeg God, dat mak’ de Beeg God mad, an’ she say: ‘You no lak I’m mak’ de riv’ ron too slow, huh? Ba Goss, how you lak dat beeg rock, huh? I’m bus’ you leetle boat all to hell—mebbe-so you git back on de scow!’ ”

Angus laughed. “I guess you’re right, Louis. Now listen to me. You’ve got to take the outfit on from here. I’m going to take Johnnie Daylight and go back to Edmonton. The two men from the smoke boat will go along with you. They’re going to the Tar Sands camp, this side of the mission. Take it easy. I don’t want them to reach the Tar Sands for at least three weeks. I’ll probably overtake you before you get there. If I don’t, leave the two there and take the scows on down to the mouth of the Ptarmigan and pack the goods up to my post. The big one will try to pay you much money to hurry. But don’t hurry—you know what happened to him once for trying to hurry. You don’t want the Big God mad at you.”

“Ba Goss, I ain’ hurry none! You go lak hell, you ketch us agin, about ten day. We ain’ be mooch pas’ McMurray.”

“There’s a moon tonight. Johnnie and I’ll pull out now. Remember—take your time. Don’t let any of the men take money to hurry.”

“Ba Goss, anyone tak de money, I t’row heem een de riv’!”

An hour later Angus, accompanied by a powerful half-breed, was forging up-river in a canoe.

On the twelfth day thereafter he overtook the two scows tied up to the bank in midafternoon, some forty miles below McMurray. The long lazy days had evidently not softened Townsend’s temper. He greeted Angus with a scowl.

“If you’ve been to Edmonton and back,” he said, “it shows, at least, that you can hurry when you want to.”

“Oh, a man may travel swiftly in a canoe or on a dog sled in winter—and the North will applaud. It is only that tradition applies to the scows. Because their fathers and their grandfathers were in no hurry, neither are these men in a hurry. We of the North have learned to respect that tradition; even as in civilization you respect your traditions. Is it more strange that our scows should advance slowly into the North than that your long funeral processions should proceed slowly to your cemeteries? You would save

much time if you lashed your horses into a run—or speeded up your automobiles to a terrific pace.”

Townsend grunted: “I haven’t much time for tradition myself. I’m a businessman. At least a funeral isn’t strung out for three or four weeks.”

“No, the procession has not far to go. The cemeteries are not far apart—in civilization. But certainly even you businessmen have learned that pleasure and happiness come in the wasting of time not in the saving of it—else why do you spend weeks in cruising idly about in a yacht or in shooting game or in catching fish that you do not need to eat.”

“If everyone looked at it as you do civilization would never progress. The whole object and aim of civilization is to save time. What am I up here for? To locate a power plant that will generate power to run a refinery that will save time in getting the finished product to market. Hell, man, it used to take six months to cross the continent; now you can cross it on a train in less than that many days!”

“And is anyone the happier for that?”

“But—look at the saving in time! Look at the mail! And the telegraph. It used to take a year to get a reply between New York and San Francisco. Now a man can wire and receive an answer the same day.”

“Well? What difference—a year or a day?”

“Time is money,” snapped Townsend, his tone revealing his irritation, “and money is happiness.”

Angus slowly sipped his tea. “If that is true,” he said thoughtfully, “then those who live in New York and San Francisco today should be three hundred and sixty-five times richer and, therefore, three hundred and sixty-five times happier, than those who lived in the two cities before the time of the telegraph. I cannot believe that this is true. I believe that exactly as much poverty and unhappiness and human misery is to be found there today, in proportion to the population, as existed before the invention of the telegraph.”

“It’s a good thing for you, Murchie,” sneered the engineer, “that you don’t come into competition with big business. A man with your antiquated ideas and methods wouldn’t last ten minutes!”

Angus nodded agreement. “I presume that is true. I know nothing of big business. I do not think I would care for it. I am happy, here in the North, in a quiet way. Maybe I am the happier because I have not learned to measure time in terms of money. If I do not get my mail this year I am almost sure to get it next. And if I do not—what difference? There are other things to think about.”

The rivermen were stowing the tea things in the scows preparatory to another short period of drifting with the current when the mechanic, who had been a silent but interested listener to the conversation, spoke up, his eyes on Angus:

“By God, bo, you know how to live! Take it from me, this here big business is all the bunk! They go after one another like a gang of pirates. Happiness—hell! There ain’t a damn one of ’em will trust another with his back turned. Business is a battle, what I mean. It’s every man fer himself—an’ God help the little feller.”

Townsend favored him with a sneering glance. “What do you know of big business, Shaffer?”

“Not a hell of a lot, but all I want to know. I’ve always set close along the side lines, an’ I ain’t blind in both eyes, nor neither in one. Let a man go down, or git a little shaky even—an’ the others is onto him like a pack of wolves. An’ believe me—when they git through with him he’s cleaned, what I mean!”

“I believe,” said Angus, his glance shifting to Townsend and back to the speaker, “that, of the two, you are the wiser.”

At the Tar Sands Company’s landing Townsend took leave of Angus with a punctilious expression of thanks and a renewed offer of payment for the transportation, both of which Angus ignored. As he returned the engineer’s perfunctory handshake he smiled.

“I cannot wish you success in your mission,” he said. “I am not one of those who view with equanimity the encroachment of civilization upon our wilderness.”

“I don’t blame you,” Townsend retorted with an ill-concealed sneer. “But it’s coming just the same. And when it gets here you and your kind will go under—or move on.”

Angus Murchie’s smile turned bleak. “Yes,” he replied thoughtfully, “I and my kind would find it impossible to synchronize our lives to the tempo of a civilization that must span a continent in a day. Nor could we harmonize our minds with philosophy that measures time in terms of money—and calls that money happiness.”

The engineer’s jaw dropped. “Where in hell did you get your education?” he blurted.

Was there mockery in those black eyes—deep down? Townsend thought so as the other replied: “Right here in the outlands—where we find time to stop and boil tea a dozen times a day.”

Townsend turned abruptly and ascended the bank. At the door of the little wood and sheet-iron shack that was the field office of the Tar Sands Company he turned and, for long moments, gazed with narrowed eyes at the two big scows that drifted slowly away from the landing. Then he stepped through the doorway to be greeted cordially by Carlson, the superintendent.

“Ah, Townsend, I presume—of Northern Utilities! I’m Carlson. Glad to see you. I’ve been instructed to co-operate with you and assist you in every way possible. It will be a great thing for us if you can deliver power right here on the field. I expected you rather sooner.”

“Yes, I’m Townsend. Glad to know you. I’d have been here sooner but for the fact that my mechanic wrecked the launch on a rock in the chute at the Grand Rapids. We came on from there with a damned scow outfit that spent more time on the bank than it did on the river.”

Carlson grinned. “Don’t care for scow travel, eh?”

“Hardest, most nerve-racking work I ever did in my life—just sitting there, hour after hour, watching those damned fools kill time. Who is this Murchie anyway?”

“Young Murchie? Oh, he’s a fur trader down on the Ptarmigan, a river that flows into the Slave about forty miles below here. His father was killed last year, and he inherited the outfit. By the way, it might pay you to slip over there. I’ve heard that just above his post the river drops down through a narrow canyon that cuts a transverse rock dike. Might be a swell setup for a power plant. I’ve never seen it myself—been too busy, here on the river.”

“Funny he didn’t mention it,” growled Townsend. “He knew I was up here to locate a power site.”

“Probably knows nothing about power and cares less. I don’t know him myself. Seems to me I’ve heard he’s a breed.”

“Yes, he’s a breed, all right. Seems to have a pretty fair education, though.”

“Father Giroux could tell you all about him. Fine old chap—Father Giroux. Been fifty years in the country. Knows it like a book. Knows every man, woman, child and dog between Edmonton and the Arctic coast. He may be able to steer you onto a better power site than the one I mentioned. Better drop down and see him, anyway. You’ll like him. His mission’s only about twenty miles below here.”

“If he’s been here fifty years he probably hates civilization as much as the natives do,” Townsend grunted. “I’ll have a talk with him, though. How does a man get around this damned country of mosquitoes and tea?”

"Canoes—and your two feet," Carlson replied. A close observer would have noted that much of the cordiality had faded from his tone as he replied to this newcomer who took no pains to disguise the fact that he despised the country and everyone in it. "You have an assistant with you?"

"No—a mechanic."

"In either case you'll be needing two canoes——"

"Haven't you got anything more stable than canoes?"

Carlson's eyes strayed to the window as he shook his head. "No," he answered, "nothing more stable. The canoe is the only practical craft for travel in the outlands, especially on the smaller lakes and the rivers where frequent portages are necessary. I've got the canoes, and by the day after tomorrow I'll have a couple of guides for you who know every inch of the country."

"Day after tomorrow! Why not tomorrow? Or today? It seems that everyone up here is bitten by the same bug!"

"*Down* here," replied Carlson, "we can't always lay hands on a man the moment we want him." Townsend flushed slightly at the obvious correction as the other continued: "I was advised that you would reach here earlier. I held the guides for ten days and then let them go back home to plant their potatoes."

"Potatoes!" snorted the engineer. "What the hell are a few potatoes!"

"Food," answered Carlson evenly. "Food for a long winter, in a country where food is scarce and sometimes hard to get—and where a shortage may well mean death."

"And what the devil will I do for the next couple of days?" demanded Townsend, glancing about the tiny office with distaste.

"You might rest," suggested Carlson mildly. "Two days should not be an excessive rest period for a man who has just completed three weeks of the hardest work he ever did in his life."

Townsend's flush deepened. "I can be getting an outfit ready," he hastened to say. "I presume you can let me have a transit, and a level, and the necessary rods, and a chain or two. I lost my instruments when the launch was wrecked."

"Yes, I guess I can fix you up. Strange no one warned you against trying to run the Grand Rapids in a launch."

"I know the river," replied Townsend shortly. "If there'd been a foot more water, or if Shaffer had run her fast enough so the rudder would have functioned, I'd have made it all right."

“I’m letting you take the only set of instruments we’ve got here,” said Carlson dryly, “and I’d hate to lose ’em. Better let the guides advise which rapids to run. There may possibly be some of the smaller rivers you don’t know.”

After Townsend had disappeared into the warehouse with the young Tar Sands engineer Carlson had summoned, the superintendent pursed his lips and emitted a long, low whistle. “It looks,” he confided to his buffalo-horn inkwell, “as though Northern Utilities is getting off to a bad start.”

XXII

Angus Drops in for a Visit

WITH his scows tied up for the night at the mission landing, Angus joined Father Giroux on the screened porch of his dwelling.

"I see you have not been idle, Father," he smiled, indicating a pile of peeled logs at the edge of the clearing.

"The logs for the new dormitory," said the old priest proudly. "Some of the older boys helped, but we would have made but sorry progress with the work had not Carlson sent six men down from the Tar Sands. He has also promised to send men as soon as he can spare them to help with the building. A fine man—Carlson. A good man in the North."

Angus nodded. "I don't know him personally, but I've heard that he is a good man. If civilization is destined to force itself upon us it is well that it should be pioneered by such as he. I brought with me from the Grand Island an apostle of civilization. He is at the Tar Sands now."

"A good man, think you?"

Angus smiled. "I am not Saint Peter. It is not my duty to sort the good from the bad. He knows all about the river—so he attempted to run the Grand Rapids in a gasoline launch. From there he took passage with me on the scows. He has come into the country to locate a site for a power plant for the purpose of generating electricity to be conveyed by means of wire to the Tar Sands Company and other industries which he says will spring up along the river. Power saves time. Time is money. Money is happiness. I had the pleasure of making him very unhappy for three weeks on the scows. Yet I shall be sorry if I do not see him again."

"In a very few words you have described the man so that I am sure I should know him on sight. But—you say you will be sorry if you do not see him again?"

"Extremely sorry. He is a man of vast business. By comparison I am a person almost, but not quite, beneath his contempt. He himself told me that in competition with this big business of which he is the exponent I would not last ten minutes. This swift obliteration would come about, he said, because of my antiquated ideas and methods. If that is true those ten minutes

should be fraught with interest. So swift a defeat should furnish a mighty thrill."

