THE MAN AT LONE LAKE

VIRNA · SHEARD

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THE MAN AT LONE LAKE

BY

VIRNA SHEARD

Author of "Trevelyan's Little Daughter," "The Maid of Many Moods," etc.

WITH FOUR FULL-PAGE ILLUSTRATIONS BY WARWICK REYNOLDS

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3. " 'I wait. I wait long. Now I will be still no more. Always, from de first day you come, I love you' "

4. "The room was blue with smoke, but the factor saw one man standing stiffly by the fireplace, his revolver still in his hand"

The Man at Lone Lake

CHAPTER I

AT THE SHACK

The winters are long at Lone Lake. This thought struck Dick Wynn suddenly, as he stood at the door of his shack whistling and ramming the tobacco into his pipe. He wondered what had so inconsequently made him think of the winter, on a day of such balmy warmth; then remembered that a yellow leaf from the silver birch overhead had just fluttered down, butterfly fashion, and brushed his hand.

Lately he had not kept track of time further than to notch a stick each morning, after the admirable method of Robinson Crusoe. The stick hung invitingly by his so-called desk; the knife was close at hand, and he had ever been prone to form habits. But he had not counted the notches for many days, for he had been working, and to work with him was to be oblivious to the passing of hours. When he worked, he worked; and when he loafed he did it quite as thoroughly.

It might be, he considered reflectively, about the twentieth of September. A flock of sheldrakes had gone by at dusk the night before, heading due south; and about a week earlier he had run across François, the half-breed partner of his nearest neighbour, sitting at the edge of the lake making a stretching-ring.

Stepping inside, Wynn picked up his time-stick, and counted the notches up from a date he had marked.

It was October—October 1st! The soft whistling stopped abruptly. The warm season had fooled him. Well enough he knew that with a quick, sharp frost winter sometimes came almost in a night, here in the uncertain north at the beginning of the foot-hills. There might be later that season of the gods, "Indian Summer." The red men of the reservation counted on it to a certainty, their ancient prophecy being "First a little winter—then a little summer"; but no white trapper he had ever met pinned his whole faith to those glorious promised weeks.

“October,” Wynn said half aloud. “Afterwards—no birds—no flowers—no honey-bees—November.” He stared at the notched stick, and drummed lightly on it with his fingers.

A chipmunk that had been asleep in the roomy pocket of his corduroy shooting coat pushed out its small head inquiringly, and then, by a movement too quick to follow, reached his shoulder, where it sat up and chattered cheerfully.

The man gave it no attention, but took up the pipe he had laid down, and went on with the ramming process.

“November,” he said again, “with the water-fowl gone, and the white frost and the bare trees, and François setting his villainous little deadfalls hereabouts; the howling of the coyotes, and the long nights—the eternally long nights.”

He went to the door of his shack again, and the chipmunk, still on his shoulder, started to open a nut it had stealthily extracted from some hidden place, vigorously throwing the bits of shell far and wide. One piece struck Wynn on the cheek.

“Go slow, old chap!” he said. “Go slow. Don’t waste your vitality. You might need it before the white months are over.”

The chipmunk chattered back saucily, a knowing look on its furry face, its head tilted sideways.

“You won’t, eh? What makes you think so? Many a little beggar like you has got his lively hind leg caught in a weasel-trap, or been taken captive by one of those fat, comfortable-looking gentlemen of the owl family, and it needs quite a bit of energy to get even a clever chipmunk out of such a scrape; even then he doesn’t come out all in one piece, my friend. Sure thing. See? You don’t see? You still think it wise to put all that vim into shelling a nut? You won’t let me lead you gently up to the old, old Eastern practice of repose, the ancient habit of relaxation, the cultivation of the lotus-lily quiet? Here, where the balsam grows and the spruce trees have taken up their abode, you should be able to ‘get into the silence,’ as those pleasant people, the Christian Scientists, say. ‘The scented silence of dreams.’ Why, even I can get there sometimes now, and without help—without help, mind you—when I try hard enough. It simply means shutting off the past, slipping out of the present, and projecting one’s soul (projecting one’s soul is easier than it sounds, old chap) into the unsubstantial future, or the equally unsubstantial extreme past in which one has had no part.”

The chipmunk suspended operations on the nut and chattered again. Wynn smiled up at him.

"What's on your mind?" he said whimsically. "I know you won't rest till I find out. Wait a second and I'll get your meaning. Ah! I have it! You want to tell me it does not matter a whiff if you do expend some extra energy, for you sleep most of the winter. You think I'm a mind reader? Well, go on thinking so, small one. It's a rattling good idea to hibernate. Would that my prehistoric ancestor, the one who 'sat on the ancestral tree from which we sprang' (I'm glad we sprang, as Oliver Herford has it)—would that he had imitated the bears and field-mice and slept o' winters! Sleep is good, Silvertail. I wouldn't mind coming out when the spring wind blows, scraggy and shaky on my legs as a March bear, if I could only get rid of a few desolate months by sleep.

"How do you manage it, you and the bears, and those little queer people, the field-mice? Who taught you how? What fairy charm do you hold? Or what kind of a blessed lullaby do you sing to yourselves?

" 'It's the wind through the pines,' you say. No good—I've tried it."

The chipmunk's chattering had ceased, and it had curled itself up on the man's shoulder—a good shoulder, broad and square. It wound its silvery tail around its body and closed its eyes.

Wynn stood quite still at the shack door, and, save for the blue smoke curling steadily up from his pipe, might have seemed asleep himself. His face was turned towards the lake. Through the trees he could see a glimmer of the "deep, divine, dark day-shine" of the water.

When the pipe was finished he lifted the chipmunk gently down and into his pocket. He would smoke another pipe, he thought, and then get to work. Going across to a box resting on a rough-hewn shelf, he raised the lid and looked in. It was empty. He glanced at three unopened tins standing by the box.

"Great Scott!" he exclaimed. "I have smoked a lot lately! But there must be a bag of fine-cut there somewhere." Lifting the box, he peered behind it, then moved the tins. In doing so he touched a small, compact, black leather case—a physician's case. He drew back his hand as though it had been stung. Slowly, he stepped back from the shelf, his eyes fixed on the little case. A slight trembling ran through his limbs, his face suddenly showed blanched and sharply drawn against the dim light of the room. Groping with one hand, he caught a chair-back, and seemed to steady himself by it. The

chair was a substantial homemade thing, and bore the weight well. In a moment more he walked towards the shelf again, took the black case and laid it by itself, plainly in sight and away from the tobacco tins. This done, he picked up his pipe. The hand in which he held it shook a little, but the colour had come back to his face, and he went on talking in the same monotone.

"Yes, I must have smoked a lot lately. At this rate I'll run out of tobacco long before Christmas. 'Christmas,' " he repeated with a short laugh. "It's a lip-blistering sort of word up here. What was it we used to sing around the fire—the old carol? Oh, yes, 'God rest you, merry gentlemen, let nothing you dismay.' Well, we let nothing us dismay those days.

"I'll have to canoe down to the agency, or have my merry day without even a pipe for company. True, I can go over to the old man's shack and have him tell me the history of his life yet once again; or the old man may take a notion to tramp down to the Mission to see that granddaughter whose name so embellishes his conversations, or he may be going over his line, or he may be dead—although he looks good for thirty years.

"I'd best depend on the pipe. Yes, I'll canoe down. The ubiquitous and honourable the Hudson's Bay Company have my profound admiration and gratitude. A man can't get an impossible distance away from their posts, if he knows the map." Then he frowned. "I didn't mean to go near a reservation or agency till spring. So much for hide-bound resolution. Wynn, you smoke too much. It's ruination to nerves. Frays them at the edges. You are probably carrying round a beastly nicotine heart at this moment, and it will spring some sort of surprise on you in the night along about February, when the candles have given out. It will perhaps run down and then make up time on the long jump."

Silence followed this monologue, and the man drew himself up and shook back his head as though confused.

"I am getting into a confirmed habit of talking to myself!" he exclaimed sharply. "When I talk to the chipmunk it's only a threadbare excuse to hear a voice. This bone-penetrating silence is beginning to tell. Once I heard of an old woman who lived alone and talked to the clock; but according to the legend she had wheels, and they went round. Now I haven't got wheels—yet. Still, out here, where the back-to-nature folk assure us it requires genius to contract any bad habits, I have contracted two with pleasurable ease—I smoke criminally and babble idiotically."

He went to the door again and leaned against the frame, his figure blocking out the light from the shadowy room. Suddenly he stiffened to a listening attitude. The far-off dip of a paddle had come to him. Perhaps the old man desired a red trout for his supper. The ice-cold water of the little lake, into which emptied a glacier-fed stream, sheltered many trout and rock-bass, and mighty touladi as well.

No; there was no fishing being done. He heard the canoe scrape bottom; then knew it was being beached just beyond a patch of thorn and bramble. The grasses there were rough and dry, and crackled as they broke.

Presently came the "pad, pad" of moccasined feet through the crisp underbrush and past a place where wild raspberries grew. They climbed a slope, touched a carpet of spruce needles, and the sound was gone.

Wynn leaned forward.

"François!" he said. "Now he's following the old Indian trick of keeping behind the trees as he comes. Though why this secretiveness, Heaven knows. Hides by instinct, I suppose. I ought to be able to see him about now. Ah!"

CHAPTER II

FRANÇOIS THE HALF-BREED

A half-breed swung into view a short stone's throw from the shack. His head had for covering only his thick, shoulder-long hair; his lithe figure was clothed in a red, sleeveless jersey and buckskin trousers, squaw-made. He wore a belt, beautifully beaded in a pattern and colours that might have come from ancient Egypt, and as a concession to social custom there dangled from it a nickel-plated Waterbury watch, and a bunch of assorted keys fastened to a copper chain. Whence or why the keys, none might say.

The expression of his handsome Indian face, lighter in colour than many a Spaniard's, was sullen to the verge of unfriendliness.

"Ah, François!" said Wynn, nodding to him carelessly. "I heard you coming. You paddled across, did you not? It's surprising how far one can hear a paddle in this quiet."

The other frowned.

"I paddle ver' still," he returned. "You have the ears of a moose."

"Thanks," laughed the other. "Will you come in and smoke?"

The half-breed ignored the invitation.

"I come from the ol' man," he said. "I bring message. Else I would not have come, bagosh. Maybe you do not think so, eh?"

"Oh, yes, I think so, François," Wynn answered, a little smile lurking around his mouth. "I know how much you don't like me. Still, callers are rare hereabouts, and we might smoke the calumet and pass the time of day. The chap that called this lake 'Lone Lake' hit it off, and the other one who built this most desirable, though wretchedly out-of-date, shack in the wilderness must have wanted, like Dundreary's bird, to flock by himself."

A puzzled look came on the half-breed's face as he tried to follow the smooth voice.

"Dundreary's bird" was a new one to him. Still, by some process he understood.

"He flock as you flock," he said sneeringly.

“You are right,” returned the man. “And now, as you won’t smoke, and I don’t owe the pleasure of this visit to any desire on your part to see me—what’s the old man’s message?”

François leaned forward.

“Ol’ man sick,” he said; “ver’ sick. Dead on one side.”

Wynn gave a sharp exclamation.

“Him face twisted,” went on the Indian. “Two nights ago he fall, then was dumb. Now he speaks—some. He say for you to come.”

“I’ll go back with you at once—at once. It’s a stroke, from what you tell me, François. A stroke, you know.” There was a pause. “It’s not necessarily fatal—not certainly fatal, that is. Who’s with him?”

“My mother, Wanota.”

“So. That’s well—very well. But you must have left him alone to go down to the reservation? You should have let me know. I wonder he’d have a woman look after him even now.”

The half-breed grunted for answer, and strode towards the lake. Silently the men pushed the canoe out. Wynn took a second paddle, and the birch-bark boat slipped over the water, red with the sunset glow. The drops falling from the paddles glittered like rubies.

A bluebill rose from his feeding ground at the water’s edge as they passed, and they disturbed a king elk who was drinking. The trout rose, flashed a moment in silver and red semicircles, scattering the spray from their fins, and then fell lightly back into the cool, beloved depths.

A scent of balsam was in the air, and the strange perfume of the water that rises at sunset and that no man can name.

By and by the half-breed glanced over his shoulder.

“How long you stay round here?”

“Really, I hardly know,” said the other.

“You trap—this winter?” came the second question after a pause.

“No, thank God!” Wynn returned quickly. “Not this winter, or any winter. I didn’t last winter, as I fancy you know.”

Again the paddles dipped.

“You not too Christian to shoot,” remarked the half-breed through his teeth. The words hissed a little, Wynn thought.

“Oh, no, François, I’m not too Christian. I shoot now and then, as you observe. When I do I almost always kill what I aim at. It’s best, don’t you think,” went on the easy tones, “to shoot to kill, or to refrain from the pleasure of shooting? Even if one only goes gunning after such little cattle as the brown rabbits, it’s best to finish them outright—swiftly, you know—to snuff out their ego on the fly, so to speak; and not send them limping off into the brush, or gasping and choking into the long grass, where they will in all likelihood have several unpleasant hours before they give up the ghost.

“No, killing an animal does not worry me, but to hurt it would keep me awake at night. That’s where my conscience gets in its work, and that’s just the plain difference between your conscience and mine.”

“An’ the ol’ man’s,” said the Indian. “He trap.”

“Obviously,” answered Wynn. His mind was busy with the old man even while he talked to François. He seemed to see him laid low, the man he had come to look upon as the very embodiment of mature vitality, or hardy age, untouched by infirmity or weakness of any sort, and enriched by wisdom; as the type of the best that was to be got physically out of the simple life. In the eighteen months that he had lived here in the wild country he had seen much of David McCullough—“the ol’ man,” as François had called him. Possibly the name had been given by reason of McCullough’s hair, which was white—white as the winter pelage of the ptarmigan, the wild hare, or the weasel—for there was no other excuse for it. McCullough had been straight and strong, and could tire out any two half-breeds, with all their inherited and boasted endurance.

The old man’s comparative nearness had made life at Lone Lake a possible thing to Wynn. Many an hour had he spent in McCullough’s hospitable shack, and he had learned of his past and the things that had conspired to drive him out of the world of men into the silent places of the mysterious North land; learned much and given little. The old man said the North had always called him; and when he had become caught in a tangle of circumstances, too much knotted and twisted to unravel with even a lifelong patience, he had cut the tangle and left. He had had no one depending upon him but a son who was at college. The boy had no taste for the life of Northern Canada. Neither the golden Manitoba prairies, the plains and ranch lands of Saskatchewan, nor the timbered foot-hills of Alberta meant anything to him but the abomination of desolation. He would have none of

the Rockies, or the land beyond. So McCullough had left him. Later, the boy had taken to the stage as a profession, and had married a popular and pretty little actress.

The old man had pictures of both fastened up on his shack wall—pictures cut from old magazines, and faded photographs. They must have been a good-looking pair of young people. Wynn had often thought how charming and how incongruous to their surroundings the pictures were. In one, young McCullough was photographed as Romeo, his eager, love-impassioned face alight even yet on the discoloured paper; and the pretty little actress smiled down at them as Peg Woffington. Somehow, he was always glad for McCullough's sake that they had stuck to the legitimate and not side-stepped.

In all the pictures there was a touch of lightness and joy, as though life were good to them and full of flavour. It hadn't lasted so very long. Both had died of a contagious fever within a few days of each other, and they had left, as legacy to the old man, Nancy, their little daughter of twelve. He had gone after her to the distant city, and it had seemed to him, long used to the stillness of unpeopled places, like a hideous maelstrom of unblessed confusion. With swiftness and dispatch he had found his little granddaughter, and borne her back to the wide and quiet space that he desperately desired to regain.

Strange and most wonderful to the old man was the adaptability of the child to her surroundings. She had loved the peace, the freedom, and the silence. Therefore, a perfect content had entered into McCullough's life, and an element of gladness he had not counted on, and it lasted four years.

Often he had retold the story of those four years the child had been with him. Wynn knew it by heart.

It ended abruptly with the day that Nance had gone to the Sisters' school at the Mission, just beyond the Company's nearest trading post.

The old man had never said why she had gone, and Wynn had never asked.

Now, as he paddled behind François over the rose-red water, his mind was busy with many things McCullough had related—half-forgotten tales of summer days and winter evenings, in which his little granddaughter had been the central figure. He remembered fragments of sentences that held her name, tenderly spoken as the old man spoke that name alone. Wynn wondered vaguely what kept her at the school. Whether she would care if

she knew her grandfather was ill: whether she would return; who would carry her word; whether any word would be sent. For the first time the girl appealed to him as a vivid personality; hitherto she had been quite as unreal and hardly as interesting as her parents whose pictures hung on the log wall. “Perhaps,” he concluded regretfully in his mind-searching, “perhaps he had not given those stories of the old man more than the merest polite attention.” He realised now he had never been very keen about hearing them. They had not had the snap and swing that carried along his tales of winter adventure, or summer sojourn among the Indians.

The paddles still dipped; now they entered the marsh where the river carried its waters into the lake that again emptied into the Little Smoky River, itself only a branch of the far-winding Peace.

They went against the current here, but when the last bit of yellow had melted into the violet-grey of twilight, the half-breed swung the nose of the canoe shoreward, landing near a spruce thicket.

The open was reached in a few minutes, and the men came upon two shacks about a hundred yards apart. One was the common shack of the trapper; the other in the gloaming loomed large and almost imposing. For two summers McCullough had laboured upon it, sparing neither himself nor the unwilling François. For several weeks during each spring he had pressed into service three young Indians—Muskegons or Wood Crees, as they called themselves—who had come down a long way from the Driftwood Mountains, sinewy and tough as poplar saplings from their winter’s discipline.

Though they had regarded the old man as quite mad they had followed his wishes, for he paid them well and they were hungry and very poor.

They, who scorned to use an axe for themselves, had cut lodge-pole pine logs for him, and shaped and piled them. François and McCullough did the rest.

The house, like “Nonsuch” House of old London Bridge, was put together without nails. Where nails might have been used they drove wooden pegs. The chinks between the walls were filled with a blue clay. There were three rooms, and in the living-room a fireplace.

The fireplace and chimney had been built of stones cemented with the clay that in firing grew hard as brick. The floor throughout was of hardened clay, covered with wolf- and bear-skins. A bark-covered veranda went across the front of the house, and poplars grew near it.

The fame of the old man's new abode spread through camp and reservation, for the three Wood Crees had seen enough to furnish forth a tale, and as they were of a nomadic tribe who still clung to teepees of birch-bark or the tanned skin of moose, the story was the subject of doubt and derision.

The Company's trading posts the Indians knew; the Mission school-house and churches they accepted with wide toleration; but that a trapper with open sky above him, and the good healing earth and forests for his habitation, should want more than a tent or shack, which was indeed a necessary evil in time of storm or cold, seemed to them foolishness.

When the new log house was finished the old man moved into it, while François lived in the shack, and, against his inclination, kept it in the order McCullough demanded.

CHAPTER III

THE OLD TRAPPER

There was candle-light in one window as the two men drew near. Wynn crossed the veranda and knocked at the door. Freedom had never degenerated into familiarity between him and the old trapper. The half-breed disappeared.

A tiny middle-aged squaw opened the door, holding the candle high. Its wind-blown flame threw weird shadows across her small peaked face, framed by the scarlet shawl she wore over her head.

The yellow light was reflected in her eyes, which were big and golden-brown as a doe's, and filled with that strange melancholy often seen in the eyes of dumb wild things.

The man lifted his hat, bowed and smiled. It was a very nice smile, and his teeth flashed for the moment, white as corn kernels.

The little squaw looked up at him, and then shaded her face with one brown hand as though dazzled.

The father of François had long ago smiled in that sudden and radiant fashion. He had bowed and lifted his hat to her upon a far-off day, as this man did now. It was a habit of the white men, she had concluded. As far as she had been able, she had instructed François to follow it, but the result had been indifferent; no Indian could acquire it in its perfection, it seemed. She had not seen the father of François since François was a toddling baby. He had gone away to his own French-Canadian people, perhaps. Sometimes these English or French-Canadian squaw-men did go back to their people—but Wanota had remembered the smile and the way he had bowed to her.

"Come," she said. "Ol' man sick; ver' bad."

"I am so sorry!" said Wynn, following her. "I hope I can be of some help."

Wanota led on through the wide living-room into a smaller room beyond. She set the candle on a rustic table and left him. A little grey and yellow Eskimo dog rose at their entrance, then settled down again. On a bed of balsam boughs, covered with the Company's heavy red blankets, lay a great gaunt figure. The right hand wandered over the blankets, the left was

still—horribly still, Wynn thought. The features might have been carven, and the mouth wore an expression that was like a smile, yet was not one. The erstwhile fine colour and tan of the old face seemed to have been burnt out, and it was ashen white. The eyes shone like blue fire; the thick hair glistened frostily.

McCullough stretched out his right hand, and Wynn took it hard between his two that were so firm and steady.

"I am so sorry," he said again, rather helplessly—"awfully sorry, sir. You should have sent for me at once. But, of course, we'll get you round all right! Why, you were looking in the pink of condition when we had a smoke together a few days ago."

The twisted smile was turned towards him. "'Here to-day,'" McCullough said thickly, "'gone to-morrow. Gone to-morrow,' boy. 'Which to-day is, and to-morrow is cast into the oven.' It's in the Church service so."

"Oh, yes!" said Wynn, nodding. "That's where it is. The Church service simply boils over with cheerful sentiment. But what can I do for you, sir? You sent for me. Isn't there anything we can get from the agency for you—François or I?"