The keen old eyes narrowed slightly, so that little fans of wrinkles showed at their corners. "But I do not understand, my son. How will your trading post come into competition with this vast business of developing power?"

The younger man laughed. "Oh, it is not the trading post. That is a mere nothing. I look upon this man's statement as a challenge to meet him on his own ground. After my obliteration I shall still have the trading post left."

"Yet I do not understand."

"You remember that I told you that my father had, upon the advice of David Gaunt, purchased a tract of pulpwood and also had obtained title to that part of the ridge through which the canyon passes. You know this country—probably better than any living man; tell me, where in all your travels have you seen a power site like the one at Murchie post?"

The old priest considered the question. "There are the falls and the rapids of the Athabasca, and the Ramparts of the Mackenzie, and——"

Angus interrupted him. "I pointed out the vast amount of power that is going to waste at the Grand Rapids, as we stood talking there on the island, and he told me that it was too much power—the expense of building such a dam as would be required to harness the Athabasca would be prohibitive. He predicted that sometime it would be done, but at present there would be no market for the power such a plant would produce.

"He is looking for a site upon some smaller river, not too far from the Tar Sands. That canyon on the Ptarmigan seems to me to be an ideal one for his purpose—with the sharp fall in the river, and the high rock ridge that crosses the broad valley from rim to rim. Think of it, Father, no dam to build across the valley—only across the canyon, which is not over fifty or sixty feet wide. Then think of the thousands of acres of swampland above that can be flooded to form a vast reservoir of pent-up power. And this swampland is cheap—it could be picked up for a few cents an acre."

The priest nodded. "If, as you say, it is a smaller river he is seeking, then in all the North I know of no other site that is its equal. And as the crow flies it cannot be more than a hundred miles from the Tar Sands."

"Not that far—and with spruce for their poles right on the ground, their power line could be constructed without great expense."

"You told this man of the site?"

"No, I would rather the information should reach him from some other source. I believe that he will come here to consult with you."

“But I know nothing of business, nothing of——”

“You know the North,” interrupted the younger man. “And everyone knows that you know it. Someone—either Carlson or this man’s guides or someone with whom he will talk—will certainly refer him to you. I predict that he will call on you within the week. And when he does I shall appreciate it if you mention the Ptarmigan to him.”

“I shall be very glad to do so, my son, not only because you ask it, but because I know that should he search the country over he could not find its equal. You have in mind, I presume, the sale of this property to this man?”

“Yes, I will sell—part of it anyway—at a price.”

“And this property of Jean McPherson’s? Think you it, also, may be of value?”

The younger man’s face clouded at mention of the girl’s name.

“The tract that McPherson bought lies above the ridge,” he said. “It would be about the first land flooded by the water held back by the dam. Yes, I should say it would have some value. This Northern Utilities Company, of which this man, Townsend, is the chief engineer, would have to pay her for flooding her property.”

“It would be a godsend to Jean, even if she should receive only a portion of what her father paid for it. We examined the deed. It is a grant of six thousand four hundred acres of spruce land from the government to Duncan McPherson, for the sum of three thousand two hundred dollars.”

“Don’t let her part with it too cheaply,” cautioned Angus. “This company is able to pay a fair price. It was necessary for me to return to Edmonton from Grand Island, on my way in, and I took occasion to look up the company’s rating. It is excellent, being a subsidiary of one of the largest utility combinations in existence.”

“Jean, poor child, is sorely in need of funds. The financing of her journey from the convent took almost the last dollar of her money. And examination of her father’s papers has revealed nothing of value save that deed alone. Of course she can remain here at the mission as long as she likes. We are delighted to have her with us. She is a great help to Sister Agatha, and I shall manage somehow to pay her a few dollars, over and above her food and her clothing, for her services. But I can see that she feels she is a burden on us. Nothing is farther from the truth, but she frequently speaks of the necessity of going someplace where she can earn money. She is unhappy here, and the matter is a source of no little worry and grief to me. For I fear that such education as she has received has not fitted her for a career of business. And she is far too beautiful and too unsophisticated to

venture among the temptations and the pitfalls of the cities without some special object in view, and the training that would render that object attainable.”

“You fear that civilization, with its bulwarks of law and religion, would devour her, eh?”

“I fear that civilization, *despite* its bulwarks of law and religion, would devour her—yes.”

“Yet here in the outlands you feel that she is perfectly safe.”

“Yes, she is safe here in the North. We are her people.”

“But she is a product of civilization—and civilization is already reaching its tentacles into the North.” He paused abruptly, glanced toward the girls’ dormitory and rose to his feet. “I will be going now.”

Following his glance, Father Giroux saw Jean McPherson walking slowly toward them in the deep twilight. “Remain awhile, my son,” he invited. “It will give her pleasure to talk with you. Visitors are few at the mission.”

“Thanks, Father. I would rather not. If Townsend comes say nothing to him of my willingness to sell any property. It is not necessary that he should know that I ever thought of the canyon as a power site. I am a fur trader—a breed. And if I do not see you in the morning before we cast off—good-by.”

“Good night, my son. Jean McPherson is a fine girl. I am very sorry that it is not given to me, at times, to read the workings of your mind.”

XXIII

Father Giroux Tells a Story

THE girl reached the corner of the porch and paused to watch the stalwart figure stride across the playground and disappear down the trail to the river. When it was no longer in sight the priest spoke:

“Come inside, away from the mosquitoes, my daughter, and be seated. It is here I love to spend the closing hours of the long days. Mayhap it is because it helps me meditate upon the closing hours of a long life.”

The girl stepped onto the porch and seated herself on a low hassock at the man's feet. She looked up into his face with a smile. “Do not speak like that, Father. You will be here for many years. Why, you do not look a day older than when I first remember you—when I was just a baby.”

“I was thirty years old when I came into the outlands, and I have been here for fifty-one years. Time has dealt kindly with me, for which I devoutly thank God. I can still get about; and in spirit I am as young as I ever was. But the years are passing. From the nature of things I cannot be here much longer. My work is nearly done—such a little work, as I look back upon it, to have occupied so long a lifetime.”

“A little work, Father! Do you call it a little work to have brought comfort and health and happiness to hundreds and hundreds of poor people who would never have known any comfort or health or happiness if you had not been here? If that is a little work, then of what does a great work consist? You should hear them speak of you up in the provinces! Why, you are the grand old man of them all!”

“I care nothing for fame. It is enough that my people believe in me.”

“I came to talk with you, Father. I did not know that you had a visitor.”

“It was Angus Murchie. He is on his way to the Ptarmigan. His scows are tied up for the night at the landing.”

The girl nodded. “I thought it was he as he walked across the playground, but in the twilight I could not be sure. I am sorry I interrupted your visit.”

“It is no matter. You said you came to talk with me?”

“Yes, Father,” she answered; and after a long moment of silence: “I am going away.”

“Where are you going?”

“I don’t know. Back to the provinces. Oh, surely there must be someplace to go—something for me to do to earn my living! I am young and I can work hard.”

“Why do you want to leave us?”

“Because I can’t stay on here and be a burden to you. I know how little you have and how far you have to make it go. I know that you are keeping me here because you know I have no place else to go, and I appreciate it, Father—I can never tell you how much I appreciate it. But I must go someplace where I can earn some money.”

“Why do you want money? You have a home here and you are a great help to us.”

“I do what I can, but I’m more of a burden than a help. And as for the money—the first thing I’ll do with it will be to pay you back.”

“Pay me back! Why, my daughter, you owe me nothing.”

The girl smiled. “I owe you more than I can ever hope to repay. But I was thinking particularly of the thousand dollars you loaned my father, to keep me in the school that last year. I found among his papers a note of hand, payable to you and signed by him, and pinned to this note was a memorandum stating that after the loss of all his money in that mining venture he had written you and asked to borrow five hundred dollars to finance my last year in the school, and that you had advanced a thousand instead. It is this debt that is worrying me, Father—more than the fact that I am living here off your bounty. If I remain here I can never repay that loan. And I know that you could ill afford to spare that thousand dollars.” The girl paused abruptly and stared up into the kindly old face in surprise. The good father was chuckling audibly.

“Listen, child, and I will tell you a story. It can be told now, God rest two stubborn old souls. As you know, Colin Murchie and your father were fast friends until the incident arose that made them enemies for life. Neither ever spoke to the other after the breach occurred, but deep down in their hearts I know that each respected the other.

“Colin happened to be here at the mission the day I received the letter from your father. It was the last time I ever saw Colin—he had stopped in to ask me to tell Angus that he wanted him to be at the post on the seventh of August. Angus would be twenty-one that day, and Colin was taking him into partnership. The letter from your father was posted at Good Hope and stated

that a mining venture in which he had invested his entire savings had failed, leaving him penniless. He asked to borrow five hundred dollars with which to finance your year in the convent. I had not that sum of money, nor did I know where to turn for it.

“That evening, as we sat over our wine and our pipes, I read the letter to Colin.” The old priest paused, and a smile played at the corners of his lips. “I remember that evening as though it were yesterday, for it gave me an insight into a strange and rugged nature. Colin was a rough man and, though strong in the faith of his fathers, was at times profane. I can see him now—sitting right here on this porch, smiting his thigh with his great hand as he laughed and laughed. ‘It serves the damned old fool right!’ he roared. ‘I warned him against putting his money into that Peace River proposition four years ago! Duncan had no business head. He should have heeded my words. And now he’s lost all he’s got—and damned good for him!’ He filled his glass again and again to drink to Duncan’s loss. And each time he emptied it he laughed the louder. It was an unseemly exhibition, and I was about to remonstrate with him when suddenly he paused, took a checkbook from his pocket, stepped in to the desk and drew a check which he handed to me. ‘There’s his money, damn him!’ he said. ‘Take it and cash it and send the money to the lass. But mind ye—never let Duncan know where it came from! Make him think it came from you. He’s never to know I’d give a tuppence to save him from hell, the underhanded old devil! Each year, till the lass is through school, I’ll hand ye a like check.’

“‘But,’ I said, glancing at the paper in my hand. ‘This is made out for a thousand dollars, and he is asking for only five hundred.’

“‘Who the hell are you to be standing between friends?’ he roared. ‘Shame on you, Father Giroux! There’ll be summat o’ gimcracks and geegaws the lass will be wanting, over and above her bare existence. D’ye think I’d sleep good o’ nights if I thought a lass of Duncan’s was crying herself to sleep, amongst strangers, two thousand miles from home, for the want of a few dollars?’ ”

Tears were streaming from the girl’s eyes as the priest finished. Presently she found her voice: “And—does he know—Angus? Maybe it was that _____”

“No,” interrupted the priest. “Knowing Colin as I did, I do not believe he ever mentioned the matter to anyone—not even to Angus. But even though the lad did know he would never have intimated the fact to you. He is no petty soul—Angus. He is generous to a fault. A man of pride.”

"But I must repay him!" cried the girl. "I cannot bear the thought of being in his debt. More than ever I am determined to go where I can earn some money."

"It saddens me, my daughter," the old priest said after a long interval of silence, "to know that, of your own choice, you would forsake the land of your birth to seek your fortune among strangers, far from the river country."

"But it is not from choice!" cried the girl. "It is from necessity! I love the river country. And I hate the provinces! It is only that I must pay my debt. Why, even the Indians look down upon one who will not pay his debt when he can pay it. If I were sick or if, for some other reason, I could not pay—that would be different. But I am well and strong, and I can pay. It is only because I can earn no money here that I would go to the provinces. When I have paid the debt I will return."

Father Giroux shook his head. "If you go out of the North at this time," he said sadly, "you will never return. A thousand dollars is a large sum for one who is inexperienced in the earning of money to save, over and above the necessary expense of living. By the time you had saved it you would long ago have forgotten the river country—and your new environment would have unfitted you, both mentally and physically, to return. You are wrong in feeling that you are more of a burden than a help to us here. You know, my daughter, that I would not lie to you. Only recently Sister Agatha and I were speaking of how fortunate we are in having you with us. In fact I had decided to pay you a small salary which in no sense could be considered a gratuity. You are earning it—and more."

"Do you mean that, Father?" cried the girl, her eyes lighting. "That I am really of use to you here? Oh, then—maybe Angus would let me pay—a little at a time, until the debt is wiped out."

Father Giroux smiled benignly. "I think the matter can be satisfactorily arranged. I do not believe that Angus even knows of any debt."

"Oh, but he must know! I will tell him—now—tonight, and ask him if I can repay it a little at a time!"

"It may be," replied the priest, "that you will not be so long in paying your debt. Do you recollect that among the papers of your father there was a deed to some land on the Ptarmigan?"

"Yes—six thousand four hundred acres. Oh, do you think that Angus would take that land in payment of my debt?"

"No, I do not think that. Should you offer him the deed I believe that he would tell you to keep it—that it may be worth more money than the thousand dollars Duncan owed the estate of Colin Murchie."

“Do you mean that maybe the government will buy it back? Will repay the three thousand two hundred dollars my father paid for it? Oh, if it only would, I—I would be rich! Why, I would never have to go out of the North.”

“I do not believe that the government would take back the land and refund you the money. But there is a man upon the river—he is now at the Tar Sands camp—who may be interested in this property. He is the representative of a large company which seeks the site for a power plant. It may be that this man will purchase that canyon just above Murchie’s post, and build a dam there. If so, this property of yours would be flooded by his reservoir, and he would have to reimburse you for the damage.”

“But it is only spruce swampland. It is not worth much. I don’t know why my father ever bought it.”

“He bought it because Colin Murchie advised him to. Colin bought a like tract, acting on the advice of David Gaunt. He considered it a good investment.”

“I know my father had respect for Uncle Colin’s judgment in business matters. It’s too bad he didn’t follow it in the matter of that mine. But spruce swampland—when the whole country is covered with spruce—that does not look to me like a good investment. Do you think this man will pay the full amount—the entire three thousand two hundred dollars—for it?”

“I do not know. I know little of business. But, should he purchase the canyon from Angus, I shall tell him of your property and explain to him that you are an orphan and that this property is all you have in the world and that you are sorely in need of money to pay a debt. Then he will pay you the full amount of its value to him, I am sure.”

“If he would give me even half of what my father paid for it I could repay Angus and have six hundred dollars left.”

“Yes, and six hundred dollars, together with your position here, would give you a competence.”

“And I could stay in the North,” breathed the girl. “I am going now and show Angus my father’s note of hand. Then he will know about the debt. And I will tell him that I will repay it at once, if the man buys my land; if not, then little by little.”

“Angus may be asleep down by the river, among the scowmen.”

“I’ll wake him up then. I don’t mind the scowmen. I have known them always. He would be gone in the morning before I was awake.”

Hastening to her room, the girl selected the note from the packet of papers and, crossing the playground, descended the sharp slope to the river where numerous blanketed forms lay upon the bank beside the two scows

that were snubbed to the trees. She paused, her eyes searching the sleepers. She turned at a slight movement close by, to see a man seated beside the embers of a dying fire, his back to the bole of a birch tree. The man spoke in a husky whisper:

“Ho, a pretty one! How you lak you stay leetle w’ile, eh? I’m de good mans, me. I’m lak you.”

“Don’t be a fool,” replied the girl shortly, and as a chuckle of amusement sounded from one of the rolled-up figures she demanded: “Where’s Angus Murchie?”

The man answered surlily: “Com’ down leetle w’ile ago. Gon’ back oop de bank.” He relapsed into silence, and as the girl retraced her steps up the slope she heard a bantering voice from the blanket: “You gre’t mans wit’ de wimmins, eh, Pierre? Ha—— ‘Don’ be a fool!’ De boys gon’ laugh ’bout dat wan in de mornin’.”

The little moon rode high in the west, and, pausing on the verge of the riverbank, the girl’s glance swept the clearing. Then she walked rapidly, in long easy strides, toward a dark figure seated at the base of the pile of peeled logs.

During the long winter in his lonely post on the Ptarmigan the picture of Jean McPherson, as she had stood in the doorway of the classroom at the mission, with the sunlight striking aslant her hair, had recurred to Angus Murchie again and again. She was beautiful—more beautiful, even, than any woman he had seen in the cities. At such times he would close his eyes and feast his mind upon that beauty, the beauty of smiling blue eyes and youth and perfect health. Then the memory of the beautiful girl who had smiled at him beside the cigarette counter in the hotel would obtrude upon him, and all beauty would be blotted out by the cloud as the words of the older woman repeated themselves in his brain: “I’m ashamed of you! . . . nothing but a half-breed.” He, Angus Murchie, was a half-breed—an object of scorn and contempt among the beautiful women of civilization, through no fault of his own, but because the mother who bore him had been an Indian. It was not that he was different from others. His skin was no darker, nor were his eyes blacker than the skins and the eyes of many white men. The girl in the hotel had smiled upon him, and the older woman had admitted that he was handsome, even as she uttered the words that had damned him in the eyes of the girl, so that she had turned away and left that place with never a backward glance.

Fierce anger always followed these memories; then the anger would cool, and in its place would come a bitter, soul-searing resentment against

these women of civilization. And Jean McPherson was of these women—not born to civilization but of it nevertheless. For the three most formative years of her life she had lived amid civilization, had become imbued with it, had accepted its customs and its inhibitions. Well, he had given her no chance to show her scorn and contempt for him. Nor would he ever give her the chance. . . .

And so when he had looked up that evening on the veranda of Father Giroux and seen her approaching from the direction of the dormitory, he had left abruptly. Striding across the playground, he had descended the slope to the river, the dark cloud gathering in his brain. Some of the scowmen were already snoring in their blankets. Others were grouped about their little fires, guzzling tea. Two played euchre with a greasy pack of cards by the light of a spruce blaze. High above the river hung the young moon, its light gilding the tiny ripples upon the surface of the water. It was a scene, not of the hated civilization, but of the North. He felt no desire for sleep. Slowly he turned, ascended the slope and, walking to the edge of the clearing, seated himself with his back against the pile of peeled logs.

After a time he heard the screen door of Father Giroux's porch slam, and in the pale moonlight he saw the girl hasten toward the dormitory. A few moments later she reappeared, and as he watched her trim, lithe figure cross the playground in long swinging strides and disappear over the edge of the slope, an unutterable longing surged up within him. She reappeared and after pausing for a moment at the edge of the bank, she came directly toward him. . . . "Nothing but a half-breed." . . . The cloud darkened in Angus Murchie's brain. A moment later she came to a halt directly before him. He rose to his feet, his face as expressionless as a mask. For a moment their eyes met. Then she extended her hand in which was an oblong of paper.

"I have here something that you should see," she was saying in a cool, impersonal voice. "I found it among my father's papers. It is a note of hand acknowledging a debt that my father owed to yours. My father is dead. The obligation rests upon me."

Angus took the paper and, tilting it to catch the moonlight, read it through. "I know of no debt," he said in the croaking guttural of an Indian. "This is for Father Giroux."

"Nevertheless, there is a debt," replied the girl in the same cool voice. "This paper represents the money your father advanced, through Father Giroux, to finance my schooling, after my father lost everything he had in a mining venture."

"Have you the money to pay?" asked the toneless voice bluntly.

“Not just at present. But I will have.”

Without a word the man tore the note into small bits, wadded them together in his palm, dropped them to the earth and ground them into the dirt. He took a step as though to pass her, but she detained him with a hand on his arm. Angus felt the blood leap and surge through his veins at the touch of her fingers. Then she was speaking.

“Why did you do that?” she demanded, her eyes boring into his own.

“There is no debt,” he grunted.

“There is a debt! Destroying the evidence of it does not cancel the debt.”

“Your civilization,” he said, a sneer in his voice, “demands evidence.”

“Nevertheless, I shall pay the debt. Maybe in very small installments, out of the money Father Giroux will pay me for helping here at the mission. But maybe all at once. Father Giroux told me that there is a man upon the river who may pay me for that land my father bought upon the Ptarmigan.”

“You have that deed?”

“Yes, it was among my father’s papers.”

“Don’t sell cheap,” growled Angus gruffly and pushed on past her.

Deep color mounted to the girl’s cheeks, and the blue eyes flashed. “When I need advice,” she said in a voice that rang chill with anger, “I shall seek it from Father Giroux!”

The man strode away with no sign that he had heard. Without once looking back he disappeared over the edge of the bank, leaving her standing, quivering with anger, in the pale light of the little moon.

XXIV

Townsend Visits the Mission

THE third day after his arrival at the tar sands saw Bradford Townsend again on the river, his supplies and borrowed instruments stowed amidship of two canoes. Seated gingerly in the bow, Townsend made no effort to paddle as the light craft slipped smoothly downstream. After a few miles his nervousness disappeared, and he laid his plans. Should the old priest suggest no better power site than the one Carlson had mentioned as lying just above Murchie's post, he decided to ascend the Ptarmigan and look over the ground. Shaffer, who accompanied him in the other canoe, could serve as rodman, and the guides as chainmen, in any exploratory level or transit work he might attempt at the canyon. The real survey would be done later, Carlson having agreed to furnish a survey party if a proper site were located.

The twenty-mile stretch to the mission was quickly accomplished, and, leaving the others at the landing, where the guides brought out the inevitable tea pails and built their little fire, Townsend ascended the bank and made his way to the white-painted cottage that stood apart from the larger buildings.

"I am Father Giroux," announced the old priest who stood framed in the doorway. "Visitors are few on the river and are always welcome at the mission."

The engineer perfunctorily grasped the lean old hand and was surprised at the power of its grip. "Glad to know you, I'm sure. My name's Townsend. I'm here in the interest of Northern Utilities. Looking up a site for a power dam. At the Tar Sands, Carlson told me you knew the country, so I thought I'd drop in and see you."

"Step onto the porch, where we may talk in comfort. I know the country. But I fear I know little of power plants or of their requirements. Be seated. I will have wine brought, and we will see whether or not I can be of assistance to you."

"I don't drink," replied Townsend stiffly as he seated himself in the proffered chair. "And I have little time for talk. If you'll answer a few questions I'll be going. Time is money—and I'm a businessman."

"Ah yes," said the priest, seating himself and filling his long-stemmed pipe. "We of the North know little of business. We live our simple lives as

best we may, and your world of business moves on without us.”

“Yes, it would,” commented the other dryly. “Briefly, I am looking for a site for a power plant—a fall or a rapid, running between high banks, on some river much smaller than the Athabasca or the Slave. Rock banks would be preferable, the higher the better. A gorge or canyon where a dam would be capable of holding back a large reservoir of water would be an ideal setup. Do you happen to know of such place?”

“This power of which you speak would be electricity, I presume. What will you do with it when you have it?”

“Sell it to the Tar Sands to run a plant they’re putting in. Later, when the country is developed, there will be a thousand demands for light and power.”

“You believe, then, that other enterprises will be established upon the river?”

“Sure there will!” exclaimed Townsend, a note of impatience in his voice. “Plenty of ’em—bitumen, petroleum, pulpwood, lumber, mineral. Trouble with you folks up here, you’re all asleep. All these natural resources lying around right under your noses, and you make no effort to cash in on ’em! I’m up here to wake the North up—for its own good!”

Father Giroux nodded thoughtfully. “I have always loved the wilderness,” he said. “I have never thought of it in terms of cash. You may, as you say, wake up the North, but I doubt that it will be for its good. I shall indeed be sorry to see the river country exploited for gain by those who have no love for it.”

“Nonsense! Everything must give way before progress.”

“Yes, always the little peoples, the weak and the simple ones of the earth, must be crushed beneath the ruthless wheels of the advancing juggernaut that is called progress.”

“You’re all alike up here. You talk like that damn fool, Murchie.”

“At times one can sympathize with his hatred of civilization,” replied the priest. “This dam that you speak of—it should be placed upon a river near the Tar Sands holdings?”

“The nearer the better, of course. The power must be conveyed to them by means of a wire line, and it costs money to convey electricity the same as anything else—to say nothing of the cost of construction of the line. The shorter the line, the lower the cost.”

“Would a hundred miles be too far?”

“No, no! That’s easy.”