The hand he was holding tightened. "No! no!" came the answer half fiercely. "I need no drugs. You couldn't get anything, anyway, except pain-killer or whisky. I'll pull through—perhaps. I feel life getting back into that side. But," lowering his voice, "I'm done for, Wynn, just the same. It doesn't matter, save for one thing. If I pull through it will be with a foot that drags—and an arm that won't do team work—and an eye that will never sight down a rifle barrel again. I'll be one with the maimed, the halt, and the blind. I'll shoot no more, and I'll set no more traps. The Company has paid me for my last pelt."

"I congratulate the beasts," said Wynn.

"Aye!" he returned. "It's a good day for them. I've taken in more fur these last eight years than any two Indians—pick 'em where you please. Did I ever tell you there was an old legend attached to Lone Lake, eh, boy? No? I reckon just at first I thought it might scare you away, and I wanted to keep you. The Indians think the place is haunted—the Swamp Crees and Wood Crees, the Chipewyans and all the rest of them. The place is damned for them. The story is that a brave of the Chipewyans drowned himself there for love, after murdering his rival by throwing him over the great Black Rock at

the north of the lake. They say the Indian canoed out, tied a stone about his neck and dived. The trouble is they fancy the dip of his paddle can be heard yet on moonlight nights, and the dive from the canoe. The wind up around Black Rock makes a queer echo that they think is the voice of the murdered man. It's an old squaw's tale that has lost nothing by time. For seventy years no Indian has hunted within miles of the lake, either summer or winter, save François—and he is no true Indian.

"The place was rich with fur when I came to it. I've good trap lines twenty miles out from the lake in any direction—up the foot-hills or down the valleys. I've taken in mink and marten, fox and ermine, and the finest black bear-skins an agent ever bargained for. Haunted—aye, you know the place is bird-haunted at least, Wynn?—I've had good hunting—good hunting—but this is the end."

"Brace up, sir!" said Wynn. "Who can say it is the end? I had an uncle—a Bishop as it happened—who had several attacks of about this sort; got into the way of having them—and he lived to eighty and died of a fever."

The white head moved on the blankets.

"But I'm no Bishop," he said shortly. Then, after a pause, "There's a thing you can do for me, Wynn. You're not the sort would fail a friend. It's a favour."

"Anything," responded the man.

"Thanks! I just want you to paddle down to the St. Elizabeth's Mission beyond the agency, and go to the Sisters' school and find Nance; she has been there for two years now. I want you to say to her, 'The old man sent me down to tell you he'll never set another trap—and he wants you.' That'll bring her. I want her to come back with you, boy. François might go, but I'd rather it were you."

"I'll be delighted," said Wynn. His lips trembled a little over the conventional phrase.

"I never told you," McCullough went on, "but Nance hated the trapping. She liked the life with me—all but that. The joy of the out-of-doors was born in her. What we needed to take of fish or fowl she was content to take; but the trapping—God! She hated it. We had two good years together before she realised what my way of living meant, she being only a child; then François—the fool—showed her a trap with a red fox leg caught in the teeth—only the leg, mind you. The little beast had gnawed it off. There's one here and there will do that, sooner than be taken alive. The child was a

perfect tornado of passion and grief at the sight. That winter she fretted off and on, and cried over the broken animals we brought in. Once, tramping on her snow-shoes over by Lone Lake, she came on a young bear dragging a twelve-pound trap. He had been caught three days, maybe, and all the fire was gone out of him. He only whimpered. With her little hands she pulled the trap apart and freed him. Rage gave her strength likely. Rage at François—and at me. The next winter she fretted more. I'd leave her in the shack, comfortable as the place could be made, with Wanota to look after her, a warm fire, a book or two, the strip of beadwork Wanota taught her to make—all she said she needed for her pleasure—and yet when I came in I could tell she'd been fretting. She was just heart-sick to see the load I brought each time, sick of hearing of fur and the price of it, sick of stretching-rings and boards, and the sight and smell of the pelts being cured, sick to death of blood-rusted traps.

"She'd coax me to give it up, sweetly enough, but persistently. I tried not to lose patience. She was only a small thing. She didn't realise that her very living, all she'd ever own after I was gone, would come from the fur—for I'd saved. The Company's money was blood-money to her, the price of innocent lives. That's what she called it once, not thinking it would some day be all she'd have. I tried to keep patient, but I loved the life. It suited me. I never knew I was old. Then came a night. There was a cub-fox she'd had for a pet—a rusty little lame chap she had picked up in the grass. She'd taught him a dozen tricks and cured his hurt. By and by he got the 'wanderlust.' You can't really tame any wild thing. He sprung one of my traps, and it was my cursed luck to bring him in with a bunch of rabbits, not recognising him; but she knew him, and that ended it. She lifted the little red beast up and held him close. His head dangled, and he was the deadest-looking fox you ever saw. Nance stared at me over him.

" 'Grandad,' she said, and her eyes went the colour of the blue in the candle flame, Wynn—'I'll not stop here and see such things brought home! You've been trapping a long time. Though it's evil work you've been lucky. You do not need to trap any more. I know about the two silver foxes, and the many, many black bear-skins, and all the marten and mink. Promise me to set no more traps, or I will go and live with the Sisters at the Mission.'

"I only laughed a little down in my throat.

" 'Cool down, Nancy,' I said. 'Quiet, honey, quiet. I'll bring home another cub-fox for you to pet. Trapping's my work, child. It's my good work. There's no reason for my giving it up.'

“I can see her little white face now. She didn’t answer, but that night she was gone. It was moonlight, and she had fastened on her snow-shoes and tramped down the river-way the whole twenty miles to the settlement. There were the small latticed tracks. It was not so bitter cold—but I knew what fear was when I found her gone.

“There’s a Providence takes care of children and fools, Wynn. She was both a child and a fool. A beloved little fool.” The halting voice dropped into silence.

“She wouldn’t come back?” asked Wynn.

“Not she. Not unless I’d give her my solemn word I’d trap no more. That was a rare winter. I’ve never seen finer pelts. I got much money from the Company in the spring. Besides, a man can’t be bullied and badgered by a slip of a child.”

“No,” said Wynn thoughtfully. “Oh! certainly not!”

“You see, boy,” the old man broke in rapidly, “I always *had* intended to give up the work; intended taking the child away from this place back to the other things that I don’t seem to need, but that she would want when the time came. I always said to myself, ‘One year more, and that ends it.’ Now fate has done the bullying. Wynn, I want her home—back here with me. Paddle down to the Mission, tell her what I said, and bring her back. Will you?”

“I’ll do my best,” he replied, rising. “You’ve talked far too much, old man. I’ll send Wanota. Indian ladies are good antidotes for the conversational tendency.”

“When will you start?” asked McCullough, following him with his eyes.

“To-night,” he answered.

“It’s the dark of the moon,” complained the trapper. “You’ll have that bad half-mile portage by the little falls and rapids, and there’s no poling them at night. There’s a fierce tangle of thorn about there along the bank.”

“Don’t worry; I know the place. I’ll paddle by starlight and return to-morrow evening.”

“Take my canoe and a rifle,” insisted the old man, “and Wanota will give you supper.”

“Thanks,” answered Wynn. “Good-night.”

“Good-night; good-night!” he muttered absently. Then, as Wynn reached the door, he called to him. “Wait!” he said; “come back here, boy; reach under the blankets. In the fir-boughs at my head—so. It’s a box—so. Do you find it?”

“I have it,” said Wynn.

“Count out two hundred dollars. Give them to the Mother Superior at the Mission. Tell her she shall have more, later.”

Wynn buttoned the money inside his coat and left him.

CHAPTER IV

THE TRIP TO THE MISSION

In the living-room he found the squaw turning flapjacks in a smoking pan on the sheet-iron stove. The room was rosy with firelight at that end.

“Kindly make up the bed in the little room next to Mr. McCullough’s, Wanota,” he said. “There’s a pillow and blankets enough.”

“You sleep?” she asked softly.

“No; I am going to the Mission to bring the old man’s granddaughter; we will return to-morrow.”

The inscrutable brown face changed for a second. In the second Wynn fancied the squaw was not pleased.

“Ver’ well,” she said, and bent over the pan.

Taking down a rifle, he went out. In the dusk he almost ran against François.

“Where does the old man keep his canoe?” Wynn asked, halting.

“I take you back?” suggested the half-breed.

“No—thanks. I want the old man’s canoe.”

François glanced at him sharply. “Ol’ man not yet dead,” he commented unpleasantly.

Wynn smiled in the dusk. “No—not yet. He wishes me to paddle down to the Sisters’ school and bring back his granddaughter.”

There was a pause. “I rather wondered,” went on the careless, pleasant voice, “that he didn’t send you, François.”

The Indian made an inarticulate sound.

“The canoe cached in the black spruce clump yonder,” he answered, jerking his head over his shoulder. Then he opened the door of the old man’s house and went in.

The man knew the clump of spruce, and found the canoe and paddles. Launching it, he started down towards the Mission. It was seventeen miles

to the trading post, three more on to the Catholic church of St. Elizabeth and its Mission houses. No distance at all, as distances are counted in the wilds.

He would be going against the stream, which was swift and deep, and safe enough save in one place, where there was a succession of tiny falls, and half a mile of rapid, stone-broken water. Wynn had at different times poled these rapids. To-night he would have to make the portage to be on the safe side, and the safe side is seldom attractive.

The stars were bright as he pushed the canoe out. There were so many that the reflection of them dappled the river with silver.

Now and then he disturbed a belated wading bird. Most of the birds had long gone south, but some few were charmed by the warm days into lingering. Once a diver duck rose sharply almost from his bow. The reeds where the water was shallow rustled like new silk, and he heard a moose tearing up the lily roots, where they grew thickest in a marsh near by. Every night-sound came to him clear and sharp pointed, making the following stillness more still. The little canoe answered to his hand like a sensate living thing, for, far more than any other craft, the canoe responds to the guidance of those who love her. He made the circuit around the rapids at midnight, and beyond being maltreated by the brambles and wild raspberries, which almost interlaced here along the bank, came to no harm. Later, he paddled on, drifting into the agency before dawn.

When he had breakfasted and bought his tobacco from the French-Canadian factor, he went down the river to where the church of the Jesuit Fathers lifted its cross heavenward. There were a few houses near, and a long grey-painted building—the school of the Sisters of St. Elizabeth.

There they gathered orphaned and friendless Indian children, and many wrecks of men and women that the chances and the tragedies of the North had sent adrift, for the building held a hospital-ward as well as a school, and it was never empty.

A dozen dark little heads watched Wynn approach, clustering together at the windows. It was so early, the day's school work had not begun.

The man went up a path bordered by faded sunflowers, and rang the Mission bell. It clanged far through the building, and a dozen more heads came to the windows.

A slender, grey-robed nun opened the door.

"I have come to see the Mother Superior, and also with a message for David McCullough's granddaughter," began Wynn, after answering the

Sister's greeting. "He is ill—though I would not alarm her. He wishes her to return to him at once."

The little nun clasped her hands, her face whitening. "At once!" she cried. "At once! The dear child is to go at once? Oh! sir!——" With sudden effort she stopped. "Pardon me," she said, her voice quieted, "I will speak to the Holy Mother. Pray come in and be seated."

Wynn went with her into a long uncarpeted room. There was a low altar at one end. The chairs were comfortless; on the walls were pictures of the thorn-crowned Christ and the Mater Dolorosa.

The Mother Superior entered after a moment, solid of figure, cheery, and with common sense written large upon her. Her rosary and silver crucifix clicked against the house-keys that swung from one hand. She came towards him briskly.

Wynn rose to meet her and bowed. The smile that had charmed Wanota did not fail to have its effect upon this woman also. She regarded him with a sudden personal interest, as one who might be more than a mere messenger from the wilderness—one who might indeed even by chance bring her what, in the depths of her devoted soul, she yet longed for: news from the world, a touch of life from the outside. Her youth had been spent in Paris.

"I have heard what you told Sister Mary Philomena," she said pleasantly, "but fear it is quite impossible for me to take the responsibility of letting the child—now in our care—return. I regret that this should be my answer." With cheerful composure she folded her smooth hands over the house-keys, and raised benign eyes to the man's face.

"There are comparatively few things quite impossible, Reverend Mother," returned Wynn gently. "I will take the responsibility in this case, and relieve you of it."

The two looked at each other a short half-minute, each measuring the type they must deal with.

"The old trapper is ill," said the man, "desperately ill. It is by his desire I come for his granddaughter."

"He will die of this illness, you think—and soon?"

"Not soon, perhaps," Wynn returned.

"Ah!" answered the woman softly. "Not soon, perhaps, you say. A trapper's hut is no place for a young girl, sir. The winter will be upon us any day. Though not so very distant from this Mission, or the Company's

agency, the place where the old trapper lives is wild and remote, so says report; it is in the hill region of Lone Lake; and the Indians fear it because of a superstition. No Athabascan or Wood or Swamp Cree will set his trap-line within miles of that lake, as perhaps you know. The country there is densely wooded. During the months of snow it is desolate beyond words, and for one to lose the trail there at any point is to be lost hopelessly. I have told you this at length, sir, to convince you of how necessary it is for us to keep Nance McCullough; what risk there is if she goes. She came to us of her own will, and I cannot let her go back at David McCullough's request."

Wynn stood motionless, except for a slight straightening of the shoulders.

"Indeed, I appreciate your feeling," he said, "but unfortunately I promised Mr. McCullough I would see that his granddaughter returned."

The cheery lady before him lifted her eyes to his in unruffled calm. She shook her head decidedly.

"A trapper's hut——" She began again, but as she spoke the door sprung open, and a girl ran in, her pink calico skirts flying, the dull gold of her hair loose from its heavy braids. Two spots of rose-pink glowed on her cheeks, and her eyes,

"The bluest of things green,
The greenest of things grey,"

shone through black lashes like stars. She looked from one to the other, then turned to the nun impulsively.

"Oh, dear Reverend Mother!" she cried. "What is this I hear? Do not keep anything from me! I was playing with the children when Sister Mary Philomena ran out, saying a messenger had come from grandad—that he has sent for me to return at once—but more than that she would not say."

The Mother Superior raised her hand gently to stop the fast-coming words.

"Sister Mary Philomena lacks discretion; she has already said too much," she answered.

The girl turned swiftly to Wynn.

"Did you bring me a message, sir? What is it? I must know."

"David McCullough told me to say to you that he would never set another trap, and that he hoped by reason of that message you would return

to him"—Wynn glanced at the Mother Superior—"to-day," he finished.

The colour vanished from the girl's face.

" 'That he would never set another trap,' " she repeated. "That is the promise I wanted. But—but why did he not come to say so himself? He thinks nothing of the distance, either summer or winter. I know—he is ill. Is he not ill? Tell me quickly."

The man cast about in his mind for the right word.

"Well, he is under the weather," he said; "quite under the weather. But," reassuringly, "of course I think he will pull round all right."

"Oh, I should never have left him!" the girl broke in. "Never! never! I was wicked—angry about the little fox, and tired of seeing the dead things, and of thinking I heard the foxes and minks crying in the traps. I may be wrong—and grandad may be right," she ended half defiantly, "for he says such things must be. All I know is that I was wrong to leave him. Reverend Mother, I must go home. You have been kind, and I thank you greatly; but I must go home. Give my love to all the Sisters, but most to little Sister Mary Philomena. I will gather my things together and go."

"I do not wish you to leave us, my child," said the nun decidedly. "If you go, it is against my express desire. Beware of the sins of wilfulness and impetuosity. Though not mortal sins, they often do far-reaching evil. I fear for you. Pray therefore without ceasing for a right guidance, and may the saints guard you!"

Nance bowed her head and left the room.

The Mother Superior turned to Wynn, no sign of disappointment or defeat showing on her quiet, unreadable face.

"It is an age," she said, "of headstrong children. I would have kept the child and taught her control of spirit."

"I fear she could only have been kept by strategy, Reverend Mother," Wynn answered, smiling, "by strategy, or force, which of course from so gentle a Sisterhood is unthinkable."

The woman looked at him again, and again they measured each other mentally.

"Force," she said, "of a physical quality, is, as you say, outside the question, and"—with a little inclination of her head—"strategy would have

failed in this case when *you* also were to be dealt with. Rest here awhile, sir. I will send in coffee and toast."

"Thank you most kindly," Wynn returned; "but I have already breakfasted." He drew the parcel of notes from his pocket and held it out.

"David McCullough asked me to give you this, with the promise that more would follow. It expresses his appreciation of your goodness to his granddaughter through these two years."

The woman took the parcel of money. Wynn thought her mouth quivered a little.

"Our Order is grateful," she said. "Such gifts are rare, and we have often great need."

Going to the door she paused, holding it ajar.

"Has the grandfather of Nance entrusted you to bring her to him, or does she go alone?"

"I have the honour to see that she reaches him safely," the man said.

She smiled at the non-committal answer.

"It would be possible for the child to go in safety quite alone," she returned softly. "Nance has a wide knowledge of woodcraft and a sense of direction. She is fearless and tireless. I could trust her to go alone. I also, with the old trapper, trust you to see that she comes to no harm with a guide, whoever that guide may be."

"You may trust me, Reverend Mother," he said. Then the door closed.

Shortly afterwards, Nance McCullough and Wynn left the Mission House. A flock of little Indian children and small half-Crees crowded about the girl to the last. The Sisters followed her down the walk bordered by the faded sunflowers, fluttering here and there around her like grey moths around a light. The little Sister who had opened the door for Wynn was the last one to bid her good-bye. Taking her rosary of black and silver beads with its silver cross, she slipped it over the girl's head.

"Keep it, dear child," she said. "I have counted every bead in prayer for you many times. The Reverend Mother has reprimanded me for having told you a message had come. I talk too much—I was wrong."

"Dear Sister Mary Philomena!" Nance cried, taking the nun's hands and seeing the slim, grey-robed figure through a blur of tears. "I know you will do penance for even that! I will keep the beads for ever and ever, and I will

say Protestant prayers on them for myself, who need them so much, and for you, who need them so little."

"Pray," said the nun, lifting her wistful eyes to the girl's beauty, "pray, dear child, that I may have God's peace."

"I will—I will! And that you may have His joy also," she answered. Bending, she touched the nun's banded forehead with her lips, and went swiftly to where Wynn waited at the end of the path.

CHAPTER V

NANCE RETURNS

The small craft was low in the water now, for the man was taking back tobacco, flour, and bacon, and Nance had all her wealth in a compact but decidedly heavy bundle. Well she knew that women in the North were expected to travel light, and so she apologised for its weight, amusing Wynn with an inventory of such contents as were not altogether necessary, but which she assured him she could not leave behind, for they were the keepsakes the Indian children had given her at the last moment—queer treasures, old and outlandish, but dear to the hearts of the little givers, and therefore dear to her. There was a string of bear claws, and the polished hoof of a baby moose; a beaded pouch, and a heavily musk-scented red cotton handkerchief; a flint arrow-head, a tiny carved totem-pole, and a strange little stone image that might have been intended for a god or might not, for it was so unbelievably old, the small Alaskan who owned it told her, no man could say what it was. Flecks of yellow shone through it like gold, and it had golden eyes. He loved it, he had said, but he loved her more, and would not be happy unless she had it. So, reluctantly, Nance had taken the strange token from his eager brown hand. It was by reason of all these souvenirs and a few books, more than her simple outfit, she assured Wynn, that the bundle was so heavy.

He smiled at her defence of her luggage, remembering the steamer trunks he had seen stored in some of the liners—trunks whose owners went for a six-weeks' sojourn across the Atlantic.

"If I carry the pack when we make the half-mile portage," he bargained, "it will be by way of seeing the art collection later on."

"Oh, if you'd like to," she returned. "But the things are not really beautiful."

"They are more," he answered, launching the canoe.

Nance insisted upon taking a paddle, and, in spite of the weight, they made good headway.

There was a self-possession about Nance McCullough, a pleasant adaptability, a frank acceptance of the situation, that should have left nothing to be desired.

Unfortunately it did, to the man's mind.

They had gone smoothly enough up past the post, where the old factor waved at them from the door, with his brood of fat, half-Cree children bobbing around him; had paddled along in sight of a little muskeg that shone with metallic lustre where silvery moss covered it like a coat of mail; they had slipped into the black velvety shadows of the giant spruce that lined the river bank at one point for several miles and were the outposts of a dense forest beyond, and had come out into the sunlight, before Wynn voiced a certain dissatisfaction.

Long before this the girl had extracted all the information she could from him regarding her grandfather's illness, and he had given her unwarranted comfort. So her spirits rose and she chatted gaily of the heavens above and the earth beneath; discussed the past summer and coming winter, the honourable Company and the kindly Sisters, the factor, his Cree wife and progeny, whom apparently she loved. Also, she touched lightly on her own life, past, present, and to come. There seemed to be no hidden holes or corners in her mind; it was as sun-washed and wind-swept as the river itself.

A newly acquired sense of freedom uplifted her, and she enjoyed the passing moment with the abandon of a child or a care-free boy. The pink calico had been changed for a rough serge dress of hunter's green, and the sleeves ending at the elbows showed her round arms; Wynn wondered at her tireless small wrist as she paddled. It looked as strong as steel, he thought—steel encased in white satin. Her hair was gold in the sun, bronze in the shade; the little escaping curls glittered. Her face had the short upper lip and small nose that artists love.

Sometimes it was her profile Wynn caught as she glanced over her shoulder, sometimes the three-quarter view. Either was quite satisfying. He congratulated himself that she had the bow seat in the canoe.

He had not expected much of Nance McCullough, or given her, till last night, any thought. She came as a surprise. On looking back he wondered at himself, for he had known McCullough, and the trapper—physically, at least—was a man among men.

This girl was the worthy granddaughter of the old man, Wynn concluded. It was at this point he put the dissatisfaction that had been simmering within him into words.