"I think, then, that I know of such a place as you have described. It is on the Ptarmigan. The valley of the river is some five or six miles wide at that point, and across it runs a high rock ridge, through which the river flows by means of a deep gorge, or canyon. This canyon is very narrow, not to exceed, I should say, fifty or sixty feet in width, and the fall there must be considerable, for the river dashes down through it in a seething smother of white water. Behind this ridge, up-river, lies a large spruce swamp that extends back for many miles. This swamp, when flooded by your dam, should give you a reservoir of almost unlimited extent and, therefore, much power—is it not?"

"Sounds good. I'll look it over. On the Ptarmigan, you say? suppose it's the same place Carlson mentioned. Up near Murchie's trading post, isn't it?"

"Yes, Murchie's post is situated upon a small flat just below the mouth of the canyon."

"What do you know about this Murchie?" asked Townsend bluntly.

"His father was a Scotch trader who married an Indian woman. He was murdered last year, and Angus inherited the post. The lad received his education here at the mission. I would say that he is a fine youth who is possessed of a remarkably keen brain."

A condescending smile twisted the lips beneath the clipped mustache. "The term 'keen' is purely relative. I grant you that, in comparison with the Indians and breeds and white riffraff that hangs about the rivers, he might be called 'keen.' But as a matter of fact I came down the river with his scow outfit from the Grand Rapids. He knew from the start that I was looking for a power site—yet this 'keen brain' of which you spoke, failed completely to grasp the fact that what is undoubtedly an ideal site lay right at his own back door, so to speak. It's as I said—you people up here are asleep on your feet. You need someone to wake you up. Why, I'll venture to say that the canyon where this river breaks through the ridge is part of his own property!"

"Yes, I know that Colin Murchie, his father, owned some land in the vicinity of the post."

"And," sneered the engineer, "with a chance to sell out at a profit, this 'keen brain' did not even mention the property."

"Angus is a fur trader," reminded the priest. "Mayhap his mind was on other things. You say there is a chance for him to sell out at a profit?"

"Well," replied the other, frowning, "possibly—at some small profit. It would depend entirely upon what the property cost Murchie."

"Duncan McPherson, who was formerly the factor at Fort Chipewyan, also bought some property on the Ptarmigan. His land, I believe, lies wholly

above the canyon, while I think that Murchie's lies both above and below. McPherson is also dead, but before he died he lost his life's savings in a worthless mining venture—save only this tract of land. His daughter is here at the mission. She is in dire need of funds to pay off a certain debt contracted by her father."

"Does the creditor hold a mortgage on this land?"

"No, the property is unencumbered. In fact the creditor knew nothing of the debt until she told him of it a few days since."

"Has her father's estate been probated?"

"Yes, it has passed through the hands of the public administrator."

"Then it's too late for this creditor to enforce any claim he may have had against the estate."

"No, the creditor could not enforce payment of the debt. He would not even if he could."

"What's she got to worry about then?"

"She is worrying about paying this debt. It is an honest debt. She desires to pay it."

"She better forget it," advised Townsend. "That's the trouble with you people up here—you're not practical. If the fool creditor didn't have sense enough to secure his debt he ought to lose it. That's merely business."

"Miss McPherson knows little of business, but she feels that the obligation should be met. At any rate, what I was going to ask is, if you should purchase this property and build your dam, is it not probable that you would buy this McPherson tract also?"

"I can't tell anything about that till I've looked the proposition over. If the land lies where our reservoir will flood it we would, of course, expect to indemnify the owner against loss caused by the flooding. I don't imagine, though, the damage would be great—you say this tract is worthless spruce swampland."

"It said that the land above the canyon is spruce swampland. I said nothing about its being worthless."

"Humph—practically worthless. The appraisers would award but little to the owner in the way of damages. Do you happen to know what the land cost McPherson?"

"He bought it from the government, some ten years ago, for fifty cents an acre."

"What's the amount of this debt she thinks she wants to pay?"

"One thousand dollars."

“Of course you realize that land holdings in this country are more of a liability than an asset, and, as I said, the damage appraisal would be very low. However, I want to be fair in the matter. If I decide to put in the dam we’ll take the property off her hands. Under the circumstances I’d feel inclined to stretch a point in her favor. I’d say that twenty-five cents an acre would be more than a fair price. That will give her sixteen hundred dollars in cash—half of what her father paid for the property—and she’ll have six hundred dollars left if she goes ahead and pays that debt. She’d better forget the debt, though, and salt the whole sixteen hundred down. Let the creditor whistle for his money—he’s got no way to collect it. I’ll be getting along now. Good-by. I’m obliged to you. If that poor fool of a Murchie had told me about this power site three weeks ago, when he first found out I was hunting one, it would have saved me some time.”

Father Giroux shook his head sadly as he watched the man retrace his steps across the playground. “It seems,” he muttered half aloud, “that there is little of honor in this world of business. But even so, the man is not bad at heart—he is willing to stretch a point in Jean’s favor and pay her half what Duncan paid for the land. I hope, though, that Angus does not fare too badly at his hands. He does not like Angus—he would not stretch a point in his favor. He says Angus is a fool. The lad undoubtedly knows little of business. But I do not think he is a fool.”

A smile hovered at the corners of the thin lips. “I recollect an aphorism of David Gaunt’s. He once said: ‘The reputation of being a fool is an asset—providing you’re not one.’”

XXV

Big Business Comes to the Ptarmigan

TOWNSEND, the mechanic and the two guides camped that night some twenty miles below the mission, where the Ptarmigan flows into the Slave.

After some two or three hours ascent of the Ptarmigan next day, they landed at the foot of a rapid, and instead of immediately going ahead with the work of packing over the portage the guides got out the tea pail and proceeded to build a fire. The sight angered Townsend, who brushed aside the little heap of bark and chips with his foot.

"Listen, you!" he said, scowling down at the two Indians. "This is no damned scow outfit! I'm paying you good wages to get us up to Murchie's post—and get us up there the quickest way you know how. From now on this damned tea guzzling has got to stop. Three meals a day is enough for any man—and the rest of the time you'll keep moving. Do you hear?"

One of the men glanced up into the irate face as the other began to methodically reassemble the bark and sticks. "Tam to drink tea," he said and, picking up the pail, stepped to the river.

"Like hell it's time to drink tea!" roared Townsend. "I just got through telling you that there'll be no more tea drinking on this trip—except at mealtimes, and that's three times a day, not five!"

The Indian on the ground touched a match to the bark, and a small red flame shot up. The other faced Townsend, the pail of water in his hand. "You t'ink no kin drink som' tea?" he asked mildly.

"Yes, damn it! That's just what I think. Can you get that through your skull?"

The man pointed to the canoes and the packs and then on up the portage trail. "You no lak drink tea, you go to hell. You go on oop Murchie Pos'. We drink de tea, den we gon' back oop de riv' to Tar Sand."

"What do you mean?" cried Townsend as the man turned toward the fire with the pail. "That you're quitting us? That you're going back and leave us here in the middle of this damned country to carry our own stuff, and the canoes, too, over these damned portages—and paddle 'em up the river?"

"Go back Tar Sand. No guide no man's say no drink tea."

"You can't do that! We don't know the way. We'd never get to Murchie's!"

"De riv', she know de way. You fol' de riv', you com' Murchie Pos'."

"But, I tell you, we can't carry all this stuff over the portages, and we can't handle the canoes."

The argument evidently failed to impress the Indians, one of whom added tea to the water.

Shaffer grinned. "Better leave 'em go ahead an' drink their tea, boss," he advised. "I sure as hell ain't got no appetite fer shovin' these damn canoes up this river—the current's too damn swift—an' I know damn well you ain't. Like you said, if they quit on us we'll prob'ly never git to Murchie's. D'you ever hear the one about 'When in Rome do as the roamers do' . . . er some such a sayin'? There's more truth than po'try in it, at that. Better leave me handle these guys. I'll try to git 'em to stick along till we git to Murchie's, anyway."

"It's a damned outrage!" growled Townsend. "Paying out good money to watch the lazy devils sit around and guzzle tea! By God, it's high time someone woke the North up!"

"Mebbe," replied Shaffer, "but when I feel the need to wake somethin' up I'll pick out somethin' my own size. This here North is too damn big."

"I suppose we've got to put up with it," grunted the engineer. "Go ahead and see what you can do with 'em. If we could get along without 'em I'd pitch 'em in the river. I'll go on up the trail and wait at the head of the rapids."

Townsend strode off, and Shaffer, extracting a cup from the duffel, joined the two at the fire, filled his cup with the scalding liquid and squatted down between the two. "Funny about the boss not likin' tea, ain't it?" he said with a broad grin.

One of the men shrugged. The other replied surlily: "No lak heem boss. No good. Say Injun no drink tea."

"Huh?" asked Shaffer in well-feigned surprise. "What you mean?"

"Boss say no kin drink tea. Dat no good. We no kin drink tea, we quit."

The mechanic threw back his head and laughed. "So that's what you was talkin' about quittin' an' goin' back to the Tar Sands for, eh? Me an' the boss was wonderin' what the hell was ailin' you. You got him wrong. He never said you couldn't drink tea. What he meant was *he* didn't want none, that's all. Hell, you boys could set around an' guzzle tea from daylight till dark, an' he wouldn't give a damn—much," he added with a grin.

“De boss no mean we no drink tea?”

“Hell no! He likes to have you drink it.”

“W’y he no lak tea?”

“Oh, it was on account of, one time way back—when he was just a kid—his ma spilt some hot tea on him, an’ he’s hated tea ever since. He can’t even go the smell of it, only at meals. That’s why he went off up the trail—so he couldn’t smell the tea.”

The Indian smiled a bit grimly and, Shaffer could have sworn, winked at him across the fire. “Dat too bad hees ma don’ speel som’ hot milk on heem; den mebbe-so he don’ grow oop. But you good mans. We go ’long to Murchie Pos’.”

Townsend tolerated with ill grace the tea drinkings from that time on, and about noon of the second day thereafter the canoes were drawn from the water at Murchie’s landing. From the doorway of the trading room, where he stood leaning against the jamb, Angus Murchie greeted the engineer with a grin.

“So—big business has come to the Ptarmigan, eh? Can I sell you a tin of beans? Or a pound of tea?”

“Fond of your jokes, aren’t you, Murchie?” the man replied with a forced grin. “But, all joking aside, maybe big business has come to the Ptarmigan. The fact is, I heard from Carlson, and later from an old priest at a mission, that the canyon here might make a good site for our dam.”

“Yes?” The dark eyes had a disconcerting stare.

“Yes. And I thought I’d come up and look it over. If we decide to locate here you’ll be lucky. It may give you a chance to realize a little something on that spruce swampland your father and a man named McPherson bought, some ten years back. The priest told me about it.”

“Oh yes,” replied Angus indifferently. “They bought it, I believe, for the pulpwood. But they never did anything about it.”

“Of course not. As you once told me, the North is in no hurry. Care if I look around a bit?”

Angus indicated all outdoors with a wave of his arm. “Help yourself. Business is not brisk today. I’ll go with you.”

Accompanied by Shaffer, the two made their way to the top of the high ridge where the naked rock outcropped in ledges and spurs through the shallow soil in which was rooted the scattered growth of spruce and banksian. Reaching the crest, they paused on the edge of the canyon, at the foot of whose hundred-foot rock walls the Ptarmigan hurled herself through

the narrow trough in a frenzy of leaping white water. A rainbow-tinted mist hung about them, and in their ears was a dull, continuous roar that was the voice of the rapid. For a long time Townsend stood gazing down into the depths, and Angus knew that his eyes were taking in every detail. Finally he turned away, his face a mask of indifference.

“What are these mounds?” he asked.

“They are the graves of my mother and my father,” Angus replied. “They loved this rapid. And now in summer the pearly mist envelops them and keeps their graves green and fresh, and in the winter it covers them each day with a shroud of pure white frost crystals.”

“Humph,” grunted Townsend as he removed a binocular from a leather case swung from his shoulder, adjusted the glass to his eyes and slowly swept the horizon. To the northward, up the valley, stretched a seemingly endless reach of spruce swampland, dotted here and there with the lighter green of a beaver meadow through which the river wound like a ribbon of silver. To the eastward and to the westward the high ridge upon which they stood reached to the higher ridges that marked the boundaries of the valley.

The man finally lowered the glass. “This ridge extends clear across the valley from rim to rim?” he asked.

“Yes, from rim to rim.”

“How wide is the valley at this point?”

“Well, I should say that we stand about in the center. And that the ridge extends about three miles in either direction to the rims. What would be your estimate?”

“About that, I should think. Close enough, anyway. And, in an air line, how far should you say it is from this point to the Tar Sands camp, on the Slave?”

“I have never traveled it by land. We use the river, which is, of course, much farther. I should say it would be somewhere between seventy-five and a hundred miles.”

“Rough country, isn’t it?”

“Yes, fairly rough—ridges and swamps.”

“Damned expensive to run a power line across it,” grunted Townsend, “even if we were interested. Mind if I do a little level work? I’d like to determine the fall of the rapids and the height of the ridge.”

“Not at all. My knowledge of such things is meager. But if I can be of any assistance do not hesitate to call on me. I shall be at the post.”

They descended the ridge, and for two days Townsend and Shaffer and the two guides were busy about the ridge and the canyon with level, rod and chain. On the evening of the second day Townsend strolled into the storeroom where Angus was tinkering with a fur press.

“Get through?” asked the younger man, spinning the heavy screw.

“Yes,” Townsend replied with a show of indifference. “I’m disappointed with the fall of the river.”

“That’s too bad. Anything I can do about it?”

The engineer thought he detected a note of sarcasm in the voice, but after a glance into the guileless black eyes he set the question down to ignorance. “Do about it!” he exclaimed. “Hell no! I mean, your river don’t drop off as fast as I thought it did.”

“Oh. Well, I know another place that you better take a look at. It’s about a hundred miles east of here. A river plunges over a ledge in a sheer drop of thirty or forty feet. Of course you’d have to build your power line that much longer, and there is no canyon. Your dam would have to be anyway a quarter of a mile long, but it sure has the fall. I can draw you a map that your guides can follow.”

“This site could be utilized,” Townsend said. “Despite its drawbacks it has possibilities.”

“About the fall of the river that is such a disappointment to you—I know nothing of dams, but it seems to me you could get any fall you wanted up to the height of the ridge by simply building your dam higher.”

“It’s plain,” retorted the other, “that you know little or nothing of engineering. Don’t you realize that the higher the dam the more it costs to build it?”

“I suppose it does, but the more power you would get too.”

“Yes, and the more land you’d flood that’s got to be paid for. But I have no time to stand around discussing technical problems with one who knows nothing of the subject.”

“No time? I thought you had finished your work.”

“I’ve done all I can do here now. What I mean is that if we’re going to do business we’ve got to be getting at it. I want to get the terms of any agreement we may reach down in the form of notes, so that our legal department can draw the necessary papers. I’m leaving these instruments here, if you can store them for me, until I can get a real survey crew on the job. I’ll have to return to Edmonton, make my report and get the papers

fixed up. Then I'll return and pay over the money when you sign them. Will that be satisfactory?"

"Yes."

"I'll stop at the Tar Sands and send up a survey party, and if Carlson has anything on hand in the way of cement or other material, I'll start that up too."

"The material can come as soon as you see fit to send it," Angus said, "providing we can come to terms. But there will be no surveying done until the deal is consummated and I have the money in hand."

"Why not? It will save time."

"Time is no object to me."

"But it is to me! What possible objection can there be to allowing the survey party to proceed with its work?"

"I would keep my wilderness undisturbed as long as possible."

"Damned nonsense!" snorted Townsend.

"Maybe," Angus agreed. "But, nevertheless, that is my feeling in the matter. The surveying will wait."

"What about this McPherson tract?" growled the engineer, changing the subject abruptly. "The priest told me that a fellow named McPherson owned a tract of swampland somewhere above the canyon. Do you know anything about it?"

"Yes, Duncan McPherson purchased sixty-four hundred acres lying just north of the canyon, at the time my father purchased a like tract, adjoining McPherson's holding on the south. Thus my father's holdings include the ridge at the point where the canyon cuts through it."

"This McPherson was a friend of your father's, I suppose."

"Yes, at that time they were great friends. Later they became bitter enemies. McPherson is dead."

"So the priest told me. He said the man's daughter is there at the mission. Do you know her?"

"I have seen her."

"I was thinking that possibly you might be able to pick up this property cheaper than I could. I would, of course, expect to pay you for your trouble."

"I would not care to have any dealings with her whatever."

"Oh, all right. I can stop in and pick up the property on my way up the river."

"Then you are planning to build your dam here?"

“Yes, providing we can come to terms. The site isn’t too bad. Now, as I understand it, your father acquired sixty-four hundred acres from the government, adjoining the McPherson tract on the south, and including the canyon and the trading post, here, for fifty cents an acre. Is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“Have you the deed or grant or whatever the government’s conveyance is called?”

“I’ll get it,” Angus answered and led the way to the trading room, where he lighted the huge hanging lamp. Stepping into another room, he returned shortly with a paper which he handed to Townsend, who scrutinized it closely.

“This is okay as far as I can see. Of course our legal department will have to pass on it. I see that your father acquired this property ten years ago. I think you’re damned lucky to get your money back on a property that has lain dormant for ten years, with no prospect of ever having any value.”

“You are willing to pay me the full amount my father paid for the property?”

“Yes—I want to be perfectly fair in the matter. My company wouldn’t stand for my taking advantage of anyone, even when it would mean money in its pocket to do so. That’s why I’m offering you the full amount your father paid, even though all we want is the canyon and a small parcel of land on either side. All that lies below the canyon is worthless to us.”

“How about the loss of interest on this money for ten years? Would your company reimburse me for that?”

“Interest!” Townsend frowned and hesitated. “Oh well—I don’t want to seem to haggle. We’ll allow interest at the rate of six per cent. That will amount to . . . Let’s see. . . .” Producing a pencil and paper, he figured for a moment. “To a hundred and ninety-two dollars a year—nineteen hundred and twenty dollars for the ten-year period—fifty-one hundred and twenty dollars all told. A handsome profit, I’d say, on a parcel of worthless spruce land.”

“But should the interest not be compounded?”

“What? Compound interest! Not by a damn sight! You’re lucky to be getting any interest at all.”

“Money commands twelve per cent here in the outlands—not six. I do not care to haggle either. I shall not insist on your compounding the interest. But I feel that you should pay a higher rate.”

“Oh, all right! We’re not trying to get something for nothing. We’ll figure the interest at ten per cent.”

“I said twelve, not ten,” reminded Angus.

“Well, twelve then. We want you to feel perfectly satisfied. That will bring our total obligation up to seven thousand and forty dollars—more than double what your father paid for the property.”

“When and how will this money be paid?” Angus asked.

“I’ll go immediately to Edmonton, stopping at the mission to pick up the McPherson holdings. I’ll take this deed or grant with me, receipting for it to you. Then as soon as our legal department can make out the transfer from you to the company I’ll return with the money and the transfer for your signature. How do you want it—a certified check or the cash?”

“The cash. And when your legal department is preparing that transfer have them make it out to convey only the land immediately adjoining the canyon, say about one hundred acres—fifty on either side. That should give you all you require for your buildings and what not. As you pointed out, the land that lies below the canyon is worthless to you.”

“What! You mean that we’re to pay you for the whole tract, and you only deed us a hundred acres of it?”

“You told me that all you needed was a small parcel of land on either side of the canyon and that the rest was worthless to you. Why should you desire to hold worthless land? I believe that I could derive some small revenue from this land in the way of pulpwood.”

“Oh, all right. Northern Utilities would hardly engage in a piffling pulpwood business. We won’t begrudge you the few dollars you can make out of it. What we want is the power site.”

“And,” continued Angus, “I would like to have a clause inserted in the contract or deed, or whatever this transfer is, whereby Northern Utilities binds itself to furnish me power and light for the post, here, and my pulpwood mill for all time, at a rate not to exceed the minimum rate they charge the Tar Sands Company or other outfits to which they may sell light and power.”

“Yes, we’ll agree to that. What little light and power you’ll use will be negligible.”

“Another thing, I must insist that your company insert a clause whereby it obligates itself to remove the remains of my mother and father from the spot where they now lie and reverently bury them in the little cemetery at the mission of Father Giroux.”

Townsend nodded. "Of course, we'll be glad to remove the bodies from our property and rebury them as you have indicated." He paused and smiled condescendingly. "We want you to feel perfectly satisfied. That's our policy. I don't know that I exactly understand the use of the word 'reverently' in a business contract; however, I'll have it inserted."

"I do," replied Angus evenly. "And—I will be here."

"Anything else you can think of?" Townsend asked with just the hint of a sneer in his voice.

"Only one other item, I believe—Northern Utilities is to pay me a bonus of fifty thousand dollars, over and above the purchase price of the property which you have so generously offered, upon my signing the papers."

"What!" The word rang like a pistol shot. "A fifty-thousand-dollar bonus! Are you crazy?"

"I think not."

"But you just agreed to sell at seven thousand and forty dollars, plus what it will cost us to meet the other terms you dictated!"

Angus smiled blandly. "I have made no agreement to sell at any price. What you doubtless mean is that you offered me that sum. If you assumed I had accepted the offer you are in error. The property is mine. You seem to overlook the fact that it is I who must set the price, not you. As you yourself pointed out, I know nothing whatever of big business. But it seems to me that the figure of fifty-seven thousand and forty dollars is not excessive."

To Angus and Shaffer, the mechanic, it seemed in the yellow lamplight that Townsend's neck actually swelled with rage. A great blue vein stood out like a whipcord on his forehead. "You're a fool if you think you can hold me up for any fifty thousand dollars!" he roared. "I offered you all the property is worth—and then some!"

Angus shrugged indifferently. "It seems, then, that further talk is useless," he said. "And in a way I am rather glad. I love this spot. I was born here—it is my home. It would be rather a pity, I think, to have it ground under the heel of your ruthless civilization—to supplant beauty with ugliness, grandeur with power."

"What damned nonsense is that?" cried the engineer. "Beauty! Grandeur! What the hell is beauty and grandeur? What is your whole damned wilderness, to stand in the way of a power site like this? Why, we can generate——" He broke off suddenly, and in evident confusion hastened to say: "Come now, Murchie, be reasonable! As I told you, we want to do the fair thing—want to pay you all the property is worth. But we won't stand for being held up. What would my board of directors say if I should go back

and report that I had let a common outlander, who knows nothing of business, hold me up for fifty-odd thousand dollars for a hundred acres of worthless land?"

Angus shrugged. "I care nothing for what your directors would say. This is your worry, not mine. Doubtless they would be glad that you had dealt with one who knows nothing of business, else it might have cost them a hundred thousand—which, by the way, will be my price tomorrow."

Townsend gulped and glared. "You mean that if I don't close with you now—tonight—for fifty-seven thousand and forty dollars you'll hold me up for a hundred thousand tomorrow?"

"For one hundred and seven thousand and forty dollars. The hundred thousand I mentioned was the bonus." Angus yawned and drew out his watch. "It is already past my bedtime, and I am growing sleepy. I have a hard day before me tomorrow. Three Indians will be here to trade. If you do not care to meet my terms I shall wish you good night."

"Oh—I'll take it, I suppose!" Townsend exclaimed. "It's a damned outrage! But you've got me right where you want me. By God, I'll get a memorandum of the deal on paper, though—right now—tonight—before you get the chance to boost the price further. I suppose you'll be willing to wait up and sign the agreement—despite your big business day tomorrow, in the matter of the three Indians?"

"Certainly. You are entitled to a signed agreement. Come around the counter here and sit at the desk. You will find paper, pen and ink."

XXVI

Father Giroux Journeys to Murchie Post

LEAVING the guides to break camp the following morning, Townsend and Shaffer strolled over to the trading room to find it locked.

“Probably asleep yet,” sneered the engineer, “getting a good rest so the big day’s business he’s expecting won’t wear him out.”

“His canoe’s gone,” said Shaffer, pointing to the rude shelter of bark on the riverbank near the flagpole. “It was under that platform yesterday.”