"I wish," he commenced, "I really wish, Miss McCullough——"

"Oh, you may call me Nance," interrupted the girl. "Nearly everybody does. Yes? You wish something? If you keep it till to-night there will be a new moon, and you may wish on that, and it will come true. That is, it nearly always does come true with me."

"I never bank on the moon," objected Wynn, "and it simply couldn't help this time. I just wish that you wouldn't take me quite so much for granted, you know; so—so entirely as a matter of course."

Nance gave a short, rippling laugh.

"Do I?" she asked. "I didn't intend to. But what would you like me to do? All the Sisters seem to take everyone and everything for granted. They are very seldom surprised or disturbed. They are self-possessed and kind and cool. That is—all but Sister Mary Philomena, and she is so very young, and is for ever doing penance for getting excited."

"Oh, the Sisters!" said the man shortly, paddling hard.

"The Sisters are dears," she returned. "I have tried and tried to be like them. But—I fail always. I have no reserve, no patience, no stillness."

"Are you like them in that you have no curiosity?" he inquired.

"Alas, no!" she admitted, shaking her golden head. "It is my besetting sin. I am always wanting to know things."

"And yet you have not even asked me my name, nor by what chance I came to be Mr. McCullough's messenger. In fact, you have taken no personal interest in me whatever. I find it most humiliating," the aggrieved voice ended.

A wave of pink swept over the girl's face and then ebbed till Wynn could see where it crept into the white throat and drifted into the hunter's green of her gown.

"I beg your pardon," she replied, "but I knew if grandad sent you that it was all right. And you are mistaken about my taking no interest. The Sisters always said it was wrong to ask questions—that is, personal ones; while you think me rude because I don't."

"No, no!" broke in the man hastily. "You altogether misunderstand me. I only desire a little kindly attention, just about what you would give one of those phlegmatic, unresponsive-looking young redskins at the Mission, for instance—though, indeed, perhaps I should not look for it."

“Won’t you please tell me your name?” she said demurely, glancing round.

“My name is Richard Wynn,” he returned.

“And—and do you come from far, up here to the boundaries?”

“From very far,” he said.

A silence followed, and they paddled on through the blue of the morning. The white poplars along the river had changed colour, and now and then a leaf floated down stream like a fairy’s golden shallop.

Something was stirring within the girl’s mind—a persistent thing that she would have scorned to call personal curiosity. It set her heart to beating rather quickly, but she determined not to let it find vent in questions.

Wynn’s voice had aroused it. It was a beautiful voice of many tones; the inflections implied more than the words, and the things that were behind the little words “From very far” started a thousand fancies to troubling Nance McCullough.

There was that about the man’s rare, whimsical, quickly-passing smile, with its dazzle of white teeth, that made her watch for it, whether she would or not.

But she resolved to ask him nothing more, whatever the temptation, and bent to her paddle, refusing to rest. Presently she looked across her shoulder, and the resolve melted.

“Have you come for the fur?” she asked.

“No,” responded Wynn; “I am not a trapper.”

Again she resolved, and by way of clenching that resolution switched the conversation rapidly to other things.

She spoke again of her grandfather, of his strength, his adventures, his moving accidents by flood and field. Wynn could see the old man was her idol—albeit with feet of clay.

She talked of Wanota, of whom she was fond; of François, whom she but tolerated, and told of how he had once, at the spring gathering of trappers, gambled all his pelts away and come home from the post with a bundle of the gambler’s little red willow counting-sticks in his pocket instead of the Company’s good money or supplies.

Laughingly she recounted a story of having herself paddled across Lone Lake one moonlight September night, when Wanota was asleep, her grandfather away, and François gone to the place where his canoe was cached to hunt for the big nickel-plated watch which he had dropped that afternoon from his beaded belt, and hoped to find on the trail between the shack and the water.

"I knew he would hear the dip of my paddle on the lake, and think it was the spirit of the long-dead Indian taking his boat into deep water so that he might dive midway out; I dropped a piece of birch-bark suddenly, and the sound echoed as far as Black Rock. You know the echo there is, like a voice calling? François had often boasted he didn't believe the legend, and laughed at all Indians who did. It seemed right enough then to test his faith. But I was only a little girl. Now it strikes me I was unkind; anyway, I was terribly naughty, for grandad would never let me go out beyond his larch trees after dark at any time without him."

"What did François do?" asked the man.

"I cannot be sure," she laughed, "but I heard the underbrush breaking and the dry grasses rustling as though someone ran very fast."

"But you?" said Wynn. "Were you not afraid?"

"No," she returned; "I don't think I was afraid. I remember it was very still and strange out on the lake, and bright like silver in some places and black in others. I wondered where the Indian had gone down, and thought of how desperate and heart-sick he must have been so long ago. I thought, too, of the white man he had thrown over Black Rock, and of the Indian girl they both had loved. But I did not fear their spirits—or the dark. Of course, if a lynx or bear had been near shore—but no thought of them came to me until afterwards. I just wanted to see if François was really truthful about not believing the legend. Even yet I cannot be quite sure that it was François who ran. Oh, it was a little unkind—very unkind, rather; but François needs punishing, anyway. He is lazy, and does not visit his traps often enough, and his deadfalls do not always kill outright. He does not mind how the beasts suffer if the fur is not injured. And he catches fish just for the pleasure of catching them—far more than he can salt down for use or dry; and he will not follow a moose he has only wounded unless he is hard pressed for meat. He is cruel." She stopped paddling and turned to Wynn.

"If you are not a trapper," she asked breathlessly, "what are you?"

“At home in one of the English Universities I was a teacher of mathematics,” the man answered. “As a student I did rather well in some of the branches of that science, and they gave me a Chair. Then—well, because I needed more money, and was offered more in an American college, I came across. After that——”

“Yes?” echoed the girl. “Yes—after that?”

Wynn laughed a little, a not altogether happy laugh.

“It could hardly be called an interesting story,” he went on. “In fact, it is an exceedingly dull one in spots. It drags—and that’s unforgivable. It hasn’t even a moral—I mean a moral applicable to the average person.”

“To me, do you mean?” Nance suggested.

“It certainly has no moral applicable to you, and you are not the average person,” he laughed. “*Ergo*, if it has not a moral for the average person and none for the other sort, it has no moral. The climax of the story is conspicuous by its absence, and it doesn’t end well. I mean the end bids fair to be flat, stale, and unornamental. Of course it will have an end—every story must have a beginning, a middle, and an end—with a flourish, a blare of trumpets or fireworks—that is, if it makes for success. Should the gods intervene and give this one a chance, it might end, ‘And so he lived happily ever after!’ But the gods seldom intervene. With the ending I see coming I don’t believe any editor would take the stuff were it turned into typewritten pages, tied with a ribbon, and signed with a big name.”

“If I were an editor,” she assented naïvely, “I should read the manuscript, anyway.”

“Does that mean that you really care to hear the dismal yarn?” he queried.

Oh, thistle-down resolutions!

“Yes,” Nance returned unhesitatingly. “I would like you to tell me all of it.”

“We will turn this canoe shoreward and have our lunch,” temporised Wynn. “There are trout over yonder, where the water is brown and still like a pool; there, under the larch. I caught a rainbow beauty just there once. In the pack, along with the bacon and flour, repose biscuits. We’ll go up the bank, and you will rest while I look around. There may also be berries.”

“You must never take chances with berries!” she warned. “Never! There are willow-berries and wolf-berries and a small pink berry—all of which are

good to let alone. The dog-berries pucker one's lips. The big saskatoons—we're too late for them; they will be sun-dried, unless the bears have had them all. Even the late, late blackberries are gone long ago. But there might be cranberries perhaps, or a few huckleberries. You can't take chances, though. Mushrooms and berries—those are two things you need to know. But," questioningly, "perhaps you *do* know them?"

"I am learning about them," Wynn admitted humbly.

Nance laughed as they pulled up the canoe where the bank was low and vine-covered. A hare scurried to cover as they passed. An otter slid under water a few yards up stream, leaving behind a train of bubbles. A sharp little head pushed aside the fringe of weed-roots that curtained a deep dry abode, and fixed eyes, bright and far-seeing, upon the intruders; then the curtain was dropped. From far away came the call of a moose—a glad free sound, piercing the silence, commanding, insistent. A diver duck flew by; away overhead a dark V sailed southward, and the bell-like note of a wild goose floated down to them.

"It is Wa-Wa," commented the girl, shading her eyes and watching that great flight. "Wa-Wa leading his flock. They are late to leave."

The man watched her, and not the dark lines against the sky. "Come," he said, "you are tired. Rest here, and I will search for wood."

Presently he returned with a load of pine cones and dry wind-broken branches.

"This is the first step towards lunch," he said, "and afterwards——"

"Afterwards," Nance interrupted, sitting down at the foot of a white willow, "afterwards you will tell me, perhaps."

Wynn whittled a stick into kindling. "I told you it was a poor tale," he returned. "Let me put off the evil day."

The girl leaned forward, her eyes full of amusement. "I thought you wanted me to give you as much attention as I would give a small Cree, for instance. Perhaps you didn't mean it—but—I know the life history of every Indian at the Mission," she ended triumphantly; "they told me themselves."

"I readily believe it," he laughed. "Oh, yes, I admit you have a way with you. I fancy you even at times compel people to grow garrulous against their better judgment. And it is quite true I desired a little notice; but the story—well, I have warned you about that. Meanwhile, watch me build the fire. We will light it when I bring back the trout."

CHAPTER VI

THE STORY OF WANOTA

No fish were ever more accommodating than those Wynn went after that sunny noon. With apparent eagerness to be caught, they rose through the sparkling brown water, and rushed upon their fate. Even before they realised they were out of their element, he had ended the gay little lives of four red-flecked beauties, and laid them in state on a grassy bier while he wound up his line.

As he lit the fire and cooked the luckless trout, strung by the gills on green willow withes hung across the coals, he watched the girl and saw her mood had changed. She had grown silent, and a shadow as of coming trouble darkened her face.

Wynn served the fish on wide plantain leaves, and laughingly whittled two forks out of tiny pieces of larch wood.

Then they ate their noonday meal of trout, hard biscuit and a few late huckleberries, thankfully, though all the girl’s charming insouciance of the morning had vanished.

She tried to talk, but Wynn saw the effort and came to her rescue by doing the talking himself, for they were too newly acquainted to allow of silence.

Insight—that strangest of all vision—had conjured up a picture before Nance McCullough that she dared not look at. In a flash the realisation of what her grandfather’s illness meant had overtaken her as she sat alone under the trees.

She did not need to ask him of the old man any longer—she knew.

Wynn wondered what fear it was that haunted her, for he saw fear in her eyes.

Perhaps, he thought, reading aright, she had a forecasting of the shadow that hung low over the log house.

Perhaps it was a sudden dread of the coming winter that would bring short, bitter-cold days and age-long nights, lit only by the mystery of the Northern Lights: a dread of the unsounded depths of loneliness, when the white stillness of the snow would close up around the living as the green

stillness of the sea closes up around the dead who go down into it. Wynn had found that all dwellers in the far North know that fear at times—a thing intangible and close-clinging as a fog.

In the Indian it has implanted the nature unsettled and melancholy. The Crees—those nomads of the West—have a name for the impulse that drives them as straws before the wind, but they give no true interpretation of the word to any white man. Perchance it means fear. At least, in their inner hearts they know why it is that those who dwell long in solitary tents and shacks scattered through the lone lands are prone to madness and self-destruction—and so they often strike tent and go a-gipsying, even when the fishing and hunting are good.

A wind had sprung up that turned the silver sides of the white poplar trees due south. The larches shivered a little and the great spruce boughs swayed gently.

As they went back to the canoe and launched it, the girl gazed skyward, shading her eyes.

"The clouds," she said, turning to Wynn, "are coming down from the north. We have had the last of our golden days—the very last, unless after the first snow we get a short Indian summer. This month will bring the hunter's moon—next month the ice moon—December the whirlwind moon. So you see."

"Do the clouds mean wind?" he asked, "or snow? No, I will not let you paddle."

"Wind, I think," she answered, seeming to realise there was little use in arguing over the paddle, "with perhaps a white frost that will bring down every leaf, and skim the river with shell-ice along the edge. I have seen it much earlier than this. The trappers will be glad. The fur is not really good until the cold comes."

"Your grandfather has much cut poplar and larch piled high to wait the cold days," Wynn informed her, eager to again draw her into conversation. "He has been a busy beaver, and he tells me he sent François to the post for supplies several times and is stocked up."

She gave a short laugh. "François will not let the tump-line bite too deeply into his forehead—he can look after himself remarkably well. I think he must be like his French-Canadian father, for Wanota is not lazy. If a squaw has that tendency it is nipped in the bud. Wanota is held in much respect by her people. Did you know she is regarded as a sort of prophetess?

Her tribe think she can foretell events and read minds. Yes, and that she can even heal the sick of certain ailments by simply touching them."

"I never saw Wanota till yesterday evening," Wynn returned. "François had only a few hours earlier brought her over from the reservation."

"I forgot," explained Nance; "of course, you would not have seen her before. She has been caring for her father, the old chief. He died a few weeks ago."

Again the shadow came to the girl's face. She was seated in the bottom of the canoe, drawing her fingers through the water. Wynn watched her while seeming only to paddle.

"Tell me of Wanota," he said, beating about in his mind for a diverting subject. "Wanota of the small face and great eyes. By Jove! she might have second sight! She might be a spirit medium—or a sister of witches. She looks it. I never saw anyone so small, and weird, and wild! I always thought that squaws were square of body and impassive of face as the image of Buddha. I had become possessed of the idea that they all looked alike, thought alike, and acted alike. Wanota came as a shock."

"You are wrong," Nance asserted gravely. "Squaws are quite different one from another, to those who can see. I have been to the reservation, and know. Grandad speaks the Chipewyan dialect and taught me a little—so I have talked to the squaws. As for Wanota—well, Wanota has lived a great deal."

"How does it come that she is so gifted?" Wynn asked, persistently following up the subject. "Is she the seventh daughter of a seventh daughter?"

The girl shook her head seriously. "Oh, no; not that! I have heard——" Then, after a pause, "It is quite a long story, but I'll tell it to you if you like?"

"I would like," he said, "tremendously."

"It seems that once Wanota was very ill," Nance began, "so ill that she lay unconscious three nights and three days. At last they said she ceased to breathe and was quite cold. The medicine-men said she was dead, that K'jai Manitou[1], the Good Spirit, had called her. So the squaws prepared her for burial, and dressed her in beautiful beaded and fringed clothes, as befitted a chief's daughter.

"It was winter, and the ground like iron. They stretched spruce poles between two trees in the crotches of branches seven feet from the ground, and made them fast. They crossed other poles over these till they had made a bier, and they then lifted Wanota, bound fast in her grave-clothes, and laid her on it, high up, where the carcajou[2] could not leap, and they covered her with balsam and spruce branches held down with a few stones to keep them from blowing away. There she was to lie till they could make a grave when the spring came. They placed a few gifts beside her, and when all was done the braves that had come out from their camp circled around the two trees and sang a death-song.

"When the song was over the braves went away in single file, none looking back. And the squaws that had come, and were left sitting near the trees on the snow, with their blankets covering their bent heads, lifted their heads up and gave that cry they give for the dead"—the girl glanced at Wynn. "You know that cry, perhaps?" she questioned.

"Not that," he said; "but I have heard the Irish women keening."

"It is a sound like nothing else on earth," she went on. "It almost makes the heart stop beating to hear it.

"Afterwards the squaws got up and went away one by one, not looking back.

"It may have been the cold wind, or it may have been that the faint just ended naturally; or I have thought perhaps the death-cry of the women reached the soul of Wanota where it waited, blown about by the winds on the very edge of the world, and brought it back to her body. Who can tell? Anyway, she began to live again, to breathe, she tells me; then she sat up, rolled the stones off the spruce and balsam branches, and pushed them back. They had left white flour bread and dried moose-meat beside her for her spirit journey, and she took these in her shaking little hands and ate.

"Then she unbound the grave-clothes where they were too tightly fastened, and climbed down.

"When she staggered into her father's teepee (the place where she had lived with the little François, for he was then only a child), it was full of braves and squaws sitting circle-wise and eating the death-feast. They left it, and ran out into the air screaming horribly and beating their breasts.

"Presently one after another they crept back and stared at her—the old chief, her father, with them; and they all went out again and left her, every one. No one would touch her or help her, save just one man only, and he had

not been in that teepee when she came, but in his own, sitting with his head bent on his arms."

"Yes?" questioned Wynn, for she had stopped.

Drawing in her breath quickly, Nance went on.

"When that Indian heard the screaming and uproar, he came out of his teepee and asked what it meant. Then they pointed to the chief's tent where they had left Wanota, and called out: 'It is the spirit of Wanota come back from the dead! She has been with the dead three days! Do not go near her, or evil will befall! The Matshi Manitou is abroad in the land.'

"Then that Indian gave a great cry and ran into the old chief's teepee and lifted Wanota in his arms and held her against his heart. She says he was tall and strong, and he carried her, half-bound as she still was by the burial-clothes, to his own place, and he took her into the tent and laid her down. Coming out again, he cursed the others for cowards, one and all, and dared any man to come near him; and they all slipped away in silence, even the old chief, Wanota's father, with the little child who was François.

"But the Indian kept Wanota, and took care of her, and cured her of her illness." The story ended abruptly.

"And afterwards?" said Wynn, when he had waited awhile.

"Oh, afterwards," the girl's voice went on, faltering a little, "they were married, with great ceremony and much feasting, and the tribe from that day have regarded Wanota as being god-gifted. She says little, but listens much. Sometimes I think myself she may know many things—more than she speaks of. She will tell one's fortune, occasionally. She has told mine."

"Is it a good fortune?" queried the man, bending forward.

"A beautiful fortune. Wanota says I will some day be a lovely lady and live in a castle—a 'grand teepee,' she calls it; and I will see far countries and have much gold and be happy." She laughed. "I will be happy, of course, for I will just live here in the wild country I love, with grandad, and he will live for many, many years; will he not?"

She leaned towards Wynn impulsively.

"Oh, say he will!" she ended, the unspoken fear of her heart finding words.

"Please God, he will," the man replied gravely, reassuring. "But the Indian?" he suggested after a moment, trying again to turn her thoughts.

“The Indian of Wanota’s story? You told me no more of him. I am most interested in that nameless Indian.”

Nance trailed her fingers through the water that shone emerald green in the autumn sunshine, then lifted her hand and let the drops fall back into the river before she answered.

“The Indian was laid on the spruce bier, fastened high where the carcajou cannot leap, just a year from that winter of his marriage. He had been hunting a moose and tracked it into a thicket. It was wounded, but it turned, came to bay, and beat him to death with its forehoofs. That is their way, you know, when they are maddened. Some Crees found him; but it was only Wanota who knew him.”

Wynn paddled on in silence. All commonplaces had deserted him—he, to whom conventional phrases came so readily, failed of speech. Some way farther on he stopped and reconnoitred. “We are about at the foot of the falls,” he said. “I will turn the canoe in. There is that half-mile portage. It had better be made in two trips. I’ll first take the canoe, then return for the two packs.”

“No, indeed!” exclaimed Nance with determination. “Just take the canoe over your head—I am sure it is grandad’s, and his canoes are always feather-light—then carry your pack, swinging it first in one hand, then in the other, as you need to rest, and I will carry mine. I think one trip will do. You see, I’ve thought it all out.”

Wynn smiled disconcertingly.

“A general was lost when you were born, little lady,” he replied. “My own canoe is abominably heavy; I’d quite forgotten this one is light. Come; I will take both packs and the feather-weight.”

For a few moments there was a smart clashing of wills which the man enjoyed. Arguments rebounded back and forth with vigour and energy.

A tramp blue jay listened boldly from a branch over their heads. He took sides first with one, then the other. He chipped in his say at every pause; with staccato notes of interrogation, he egged them on to further parley, then tapered off with all the insinuatingly soft nods and becks of a peace arbitrator.

A pintail grouse flattened itself in the dry grasses and quaked for fear. A hare with pied coat, where brown shaded into the winter’s white, sat up behind a boulder listening with nervous interest. Down stream, a little doe sniffed the wind, ears pricked, head lifted. Then Wynn led the way, breaking

a trail through the bushes where he could not find good going. His head was hooded by the canoe, and from each of his hands a pack swung free.

Nance McCullough followed unmeekly in his wake, bearing the rifle over her left shoulder, for this, by way of concession, he had allowed her to carry. The man smiled to himself to notice, on looking around, that her right hand was entirely occupied in plucking her serge skirts free of the berry branches, though her rose-flushed face showed no signs of admitting that she could not very easily have carried her own pack.

So the portage around the rough water was slowly made, and afterwards they paddled down stream steadily, yet against the wind, reaching McCullough's claim at sunset.

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[1] K'jai Manitou is Algonquin for Good Spirit; Tehishe Manitou is Montagnais for Good Spirit; Matshi Manitou is Montagnais for Evil Spirit.

[2] Carcajou = Wolverine.

CHAPTER VII

THE NEW LOG HOUSE

Wynn drew the canoe into the clump of black spruce and turned it. In the gloom of the trees his face showed lined and white. Stepping out to where Nance waited, he smiled in his quick, radiant way.

“I have kept my word to the old man,” he said, “and have brought you home.”

The girl glanced up.

“You have been very kind; I thank you a thousand times. I know my grandfather is dreadfully ill,” she said tremulously; “I feel sure of it. But you have tried to save me for this one day from the grief of it—I will not forget. And I have not forgotten the story; your story that is not ended, you know. You promised to tell it to me some time.”

She held out her hand to him.

Wynn took it a moment and looked across the gathering darkness to the rim of the far-off hills.