“Probably gone hell-bent to meet his Indian friends and brag about what a big businessman he is. He won’t do much bragging when he finds out that the company would have fired me, lock, stock and barrel, if I’d let this property slip through my fingers for ten times what I paid for it! And when I’ve got him where I want him, maybe I won’t tell him about it! Insufferable ass! He thinks he’s a businessman!”

“Better wait till you git him where there ain’t no chanct of his comin’ back at you, boss,” advised Shaffer. “Take it from me, there’s one gazabo that ain’t so dumb as he lets on.”

Townsend regarded the man with a supercilious glance. “Really, Shaffer, your advice upon a matter of business is invaluable. It is remarkable that you’ve never risen beyond the calling of a common mechanic.” He paused and frowned. “It’s queer, though, that Murchie should have left the post today. He spoke of expecting those Indians to trade. I’d like to know where he’s gone.”

“Well,” drawled Shaffer, “not bein’ no heavy businessman, nor nothin’ like that, mebbe my guess wouldn’t be so good.”

“What is your guess?” growled Townsend.

“Jest askin’—like a common mechanic would—how many acres do you figger on floodin’ with yer dam?”

“Can’t tell till we run some contour lines. Fifty thousand—a hundred thousand, maybe.”

“An’ how many of ’em do you own?”

“None of them. I figure I can pick up the McPherson tract of sixty-four hundred acres when I get to the mission. Why do you ask?”

“H-u-u-m, well, not bein’ no businessman, mebbe I’m wrong. I don’t know where this here Murchie’s went, but if I was him I’d be hittin’ out hell-bent to pick up them other acres.”

Vituperative profanity poured from the engineer’s lips in an unrepeating stream that astounded the mechanic, who listened with an appreciation that amounted to awe. When he paused for want of breath the other heaved a deep sigh. “Hearin’ that makes a common man plumb discouraged——”

“Shut up! God damn it! Can’t you let a man think?”

“Every word but the word ‘fie’—an’ nary one of ’em twict,” mumbled Shaffer reverently as the hand of the engineer descended on his shoulder and shook him roughly.

“Shut up that damned gibberish and listen to me! You’ve got to beat Murchie to Edmonton! Take Amos—he’s the best of the guides—and hit out. Offer him anything he wants—twenty dollars a day—twenty-five—to forget his damned tea drinking till he gets to Athabasca Landing. If Murchie’s alone you can beat him out. Two men are better than one in a canoe—especially upstream.” Townsend paused and scribbled for several minutes upon a paper, which he handed to the mechanic, together with the government grant to Colin Murchie, and the contract of sale signed by Angus. “Take these papers to Mr Dalton himself and tell him to get busy and secure options on at least fifty thousand acres of that land. I’ll follow as rapidly as possible after stopping at the mission and picking up the McPherson tract. Get going now.”

“That’s a good propersition fer Amos,” said Shaffer, “but how about me? I’ve got to go jest as fast as he does, an’ I like my tea too.”

“There’ll be five hundred dollars in it for you—if we get that option.”

“Put it on paper, boss, an’ I’m on my way.”

“What—don’t you trust me?”

“Oh sure, I trust you, all right. But jest in case you might fergit.”

Townsend scribbled a memo of the offer, and the other pocketed it. “So long, boss,” he said. “I’ll be seein’ you in Edmonton!”

“Mind you don’t fall down on this assignment!” called Townsend as the mechanic hastened toward the bank where the guides were waiting. “If Murchie should beat you to Edmonton we can both kiss our jobs good-by!”

The memorandum of agreement signed, Angus Murchie turned out the light, followed Townsend to the door of the trading room and watched him in somber silence as the engineer and his mechanic made their way to the tent at the edge of the clearing. His clean-cut lips twisted into a sardonic

grin. "Big business," he muttered under his breath, his voice vibrating with an abysmal contempt. "Lies, lies, lies! Said he was offering all the property was worth; then when I demanded fifty thousand dollars additional he paid it—with a mighty protest, but without batting an eye. It seems that I am beginning to get a smattering of big business."

Minutes passed as he stood there watching the grotesque shadows on the lighted walls of the tent, as the men moved about within. Then the tent went black. Angus made up a light pack, stepped from the building, locking the door behind him, and, hastening to the river, lifted his canoe into the water and slipped swiftly downstream in the moonlight.

Late in the evening of the second day thereafter he ascended the steep slope from the mission landing to see Jean McPherson standing in a little clump of white birches, her eyes on the blood-red sunset. She did not see him, and for some moments he stood there drinking in each detail of her profile as she stood, one hand resting lightly against the trunk of a tree. She seemed even more beautiful this evening than upon the other two occasions he had seen her. "Beautiful," whispered an inner mocking voice, "—and white." Then the words of the woman in the hotel flashed into his brain: "He's nothing but a half-breed."

He had stepped close before she saw him. Their eyes met, and Angus noted that the blue eyes narrowed perceptibly and that the red lips did not smile. He spoke abruptly, in the flat voice of an Indian.

"That land on the Ptarmigan—you still own it?"

"Yes," the girl replied, her lips tightening.

"There will be a man to buy it. As I warned you, do not sell cheap."

The gruff, peremptory tone—almost a command—angered the girl. "And," she retorted, "as I told you, when I want advice I'll seek it from Father Giroux."

For a moment Angus hesitated as though about to speak further. But only for a moment, then with a shrug he turned abruptly, strode to the landing, pushed his canoe into the water and headed back down-river. From her position in the birch grove the girl watched the canoe until it became but a speck in the distance. Then she turned and walked slowly toward the dormitory.

The following morning, from the shelter of a clump of scrub spruce on the riverbank, Angus watched a canoe pass him, headed up-river, its occupants paddling furiously. He recognized Shaffer and the guide, Amos. A few hours later another canoe passed, the guide working laboriously to force

the craft against the current, while Townsend, in the bow, lolled back against the duffel.

A month later he looked up from his account books to see Father Giroux standing in the doorway of the trading room. The old priest smiled at the hearty welcome of the younger man.

"I have come," he said, "to pay you some money. And also to view, for perhaps the last time, one of the beauty spots of the Northland. Corporal Downey stopped at the mission a few days ago, and he told me that already several scows loaded with material and machinery have reached Fort McMurray."

The younger man's glance strayed to the canyon with its floor of roaring white water above which the rainbow mist rose to disappear into thin air. "Yes," he said somberly, "they will be spoiling it all. I am almost sorry I sold."

"You will be leaving here when the work begins?"

"Yes!" The word was savage in its abruptness. "I shall never live here after they begin work. Later I shall return and put in a pulpwood plant. I retained my father's holdings below the ridge, and also I hold options on many acres besides. But I'll never live here again."

"Where will you go, my son?"

"Back from the river—maybe to the Burntwood, possibly to the country of the Yellowknives, and establish a new post. I promised my father that I would keep the flag of MURCHIE flying."

"These other acres upon which you say you hold options—are they above the ridge or below?"

"Below the ridge. My options cover practically the entire valley for several miles down the river."

The brow of the old priest puckered into a frown of perplexity. "But, my son, why did you not take out these options on the land above the ridge rather than below? Did it not occur to you that when this dam is completed the company will have to pay for the land it has flooded?"

Angus smiled. "Yes, I thought of that. But I also thought of the profit to be made in pulpwood. David Gaunt gave me some idea of what I could expect; and I will make even more than his estimate, because without spending a large sum in the building of a power plant I will have cheap power delivered to my mill. I took care to have a clause to that effect introduced into my contract of sale."

"You came to a satisfactory agreement with the man Townsend?"

“Yes, I expect that it will prove very satisfactory to me.”

“Jean also concluded a satisfactory transaction with him. Here is the money she asked me to hand you—a thousand dollars, together with a year’s interest, at twelve per cent, making eleven hundred and twenty dollars in all.”

Angus thrust the bills into the safe without counting them. “She made a good deal with him then?”

“Very good, we thought, under the circumstances. Townsend pointed out that it is nothing less than a miracle that the land was worth anything at all. He was very generous, paying her, in behalf of his company, one half of the money her father paid for the land. It was a godsend for Jean. She has four hundred and eighty dollars left after repaying this loan. And Townsend was very prompt in the matter. He had the cash sent down from the Tar Sands the day after he departed from the mission.”

“Did not Townsend’s generosity include the payment of interest for the time this money of McPherson’s was tied up?” Angus asked.

“No. There was no mention of interest. Jean was so glad to get the money, so she could repay this loan, that she accepted his offer almost before the words were out of his mouth. When one considers that, had Townsend bargained sharply with her, he could have acquired the land for the amount of her debt to you, one has a kindlier feeling toward the methods of big business.”

A peculiar smile twisted the lips of the younger man. “Stop here with me for a few days, Father,” he invited. “I am expecting Townsend any day now, with the money he is to pay me. I am thinking that you will have even a kindlier feeling for that man—if not exactly for the methods of big business. He will be paying Jean McPherson some more money.”

“More money! Do you mean, my son, that he paid you interest on the money Colin put into the land?”

“Yes, he paid interest.”

“But,” said the priest ruefully, “I fear he will not consent to pay Jean any interest. You see, that transaction is closed. He has the deed to the property, and she has accepted the money in payment. I am sorry I know so little of business methods. The matter of back interest did not occur to me, or I should have mentioned it. However, a bargain is a bargain—even though it is not as generous as we thought.”

“Oh, he will be generous, Father,” said Angus, a flinty note in his voice. “Somehow I feel that he is going to be very generous in the matter of his deal with Jean.”

The good priest looked puzzled. “I remember you did not like him at first, my son. And I must admit that my own first impression of him was unfavorable. I recollect that you were under the impression that he was money mad, and after talking with him on the occasion of his first visit to the mission I was inclined to agree with you.”

“So I was! So I was!” smiled Angus. “It is true, I did not like him—at first. But come, let us forget him for the moment. Look—see that big one jumping, just at the foot of the rapid! We will rig the fly rod and take turns casting for him!”

XXVII

Townsend Unburdens Himself

THE following afternoon Townsend came, accompanied by a survey party that was the vanguard of the small army of workmen that was following more slowly on the scows loaded with construction material and machinery. He stepped into the trading room, closely followed by Shaffer, who carried a black leather bag, to find Angus and Father Giroux engrossed in a game of cribbage. Nodding curtly to the priest, Townsend took the bag from the mechanic, set it upon the counter and, unlocking it with a key he took from his pocket, withdrew several documents. Advancing to the table, he laid the papers before Angus.

“If you are not too busy,” he said, a note of sarcasm in his voice, “will you give this deed and contract of sale your attention? I want to conclude the business as quickly as possible, so my men can get to work on the elevations.”

Angus glanced up after carefully pegging his hand. “The papers can wait until we finish our game,” he said, picking up the cards and dealing them. “A few more hands will settle it. With a little luck I should win.”

Townsend flushed angrily. “But I’m in a hurry!” he growled.

Angus scanned his cards, tossed two into the crib and, as the priest cut the deck, turned the top card. “The graveyards are full of people who were in a hurry,” he said. “They realized their folly too late.”

“What’s a damned game of cards, to be holding up business?”

Angus smiled. “What is business, to be interrupting a game of cards? I believe the answer to either question lies in perspective. What do you think?”

“What do I think?” cried the exasperated engineer. “I think you’re a ——” He paused abruptly and continued with a shrug of resignation. “Go on, finish your game. Get it over with.”

A few minutes later Angus pegged the final hand, shoved the cards and the board aside and picked up the papers. Very carefully he scrutinized them, reading every word, as Townsend waited impatiently. Then, carrying them to the desk, he signed them and handed them to Townsend, who drew two thick

packets of bills from the bag and placed them on the counter. Removing the bands from the packets, Angus counted the money.

“Right?” asked Townsend.

Angus nodded, and smiled as he glanced toward Father Giroux, whose eyes were wide with surprise at sight of so large a sum. “Right, to the penny,” he answered. “Fifty-seven thousand and forty dollars. You have the deed. The property is yours. The money is mine.” He turned toward the priest, his smile widening. “Not so bad, is it, Father, for a hundred acres of rock ridge?”