“Did I really promise?” he asked lightly. “Yes? Then I must make good. But,” with a short laugh, “it was the devil led me into that promise. It isn’t much of a story—not one that will make you like me, and—well, sufficient unto the night is the evil. Come,” lifting her bundle, “I will take you up to the shack.”

“And you will come in?” Nance insisted.

“Not to-night,” the man replied. “I must go back to Lone Lake.”

“Is it at Lone Lake you live, then?” she exclaimed, the irrepressible questions rising to her lips.

“Yes,” he nodded; “near shore, a mile up, in a deserted shack perhaps you have noticed. God knows who built it.”

“I remember it,” said Nance. “I’ve heard François say that a white man built it.”

“A white man,” assented Wynn; “and he built well. The ancient place still keeps out the wind. A chipmunk thereabouts will be getting worried over my absence, for he counts me his goods and chattels. Quite often I am

his table, and he takes his meals on my shoulder. The pocket of this old duck coat is sometimes his bed. He has the gift of oratory, and frequently lectures me, using the toe of my boot for his pulpit. Candidly, I like his way of living better than he does mine."

Nance laughed uncertainly, and they pushed their way out through the young alders into the clearing. A stormy afterglow was fading in the west, and an ominous low wind sang the prelude of a coming storm. The howling of a dog broke the stillness.

"Hark!" said Nance. "That is Joris, grandad's little Eskimo dog, baying the new moon. He always bays the new moon, and finds it before I do."

"It is Joris," said the man. "But look ahead, little lady!"

Nance leaned forward, her eyes wide with wonder.

Beyond a thin line of young trees she saw the old man's new log house. The tiny windows glittered where shafts of light caught them.

"Oh!" she cried, clasping her hands. "Is it fairy? What a dear house! Did we land at the right place, Mr. Wynn? It all looks familiar."

The sound of his name caught Dick Wynn like a soft blow. It was so long since any woman had spoken it.

"Absolutely all right," he assured her. "The log palace was built for you. Built by the grace of patience, without nails, like the Queen's house of long ago on old London Bridge. It rose silently as King Solomon's temple. There are pegs cunningly fastened through auger holes in the wood, where nails might have been used. When I look at his achievement, I figuratively take my hat off to the old man."

"It is the 'grand teepee' Wanota told me of!" she cried, hurrying on. "Oh, dear grandad!"

"It may be," Wynn acknowledged. Nance reached the veranda first.

"Come in with me," she coaxed. "Won't you?"

He lifted his cap, standing bare-headed. "Not to-night. The old man will want to see you alone."

"To-morrow—will you come?" she questioned.

"It may be to-morrow," he answered. "You will not be alone. I see Wanota at the window." With a smile he left her.

Nance opened the door and entered the house. She held out her two hands to the little Indian woman, and listened breathlessly to what she told her—listened and feared. Then she went softly into the room beyond, where the old man lay on the bed of balsam boughs covered with the Company's red blankets. His sharpened face was turned to the door, his eyes were hungry with long watching.

Wynn took the canoe down to the water again.

"I'll tow it back to-morrow," he said half aloud.

The afterglow was gone, and the wind grew stronger. As he pushed out, a figure glided between the trees.

"You come back—eh?" said François. "I see the girl go in." His words cut the stillness like a whip.

The canoe stopped. "I knew you saw," Wynn returned, "although I didn't notice you about. It is safe to take it for granted that you always see, François; and that you are soundless—or almost. But the lynx makes no noise, and yet—somehow—I know when he is overhead."

The other drew in his breath sharply. "You hav tak your own time to come from de post," he rasped out. "You hav not been too damn quick. Me—I pack eighty pound from dat post in six hour."

Wynn dipped his paddle and sent the canoe on a few yards.

"My friend," he commented in his smooth voice, "I continue to wonder why the old man did not send you—this time."

An evil expression flashed across the half-breed's face, but he made no answer. His lithe figure melted into the blue-black of the spruce trees, while the bark boat made its way into the hill-shadowed lake. The water, deep and cold and mysterious, mirrored the new moon fitfully, for, like a golden canoe that had slipped its moorings and gone adrift, it was voyaging through storm-driven clouds down the sky.

The man went ashore and up to his shack. As he opened the door, a small furry thing sprang on to his shoulder from out the darkness, startling him. He laughed softly, and lit a candle.

"The welcome *sans cérémonie*," he commented, "but there is no doubt about its being a welcome. I am grateful. What is home without a chipmunk, eh, Silvertail? We will bring in wood, make a fire, and fry bacon—bacon, do you hear? Afterwards I will tell you things."

The wind blew the door wide as he went out, whistled through the shack, and died down. Wynn stood in the open, quite still, and listened. On his shoulder the chipmunk sat up, listening also. A great white owl, buffeted out of its course, made way heavily through the night. Its eyes, like twin lamps, shone with green lustre as it passed. It swooped down, and a sharp short scream tore the dark. Then stillness came again.

"He's a good executioner, Silvertail," Wynn remarked, touching him gently. "Kills with one blow. No ancient British headsman could do better. 'Ware owls, small one. They have beaks of polished brass, and beautiful steel hooks on their claws. 'Ware owls! You're on to them, eh? So far, so good. Hark to the wind! The wind that has blown down from the North seas where

"Ice, mast-high, goes floating by,
As green as emerald."

Listen to the frou-frou of the hemlock and balsam boughs, and the rustling of the birch leaves. It's an old sound, Silvertail—old as Eden. Ever since I've been up here that sound has hurt. At night it has hurt most. Queer too, for I like it. Yet sometimes it has made me feel as lonely as the Ancient Mariner. But to-night, to-night, small one, I feel as though I'd never be lonely again. The curse is lifted from Lone Lake. You want to know why? Come, I've told you enough. We'll make the fire, fry the bacon, and then sleep. Now I come to think of it, I am tired, old chap. Dog-tired!"

Twenty-four hours later there were no leaves on larch or poplar trees. On the ground, below a coverlid of frozen snow crystals, the rusty brown and yellow of them was fast turning black.

The north wind had brought a sharp frost, and this had been followed by sleety snow.

Silvertail curled up in the corduroy pocket, and lost interest in life. Some shreds of tobacco annoyed him there in the dark, and their perfume prevented his entire ease; yet, better the pocket and the loathed tobacco, according to his views, than the best nut-stored, leaf-lined hole in any tree.

He was still in the coat when Wynn put it on that evening, pulled down his cap and started out. Fastening the borrowed canoe behind his own, he paddled down to the old man's ground, and went up to the log house.

Wanota let him in unsmilingly. The room was rosy with the reflection of an open fire, and sweet-scented from the burning hemlock logs. Rugs of bear and blue-wolf skin covered the clay floor, and for furniture there were a

couple of odd chairs, fashioned from twisted spruce roots, a table, and a rough sort of couch hidden by the skin of a grizzly bear.

On a shelf stood half a dozen books, and above a rack for guns and rods was fastened the skeleton head of a moose, its branching antlers throwing fantastic shadows across the room. Snow-shoes hung on the log wall, the dangling strings of babiche new and unknotted, for the old man had made ready for winter before the stroke felled him. A beautifully carved spruce paddle hung by the snow-shoes, and a poling-iron and landing-net stood in one corner. Upon a chair was a beaver-skin coat in the making, and a needle glittered in the fur where Wanota had left it. The pictures of Romeo and Peg Woffington were fastened up between McCullough's hunting licence and a birch-bark calling-horn. A sheet-iron stove at the end of the cabin was the one note of discord, but its usefulness warranted its existence, for life in a shack without a sheet-iron stove is full of trouble. There were a few cooking utensils shelved above it, and some tin cups and plates; amongst them a plate and cup and saucer of pink china.

Wynn stood with his back to the fire, and the details of the strange room printed themselves on his mind. He had not seen it before by firelight, and he wondered still more just how the old man, unaided, had got the effect; how alone in the wilderness he had made such a home. Then Nance came in.

"Oh! Mr. Wynn!" she cried, holding out her hand. "I am so glad you are here! Grandad wants to come in by the fire, and Wanota and I are afraid to lift him—he is so big." Her lips quivered. "François is away, and we could do nothing. Grandad got impatient and determined to try and walk in by himself, but," lowering her voice, "you know he couldn't even stand without falling." The words broke, and the blue-grey eyes, lifted to the man's face, filled with sudden tears.

"Don't," he said softly, bending down. Then with a quick change of tone: "Certainly, he must come in here if he wants to. That's easy. He's a—well, he's a pretty husky boy, as we used to say at college, but I've been knocked around a bit at Rugby and a few other things, and I think I can lift him in without breaking, or even bending him badly. Later in the fall he can try it alone."

He laughed his low, boyish laugh, and Nance tried to join in.

"If you only could," she said. "We couldn't. The strength all slipped out of my arms—and Wanota is so little."

“Wanota is,” he consented. “That’s settled, then. Isn’t this a jolly fire, though?”

“If we only had some chestnuts now,” said Nance. “I have always wanted to roast chestnuts, as grandad says they do in England.”

“You may yet. By the same token—speaking of nuts, reminds me of this chap,” returned Wynn. “I’d better get him out of my pocket,” lifting out the chipmunk.

“Is that the one?” the girl asked, touching the little animal with a soft finger.

“That’s the one,” Wynn nodded, “and a more know-it-all, cheeky little beggar never lived. For cool nerve he is unsurpassed. The simple sincerity with which he speaks the unadorned truth may hurt the object of his friendly solicitude, but it accomplishes its purpose. I am positive that in a former existence he preached for a living. I’ve often wondered why I like him. Perhaps because he is so intensely alive, so a-quiver with undying interest in things; perhaps only because he likes me, and is bent on my salvation. There’s smoking, for instance; he’s for ever insisting that I cut it out.” Putting the chipmunk up on the bookshelf, the man turned again to Nance.

“If you will allow me, I’ll pull the couch round. Yes, that’s right. Now to bring in the old man.”

In a few minutes McCullough found himself resting on the couch covered by the grizzly-bear skin. Nance and Dick Wynn sat down beside him, and Wanota drew near, looking on with inscrutable sad eyes, but speaking nothing.

Neither had the old man any further desire to talk after he had thanked Wynn. The twisted smile had almost left his face, but his left side was no less helpless than at first.

Wynn thought him more gaunt, more sharply white, than on the day before. He reminded him of a giant spruce he had seen in the bush storm-felled.

CHAPTER VIII

WYNN RELATES A STORY

The scented warmth of the hemlock fire brought the old trapper drowsiness. He shut his eyes in deep content, after listening while the two gave a jocund account of their voyaging. He asked no questions, but, when they had done, roused and mentioned François, saying he had sent him to look at a bear trap set miles north of the lake; that he was to go still farther over one line where snares and little steel marten traps were already set, take the fur, and raise and bring in the traps.

Reaching out his right hand, he touched the girl's dress as he spoke, and she clasped his fingers and understood. He rested awhile, then spoke again to Wynn.

"When you come over next time, boy, bring the fiddle. Nance would like to hear it, wouldn't you, honey?"

"Has he a fiddle, then?" she demanded, opening her eyes wide. "Do you play?" to Wynn.

"I do," he admitted.

"Oh, lovely!" she cried. "And it may be that you sing also?"

"No. I am a person of one accomplishment, and that one a trifle tarnished. But you—now I am convinced that you sing."

"I remember a lullaby that was sung to me when I was a baby," she said half wistfully; "and—Sister Mary Philomena taught me two or three little French songs. But they are love songs. The Reverend Mother would have been distressed—she does not get angry—if she had known Sister Mary Philomena taught me those songs, or that she even remembered them."

"But memory is so elusive a thing," rejoined the man whimsically, gazing into the red heart of the logs, "so difficult a thing to capture and slay. What does the Reverend Mother do to prevent Sister Mary Philomena from—from remembering things better forgotten?"

A troubled expression darkened the girl's face.

On the couch the old man now slept, his drawn face peaceful. Wanota sat on the floor and stitched at the beaver coat. A candle stood on a chair beside

her, and threw its yellow circle of light down on her work. She did not seem to heed or hear.

"Sister Mary Philomena," said Nance, dropping her voice, "fasts often and does much penance. She is only twenty-three, and she had a sweetheart —before—well, when she was in the world. I do not know what he did, but he is in prison, she told me; and it is for life. That is why she took the veil, I think, though she did not say so. She prays for his soul far more than for her own. She did a great deal of penance for telling me of him. Once afterwards I heard her crying in the night, and I understood." The blue eyes that were not all blue grew dark in the firelight.

Wanota drew her waxed pack-thread back and forth monotonously, as the Fates spin their web.

The man leaned forward.

"I said you had a compelling way with you," he answered, pitching his voice low. "It is a charm born in you with the sea-colour of your eyes, the bronze-gold of your hair and the wave in it. It is a mystery, a queer, fatalistic thing, felt but not understood, and so unmeaningly called 'magnetism.' One here and there is born with it. To some it is a gift of hell; to others—to you —a gift of the gods. Who knows why the Pole-star draws the needle? What explanation satisfies? Sooner or later you draw the secrets of those you meet from them. Always you will find people telling you of themselves, of their hidden ego. Not—Heaven knows—because you desire that knowledge, but by reason of an impulse that drives them on to the comfort, the relief of just telling you. Perhaps it is that you possess a sympathy with all living things, or an intuition, a sweet insight, which makes you see clearly hidden motives, blurred truths, the causes of hideous mistakes and errors, and helps you to cover them with charity."

The low, rapidly spoken words stopped, and Wynn rose and stood by the fire.

Nance looked up at him, a look of soft surprise on her face. Her hands folded together, tightened.

"Oh, no," she said positively. "I am not like that. I am not ideal in any way. I make even more mistakes than most. I have no charm out of the common; you imagine it for some reason. People interest me; I know so very few, and I would rather be kind to those few than not. But they do not give me their confidence—always. Why," smiling a little, "I went so far as to ask you to tell me that story, and you have not."

“Not yet,” he answered; “but I will. Now—if you still care to hear it. I have only been waiting for the chance. But all last winter and the winter before I did not tell the old man, well as I knew him.” There was a pause, filled in by the snapping and crackling of the fire. Then Wynn went on: “You wonder what has brought me up here to the Boundaries when I am no trapper, surveyor, homesteader, or even waylaid gold-seeker making for the Yukon. You wonder why I live alone on Lone Lake—in the summer even a man-forsaken place.

“I will tell you. I came here eighteen or more months ago to fight myself and save the remnant of my soul—and the rest of me—if I could.

“Do you remember, I told you yesterday—yesterday,” he repeated, “it seems a century ago—that I told you I had come out from England to take a professorship in an American University?”

“I remember,” she answered.

“I had no people at home,” Wynn continued. “No near relatives, except an uncle. My father and mother died when I was a half-grown boy at Eton. I was a good deal alone later. This uncle I spoke of is quite an old chap, and not a very amiable character—at least, I never found him so. He happens to be a baronet, and distressingly rich. What Socialists in the States call ‘criminally’ rich. My father was his younger brother, and in the Navy. He had nothing much but his pay, and died poor.

“When I came to America my uncle was unmarried, and therefore, as I was his next of kin—his all of kin, in fact—as things stood my future looked tolerably rosy to outsiders. I always thought he would marry, in spite of his years and the pessimistic opinions he expressed regarding matrimony. I never wanted to count on the title or the beastly money.”

“No,” said Nance slowly; “I understand.”

“There was a girl in England I—well, I was in love with. I had known her since she was in short frocks, and she was very pretty. We were engaged. It had been a sort of understood thing for years. That was why I came out to make more money.

“My uncle had owed my father a debt, though not a moneyed one, and he put me through Oxford by way of payment of it. He pleasantly informed me that that was all I might expect from him until he was with the other laid-by Wynns in the family vault.

“This girl I was engaged to said she would wait while I picked up gold off the American thoroughfares. Her mother, after a conference with my

uncle, was not of her daughter's mind, but nevertheless the engagement stood. It all seems a great while ago." The man stopped.

Wanota stitched in the ring of candle-light, her smooth dark head bent over the beaver coat. The old trapper slept heavily.

"Yes?" questioned Nance, in the soft, eager way she had.

"I liked the American college," Wynn went on. "The fellows were good students, good clean sports, keen, quick-witted gentlemen all through. They were very kind in every way. They took me in as one of them, and we made friends. I'm coming to the middle of the story now," he interjected.

"There was an old professor of chemistry in the college who was an enthusiastic experimenter, and fired the students with deadly ambition. His laboratory was next to my class-room. One day there were half a dozen sophomores in that laboratory trying a difficult experiment by themselves. As I passed the door to go to my class there was an explosion of chemicals in there, followed by fire. I rushed in to help get out the fellows who were down—they had been scattered in every direction, and the place was filled with gas fumes—when there was a second explosion. I didn't know about that. It bowled me through the room, and I struck my head against an iron-bound locker. It might only have been the marble tiling, but I was unconscious so long they concluded it was the locker. There had been a great deal of glass blown to bits, and a few fragments of it struck my face. The surgeons assured me in the days that followed that they had got all the glass and saved the eye which was in the scrimmage." Wynn leaned towards the girl. "You can see the scars below the left eye."

"I saw them at first," she replied, "and wondered. But you need not mind; they don't spoil you."

He laughed, and shrugged his shoulders.

"They were almost my finish. You see, the surgeons, with all their skill, left a bit of the glass in—just below the eye there. What Stevenson would have called 'a crumb of glass.' An infinitesimal thing, yet enough it proved to set up trouble in a nerve. The place healed outwardly—but the pain continued. It became a maddening, unending horror, and put an end to sleep. I had not made a good recovery from the concussion of the brain, and could not think clearly or reason at all.

"So, because I was no end of a trouble, or perhaps from the kindest of motives, they began to give me morphine hypodermically. Whenever they stopped the pain came back, a devil refreshed, so they gave me the drug

steadily, increasing the dose. Months went by. The other men who were hurt in the explosion got better and went home, but I was still in the hospital. My uncle had been good enough to cable that they were to look after me. Everyone was kind, but they got tired of asking how I was. Still more months went by. There was never any question about the morphine now. They gave it to me as a matter of course, or ordinary routine. I would have been in the county mad-house without it, and, just as probably, was tending that way with it. Still, it put an end to agony, and brought sleep of a sort, and indifference to fallen fortune.

"I drifted off to a little half-lost room in the big hospital, and in it lived and moved and had my being—such as it was. At first the college men used to come up, but I had a depressing effect upon them. They came less often, then not at all. I was practically forgotten—a man who had come and gone. The hospital doctors lost interest in me, for no diagnosis seemed to fit my case; I was one of their failures, best out of sight. Even the nurses ceased to chatter over the obscure cause of the pain that continued unabated when I was not drugged."

The man stopped suddenly.

"Do I bore you?" he asked.

She gave him a queer little smile that seemed to answer, for he took up the recital.

"Then a young house-surgeon—so extremely young that everything looked possible to him, and even old chronic cases that neither died nor got better, but hung like Mohammed's coffin, between heaven and earth, stirred him to endeavour—started to spend odd half-hours in my room. He took an inconsequent fancy to me, in much the same fashion as the chipmunk did, and like him, he lectured—appealing to anything that was left in me of strength, to give up the hypodermics.

"When I gave the morphine up for hours at a time to please him, he would watch me stealthily occasionally; trying to divert my mind at other times. At last, he was convinced that I suffered in those undrugged intervals the tortures of the Star Chamber, and—because he was so boyishly sure of himself, and in his bright lexicon was no word that stood for defeat—he determined to find out what caused the pain. He tried to arouse interest in others of the staff, but I was too old a story. So he worked the thing out alone. 'There is a cause for such an effect, Wynn,' he said. 'Great Heavens! —what can't be endured has just got to be cured! There's glass in there, yet, I believe!'

“A nurse was in the room at the moment, and she smiled. It was a smile that maddened the boy. ‘Why do you smile, nurse?’ he asked savagely.

“ ‘The surgeon who operated said he got all the glass. You know his rank in the profession. The other doctors agreed with him, and the wound healed perfectly,’ the woman returned in her unemotional voice.

“ ‘Not it!’ the young doctor exclaimed. ‘Not by leagues! I’m going to operate again, nurse. On the quiet, if Wynn consents.’

“I consented, and he got the bit of glass. The pain stopped. But . . .” The man’s voice wavered, and went into silence.

“Oh, tell me!” said Nance.

“I went on taking the morphine. That’s about all. My mind was still confused. I could not grasp figures; the simplest problem baffled me. I was worn out in body and mind. So I stayed on in my little lost room under the hospital roof and took the drug.”

CHAPTER IX

WYNN'S STORY CONTINUED

He stared into the crumbling logs for a few moments.

"About that time my uncle came over from England to find out what really was wrong," he went on. "With him came the girl I told you of—and her mother, just a party of three. When they finally did understand how things were, I do not think they were any of them so much grieved for me as indignant that I should have become such a wreck. There was no question about the wreck," he ended. "The nurses dwelt much on my deplorable lack of will. The original cause of the trouble—the accident—had become a thing of the past. I was no longer a patient, but a morphine-fiend."

"What did they do, all of them?" Nance asked in a little tense voice.

"Do?" he laughed softly. "Why, the one and only reasonable thing. The engagement, which had become to them a farce, was broken absolutely. Months before I had written to—to the pretty girl—we may as well call her that, she was pretty—offering to release her from what her people considered a hopeless entanglement, but she insisted that things be left as they were until she saw me. The idea that we were intended for each other from the beginning had taken root in our young minds long before, you understand."

"I understand," responded Nance absently, watching a shower of golden sparks fly up the chimney. "And I suppose you wrote to her very often during your stay in the hospital?"

"Hardly," he returned. "My handwriting at that time was akin to the hieroglyphics of the old Assyrians. Now and then I persuaded one of the nurses to put my thoughts into shape and post off a letter for me, but unless one has tried it, one can hardly realise how weird a correspondence becomes under such circumstances. But I told you that the engagement terminated after the three in the party from England had seen me. Then my uncle kindly settled my account with the hospital, and they all took ship for home."

"They left you—that way?" Nance questioned, leaning forward.

"Why, yes," he nodded. "After the mother of the pretty girl had conveyed to me, most sympathetically and charmingly, the fact that she considered me a distinct failure, and after my uncle had somewhat brutally

insisted that, in his opinion, I was decidedly more the victim of a drug than an accident, and dwelt at length on my lack of moral fibre, and still further, after the pretty girl had shed a few tears for lost illusions—I *was* changed you know—there was no getting around that, and I *hadn't* made good—after these concluding incidents, they left. Fate has a way of giving a few more knocks to the man who is down," he continued after a moment's pause. "I got mine; not that I minded so much just then. I simply took more morphine—which was indefensible."

Nance drew a quick breath. She looked up at the man standing before the fire, noting the wieldy strength of every line of his figure, the strong beauty of his face with its clean-cut outline and eyes whose outlook was steady and far-seeing, and she wondered at what he had told her.

"What followed then?" she asked.

Wynn took his pipe from his pocket, and filled it slowly.

"What followed was unpleasantly—well, bizarre. It went to prove that one should invariably be prepared for the unlikely to happen. This uncle of mine, whose opinions and habits had apparently become ossified, and who had often in my hearing anathematised marriage, took up the engagement when it had been broken off and married the pretty girl himself. As time was at a premium with him he lost as little as possible, and the wedding took place on board ship during that return voyage, the ship's chaplain officiating. When I heard of it the news broke my drug-made indifference, and I regret to say that my anger was abominable. Indeed, on looking back, I conclude it was not so much anger as rage—an atavistic horror, unreasoning and deadly. Most men have the possibility of such rage in their nature, but in some it is never roused. Not all the years since we lived in trees have been able to kill its primitive strength. It sweeps every other sensation totally away before it and does not last long. It is like a cyclone that leaves the country waste.

"So it passed with me. I was a bit more desolate than before, and what ideals had been left me were storm-laid, that was all. Nearly a year later, just before I started North, I received a cable from my uncle telling me of the birth of his twin children—a son and a daughter. The line in direct succession is tolerably secure."

"And you," said the girl, "are no longer next of kin?"

"No longer," he repeated. "I invariably hate myself when the realisation comes over me that in my inner heart sometimes, even as long ago as the

Eton days, I used to, in a subconscious way, count upon—upon the things that might have been mine."

He paused so long that Nance grew impatient, but something in the expression of the quiet, dark face kept her still.

By an effort he seemed to throw off the thought that held him, and took up the story.

"One piece of great luck came my way shortly after the departure of the English party. A publisher who had accepted a book of mine just before the explosion—I date from that—notified me that the book was beginning to sell. It was only a little book of nonsense-verse jingle, that had been written just by reason of my having known Lewis Carroll when I was a boy at home."

"*The* Lewis Carroll?" Nance exclaimed.

"The one and only," Wynn asserted.

"I know 'Alice'!" she returned. "Sister Mary Philomena lent me a copy of 'Alice.' It had belonged to her when she was a child, and she did so love it that she kept it after she entered the convent. It was very wicked of her, she says, and the Reverend Mother did not know. Sister Mary Philomena has done much penance for keeping it. When she lent it to me she did long penance, I found out afterwards. But," she ended curiously, "what has Lewis Carroll to do with your book, Mr. Wynn?"

"Lewis Carroll was a mathematician," he explained, "and once I heard him tell my father that a man should never let his mind swing too far in one direction. That was why he wrote his blessed nonsense, I suppose. Later, when figures and facts dominated me too much, I tried in a poor sort of way to follow his example—hence the small book. The sale of it has put me beyond actual want, and enabled me to return to the uttermost farthing what I owed my uncle. According to last accounts my bankers continue to stack up the modest royalties that accrue from it."

"I am so glad!" she said. "How terribly proud your mother would be if she knew! And Lewis Carroll—he would have loved to know what that chance word of his did. Such luck must have helped you to get well?"

"On the contrary, it made it absolutely easy for me to stay where I was and continue to take the drug, when I could outwit the attendants. Morphine develops diabolical cunning in its victims, and a methodical madness. As I paid largely to the hospital, and had some freedom, I usually did get it,

although I was supposed to be a closely watched patient. I might have gone elsewhere, doubtless, but I did not; I lacked the energy."

"You do not spare yourself," she said gently, leaning forward, her round chin on her hand. "You need not tell me the bitter details—unless you choose."

"I choose," he said shortly. Then, after a moment, "I would have you know the worst, so I will 'nothing extenuate.' If we had met in London, for instance, I would hardly have read you this scroll of my life, but up here, among the honest things of God, I will not pass myself off as a better or stronger man than I am.

"Yes," he went on, "I stayed on in my forsaken hospital room, for it had become the only refuge I could think of. I had lost my grip, and when a man does that, you know—or perhaps you don't know—into what an abyss he can fall. I had lost the power of mental concentration. My mind was like a maze in which unhappy disconnected thoughts, lost desires and ambitions, wandered like ghosts—ghosts that could only be laid by the poppied charm."

"But the doctor—the young doctor you told me of?" she broke in, raising her troubled eyes to his. "Surely he did not let you go so easily? I cannot believe it!"

"You are right," Wynn answered. "He was not the sort to let anything he cared to keep get away from him. I have never seen such concentrated force as he had embodied in his personality. He stood by me. He told me that before he removed the glass splinter there had been excuse enough for an opiate; that afterwards there was none. He offered to fight it out with me, but my will seemed paralysed. I was indifferent, apathetic save for one insatiable craving. He was vivid life and youth personified—'Excelsior,' the nurses had nicknamed him. Weeks went by—no, months; and he stood by me, never admitting defeat, though I baffled him time and again, and tired his spirit to the breaking point often. And then——"

"And then?" Nance repeated.

"Then he did not come to see me for a few days, and I had things all my own way. As far as the time allowed, I undid his work. After a week it came to me through the haze of thought befogging my mind that something serious kept him, and I roused from lethargy sufficiently to question the nurses. They told me that the doctor had pricked his finger during a post-mortem, and was ill of blood-poisoning. In another day I heard he was

beyond hope. Then one of the nurses brought me a note from him. I have it here."

The man drew a sheet of folded paper from the inside pocket of his coat, and handed it to Nance.

"You may read it, if you care to," he said.

She took the paper and bent her golden head over it. Wynn stirred the logs into sudden flame.

"Dear Wynn," the note began, and the writing ran queerly across the sheet, "I am afraid I won't see you before I start. I would have liked to stay and see the end of the game, but I have a hurry call. Don't spoil my work, old chap—dear old chap—and for my sake, if not for your own, win out.—Yours till we meet,

A. L."

Nance folded the paper with fingers that trembled a little, and handed it back. The man held it a moment before he returned it to the inner pocket.

"And you?" she said. "You did win out?"

"One will occasionally do more for the dead," he answered in his low-pitched voice, "than for the living. I left the hospital after—after I got this note, and the real fight was on. I took my enemy along with me, for it seemed a poor sort of thing to try to overcome an unseen force that was so material. I have it with me up in the shack on a shelf with the tobacco tins; it is in a rather attractive leather case. Now and then I forget that it is there—I have won so far. Again I have a wild half-hour. Once in a while I chance to touch the case, and then I see red for a moment or so. But the spell is broken. I am able now to hold figures in my mind, to wrestle with facts without being thrown, to concentrate and work steadily. For some weeks I have been trying to solve a problem that was too much for me at Oxford. The shack is piled high with curled scraps of birch-bark covered with figures, and perhaps what you would consider 'occult signs.' They will make a beautiful bonfire, most of them; but I have at least one piece I will save to take home to the wise dons one of these days. I got the result I was after just two days ago. It seemed to rise under my fingers on the bark as a photograph rises on the dry plate when it is developed."

He gave a short, low laugh and rose from the chair he had taken beside her.

“It is time for me to go, I fear. You are awfully kind not to tell me I have wearied you,” he ended. “Take warning, and make a note of what happens when a man is allowed to talk about himself.”

“Encouraged to,” she corrected softly, rising also.

CHAPTER X

THE NORTHERN LIGHTS

Crossing to the shelf, Wynn lifted down the sleepy chipmunk. He glanced at the Indian woman. She stared unwinkingly at the beaver skins, and drew the shining needle in and out of the fur. The ring of candle-light circled her quiet, tiny body.

“Good-night, Wanota,” he said.

The squaw turned her face up and responded with a few soft Indian words.

“She wishes you a long sleep,” interpreted Nance.

“A long sleep is good,” he replied, “if it is not too long. Give Wanota my thanks. Now to start. If you should need me, fire two quick shots. I shall hear the report. Your grandfather will rest, I think, till morning.”

The girl went with Wynn to the edge of the veranda. A frosty wind caught the curling ends of her hair. She lifted her pretty head and looked up at the stars. They were startlingly big and bright, and the silver mist of the Milky Way wound in and out amongst them—a fairy road that led no man might say where.

“What a night!” she said, then looked up at Wynn. “You have not told me why you came to Lone Lake? There is that much of the story for me to hear yet—if you care to tell it.”

“I have no reason to give for coming,” he answered, his eyes on her face outlined in the starlight. “I just drifted this way. An unseen current brought me North, and it was the right way. Some unseen current always *does* drift us in the right way eventually, I have come to believe. But you are cold? I must not keep you.”

“I am not cold,” she answered, looking up. “I’ll just stay a moment. Ah! See that amethyst light flash from the north—now the pink!”

“*She touched his hand lightly with her own, then drew back. In the dusk the dark gold of her hair was luminous, and her eyes brilliant as the stars in the frosty sky.*”

“The Aurora!” he exclaimed. “It is the first time I’ve seen the Northern Lights this year. Do you fancy you hear them unfurled with a soft rasp as of ribbon through the fingers?”

Nance nodded. “I have often thought I heard them. Sometimes they come like a great rose-coloured umbrella opening and closing over the world; and I have seen them like a fan of iridescent feathers, waving back

and forth. Or they grow up softly in the sky as one might imagine fairy flowers would grow—queer-coloured lily-like things, with floating leaves, faintly green as seaweed; and they bloom and fade in the same moment. Once I saw them like chains of opals; and once they looked as though they were the long white fingers of a ghostly hand that moved among the stars. See—they are gone! Oh! I love the night, and the October stillness, and the winds edged with frost!"

"Up here they remind me of the moor-winds that Stevenson loved—'The winds austere and pure.' "

"Only a Scotsman would have described them so," she laughed; "though I admit it does describe them." Then, irrelevantly, "Tell me, when did you meet grandad?"

"When I got as far as the post near St. Elizabeth's Mission. He chanced to be there. The factor introduced him to me as 'the old man.' They both accepted me without comment or question. I had about come to the end of my tether, in fact, and I asked your grandfather if he knew of an empty shack where a man could live and disturb no one. He told me of the shack at Lone Lake. There seemed a fitness in the name and the place. 'We belonged.' So I bought a canoe from a reservation Indian, who luckily had one for sale, loaded up with supplies, and, following the old man, paddled up the river to Lone Lake. He kindly went with me to the hut, and I took possession. There was enough of the 'eternal vagabond' in me to make me enjoy the adventure. The place held a stove—rusted but whole, a stump table, and two odd spruce-root chairs. Also I found there a violin in its case, a faded red shawl, and what was left of a small pair of moccasins. Sherlock Holmes would have deduced that at a remote time a white man had lived there—and an Indian woman."

"Yes," said Nance, "the white man who was thrown over Black Rock by the Indian whose spirit, they say, haunts the lake, and the woman the Indian loved."

"I have seen no spirits," said Wynn, "though they may be there. The place is filled with an unutterable quiet. A healing silence. It is perfumed with balsam till the very shadows seem sweet-scented. I sought it as hurt things seek hidden places where they may be left alone and perhaps win back strength. It has been lonely—so lonely, little lady, that at times I would even have welcomed the spirit of that love-mad Indian for company. But"—he looked down at the girl and held out his hand—"that has about passed."

She touched his hand lightly with her own, then drew back. In the dusk the dark gold of her hair was luminous, and her eyes brilliant as the stars in the frosty sky. “Oh, it is very late!” she said. “I must go in.”

“Yes—yes!” he said hurriedly. “And I have kept you too long. But tell me”—his voice suddenly eager—“tell me my story did not weary you, that it has not made you despise me. Tell me you like me quite as well as you did yesterday morning. You see,” with a short, uncertain laugh, “I take it for granted that I made a good first impression.”

“Indeed, I like you as well,” Nance replied, echoing the little passing laugh. Crossing to the door, she stood suddenly absolutely still, listening. The long, unhappy wail of a lynx came faintly on the wind, swelled louder, broke into moans, and died away.

“Have you a rifle in the canoe?” she questioned suddenly.

He smiled in the dark. “Yes,” he assured her.

“And—it is loaded?”

“With bird-shot,” said Wynn.

“It should be buck-shot,” she answered. “Keep the muzzle towards the bow; it is wiser when it’s dark. Good-night.”

“Good-night,” the man repeated.

The queer bark door swung on its moose-hide hinges, then closed. Wynn watched the girl’s shadow fall on the window, stood a moment, lit his pipe, then strode across the brittle grasses towards the river.

Nance slipped off her green serge gown and put on a red woollen kimono that Sister Mary Philomena had made for her. She took the pins from her hair, brushed and braided it. Then she drew a bear-skin near the couch where the old man still slept, and sat down on the floor beside him. Joris, who had been nervously trotting about the room until she came in, went over to the hearth, stretched contentedly, tramped round in one small spot after a fashion probably followed by his wolf-kin in prehistoric days, curled up, and slept. Wanota had disappeared. The wind blew up sharply. In the warm room once more, the girl grew rigidly still and listened, for again came the desolate, horrible cry of the lynx—nearer this time. Silence followed.

She crouched down, resting her head against the old man’s hand where it lay on the fur. The red kimono that the little grey nun had fashioned

wrapped her round as in poppy leaves, but it held none of their charm, for sleep and she were two.

Thoughts, sweet and bitter, held her in bondage. Her soul was swept away on the flood-tide of them. The presence of the man who had just left her seemed still to fill the room. She saw him everywhere, and heard his voice; the vibrant careless voice that rang the changes on each tone, and made even common words and current phrases of golden value, to be treasured against the colourless and soundless days when perchance they would be heard no more. With small reason, she had always looked forward to the future as full of vivid possibilities—as a joyous kaleidoscopic time that would turn each day into a new delight. She shuddered as she realised that all in a moment her outlook upon the coming years had changed. She feared them, feared the long grey procession of them, for she knew that they would be blank, empty, silent as the seas beyond the last land, if Richard Wynn went away. Richard Wynn—the man she had only known since yesterday morning; a sojourner, a passer-by; one who would, without the faintest doubt, return to the place whence he came.

Though he made light of it, he was of a different world from her own. There were many, it might be, in Oxford, in London, or in the American university town he had named, who waited eagerly for news of him and wearied at his long absence. Here in the North, she had seen no man like him. Here the men grew silent as the silent places they knew. They were taciturn, and often rough on the surface. Sometimes they were kindly, sometimes cruel, but not one of them who had come her way had this man's gentle freedom of speech, or his open delight in the beauty of the North. Not one had his buoyant indifference to the day's hardships, or possessed his unfailing courtesy.

Her father, she remembered, had been such a one as Wynn, and other men she had met in those dim days of her childhood, spent amongst Shakespearean players and in the atmosphere of the theatres, now crossed her mind as vague, indistinct figures, yet of the same gracious bearing.

Her grandfather was different. He had no outward graces. At times he talked, but he was often unreadable and given to long silences. His temper was quick and uncontrolled, and he was a dangerous man to cross or deceive, as different Indians had found to their cost. Yet he could be a faithful friend, and was strong and good also—apart from his trapping of the beasts.

She wished now, passionately, that she had inherited his strength of will and self-sufficiency, and had been less easy to charm, less quick to give her friendship.

There in the dark her face burned as she realised that she had asked for—no, insisted upon Wynn's recital of his story. Had he not laughingly admitted that he would not have given her such confidences if they had met in England! How would he have talked to those conventional English girls, she wondered. In what way was she unlike them? Perhaps he was only starved for sympathy. One listener might have answered as well as another. Perhaps the silence of Lone Lake made him eager to hear his own voice and hers. That they had drifted into personal matters was natural enough. It was the tendency when people were cut off from outside interests. The settlers, hunters and trappers were nearly always introspective. No, it was not strange that he had told her. But there should be no more questions. Desperately she resolved to keep close guard upon herself. Yet—oh! how dear the long paddle up the river had been! How for ever unforgettable the hours in the firelit room!

She pressed her head a little closer against the big helpless hand on the bear-skin, for Wanota's candle on the chair fluttered and went out. The room grew dark, save where the embers glowed; grew darker and darker, then grew grey, for the eastern sky turned rose and silver, and Nance kept vigil by the old man till he awoke at sunrise.

CHAPTER XI

WYNN GIVES A PROMISE

There were snow-flurries during the next few days, and sharp frost at night.

Then came a morning of mellow warmth. A haze as of floating amber and blue smoke blurred the hills and woods, making distance a thing impossible to measure with the eye, and transforming the earth into a place of ethereal, unearthly beauty. Far off a bush fire raged, and at night the moon was red. The scent of dead leaves was on the air.

McCullough had set out thirty traps the day before illness seized him—what he had counted a heavy day's work for one man. François, he concluded, was making lazy outward journeys over the few lines and gathering in the traps and fur to a central point. But the half-breed had outstayed his time limit. Wanota grew restless, the old man impatient.

After the one long night's sleep he had been wakeful, and his strength was at low ebb.

On the morning when the weather changed, Wynn came in and found him lying on the couch with the Eskimo dog for company. He told Wynn to draw a chair up and light his pipe.

"You will smoke too, won't you, sir?" Wynn suggested.

McCullough shook his head. "I've lost the taste for it," he said. "Wanota has gone over to the old shack. She's unsettled, somehow. I sent Nance in yonder to rest, for the child's had little sleep. This is my chance—I must speak to you about my girl, Wynn. It was dead wrong of me to bring her up from the Mission. She was safe there."

"She is safe here," Wynn assured him. "You are not alone."

"I am helpless," the old man said irritably. "There are supplies here to last till spring, provided François brings in plenty of game—but I am helpless. Wanota I trust, you I trust, though I have no hold on either of you—but François——" he broke off, his mouth twitching.

"François—you trust him too?" queried Wynn, knocking the ashes out of his pipe and refilling it.

The old man’s face grew shrewdly knowing. He glanced around cautiously and dropped his voice to a rough whisper.

“Should you go,” he said, “I would be at the mercy of François. He is clever—ay! the best trapper and the best shot I know. He can get fish through the ice as well as through the water. He knows the tricks of the fur-gatherers and the tricks of the beasts. He is wily as a fox, still as a snake, quick as a weazel. He has all the cunning and long patience of a redskin, while the damnable French-Canadian who fathered him endowed him with a full capacity for every civilised vice. He ran away from Wanota when he was a boy, and travelled from one trading post to another picking up a living, a crude knowledge of English and an expert one of card tricks. They know him from the Upper Yukon to the mushroom towns along the C.P.R. He has wintered as far east as Fort Churchill, and summered in Sitka. He is known in the barren lands and the southern forests, and I heard he trailed into Fort Norman through the mush-snow one spring, with a toboggan load of white fur, drawn by a pack of starved, half-mad huskies. He is a devil when he is drunk, and needs watching when he is sober.” A fit of coughing shook the gaunt frame for a few moments. “But I have bargained with him to stay out the winter with me, Wynn. He’s the more ready to stay as the mounted police are looking for him, and have been looking since a year ago last April, when he shot a man at the Company’s post at Peace River Landing. I have bargained with him to snare hares and bring in moose-meat till spring. If Nance would go back to the Sisters, now I have seen her, I would be more content—but she refuses to go. I may be better by spring, or I may be dead; if I mend, I will go to Winnipeg with Nance. I never intended to keep her here long. But I’ve no strength to journey now. I am utterly helpless.”

“You don’t seem to count on me to any extent,” said the other with a slight shrug.

“I have no right to count on you, boy. François I can pay. Yet it helps to know you are near, and I want your promise that if—anything happens—you will take Nance back to the Sisters. Later, she can go to a cousin of mine in Scotland, if she will. There is money hidden, boy—hidden deep under the fifth hearthstone. The flat stone. Yes—that’s it. That’s the one. And there’s money in a bag under the bear-skin here, and a bit is stowed in an Edmonton bank. A silver-fox skin and some marten-pelts are wrapped in a blue-wolf skin yonder. They will bring a better price further east. Nance knows of the fur—not of the hidden money. Promise you will look after her if anything happens.”

"I promise," said the man. "There's my hand on it."

The old man thanked him and closed his eyes.

"Wanota," said Wynn reflectively, after a moment. "You trust Wanota?"

"Ay!" assented McCullough. "Yet, mark you, she would sell her soul for François, and he might use her for his tool, if he needed one."

"I fancy he might," commented Wynn, rising. "It's warm in here, sir; you hardly need a fire. It's positively balmy out of doors."

"I am cold," he answered, "though it's Indian summer on the hills. The northern lakes have frozen and released their heat. I wish I could take my rifle and calling-horn and go up towards the salt-licks at the north of the beaver meadows for moose."

"I will see you have moose-meat for dinner to-morrow," Wynn told him. "That is, if I have luck. I left a string of red trout at the door."

"You are a good friend," said McCullough. Presently he slipped into a doze, and Wynn went out. Nance, from the inner room, heard the door close softly.

Wanota stood at the edge of the river, her hands shading her eyes.