“But I do not understand,” said the priest as his eyes shifted from the pile of bills on the counter to Townsend’s face. “If you could pay Angus such a sum for one hundred acres, surely you could have paid Jean McPherson more for her sixty-four hundred acres!”

Angus laughed shortly. “I am afraid Jean McPherson knows but little of big business,” he said. “Twice I warned her not to sell cheaply. It seems she disregarded my advice. But it is possible that, even yet, Mr Braddock will _____”

“Townsend, damn it—Bradford Townsend!” snapped the engineer.

“Ah yes. Mr Townsend may, even yet, pay her some more money.” He paused, and his black eyes encountered the engineer’s sneering gaze. “You see, Jean McPherson is an orphan,” he explained, “and she used most of the money you paid her in liquidating a debt of her father’s.”

Townsend laughed nastily. “It’s immaterial to me what she did with her money. She was under no obligation to pay that debt!”

“She felt under a moral, or an ethical, obligation,” said Angus.

“What’s morals and ethics got to do with business?” sneered Townsend. “The only obligations business knows are legal obligations! It’s no fault of mine that she didn’t have sense enough to hang onto her money. I advised her to.” He paused, and his sneer became more pronounced as he continued, staring straight into Angus’ eyes. “And now that our deal is closed, I’m going to tell *you* something! I’ve been waiting for this moment with pleasant anticipation. In spite of your frequent protestations that you know nothing of big business you’ve had the idea in your head all the time that you’re a hell of a businessman. You haven’t fooled me—not for a minute—and I’ve played up to you. For instance, you thought it was a shrewd business move when you refrained from mentioning this property when you first found out I was looking for a power site. You figured that I would eventually hear of it and that you would be able to get a longer price if you didn’t appear anxious to sell.

“You thought it was shrewd business to make me pay interest on your father’s investment. And to shoulder the expense of moving the bodies of your parents to the cemetery. And to agree to furnish you power at a reasonable rate. And to retain that worthless pulpwood land below the ridge. And you thought it was a master stroke of big business to demand a bonus of fifty thousand dollars for closing the deal.”

He paused, and the black eyes smiled guilelessly into his own. “Well?” Angus asked. “Isn’t it good business for one to obtain all that he can get for the property he is selling? Isn’t it good business to force the buyer to pay full value for the property—after the purchaser had insisted, in apparent good faith, that his original offer was all the property was worth?”

“Yes,” agreed the engineer, “that would have been good business—damned good business. And you smugly imagine you have done just that. But you fell so far short of it that it’s funny! Why, you poor chump! This is the best natural power site I’ve ever seen in all my years of experience! It’s got everything an ideal power site should have. I doubt that there’s another like it in the dominion. Northern Utilities would have kicked me out so quick it would make my head swim if I’d passed this proposition up for ten times what I paid you! Big business—hell! It was like taking candy from a baby!”

“Do you mean,” cried Angus, his eyes widening, “that you would have paid me ten times the amount you did had I demanded it?”

“You bet I would! A site like this, situated as it is, would be a pickup at half a million!”

“Then you have deliberately lied to me all along—to me and to Jean McPherson?”

Townsend laughed. “Call it lying if you want to. I’m paid, among other things, to buy up property as cheaply as possible. ‘Lying’ is a crude word, and a harsh one. Why not call it business acumen. And, speaking of business acumen, here’s another one to chew on when you get to thinking you’re a big businessman: we’ve got to flood a hell of a lot more land with our reservoir than we bought of Jean McPherson—government land that we can pick up at a price not to exceed fifty cents an acre. If you had known the first thing about business you could have slipped down to Edmonton and got in touch with Ottawa and optioned that land for almost nothing; then you could have made us pay through the nose.”

“I thought of that, but it hardly seemed worth while,” Angus admitted.

The other sneered. “Oh, it didn’t seem worth while, eh? And I suppose it didn’t seem worth while to slip over to the mission and pick up that

McPherson tract? You could have held us up for fifty thousand for that.”

“You mean that property you bought of Jean for sixteen hundred dollars—you would have paid fifty thousand for that?”

“Sure we would. Twice that if we had to! Hell, we’ve got to flood it, haven’t we? I don’t mind telling you that when I woke up the morning after we’d agreed on the terms, and found you missing, I figured you had done just those two things. You had a good start on us. You sure had me scared for a while—until I found out you’d overlooked both bets. You weren’t as smart, even, as I gave you credit for being. Now we have the government options and the McPherson tract and our power site all in the bag. Take the advice of a man who really knows big business, Murchie, and stick to your furs and the trading of tea and sugar and blankets. Don’t monkey with big business. It will smash you like swatting a fly! You’re lucky to have what you’ve got. Better go bury it under a rock!”

Angus nodded thoughtfully. “I suppose you’re right,” he admitted ruefully. “I know even less of big business than I thought I knew.”

The man grinned. “Remember what you told me, back there on the island at the Grand Rapids, after I’d lost the launch that day? You said maybe the price I paid for not knowing as much as I thought I knew might not be overly high, considering the fact that many men lost their lives for thinking they knew more than they knew. Well, I’m willing to admit the truth of the words. Maybe the price you’ve paid isn’t overly high, either—but it’s a damn sight higher than the one I paid!”

Again Angus nodded. “At least I have learned that big business is a game that knows neither honor nor ethics. It may be I have learned this too late.”

“What do you mean—it may be?” scoffed the other. “You know damned well it’s too late! The deal is closed. The papers are signed, sealed and delivered, as our legal brethren would say. And believe me, they’re iron clad!”

“There still remain the stipulations as to the removal of the bodies of my parents and the furnishing me with power,” Angus reminded him.

“And,” retorted Townsend, “you may rest assured that both agreements will be carried out to the letter. Don’t imagine that we’re fools enough to jeopardize our investment here by nonfulfillment of contract—especially as complete fulfillment involves only a few dollars. There are two caskets on the scows, and you may be assured they are not cheap ones. Also we are bringing with us an undertaker, and I am authorized to hire Father Giroux to

officiate at the burial, so there can be no quibbling over the word 'reverently.' ”

“I shall make no charge for the service,” said the priest.

Townsend shrugged. “Suit yourself about that. But there will be plenty of witnesses as to the reverence of the proceedings. And,” he added, turning to Angus, “in the matter of what little light and power you’ll ever use—we would have been glad to furnish that for nothing if you had insisted. Well, I’ll be running along now. Got to get that survey party strung out.”

When the man had gone Father Giroux filled and lighted his long-stemmed pipe and puffed for several minutes in silence. “It is too bad, my son,” he said at length. “I am sorry you have been cheated—and even more sorry for Jean. I know now that our first estimate of the man was the right one. After having listened to him today I am very glad that my life has been cast among the people of the outlands.”

“Maybe he will do the right thing by us yet,” answered Angus absently.

“No, no, my son,” answered the priest. “It is as he said—the deals are closed. His company has the properties. And a man of his type would make no effort to right a wrong if he could.”

“Even yet I am hoping to persuade Townsend that he should pay at least the amount of his own valuation of the property. You will remember he said it was worth ten times what he paid for it. I am hoping that the deal may be reconsidered. If it should be, he must pay the full amount. That would be only justice. I have not lied to him, and he has told me many lies—and Jean too. I would feel justified, under the circumstances, in forcing him to pay the full amount of his own estimate—to me and to Jean McPherson.”

A puzzled frown wrinkled the brow of the old priest as he slowly nodded. “Most certainly, my son. No man is bound to submit to being swindled. But do not raise your hopes. That man is as shrewd as he is unscrupulous. He will fulfill, as he said, all stipulations of the contract to the very letter.”

“I was thinking that he himself may offer to reopen the deal,” said Angus diffidently. “I must go now and prepare our supper. I will call you when it is ready. You will remain with me here until the scows come with the caskets. Then we will both accompany the bodies to the mission.”

“Yes, my son, I will remain,” answered the good father, and when the door to the kitchen closed behind Angus he laid his pipe aside and spread the cards for solitaire. “Poor lad,” he muttered to himself, “the loss of so much money has dulled his wits—else he would perceive that the man Townsend has no more heart in him than a stone. Ah well . . .”

XXVIII

Angus Plays an Ace in the Hole

FIVE days later the first of the light scows that had been built for track-lining up the Ptarmigan arrived at Murchie's post. From this scow two caskets were removed and carried into the storeroom. Townsend appeared, and arrangements were made for the removal of the bodies the following day.

"The finest I have seen," said Father Giroux, examining the two metal caskets with interest.

"You bet they are," Townsend agreed. "When we do a thing we do it right. That's business."

The mechanic, Shaffer, stepped into the room and handed Townsend a field report, which the engineer studied for several moments and then turned abruptly to Angus, who stood, his eyes on the gray metal boxes.

"Look here, what's this?" he demanded, a note of truculence in his tone. "There appears to be a sixty-foot breech in the ridge a mile east of here."

Angus glanced at the paper with its neatly penciled figures and accurately drawn sketch. "Yes," he replied, "it would be about sixty feet wide, I should judge. I never measured it."

"But," exclaimed Townsend, "it will have to be dammed! According to these levels, when we get a five-foot head here, the water will begin to spill out through that sluice!"

Angus nodded indifferently. "That's so—I believe it will."

"But you didn't mention any such breech in this dike."

"No, I assumed that you or your men would find it eventually."

"You told me the ridge ran clear across this valley, from rim to rim!"

"It does. A ridge is none the less a ridge because it has a crack in it."

Townsend scowled. "How many more of these so-called 'cracks' are there?"

"That is the only one. No water flows through it, except in the spring when the break-up comes suddenly or when there has been much rain."

"Damn it!" grumbled the engineer. "This is going to run the cost way above my estimate—and hold us up on time besides!"

Angus smiled. "And maybe this board of directors you spoke of will wonder how you came to overlook so obvious a defect as a sixty-foot breach in your dike."

Color mounted to the engineer's face at the jibe. "I'll have to build a road in there and send for horses or trucks to get the material in."

"Why not build your dam here first? Then you can float your material to the breach on scows as soon as the water rises to that level."

Townsend's flush deepened, and he glared at the paper in his hand. "Might work," he grunted grudgingly. Behind his back Shaffer, the mechanic, emitted what sounded suspiciously like a titter turned adroitly into a cough. The sound angered Townsend, who regarded Angus with curled lip. "Pretty smart, aren't you?" he taunted. "But not quite smart enough. If you'd been just a little bit smarter you'd have grabbed off that breach in the ridge when you had the chance. Then you'd have had us—cold turkey. As it is, that gap is covered by our options."

"When were these options obtained?" asked Angus with a yawn.

"While I was in Edmonton—the last trip down. I sent Shaffer on ahead while I stopped at the mission to pick up the McPherson tract. He carried instructions to our legal department to cover everything in this section of the valley with an option, except, of course, the property that you and Miss McPherson already owned. They acted promptly, and the papers were in Edmonton before I left. I brought them with me, just in case there'd be any question."

"That was thoughtful," Angus approved. "Have you examined them?"

"No. Why should I examine them? We've got a high-priced legal department to look after that end of the business. I'm an engineer."

"Oh."

The single syllable sounded indescribably insulting, and Townsend flared up angrily. "Look here, what the devil are you driving at, anyhow?"

Angus shrugged. "Nothing—except that you mentioned that the gap was covered by your options, and I was wondering how the government could grant an option on property that had already passed from its possession."

"What do you mean?" asked Townsend sharply, the color receding from his face as his eyes met the inscrutable eyes of the half-breed.

"Only that I was the owner of that block of land, a small matter of one hundred acres that takes in the gap, at the time your options were granted. You just told me that it would have been a smart move for me to have grabbed off that breach in the ridge when I had the chance. I agree with you.

You are a man of big business. Also you are an engineer. You should know. In fact that is just what I did——”

“You lie!” shouted Townsend, the color flooding his face almost to purple.

Angus smiled. “That would be rather a foolish lie, wouldn’t it?”

“But why should you have bought that gap? When could you have done it? You had no inkling of the value of this property until after you had talked with me! And you have not been out of this country since!”