"You are watching for François?" questioned Wynn, as he came up a few moments later. Then he smiled down at the little squaw in friendly fashion. "I am going up the river now, and on towards the salt-licks. If we meet I will tell François to hasten."

"He come," she answered placidly.

Wynn gazed up-stream.

"Really, I see no canoe," he said.

"Hark!" she returned, leaning forward.

The other listened. He heard the river purling against the frost-bitten grasses on the bank, heard a rabbit scurry to cover, and a spruce partridge whir by. That was all.

"Look," said Wanota, pointing.

Far off there was a blur of grey midstream against the blue of the water, a filmy, shapeless thing. Slowly it grew into the form of a canoe and a man paddling.

“He come,” the squaw repeated, gently exultant. Turning, she walked along the bank and sat down to await her son. She picked up a strip of deer-skin she had been working at, and proceeded to whiten it with a piece of fungus broken from a hemlock log. To Wynn she paid no more attention than she had to the passing spruce partridge.

“I will bring you fresh moose-meat to-morrow, Wanota,” he called back, carelessly, as he launched his canoe.

“François bring moose-meat,” she replied.

The man gave a little laugh. “And you will have none of mine, eh? Come, be friends with me, Madam Wanota.”

She looked at him silently, and lifted her head with a slight gesture. It was not a friendly one.

“I regret that I do not please you,” Wynn said. Raising his cap, he bowed to her, stepped into the boat, and paddled off.

The squaw watched him depart, her big inscrutable eyes shining out from the expressionless calm of her face. So she waited till her son landed, and drew his canoe up the bank.

McCullough was not cordial in his greeting to the half-breed, though he brought in a fair number of pelts as well as the traps. The old trapper was irritated by the length of time he had taken, yet dared say but little.

“Clean the traps and hang them,” he said; “that is, my traps. I will use them no more, François. After you have brought me what game I need, go fur-gathering for yourself with your own traps whenever you wish; but, hark you, not farther than a day’s journey, or our bargain is broken. I need you at hand. Sleep in your own shack at least every other night. Wanota will pass the winter here.”

“In spring you go?” asked the half-breed.

“Yes; in the spring—or before.”

François sauntered to the door leading on to the veranda. Leaning against the frame of it, he smoked for awhile, blowing smoke rings lazily.

“I stretch the skins now,” he observed when the pipe was burned out. “Wanota she help. The bear I got; him not much. Old, mangy. The four beaver good. To-morrow I go for moose.” Then he struck out for his shack, swinging along in an indolent, graceful fashion that yet covered the ground fast.

At the edge of some alders he came suddenly on Nance. She often walked to the river, or as far as these trees. The old shack was just beyond them.

The girl started as the half-breed came up. The last time they had met was a year before, when the man had gone to the Mission with word from her grandfather.

“Oh, François!” she exclaimed. “I did not know you were back! How are you? I am glad to be home again with grandad—poor grandad—is it not dreadful to see him so?”

The half-breed looked at her steadily. No rose-tint of her face or gold-gleam of her hair was lost to him. The smooth white of her throat dazzled him. The French blood in his veins went on a mad race. He bent towards her, his handsome face flushing.

“You are right,” he said. “I have come back—me, François. You think I stay away and leave you to dat man at Lone Lac? No, no! my beauty! I come back.”

With a lithe movement he caught her and drew her close to him. His hair brushed her face.

The girl gave a little cry, and with all her strength loosened his hold.

“Let me go! Let me go, François!” she said breathlessly. “How dare you!”

He laughed down at her, his eyes aflame; then threw back his head and straightened to his full height.

“Is not a half-breed a man?” he demanded. “Can he not love—and hate? You will see. I love you, leetle Nance. Look! I will marry you by Catholic priest and ring. I will not leave you as dat Frenchman who was my father left Wanota. He was, dey say, ‘a gentleman.’ Me, I will do better.” He gave a shrug. “I come of good blood an’ bad; but you—you, beautiful, shall only see what is good. I love you.”

Nance glanced about her. They were quite shut off from her grandfather’s shack by the thick alders. The wilderness was on every side. She stood ready for flight, yet did not move—or dare to. After that first wild glance she turned to the man, the colour slowly ebbing from her face.

“You shall not say such things to me. You would not in my grandfather’s house, and you shall not here.”

“Shall not?” he echoed hoarsely, his eyes lit with rage. “Then for why? You run, eh? Not far, I think, if I not choose. Me—I speak when, and where, and how I will.”

He caught her strong little wrists and held them in his fingers that were as flexible steel bands. Looking down, he compelled her unwilling eyes to meet his.

“ *‘I wait. I wait long. Now I will be still no more. Always, from de first day you come, I love you’* .”

“Why you think I wait here?” he questioned. “For what? De ole man’s pay likely? Mon Dieu! For de fur I take, or for de ole man to die an’ leave for me his trap lines? Not by much. I wait for you. I know you come back from de Mission some time. I wait. I wait long. Now I will be still no more. Always, from de first day you come, I love you. Now I will marry you. Dat man at Lone Lac—where he come from? Who is he? Honest men, they do not hide at Lone Lac. You think so? He come, play his cards. Ver’ well. I play mine in turn. De trumps, maybe. Wanota tell me he talk, talk, talk to you mos’ all de night.” The soft, dangerous voice dropped still lower, and the half-breed threw a glance over his shoulder. It was the glance of an Indian—swift, cold, cruel.

A sudden fear turned the girl’s heart to ice. She caught her breath with a helpless sob. In the man’s grasp her wrists quivered.

“Oh, François!” she cried again. “Let me go, please! You hurt me!”

The cynical face changed, and a passionate wistfulness swept over it.

“Ah, it is not you I would hurt,” he said, loosening his hold. “Not you. I hav frighten you. Your pardon, leetle Nance. I let you go——”

Nance broke from him and ran, on and on, up to the old man’s shack.

CHAPTER XII

AT THE BEAVER MEADOWS

After leaving Wanota, Dick Wynn went towards the lake. He had not counted on going after moose that day. What he had counted on was seeing Nance. Now he probably would not be back for twenty-four hours. He had been up at the old man's log house every day, but since the night of their long talk he had not seen Nance. He wondered why, although the excuses given for her absence by McCullough or Wanota had sounded plausible enough.

Well he knew that the ways of a girl are past finding out, yet he wrathfully determined on an explanation of these absences when next they met, and gloomily concluded that it must have taken considerable planning to elude him so long.

Altogether, he was in a bad frame of mind. He hated shooting moose. They always seemed to him the rightful kings of the country, and when he brought one down he grimly imagined he felt about as a socialistic Irish sharpshooter might who had just picked off his landlord.

If the old man wanted fresh moose-meat it must be got, but he hoped in his heart that François, whose canoe swept nearer each moment, had some aboard.

Midstream the boats met. Wynn dipped his paddle deep and stopped. The half-breed kept on his way, his paddle flashing and disappearing rhythmically, although his canoe was heavily loaded and low in the water.

"Hold hard, François!" Wynn hailed him. "Have you moose?"

The other shook his head.

"No moose," he called back, not pausing.

"Too bad!" returned the man. "I hoped you had. That's all—thanks."

Leaning on his paddle, he looked after the Indian. "Now I wonder?" he mused. "He's such a cheerful liar."

However, he decided there was nothing for it but to go on, so he stopped at his shanty for a rifle, hard biscuits, and a blanket.

The lake was rock-bound at the north, and perhaps at its widest eight miles across. North-west it emptied into a branch of the Little Smoky River, but due west narrowed between huge hills, for the most part blue-black with their terraced covering of spruce, though one here and there was ragged-walled, stone-ribbed, and desolately bare. Wynn steered his light craft in that direction. Midway out, the lake glittered deeply blue, but he drew near shore where it was dark and still, and mirrored the great trees.

Indian summer swung her gauzy veil across the gold of the noonday sun and the dreamy azure of the sky, and the air was heavy with perfume of dying leaves and pine-needles—the forest's offering of frankincense and myrrh.

Farther along, the hills grew fewer and seemed to melt down into waves of wooded land, mottled here and there with green and black muskegs, treacherous, horrible places, shining with an evil lustre in patches, and offering foothold, yet sinking beneath the lightest step.

About here some little streams hurried down to the lake; one, larger than the rest, had been dammed long since and turned into a beaver meadow, thick-set with sedge and overgrown by lily-pads. Moose came to this place to feed on the lily roots, and small water-loving beasts haunted it. For a few miles the other side of the pond the land was comparatively level, but beyond again it was rough and boulder-strewn, while in one small, barren spot some salt springs had coated a rock with their white powder. Many feet had beaten hard paths to these salt-licks. Here the great moose monarch brought his following; elk and deer knew the spot, and even the sheep of the mountain, blithering, simple things, found their way to it, driven by their craving, and led by some mysterious sense of direction.

Wynn found a channel where he could paddle into the marsh. A colony of beaver, industriously trowelling mud on the roofs of their houses, stared at him glassily; then in wild panic, went below. The water, beaded a moment by their going, settled back into its oily calm. A heavy stillness brooded over the place. In the windless air the rushes did not rustle, and there was no sound of water-fowl or insect. Overhead the blue was clouded by the autumn haze; beneath were only the metallic colours of the frost-touched marsh growth, beautiful yet lifeless. A sense of death and desertion closed down upon it all.

Somewhere in the hills a loon gave its long, dolorous cry. Then silence came back. To Wynn it seemed as though he might be the last living man in the last world. His fret of temper left him. A consuming desire to get his

moose and leave this place of desolation swept all else before it. A swift remembrance of the old man’s living-room came to him. As a picture grows in a sorcerer’s crystal ball, so, on the marsh water, he saw appear a vision of that room of comfort, with the hearth-fire, the twisted chairs, and in one of them Nance herself, with the light setting her hair a-glitter. The warmth of home was in the picture, and it took away the edge of the chill that had crept over him.

If Nance McCullough had kept out of his way, he thought, it was for a whim, a caprice, a fancy. So much the better. The joy of pursuit would be his, the satisfaction of capture; and then—well, what would they say of her in Washington and London, he wondered. The critics might line up, one and all. Let them. He had not intended to stay the winter through at Lone Lake. Not more than a month or two of it, perhaps. The battle was about over, and the rest could be fought out anywhere. Now the question of going was dropped. He awaited the old man’s pleasure.

At the far side of the beaver meadow Wynn beached the canoe, and padded on his moccasins up country between the young trees. In spring there would be a web of bloom on the ground, but now it was rusty-gold with leaves the frost had ruined. The moose loved this land about the outskirts of the lake, though to-day there was no sign of big game. He waited, listening, and swore softly for failing to bring a calling-horn. A fawn that had not outgrown its dappled coat brushed through the birch not far off. A fox crossed his path in a sharp red streak. Some rabbits, whitening for winter, rose from their forms and were gone. The little plump people of the underworld, the field-mice and moles, roused sleepily as he passed, and dozed again.

Wynn strode on towards the rougher land slowly, after stopping to eat his hard tack beside a brook. The short day drew in. He stopped often, listening keenly. The golden film over the hills shaded to violet. A white ptarmigan passed him. Once he heard a faint snapping of branches and the rustling of a big body through the trees, followed by the rattle of antlers against bark.

Sound-guided, he trailed back towards the beaver meadow, reaching it in time to see the dusky body of a moose slip into the water and swim out lazily under cover of the lily-pads. He raised his rifle, sighted, then lowered it. A shot at that distance was uncertain, and there was no overtaking the game, for his canoe was far down shore. A sensation of sickening disappointment went through him.

The rusted lily-pads curled and uncurled about the big moving head. The antlers drifted across the pond, into the narrow channel, and out to the lake.

Wynn turned and did not watch. It was sunset when he reached the salt-licks. A little hill rose behind these rocks, and was crowned by a clump of young birch that had grown circle-wise, and bent in such fashion that their drooping branches touched and formed a natural shelter not unlike the willow wickiups[3] of the desert Indians of Shoshone Land.

The man knew the spot and climbed to it. He had eaten his supper of biscuit, so now he took out his pipe and smoked. A restless desire to get away from this unpeopled place and back to the yellow candle-light and fire-glow of the old man's shack seized him, and held him and wearied him. He was tired—tired to death of being alone. He would shorten the night by sleep, he at last resolved; would "will to sleep," whatever thoughts tormented him.

The silver-grey moon sailed down the sky companioned by the stars, and shone through the twig-laced chinks of his tent. Two white owls—lantern-eyed fly-by-nights—brushed the roof of it.

A coyote glided across the hoof-beaten path below the hill and scented the air, but the moon troubled him more than his half roused suspicions. The sun and the stars he knew, but the moon that sometimes bloomed like a red wonder-flower in the sky, and sometimes was small and sharp of edge as a hunter's knife, and again floated high, white and ominous, and ringed with violet that foretold storms—the moon troubled him, and he howled at it bitterly for many minutes. A little cold wind blew up and swayed the birch branches, but the man slept unheeding.

In the twilight of the morning, Wynn found himself suddenly awake and listening. His nerves tingled with the feeling that he was being watched—and watched by some hidden thing. Rising on one elbow, he listened, peering through the low branches.

No; nothing was near. Nothing that he could see.

"Probably a beastly bob-cat," he said, throwing off the unpleasant sensation with an effort, and stretching mightily, for he was stiff from the night chill. "Queer—but I invariably have that uncanny feeling when there's a bob-cat about."

Rising, he pushed the swaying branches apart. A ghostly pearl-white mist shrouded the lonesome hills and draped the land, making it impossible to see far, but it seemed to the man that he caught the faint sound of hoof-

beats. In a moment more he was sure, and it was good to him to hear a sound, definite and indisputable.

Presently, down the hard path below came a young bull-moose and a yearling. They were swinging along together at their peculiar pounding trot, and made playful lunges at each other, apparently in the highest spirits.

As they came up to the base of the hill, the bull stopped dead and lifted his head inquiringly. He stood in fine relief, a dark silhouette against the misty light.

It was the man's chance. His nerves were tense with watching; his rifle already raised. He sighted—fired!

The young bull went down with the shot—quivered dreadfully, straightened, and was still. The yearling looked on in wild-eyed wonder, then bolted, and was lost among the half-grown tamaracks.

The man drew a long breath. He had done what he hated to do, and was glad it was over. Taking his knife, he started down hill. As he halted a moment by the dead moose, a bullet whizzed over his shoulder. The report rang against the rocky hills, and passed.

Wynn stood as though petrified. The leather rifle-rest stitched on the shoulder of his corduroy coat had been cut slightly by the bullet.

Swinging about, he lifted his hands to his mouth and gave a long, clear "Hal—loo!" twice.

"Unpleasantly close!" he commented, with a soft whistle. "Now what fool Indian mistook me for big game? Or—or did any fool Indian? There's a chance that some half-mad or over-bold trapper has strayed into the haunted territory—just one chance. However, as the college boys used to say, 'I've put him wise.' "

Wynn still stood by the moose, his far-sighted eyes sweeping the rough land. The mist was rising now, and the eastern sky turned golden and pink, while over the ground was a silver net of hoar-frost.

As he was about to turn to his work, a second bullet sang over his shoulder. This time the corduroy was bitten into beneath the rifle-rest.

The man caught his breath sharply, and his eyes blazed. He gave a short, hard laugh. "Fancy shooting! There's a method in that madness. He's not shooting to kill, but to let me know he *can* kill—when he gets good and ready."

Again he searched the land about him. No puff of smoke showed through the trees. “François, I believe!” Wynn asserted half aloud. “It may be his dislike for me is becoming concrete—at least, there is no other such shot hereabouts. He may hide behind the tamaracks or the alders. Possibly he prefers rock shelter. In the direction from whence those shots came a man has his choice of cover. I’ll give him ten minutes to fire again, and then he will go, I believe—shod in silence. I shall not take to the timber. It wouldn’t be of the slightest use. Sooner or later I should emerge, and then!——Oh! my enemy! Another shot, and this one through the heart. First the torture, then the kill. To prolong the torture is to defer the death. No! I will not take to cover. There is one chance. By defying him long enough I may get it. I apologise to all wild cats. François and they are of no kin. He is brother to the adder in the grass and the copper-head!”

Probably the man did not know that he spoke. He watched for some faintest puff of smoke and waited, standing beside the moose as absolutely still as the stiffening beast.

Just before the allotted ten minutes passed, again came the singing bullet from seemingly farther off. This time it went a trifle deeper, and grazed the skin beneath the coat in the same spot where it had been cut before.

When the report died, Wynn took his knife, knelt down and went to work. Whether he guessed rightly or not, nothing further disturbed him, and by noon he started across the marsh, his canoe heavy in the water.

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[3] “Wickiup” = Willows planted in a circle drawn over to an arch and tied about with withes. These form a sort of tent, much used by the desert Indians of Southern California and Mexico.

CHAPTER XIII

SCAR-EYE AND THE CHIEF

The small craft glided along smoothly enough, she made no false move, did not even once quiver or start; but though the man guided her with the easy stroke of long practice, he was as a living machine that watched the tree-fringed water and listened.

He stopped at his shack, remembering that he was hungry, and later unloaded part of his game.

About mid-afternoon he paddled to the old man's ground, drew up the canoe, and started with a load of moose-meat for the log house.

Passing through the alders, he caught a glimmer of fleeting red against the trees.

"Ah, Wanota!" Wynn called, "is François about? I want his buffalo-knife a moment."

The woman stopped on her path towards the river. She came towards him slowly.

"Him gone," she said placidly, "for moose."

"Then he brought none before—eh? You expect him by the river-way—and soon?"

She nodded.

"I've had luck, Wanota; I'll cut up this meat with one of the old man's knives, though really he does not possess one the equal of that bevel-edged buffalo-horn affair of your son's—and you may cook a steak for supper."

Her reply was inarticulate.

"I think, perhaps, if you were to come up to the house now," he suggested.

Half sullenly the squaw turned and followed at heel.

"François is after moose, you say?" Wynn questioned, glancing back. "Up near the beaver meadows, it may be, eh?"

She nodded.

“I thought so. Someone was shooting a bit carelessly round about the salt-licks, and my coat got nicked.” The man flashed a smile at her over the shoulder where the leather rifle-rest showed the bullet marks. “Of course, it may not have been your son, Madam Wanota, but”—he gave a little shrug—“you might tell him to keep a sharper outlook when he goes gunning. It would be better for both of us.”

The squaw padded along softly. She did not reply, but the bisque shade of her face turned grey. When they neared the log house, she suddenly sprang a step forward and touched Wynn.

He turned inquiringly.

“You go!” she said hoarsely. “Go soon. Go far.”

“That is not my intention, Wanota. Why do you wish me to go?”

She gave a swift glance around. “You stay—François kill.” Her words came in a whisper, prophetic and direct. The great eyes in her strange little face burned with an unearthly beauty. They reminded the man of the jewelled eyes he had seen years before deep set in the blank face of a Hindoo god.

“Even so,” he returned, “I shall stay.”

“Then François kill,” she reiterated finally.

The man bent towards her, and his face was very grave.

“Unless—unless I kill François.”

Across the close-held line of the woman’s mouth came a stifled, anguished cry. Her work-worn hands knotted together.

“No! No!” she exclaimed. “No! No! You go—you go——!”

He made no answer, but swung along up to the house, and the small moccasined feet followed stumblingly.

In the living-room of the log house the old man entertained. He lay on the couch beside the fire, and the young chief from a Muskegon reservation and an old pagan Indian medicine-man with but one eye sat on the clay floor near him.

They all smoked solemnly, and for the most part in profound silence. The old man’s pipe smouldered low, for he drew at it seldom. His face lit up as Wynn entered, and he made a futile effort to rise, then beckoned.

The Indians laid their pipes down and nodded in salutation. The medicine-man spoke a few words in Cree to McCullough, who answered and beckoned again to Wynn.

“Come, join us, boy!” he said. “Scar-eye wishes you to come into the circle and smoke also. He and the new chief have journeyed from far to see me. Scar-eye urges me to have this room turned into a temporary sweat-house, and when I have been thoroughly parboiled he will, he says, administer to me certain remedies known to him alone, remedies whose formula has been a secret, handed down to the medicine-men of his tribe for generations. I have assured him that François has given me what tubbing my strength will permit.”

Wynn took one of the twisted chairs, lit his pipe, and listened.

“Scar-eye is kind,” he said. “Tell him it is a matter to be carefully considered.”

McCullough interpreted between them. The old pagan nodded, and presently spoke at some length.

“Besides those remedies, whose secret he cannot disclose, he has brought with him the powdered heart of a lynx mixed with the marrow from the leg-bone of a hare. This, he tells me, will bring strength if taken during the first quarter of the first moon of the year,” said the old man. “But, should it work slowly, he has also an oil extracted from the livers of serpents, which is of great value when rubbed into the skin. The other medicines he carries can only be applied by himself alone, with charms and incantations—and he would prefer not applying them unless I took the steam bath.”

“Scar-eye is wise,” Wynn commented.

“Ay!” returned McCullough. “He will leave the remedies I may use alone,” quoted the old man when the Indian had again spoken. “And he has asked the little gods of healing to cure my ill—those little gods who give virtue to the herbs and roots, and implant strength-giving properties to the hearts and livers of wild cats and serpents. By following his directions, Scar-eye tells me, I may yet swim in the river or roll in the snow wallows, as do strong Indians.”

“Scar-eye has power and magic,” nodded Wynn.

The medicine-man had finished his long smoke. Now he rose and drew his blanket about him; on his old marred face was a great dignity, mingled with gratification. The young chief stood also and spoke a few words of farewell. For himself, he had no great faith in the healing art of his tribal

doctor. Were he ill, he would send to the Post for the white man's medicine that came in bottles, labelled "Pain-Killer," or he would go farther, and move heaven and earth to procure a measure of that potent, fiery fluid that was as a swift golden wave, flooding the body with strength and courage—at least, temporarily. He bowed gravely to the old man, drew his belt close about his buckskin coat, and led the way to the door.

"Wait a moment, my friends!" McCullough said hastily. "I would not have you leave me empty handed. I would have you carry away some token of remembrance that you might look at now and then, and say: 'This belonged to the old man who sometimes trapped and hunted over the haunted ground, who built the strange, unnecessary house, and who wintered once at the reservation and learned to speak our tongue.' Tell Nance to come to me," he ended, turning his eyes to Wynn. "She is by the willows, below the house."

The man went out and down to the clump of trees. Nance was cutting willow withes, although it was no season for that work, while the little yellow and grey dog dug madly at the roots of the trees as it were for buried treasure.

The girl wore a scarlet woollen cap and knitted coat. Her face glowed, and the waves of her hair shone. Wynn stopped a moment and drew a sharp breath. The vivid beauty of her stirred him, as it had the half-breed on the day before, but he determined she should not know how glad he was to see her.

The girl turned with a little exclamation. "You?" she cried, letting her knife fall. "I thought you were up by the beaver meadows."

"I have returned to civilisation," he said coolly, lighting his pipe. "Even the society of beavers grows monotonous in time."

This conventional tone was one Nance had not heard him use before. She raised her brows in slight surprise, and pursed up her mouth. His determination almost vanished for the moment. He puffed a ring of smoke into the air.

"Your grandfather wants you—the silent, smoky savages are about to depart."

"Oh!" she said, her eyes flashing. "Dear old Scar-eye! You shall not call him a savage. He is kind and very, very wise. He has the woodcraft of a thousand years stored in him. Once, long ago, when I had a cut on my ankle

that would not heal, grandfather brought him here, and he cured it by herbs he knew of.”

“And charms?” he suggested, smoking lazily.

“Yes,” she answered defiantly, “and charms.”

“That pagan gentleman should inform you it is no season to cut willow withes,” he smiled.

“Indeed, I know it. But they are still pliable enough to make rough baskets.”

A slight constraint fell between them, the first they had known, and they crossed to the house in silence, Wynn carrying the willow canes. Now and then Nance glanced at him, but his face had that pleasant nothingness of expression so easy for an Englishman to assume.

Nance smiled at the Indians as they entered, and went over to the old man.

The beady eyes of the young chief brightened at sight of her, and Scar-eye’s thin-lipped mouth answered her smile.

“Yes, grandad?” she said. “You sent for me——?”

“Take down the rifle hanging there beside the snow-shoes, Nance, and the belt also; give them to the chief.” Nance did so, and the young Cree received them graciously, though his dignity allowed of no transports. His hand trembled a little, for his desire had been for such a rifle.

“Give Scar-eye the book with the leather cover,” said the old man. “It tells of the God named Christ.”

Nance handed it to him, and the old pagan bowed. Then without further words they filed away.

CHAPTER XIV

THE LITTLE LEATHER CASE

Whether by reason of his long conference with the Crees, or only that his illness was following an inevitable course, McCullough took a turn for the worse early that afternoon.

A burning pain came in his side and brought with it a restlessness that showed that the power of resistance and endurance was waning.

Wanota suggested weird remedies, and Wynn and Nance did what they could with the resources at hand.

By sundown, though they said no word of it, they feared to face the night.

The room grew dark save for the firelight. McCullough had asked for air, and Wynn stood by the open door, his troubled eyes gazing helplessly out into the gloom. From among the trees near by came the persistent, mournful calling of a grey owl, and any sound more bereft of hope he had never heard. Stooping, he picked up a pine cone that lay at his feet, and threw it hard in the direction of the trees. There was a muffled passing of wings, and silence.

Wanota crouched by the stove, motionless. Nance stayed close to the couch beside the painstricken figure.

Suddenly she rose and went to the open door. “There is something that will help!” she cried softly, her face close to the man’s arm. “I have just thought of it. The morphine! The morphine that you told me you had at your shack, Mr. Wynn.”

The man cut a word short under his breath. “How did I manage to forget it?” he said, looking down into the face that showed white in the dark. “I will go at once, and return in all haste, Nance. Don’t be frightened.”

“I am not frightened—only hurry, *please*.”

He half leaned towards her, as though about to say something further, then swung out through the open door.

The thread-like path to the river was as familiar to him by night as by day, but now he went armed and watched the shadows. They lay like black velvet across the silver-frosted, brittle grasses, for the moon was rising, and it was still and cold.

As he took his way, he thought of François. It was his opinion that the half-breed would be wary, and not go the length of murder if he could force his enemy away by fear.

François knew—none better—that, even in the wilderness, murder will out, and that through that crystal-clear air, the scent of human blood carries far. Deep in the nature of every Indian flourishes an undying, though seldom expressed, curiosity regarding his fellows. For a man who had lived for a year or more in their neighbourhood, or comparatively near to it, totally to disappear, was to turn this curiosity into questions—simple questions of direct, penetrating, and unpleasant quality. He knew the mounted police are never better pleased than when they play avenging angel. For the most part they are young and keen for adventure. They ride like centaurs, and are tireless as the wind. They track their quarry with light hearts untroubled by sentiment, and they bear their prisoners bound, and desolate of friends, across unbelievable miles of roadless wastes, gaily conducting them in safety to those tribunals where justice is sure and often swift.

Wynn had heard from McCullough that the half-breed feared the law; that much as he dreaded the red flag flying above a smallpox-smitten district, he dreaded more the sight of a mounted soldier.

Death, of itself, François disdained. He risked it continually. His soul troubled him not at all, nor the affairs relating to it, for he was neither pagan nor Christian, but cheerfully scorned the tenets of both. Death, short and sharp, by a rifle bullet, would have given him no qualm of fear, although he preferred to live; but death at the end of a rope, the possibility of slow strangulation, the ghastly preparations, the creaking gallows, the curious-eyed onlookers, the priest with beads and book and graphic tongue-picture of the fire to come—which a man might disbelieve, yet not wish to listen to—the thought of these things sent him into a cold sweat and took the strength from his limbs.

And so Wynn surmised, while not being absolutely sure. Of one thing he was sure; he would be a target for many bullets. François would shoot at him continually from safe ambush, touching his leggings or his coat-sleeve, or nicking the wood just above his head, with incomparable skill and diabolical cunning. Unless chance favoured, there might come no opportunity to retaliate, while each day his nerves would be strained to the breaking point.

The man wondered if he would kill the half-breed should the chance come. Somehow his white heat of anger had died out. He realised the fire of jealousy pent and smouldering in François' narrow soul, and understood it.

“To have killed a man in cold blood,” he said to himself, guiding the canoe through a thin skimming of ice; “the memory of it would be a tedious sort of companion. To shoot a man deliberately, and leave him out among the lodge-pole pines for the coyotes to find, or it may be to freeze into a queer, distorted shape that slowly lost outline under the snow.” He fancied how that belt Wanota had made, with the Egyptian-like pattern embroidered on it in blue beads, would gleam out through the snow last of all; and that brought the thought of Wanota. She came into the question. The eternal feminine.

The small melancholy face rose before him, the pleading eyes. He heard still the pain-wrung cry, with the words: “You go! you go!”

“I am a fool!” the man said, striking a match in the cold cabin, and searching with benumbed fingers for the black leather case on the shelf with the tobacco tins, “a fool given to philosophy and sentiment. Facts are facts, and if one of us is to be shot and left to the coyotes, it had better be the Indian.”

He dropped the case into his pocket, and returned up the freezing river.

The door of the log house still stood open, and the moonlight now made a shining path into the living-room.

As Wynn crossed the threshold Nance met him. In that white radiance, and with her hair loosened about her, she looked to him strangely unreal. Hitherto she had been woven in his thoughts as part of the gold and blue of the morning, the glow of the sunset, the rose-warmth of the firelight—a tangible part, a delight material and to be overtaken. For the moment she seemed as something ethereal that might vanish at his touch.

“Oh!” she said hurriedly. “But I am glad you have come. The pain has grown worse—much worse this last hour; and here, in the dark, Wanota has prayed to her gods, but I could not pray at all. I only listened for your step.”

“I am no doctor,” Wynn answered a little unsteadily. “I can only trust I am doing the right thing.”

“Whatever causes the pain, he will die of exhaustion if it is not stopped,” the girl answered. “Anything is better than to sit by helplessly.”

The man told Wanota to light three candles. By their glow he filled the small nickel-plated syringe. Long familiarity with the delicate instrument had made him expert.

In a moment he was by McCullough and had bared the tossing right arm. The old man raised his eyes.

“Put out the candle,” he said thickly. “Nance need not see.”

“You will be all right now, old chap,” Wynn assured him, slipping the needle under the skin quickly. “There will be no more pain, I know.”

“No more pain?” the grey lips repeated. “When?”

“Soon,” said the other, nodding. “Very soon. Trust me.” He flashed the sunlight of his smile on to the drawn face.

The three candles burned brightly, an unheard-of illumination. The hemlock logs crackled. Joris, stretched on the bear-skin rug, sighed deeply and shut his eyes. With the wisdom of wild things he knew that for this time at least his watch was ended.

A rising wind swung the bark door close and shut the moonlight out.

Wanota sat on the floor, her eyes shining from beneath the red shawl. Her stillness had passed, and she rocked a little back and forth.

The old white head still moved restlessly against the fur-covered couch. Wynn held his watch and waited. Ten minutes went. Fifteen. McCullough was quieter. Twenty minutes were gone.

“Wynn,” he whispered.

“Yes?”

“I’m mending it may be.”

“Sure, old chap. Didn’t I tell you?”

“Aye!” the voice said faintly.

“Wynn,” he spoke after an interval, “I’ve been lying here on the rack these hours past, while unseen hands have turned it, and I’ve been thinking—thinking of the beasts I’ve trapped out over the lines around Lone Lake. Foxes—game little beasts that would snap at one in their pain, hatred in their hearts and defiance in their eyes beneath the death glaze. And bears—big brutes whimpering under trap torture, and grown tame. Nance was right, boy! Nance was right! Take every cursed trap,” he ended, struggling to rise on his elbow, his eyes burning; “take every one and sink them in the river midway out. I can atone no more. I wish I’d been willing to till the land; but I was an Indian at heart.”

“The past is past,” Wynn returned quietly. “I’ll sink the traps if the river is still open.”

“To-morrow?” insisted the voice drowsily.

“Yes,” he replied, going to the hearth.

Wanota blew out two of the candles. Nance rose from the twisted chair.

“Is he asleep?” she questioned breathlessly, after a pause.

“Beneath the waters of Lethe,” the man answered. He still held the hypodermic syringe, and glanced at it now with a whimsical curve of his lips.

“As Aladdin was the slave of the lamp, so was I the slave of this inadequate master, little lady. In exchange for my will it gave me dreams.”

“And now?” she said, raising her sea-blue eyes.

“It has no more influence upon me to-night, no more call, than—than that fur-needle of Wanota’s sticking in the beaver coat over there. I have outlived the obsession—the spell is lifted.”

“Oh, no!” she broke in on his words. “No! No! You have fought it and won. It was the dragon; you were St. George!”

He laughed softly.

“Nance,” he said, “we’ve had a pretty wild afternoon, haven’t we? People get acquainted under such conditions. Conventionalities go hang. For one thing, I’ve found out the particular brand of courage you possess. Tell me,” he branched off irrelevantly, “tell me why you kept out of my way those three days?”

She glanced down, the colour flying to her face, then looked up and laughed a little also, as is a woman’s way when she hides the thing in her heart that hurts her most—or it may be has given her the most joy. The thing, at least, she will not speak of.

“What nonsense,” she parried, “to think I kept out of your way!”

“You did,” he repeated doggedly, and growing grave. “But next time—next time you hide, I’ll find you. Look at me.”

She lifted her eyes half defiantly.

“You are not going to keep out of my sight, not for one day, while we are both here at Lone Lake,” said Wynn. “Give me your promise that you will

not try to.”

“Is that a command—or an entreaty?” she challenged.

“Both,” he answered. “It’s a good sort of blend, don’t you think?”

“Oh, well—I promise,” the girl said lightly, moving to the couch.

“Be serious for a moment, and come over to the hearth again. I know when you give your word you will keep it if it be possible, Nance, but has it struck you that up here we only live from day to day—that a thousand things may interfere with our intentions? ‘Great is the wheel,’ as the old Lama beloved of Kim insisted, and we are bound to it. Who knows what a turn may bring? There are all the winter perils to come—blizzards that will blot the trails out in a white smudge, and the cold that goes through fur. Either you or I might be storm-bound in our separate cabins for days. There is plenty of food and firing, luckily. Your grandfather has overstocked, if anything, and I have enough for two months at least; but accident could befall us, or, maybe, worse.”

“Why do you say all this now—to-night? What reason have you?” Her voice was half indignant. “You know I anticipate things.”

The man turned and looked down at her. His eyes were grave, and in their depths was an expression she had never before seen.

“There may be things you don’t anticipate. It would be wiser for you to go back to the Mission, and leave your grandfather in my care. You and Wanota could go safely if the weather turned a bit milder. The river is open still. It would be a stiff paddle, but you could do it; and it would be safer than stopping here. I fear——” He stopped. “It does not matter what I fear.”

There was a pause. Wynn kicked a log back into place, and the hearth was gay for a moment with golden sparks.

“How can you think I would go?” she exclaimed with a catch in the words. “How can you?”

“I didn’t think you would,” he returned gently; “but, you see, I had to tell you to. We must take chances—together.”

The last word sent a thrill to her heart, but she made no answer.

Wanota was cooking the inevitable flapjacks and frying moose-meat at the sheet-iron stove, and presently they had supper.

Never at any table had Wynn been better company. The long strain of the afternoon was past. He had advised Nance to return to the Sisters, and she

would not. Never in the far student days at Oxford had his spirits soared so high. He determined to banish the sad little droop from the red lips opposite, to bring the colour to her face. The long pain of the day should be forgotten, the ghosts of fear laid. By a thousand turns he led her thoughts away from trouble, and held them where he would.

When they had finished supper Wynn lit his pipe.

“Now,” he said, “I am going to take affairs into my own hands. I will watch with the old man to-night, and you and Wanota are to go into the next room and rest.”

Nance had learned the futility of protest with him in such matters.

“I will not sleep,” she said.

“Yes,” he returned, “you will—by and by. The scent of the balsam-bed Wanota has made in yonder room will be sweet, and you are very tired. For to-night, anyway, I will watch.”

Wanota regarded the man sombrely. Witchcraft, or power given by unseen spirits—one of these, she concluded, had been his in dealing with the old trapper. The small shining instrument had meant nothing to her. Her eyes dwelt upon Wynn with awe, and she who had lain as the dead three days was not easily awed.

The man from Lone Lake was no longer a mere man to the little squaw; he had become as a god—one who could banish agony and bring healing sleep and quiet even by the laying on of his hands. Hitherto she had conceded to him an unwilling and unexpressed admiration, for, like the women of all races and times, she adored the qualities of brute strength and physical endurance in men, while, still more than the average woman of her own people, she was subject to charm by voice and smile and trick of manner.

Now she grew humble in the presence of a force she failed to understand, and had reached the point where obedience would inevitably follow if Wynn by word or look demanded it. Not the questioning obedience of the white woman, but dumb, absolute surrender of will known only to those of the brown skin and humble heart.

She followed Nance into the inner room and rested submissively on her bed of boughs—though nothing had been farther from her intention. What she had planned was to set rabbit-snares at a spot that crossed a certain near-by runway, and also to hang a harmless-looking but deadly grass rope noose

under the trees where the spruce partridge fed. Later, if François had not returned, she had thought to watch for him, it might be till sunrise.

CHAPTER XV

THE FIGHT

Next morning the old trapper awoke free from pain, and stronger. After he had taken breakfast he talked for a while, then slept again. Wynn left to go to his shack, but promised to return in a few hours.

The wind had veered, broken the shell-ice and drifted it in big flakes along the shore.

Some snow-shoe rabbits gambolled along the bank as the man's canoe passed, and a flock of ptarmigan flew by, white-feathered for winter.

Once he fancied he heard a sound as of a foot breaking through the drift of frost-bitten leaves at the back of some bushes near the bank.

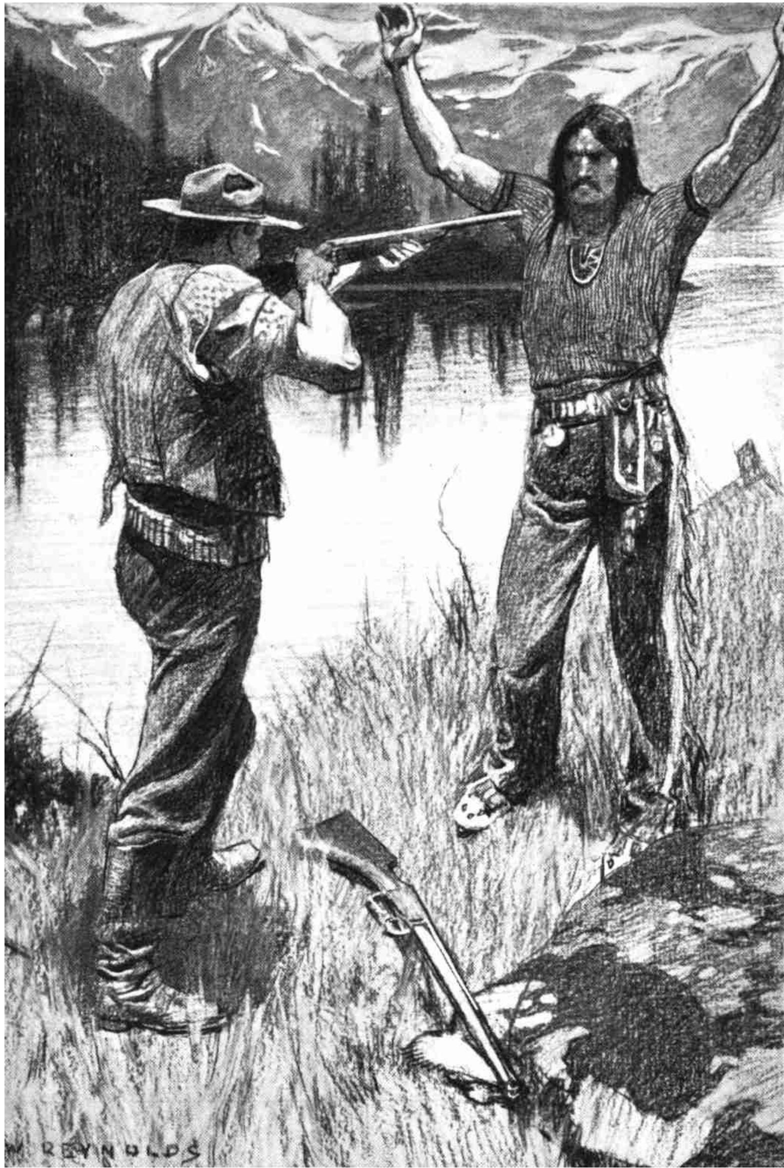
Leaning on his paddle he listened, as had become his habit.

No; there could have been no such sound. From across the river came the sharp barking of a fox-cub, and from away farther off through the forest the belling of a deer to its mate. The frosty morning air carried the wild music along with scent of mountain pine and balm of balsam, and something deep and untamed within him responded to it.

It was not any sound so good he had thought he heard.

The man sent the canoe swiftly ahead, though he was tired with more than his night's watch.

After pulling the little craft up near his shack, he stopped to tighten a belt buckle, and again listened.



“*Wynn walked over the space between them, the glittering gun-barrel swerving neither to the right nor the left.*”

This time he was sure. He had heard a foot on the frosted grasses or dry curled leaves. The cushioned foot of a fox makes no noise; an otter slips silently into the water; and a bear goes blundering on his way, snapping branches, snuffing the ground, joyously indifferent to the presence of

enemies—his careless abandon envied, but uncopied, by his neighbours. It was no bear.

Wynn stood immovable now as he had by the dead bull-moose, and now, as then, came the slight singing sound, and a bullet passed just above his head.

With a surge of anger he wheeled about and saw the half-breed stumble beyond a tangle of thorn bushes on the very curve of the bank.

Possibly the ground had been undermined at this point and broken suddenly beneath his weight, or in the recoil of the gun he had lost a footing at best uncertain on that particular slope, where the slippery pine-needles lay thick.

Wynn had counted on some such chance befriending him, while hardly daring to hope that François would grow reckless enough to give it.

He covered the half-breed with his rifle before he had fairly regained his balance.

A snarl of anger at his own amazing misadventure broke from the Indian.

His gun, fallen from his hand, lay not a yard away, but he dare not stoop for it. That he who was past-master in the art of stalking his prey should have been guilty of a clumsy step at a critical moment filled him with a red rage.

But he had not wintered in Alaska and the Klondike for nothing. He knew the law of those outside the law—the unwritten precepts laid down by miners, fur-gatherers, first-comers, and prospectors.

Slowly he raised his hands.

Wynn walked over the space between them, the glittering gun-barrel swerving neither to the right nor the left.

“You are a clever fellow, François,” he commented. “It’s a pity you waste your talents. Yes. That’s perfectly satisfactory—keep them good and high.”

With a vigorous knock of his moccasined foot he sent the half-breed’s rifle down the rock-ribbed bank and rebounding into the lake.

François’ upper lip lifted over his sharp, white teeth as the lip of an angered timber-wolf lifts, but he made no sound.

“I am awfully sorry that I had to do that,” said the man. “I have reason to think it was a good gun; but one is all we need, and this one is a thirty-two automatic Winchester, fully loaded, and perfectly reliable.” The barrel was close to François’ heart now.