“It is true enough,” replied Angus, “that I did not realize the value of the property until I had talked with you. But that was back on Grand Island—at the time your knowledge of the river prompted you to attempt to run the Grand Rapids in your pretty white boat. You will doubtless recollect that you told me at that time you were seeking a power site, and when I pointed out that there was an enormous amount of potential power going to waste at the Grand Rapids you explained that you were seeking a site on a smaller river not too far from the Tar Sands holdings. It was then that I realized that the best possible site lay right here at my own door. I knew that you would eventually hear of it—and buy it. And I knew that it would be worthless if you did not also buy this other gap. You will recollect that I left the scows at the Grand Rapids and returned to Edmonton. You yourself pointed out the wonders of the telegraph. Again I admit that you are right. I telegraphed to Ottawa and bought that gap, figuring it was only good business. Am I right?” he asked after a short pause.

Fairly choking with anger, Townsend whirled upon Shaffer. “Go to my tent and bring me that tin dispatch box!” he ordered, and as the man left the room he turned again to Angus. “You never mentioned this other holding,” he snarled.

The younger man smiled into the irate eyes. “Why should I? I believed that the matter would be brought to your attention. And besides, I was under no obligation to list my property with you. I have other property also—options on thousands of acres of spruce, my trade goods here, a rifle or two, some traps and canoes——”

He was interrupted by the arrival of the mechanic with the tin box, which he placed on the counter. Unlocking it, Townsend snatched up some papers and, carrying them to the light, scrutinized them intently. Father Giroux noted that the man’s fingers trembled so that the papers rustled softly in the stillness of the room. The eyes of Angus Murchie strayed to the two gray caskets.

After what seemed a long time the engineer turned to Angus. "You win," he said, his voice sounding dry and hard as it issued from between set lips. "What's the answer?"

"The answer?" asked Angus, raising his eyes from the caskets.

"Yes. Why did you withhold this property? You could have forced me to buy it too."

"I'll tell you why, Townsend. In the first place I will tell you that when we first started to deal, that evening, here in this room, I had no intention of withholding it. Had you dealt fairly, had you not lied, that small piece of property would have gone with the rest. As I have told you, I know nothing of big business. That is not a pose. It is the truth—as you yourself have several times pointed out. But I have played much poker. I have studied the faces of men across tables—men whose faces are schooled to conceal, rather than to reveal, what is passing in their minds. It seemed to me that your face, too, was like that.

"So when you made me your first offer I brought up the matter of interest—as one might boost the ante in a pot. When you saw that boost I realized that the real play was ahead of me, so I made other small raises, trying to feel you out. When you met all these raises you had me in the dark. I realized that I was at a decided disadvantage, in that you, being a man of big business, knew the real worth of the property, and I, knowing nothing of big business, had no idea of its worth. So I decided upon a bluff. Fifty thousand dollars seemed like a vast fortune to me, so I raised the pot fifty thousand, knowing that if my figure was out of reason it could be readily scaled down. I hoped that you would agree to ten thousand.

"You blustered and raved, but somehow this blustering and raving was not quite convincing. It lacked—shall we say?—sincerity. So I pretended to assume that the deal was off, and by way of forcing your hand I mentioned that tomorrow the bonus would be one hundred thousand instead of fifty.

"When you saw my raise I knew that you, too, had been playing poker and that my attempted bluff was in reality no bluff at all, but a bet upon the winning hand, and also I realized that you would have called for more than the fifty thousand—more, maybe, than the hundred thousand I had mentioned. Then I knew that the game had only just begun.

"I knew, of course, that you had despised me from the start. You had shown that in many ways. So I set about to foster that feeling, believing that when the proper time came, when you thought you had me right where you wanted me, when I was beyond any hope of fighting back, you would then boast of your own business acumen, as you call it, and, in gloating over my

lack of such acumen, would show me what a fool I had been and tell me how far I had fallen short of making a shrewd bargain. In that way only could I learn the real value of my property—you yourself must tell me.

“As we have seen, I was right—you did just that. Having, as I said, played much poker, I realized the value of an ace in the hole. So when we concluded our business I clung to my ace in the hole—I did not expose my whole hand. And after I learned the price you paid Jean McPherson for her property I was doubly glad I had my ace in the hole.

“There are certain ethics among gamblers, Townsend, that it seems do not obtain in big business. I have known many gamblers, yet I have never known one to rob an orphan!” The utter contempt of the younger man’s tone was not lost upon the engineer, who had listened with tight-pressed lips, his eyes on the unfathomable black eyes of the speaker.

Tiny beads of sweat broke out on his brow, and he moistened his lips with his tongue. “Listen, Murchie,” he said in a voice that was hardly more than a croak. “That was no robbery. It was business. I am paid——”

“Paid,” interrupted Angus with fine scorn, “to do the dirty work for your masters! The fact that the innocent and the weak and the helpless suffer for your acts is of no moment whatever to you—or to them. That, as you say, is business!”

Townsend’s eyes narrowed at the contempt expressed in the words, and his shoulders stiffened. “We’ll never see alike, Murchie,” he retorted with something of his accustomed arrogance. “What’s the answer? How much are you going to stick us for?”

“I do not choose to stick you—in the sense of charging you an exorbitant price. I want only what the property is worth, and I am willing to accept your own valuation. You said, I believe, that the property would be a pickup at half a million.”

“But, good God, man, the half million I mentioned would include the whole layout—the money paid for the McPherson tract, and for your property, and the government land we’re going to flood!”

Angus nodded. “I understand. I will be liberal. I will allow you to obtain the property at a half million—so that you may still boast to your directors that you secured it at a pickup. That will undoubtedly please them immensely. We will deduct the fifty-seven thousand and forty dollars you paid me, and the sixteen hundred you paid Jean McPherson, and the thirty thousand that you will have to pay the government when you take up the options on the flooded sixty thousand acres. That will add up to eighty-eight thousand six hundred and forty dollars, if I have figured rightly, and will

leave four hundred and eleven thousand three hundred and sixty dollars as the balance due. This sum is to be divided equally between Jean McPherson and me. I am adding nothing, you will note, for the small tract that includes the gap through the ridge. When the money is paid over I shall deed that property to your company. It has served its purpose. I am donating my ace in the hole.”

“We’ll pay,” said Townsend dully. “We’ve got to. We’re in too deep to back out. It’ll mean another trip to Edmonton. You’ve got us right where you want us. Does that mean that all work must stop here until the money is turned over?”

“No,” Angus replied, “the work may go on. I will accompany you to Edmonton for the money. The reason I refused to allow the survey party to proceed before you paid over the fifty-seven thousand was because I feared your surveyors would take a peek at my ace in the hole, and then I would have been forced to name my price for it without knowing its real worth.”

“Dumb—like a fox, ain’t he, boss?” grinned the mechanic impudently as he followed Townsend from the building. “I told you you better hadn’t do no tellin’ till you had him where he didn’t have no comeback.”

XXIX

A Promise

FIVE days later Angus turned from the newly made graves in the little cemetery at the mission and, joined by Father Giroux, walked slowly across the playground toward the landing where the canoe waited that was to carry him and Townsend to Edmonton. He turned at the brink of the bank and glanced back to see Jean McPherson and Sister Agatha still standing beside the graves. The girl had stood throughout the service, a sadness upon her face that Angus thought seemed to enhance her beauty. Then the dark cloud had risen in his brain, blotting out all beauty.

The good priest held out his hand, and Angus noted a certain sternness to the set of his fine lips that belied the twinkle that lurked in the bright old eyes. "Good-by, and a bon voyage. Poker is a game one cannot condone. My son, I am very proud of you."

Angus smiled. "Thank you, Father," he said. "But, even so, you must admit that it is far more ethical than big business."

"At least as some men play it," answered the priest. "And, speaking of business, there is one request that I would make."

"Name it, Father—it is already granted."

"It is that you will give me your promise to return here and personally deliver to Jean McPherson her share of that money."

For a long moment the younger man stood silent. His lips tightened as the words of the woman in the hotel flashed through his brain: "He's nothing but a half-breed," and he turned abruptly away. "All right," he said shortly. "It is a request that was granted before it was made." Then he hastened down the slope and took his place in the canoe.

Early frosts had already yellowed the leaves of the birches and aspens and willows as Angus Murchie again ascended the bank at the mission of Father Giroux. As he walked slowly across the playground in the direction of the priest's cottage he glanced toward the cemetery and caught sight of a solitary figure standing silently beside the two newly made graves.

His lips tightened, and, changing his course, he walked rapidly toward the figure whose back was toward him. He would fulfill his promise to

Father Giroux here and now and get it over with! A clump of spruce shut out the figure as he skirted the edge of the clearing, and he stepped from behind it to find himself face to face with Jean McPherson, who was just rising to her feet after placing a wreath of fresh flowers upon one of the graves. Angus glanced down at the grave with its wreath of brilliant blue flowers—the grave of his Indian mother.

Then he raised his eyes and encountered the blue eyes of the girl who stood just beyond the ugly unsodded mound to which her wreath had added a touch of beauty. And as his eyes drank in each feature of the lovely face he waited for the black cloud to arise in his brain—but the cloud did not come, nor did the words of the woman in the hotel recur to his mind. There was only the girl—the ravishing beauty of her—and the beauty of the wreath at his feet.

“Jean,” he said, hardly realizing that he had spoken, “Jean McPherson.”

At the sound of his voice the deep blue eyes widened, and the red lips parted in surprise. Then the lips moved: “Your—voice,” she breathed. Then after a moment of silence: “Oh, Angus, Father Giroux told me all about it—how you made that horrible man pay—how you beat him at his own game!”

“I did not beat him,” the man replied, “I only exacted payment at his own valuation. All I sought was—justice.”

The girl’s heartbeats quickened at the rich, resonant quality of his voice. Could this be the same voice, she found herself wondering, that, since her return to the country, she had heard only as the flat guttural of an Indian? Aloud she said: “But why did you insist that all the money be divided between us? Surely——”

“It is as I wish it to be,” he interrupted her, “and as I know that my father would have wished it to be. He and your father bought equal tracts, for which they paid equal amounts. I believe that they intended to share in the profits as partners—till that foolish quarrel arose that estranged them. I have placed your share of the money, subject to your order, in the bank in Edmonton. And that, too, is justice.”

“And now that you have all that money, what are you going to do?”

Angus noted a certain eagerness in her voice that he strove to account for. “I am going into the back country to find a location for a new post. I promised my father that I would keep the flag of MURCHIE flying over the post that has stood for many years for fair dealing. Later, after the power plant is finished, I shall also engage in the pulpwood business.” He paused for several moments, his eyes on the mound at his feet. “And you?” he found himself asking. “I suppose that you will now return to the provinces.”

He looked up quickly, surprised at the vehemence of her reply. "I hate the provinces! I never want to see them again nor anything that they stand for! I was born here in the outlands, and it was here I grew up—until my father sent me away to school—and it is here I want to live—always!"

The man felt his heart thumping wildly against his ribs. "Do you mean," he said, striving to steady his voice, "that automobiles and fine hotels and all the thousand and one comforts and advantages of civilization mean nothing to you?"

"They mean," replied the girl, "glitter and greed and mockery—everything that is intolerable."

Angus stepped swiftly around the grave and, placing himself directly before her, looked deep into the blue eyes. "I am a half-breed," he said fiercely, almost viciously. "Does *that* mean anything to you?"

"Yes," she answered, meeting his gaze without flinching, "it means much. It means that you must strive always to make yourself worthy of your ancestors. My father has told me of the really great chiefs who were the people of your mother. They are all dead now—and your mother, also, is dead. You must be an honor to their memory." The last words were muffled in the breast of his flannel shirt as he held her fiercely against his breast. Slowly she raised her head, and their lips met as her arms stole upward about his neck.

"Together," she whispered, "at the new post, we will keep the flag of MURCHIE flying."

"Yes, Jean," he answered, "and someday we will bring out the new flag and raise it to the top of the pole."

"New flag? What new flag is that?"

The man smiled. "I will show it to you some day," he replied. "And the day it is raised we will both be very proud."

"Oh, Angus," she said a few minutes later. "We are going to be very happy here in our North. Come, we must go and tell Father Giroux."

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Blood of the North* by James Beardsley Hendryx]