“Take your left hand,” the man commanded—still in unruffled tones—“keep the other up, please—and drop any knives you may have about you.”

The half-breed obeyed.

The famous bevel-edged Hudson Bay knife rang on the ground, and another of lesser value.

“Kindly turn your pockets inside out,” Wynn continued. “Yes—all. I shouldn’t think you had any more pockets than I see. Thanks.”

The knives also he sent over the bank. They flashed, steel-blue, and disappeared.

“I am not going to shoot you, François. I hate killing things—as I think I have bored you by remarking before at different times; but we are going to settle all scores that lie between us, here and now. I will walk backward, and you follow for ten yards or so; it is not safe to fight on the edge of a ragged-walled lake. I don’t know how far you are able to use your hands. If you have not acquired the approved art of self-defence with those primitive weapons, you may at least have learned some French or Indian trickery that will serve to help you out. For myself, I was trained for a time by a man who is what they call a prize-fighter. He was just an animal—no more. Not nearly so fine a man as you, François; but probably with greater staying powers. In many an encounter ‘his head was bloody but unbent.’ Oh! I’d forgotten; as well as the instructions from this person, I had a few lessons from a little Jap at Oxford in the gentle pastime of Jiu-jitsu. Now I’ll mark the paces back, and you follow.”

The handsome face of the half-breed expressed nothing, unless it might have been disdain.

He followed Wynn some yards inward from the bank to a clearing where only a few brambles grew.

They halted, and in a flash his nonchalance was gone. The upraised hands trembled, for above him rang the report of Wynn’s rifle. He had fired into the air to empty it, and, having done so, pitched it lightly into the heart of the thorn bushes.

“Now!” he said, squaring for action.

François sprang as a wild cat from a bough, closed with him, and clung faster than a wild cat clings to its prey. They rocked back and forth, as one man, writhing and twisting in silence, neither having the advantage. Wynn was the taller and stronger; the other quicker in action, certainly more subtle.

Presently, in the fearful tension of that swaying struggle, the half-breed began to speak. The words came first in Indian. Wynn realised it was a curse—how black he could not know. Silence followed.

François broke it again, speaking between deep breaths.

“I send you to w’at de priest call ‘hell’!” he whispered hoarsely in English, his eyes glowing yellow.

The other strained to break from the vicelike arms that gave him no chance to strike, and eluded at the same time the half-breed’s desperate attempts to trip him.

“I know the place,” he answered, smiling down at the infuriated face. “I went through it once, and came out on the other side.”

Again they swayed backwards and sideways, locked in a grip that became agony. No other word passed, till on a sudden François twisted away a trifle and wrenched his right hand free.

It held a knife, drawn, during some contortion, from his beaded girdle. A silver-handled, pretty thing, pointed like a stiletto. With a movement too swift to follow, he sank the blade in Wynn’s arm and drew it back. It was close enough to the heart to show what aim had been taken, and missed.

The cloth of the man’s sleeve near the shoulder grew wet, but all aching had gone from his muscles with the sense of strain. A blinding anger swept through him and brought a reserve force to his aid.

“You traitor!” he said between his teeth, and then, seemingly without effort, tore the Indian from him and hurled him off.

As François sprang back in swift recoil and struck again, Wynn caught the wrist of his upraised right hand and held it. With his other hand he reached the brown bare throat.

There was a long moment. Then he gave a sharp turn to the wrist he held, and the little knife straightway fell. Slowly he took his fingers from the half-breed’s throat.

François sank to the ground. His right hand dangled queerly, and his breath came in hard gasps.

“So!” said Wynn, and he, too, breathed unevenly. “You are perfectly safe for a while. The Jap at Oxford taught me how to twist a wrist so that it would be useless for a very long time. I remember it seemed superfluous information in those days. Perhaps,” he added, glancing down at the limp figure, “it might have been better to shoot you.”

Wynn picked up the half-breed’s little knife and dropped it into his pocket, then lifted the rifle out of the bramble thicket. As though unaware that the stain on his coat-sleeve grew larger, he loaded the Winchester and laid it along his arm.

The half-breed rose slowly and swung off across the clearing and on through the trees, uncertainly, and as a blind man might.

The glimmer of the blue belt showed now here and now there against the satiny white of the scattered birches, then was gone.

The man went up to his shack, and sat down heavily, looking through the open door with eyes that for once did not note the glimmer of the morning sun on the emerald green water. Stamped on François’ face, when he rose and lurched off, Wynn had seen the lust of revenge. The fiery French nature, in which was mingled the cold craft of the Indian, would stop at nothing now.

If he slept in this cabin at night, it might be to awake and find it in flames. There was the possibility also of not waking at all; a quick knife-thrust in the dark——

He got up and slipped off his coat, determining to think no more. After washing the wound with whisky, he bound it up. It was deep, but not deadly, and would soon heal. He washed the stains from his shooting coat, and put it on again half dried.

The small chipmunk that had apparently been detained far afield by stress of business, now came bounding through the window like a furry bolt, and took possession of him.

Noon came and went, and they had luncheon together. Then the man took the old violin in its case from where it hung, and with the squirrel, surfeited with sugar and pine cone seeds, asleep in his pocket, launched the canoe and paddled, somewhat painfully, back to the old man’s ground.

Wanota was away on one of her near-by wanderings, and Nance and McCullough welcomed him as though he had been gone many moons. To Wynn it seemed that he had.

CHAPTER XVI

THE FLIGHT TO THE HILLS

Now came a little peaceful period, for ever unforgettable to those who sojourned in the old man’s dwelling.

François, unaccountably as it seemed, had broken his wrist, and Wanota tended him and spent much time in his cabin.

Far down in her eyes Wynn saw something during those days that he could not define. Fear it might have been, or warning, or hatred—or a mingling of all three. He did not think her son had told her of his defeat, but he had no smallest doubt that the squaw divined it. Wanota knew.

She also knew, as the man knew, that François would wait for his revenge with a long patience, and that it would be, as far as he could make it, satisfying and complete.

But Wynn held to his resolution to let nothing darken the beauty of these swiftly passing days.

François was helpless, his right hand disabled for weeks to come. His gun and knives rotted in water thirty feet deep. He had other knives and another gun, but they were second-rate weapons, clumsy and hard to handle.

He would be slow to attack either man or beast at close quarters, and his trigger finger was useless.

Wanota would snare rabbits for him, would cook for him and keep his cabin warm. Wanota would tend his hurt, and humbly do as he bade her. He would not fare ill, for he knew many ways of killing time, even in the wilderness.

Wynn put the half-breed out of his thoughts. He had done with him.

For a few nights he slept in his shack as usual, and spent hours each day at the log house. It had become more a home to him than any place he remembered. He had tired of the great cool halls and dormitories of school and college, tired of rule and order that repressed the spirit, and of pedantry in cap and gown.

This rough house, enriched by trophies of the wild lands, with its kindly hearth-fire, simple fare and unpretentious hospitality, called to him as no place had ever done.

The past was best forgotten, but the future he saw through a rose-coloured mist.

To see Nance each morning, when it was as though he had been away a year since the night before; to tramp over the sparkling uplands in the blue noon and bring in what small game was needed; to drink the wine of the wind, that sent his blood beating high with the joy of living; to smoke by the fire in the evenings and watch the gold of a girl's hair glitter in the shadows—life had come to mean these things for Richard Wynn.

"While the old man lived, it would go on thus," he told himself. "Afterwards!"—well, he could not dwell on that and keep a cool head.

Nance McCullough was for him and him alone, he had long decided, but he planned to go slowly. Experience had undermined his faith in his power to charm a woman, and robbed him of that pleasing confidence born of conceit.

Never knight of old strove harder to win favour of his lady, than he to gain headway in the good graces of the lady of the log house. And Nance kept him in a turmoil of uncertainty as to whether he gained or not.

After deliberating at great length on the ways and manners of town-bred young persons, and comparing what she knew of them with her own unfortunate tendency to impulse and abandon, she set a strict guard on her eyes and lips, that they should neither look nor speak more than she willed.

But with it all, she had never been more gay. Her grandfather was better, she asserted determinedly; there was reason enough to be glad!

Wynn now and then played on the violin and Nance, not to be outdone, even went so far as to sing the little French *chansons* Sister Mary Philomena had taught her.

A week went by of crystal-clear skies and sunshine, and then, without warning, and as on the day of the Indian's visit to McCullough, he was seized with the same violent pain about his heart; and again, after battling with it, had recourse to the morphine. On that day also the weather turned bitterly cold. The old man begged Wynn not to return to his shack, but to stay with him indefinitely.

Nance said nothing, but the man thought he read fear in her eyes, so he stayed.

McCullough made no such good recovery from this second attack of pain. Following the sleep brought by the opiate, he was weak and restless.

Wynn knew the end was not far off, and said no more of going back to his cabin, but agreed to bring his small possessions and store them in the log house.

The river was deeply frozen, and would not run free until the chinook blew warm to unlock the ice, and send the sap singing through the trees.

The land was still with a stillness intensified by an occasional booming crack through the ice, or the sharp snapping of a tree beyond the clearing.

After the cold grew less, the snow came; first a fine mist, and then a whirling foamlike smother of clinging flakes that wrapped even the tree trunks in white, blotting out blazed trails and changing the outline of the landscape.

Wynn resolved to go to his shack and move his supplies and blankets. He was anxious about the precious bits of birch-bark that held the solved problems that had baffled him at Oxford.

These were stowed in a bark box, and would probably be the last thing touched should the place be raided by that thief of the world—the wolverine—or a hungry coyote, but there was the perpetual danger of fire. Some storm-belated trapper, careless of the legend of the lake, might stumble on the cabin, spend the night there and leave red coals that the wind could scatter. He was unwilling to take a chance, and watched the weather. McCullough would not listen to his going so far in the drifting storm even though he promised to follow the river.

The old trapper knew well that even the wild sheep of the mountains were often bewildered and lost in such a snowfall, and that deer and elk would sometimes flounder for hours, body-high, through the lowland drifts. Still more, he knew that when the snow was moist and clogging, and sent in circles by the wind, it had a strange narcotic effect on man and beast. None dared rest in its white pavilions.

On the third night the snow stopped falling, and a heavy crust froze on the surface of it, where it lay knee-deep on the hills and in the hollows.

McCullough lay with his weatherwise old face turned to the window that morning after the storm. His features were sharp as though cut in ivory, but his eyes were still keen and far-seeing.

“You’d best tramp to your shack this morning, boy,” he said slowly. “It will snow again by night. Strap on my snow-shoes—go and get back. Pack only what you need.” He closed his eyes wearily, for he had not said so

many words in three days. Then he opened them again. They held the other with their burning intensity.

"You will come back—before the close of day? Promise!"

"Old chap, nothing could keep me at the shack now. I shall want to come back rather more than you will want me to."

McCullough shook his head feebly. His lips moved in protest, but Wynn did not catch the words.

He strapped on the shoes and took his rifle. Nance went with him to the edge of the veranda. Fain would she have forgotten what those girls in London, the decorous and rightly trained, would be likely to do under the circumstances.

She desperately longed to plead with him to hurry his packing and return. Never had she seen him go with a more forlorn sinking of her heart. Wanota was not to be depended on of late. She was as a will-o'-the-wisp that flitted between the log house and François' shanty during the hours of the day; at night she stole in shadow-like to sleep on the bough-bed by Nance, for she had read the command to do so in Wynn's eyes, and dared not disobey.

The man filled his pipe as he stood ready to start. He did not look directly at Nance, nor she at him. Both knew that the old man was fast coming to the parting of the ways, and that these days would have an ending. Words were hard to find. The man struck a match, but his pipe was troublesome, and took long to light; when it glowed red, he smiled to her, and swung off over the snow. The girl watched him a moment, then went in.

Wynn took the river-way, his shoes making scarcely any markings on the snow-crust. The bleak beauty of the far-off hills gave him a feeling of depression. A steel-grey sky cast a shade of grey over the unbroken white below.

Pity stirred in him for the wild things that might find nothing to stay their hunger but the winter buds of the trees.

The great white owl would fare well on many a starveling, yet even he, for all his feathers, was a-cold.

He pushed on rapidly through the silver solitudes, for to-day he had no desire to be alone.

Wanota, watching from the tiny window in her son's shanty, saw the man go by.

It was perhaps a quarter of an hour later—long enough for Wynn to have passed safely beyond sight and hearing of them—that she and François came out together.

They crossed to the old man's house, Wanota pulling a bark toboggan by its babiche strings, and François swinging a light coil of rope from his left hand. His right arm was in a sling, a hunting-knife dangled from a thong on his blue belt, and an old flint-lock rifle was slung over his shoulder.

Both he and the squaw wore snow-shoes, and were dressed as for a long tramp.

They stopped at the log house, and, leaving the toboggan, entered without removing their snow-shoes, the half-breed first, Wanota following, the red shawl pulled about her head.

The old man roused at the sound of their coming.

"Ah, François!" he said haltingly. "How is the wrist?"

Nance, from her low chair, glanced at them, mildly curious. There was something odd in their entrance together at this hour. Given as they were to silence, now they were even more forbiddingly silent than usual. On the half-breed's handsome face she read a certain insolence. In his eyes smouldered an ominous light. Wanota hung back strangely, and her face was half hidden by the red shawl. She had always been free in her coming and going, as one above being questioned. To-day she seemed cowed and miserable.

Nance felt a growing sense of uneasiness as she looked at them, and rose and went over to her grandfather. Stooping, she lifted his helpless hand and patted it softly.

François ignored the old man's kindly question. He stood motionless, and as though choosing words to say what he had come to say.

Presently he spoke.

"I come," he said coolly, "to mak terms."

McCullough's eyes flashed. He did not like the tone or the words.

"We have made terms—fair ones. I will abide by them," he answered.

"Me," returned the other, "I will not."

"What's on your mind?" questioned the old man sharply, with an echo of his past vigour. "Out with it."

“Dat man from Lone Lac—will you tell him to go from here?” demanded the half-breed.

“Whether he goes or stays, what affair of yours is that?” said the old trapper, his blurred voice trembling.

François smiled.

“I mak it mine. Will you tell him to go?”

“What mad notion possesses you?” said the old man querulously. “I am sick. Do not weary me with annoying questions.” He shut his eyes as dismissing the subject.

The Indian moved to the couch indolently.

“I come,” he reiterated, “to mak terms. Dat man from Lone Lac—he want your money. He want also your girl. He stay for her. Ver’ well. Wen you be dead—and you be dead pretty quick now—he tak both. You sen’ him away, I be content. I tak care of you. But,” he leaned down, his face distorted by sudden anger, “but—if you not sen him away—by the priests’ God!—me!—François!—I shall tak your money, and the silver-fox pelt hid in dis cabin, an your girl, an tak them where you will not fin’ them, though you sen’ that man from Lone Lac to seek! I not wait for you to die!”

With a quick swing of his body and left arm, he unwound the little coil of rope, a looped length flew out lightly and settled over the girl’s slender body.

In a flash François had tightened the noose, and her arms were pinioned to her body. She gave a cry and struggled like a bird caught in a net. Suddenly she was still and smiled reassuringly into the old trapper’s face that was convulsed with impotent rage. The Eskimo dog sprang from beneath the couch, his hair rising along his back.

“I’m really not frightened, gran’dad,” she said. “I suppose this is a trick of François’. He is only fooling, of course. It is absurd to think François would harm me: and besides,” she glanced over at the squaw, “there is Wanota—Wanota who has always been kind.”

The half-breed stepped a little closer to her and coiled the rope about her again, three times, four times. There was that in his face that made her feel that no struggle would avail. Her hands were fast now—her little feet.

“My gun, Nance! My gun!” McCullough cried hoarsely, his eyes bloodshot and wild. “By heaven! he is not fooling.”

“No,” said the half-breed with a shrug. “François no fool—this time. He can do well with one arm, as mos’ with two. But I not hurt your girl. That not my game. No! Me—I will marry her. Where I tak her, by and by, she will say she marry François. Then it shall be by priest an’ ring—your way, ole man! Wrap her up warm.” He turned, and threw the last words sharply at Wanota.

The squaw took from her arm the beaver coat she had long been making, and fastened it around Nance, the arms hanging empty.

The girl stood very still, but the colour ebbed even from her lips.

The old trapper babbled threats of violence that broke and ended in inarticulate sounds.

“Gran’dad,” Nance said gently, as Wanota pulled a scarlet toque over her yellow hair. “Gran’dad, Dick Wynn will be back in a little while, and he will make everything right. François could not take me where he would not find me. There is no danger in this at all—except”—she tossed an indifferent smile over at the half-breed—“except for François.”

He beckoned to Wanota. “Bring the fox-skin,” he said briefly, “an’ the bag of money hid in the fir bed.” The squaw obeyed quickly. The half-breed slipped the tiny bag in his belt, then lifted Nance with his left arm as though he felt no weight. They filed out as they had come in, and he placed the girl on the toboggan. Wanota bound over her the buckskin side straps, then gathered up the babiche drawing strings, and they started across the snow, François leading. The girl clinched her bound hands and set her white teeth together lest she give some sharp cry that would still further hurt the old man within the house.

McCullough rose inch by inch till he rested on his right elbow. So much he had not done since he was stricken. He strained forward, listening, listening, and his face was as the face of the dead.

He heard the trailing away of the toboggan over the crackling snow-crust, the sound of the snow-shoes. When all was still, he turned his eyes to the small yellow and grey dog, whose rough hair still bristled along his back, while he whined questioningly, being uncertain whether to hold his post or leave it.

“Follow her, lad!” the old man said sharply, commandingly. “Follow her! Follow her!”

Joris sprang forward and out through the half open door.

The old man’s voice trailed into silence; he fell back heavily, and lay very still.

CHAPTER XVII

THE EMPTY LOG HOUSE

At the shack at Lone Lake, Wynn gathered up his belongings. He did it wrathfully, for someone had visited the shack in his absence and taken what had seemed worth carrying away. On finding the place open to the weather, he at first thought a timber-wolf, or carcajou had broken in, but that thought passed when he entered.

The thief had been systematic and thorough. Not an ounce of tobacco was left, nor any food supplies. The blankets were gone, and a hunting-knife. Even the bits of birch-bark had been emptied out of the box and scattered over the floor.

Wynn searched through them with desperate anxiety lest the pieces he valued had been blown away or used for kindling. No—he found them, wrapped them together, and put them in the pocket of his duck coat that still hung on its peg. The thief had not come for clothes, for such as Wynn had were left untouched.

The man glanced around the desolate place and wondered how he had endured the days of loneliness and lived.

Then remembrance of the simple, straight life he had led there surged through him.

He thought of the nights when he had slept deeply and well, though the wind blew through the chinks in the walls, and he recalled the sun-washed hours spent in the open.

He lifted his pack and went out, swinging the door behind him for the last time.

“It doesn’t matter who the thief, or what he took,” he said, heading for the trail. “It was François, doubtless. But it doesn’t matter. In such small things I can afford to be gracious.”

The chipmunk dropped down on to his shoulder from a low-hanging branch, and, sitting up, chattered steadily and, as it sounded, vindictively.

The man laughed.

“Heigho, small one!” he said. “Still trying to set the whole world right? I’d give it up; it’s too big a contract. It’s not such a bad world. The One-

Who-Knows went so far as to call it good.

"Yes, yes. I follow you. The bears are lazy and sleep endlessly, and the bob-cat is an abominable sneak; the whisky-jack is the world's gossip, and the wolverine should be hung for a thief; the coyote is no gentleman, and the owl kidnapped the musk-rat's progeny while the red fox applauded! Sure, they're all a bad lot, and not one of them thrifty enough to store nuts against the winter's famine. Only you, small one; only you. It's not for me to blame them. I've wasted too many a good day myself."

The chipmunk chattered back volubly, and presently leaped down and flew in mad pursuit of its own engrossing business. Once it looked back as undecided whether to return to the solitary figure or not; then, with a flourish of its silvery tail, was gone.

"To our next meeting!" the man called after it.

He strode on now in silence. As he reckoned, it was past high noon. The hunt through the birch-bark notes had taken time. He was impatient to be back at the log house, with an impatience new to him—a consuming, impelling sensation that blurred all others.

Passing François' shanty he noticed that no smoke curled from the short smoke stack, and, as he came near to the log house, saw the door was wide open. That was not so unusual, and yet he rather wondered at it, for it was cold, and a light snow had been falling for the last two hours.

He swung in over the veranda, loosening his pack and dropping it there, and passed into the house.

There he stood as though stricken dumb. The room was filled with silence—a silence so profound it turned his blood to ice.

The old trapper lay as though asleep, but on the hearth the fire was out and the sheet-iron stove was black.

Wynn opened his lips to call Nance, but did not call her. There was no sign of Wanota. Joris? Perhaps he was asleep under the couch! Softly the man whistled a bar that always brought the little yellow and grey dog bounding from any hiding-place.

The sound of his own whistling was so appalling, he did not try it again.

He simply stood as before, in silence; then mechanically closed the door. The snow had blown in and drifted in tiny waves along the floor. Wynn remembered afterwards he had noticed that.

Slowly he made his way to the couch, the snow-shoes falling clumsily and tripping him. For a half moment he thought McCullough slept. Then he knew.

The old man lay as he had fallen back; his face was towards the window. Those last tragic moments had left no mark. He seemed as one wrapped in immeasurable peace.

Wynn turned from him with a helpless gesture. Going to the door, he opened it and looked out.

For the moment he could not disentangle facts or guess as to what had occurred in his absence.

The stillness hurt him; the lonely leagues of white tortured his eyes.

Little by little he brought order out of the chaotic thoughts that assailed him. Nance was gone! Where? God knew! Wanota? It did not matter about Wanota. But François? Yes. It would be the Indian who was at the bottom of it all! And yet, give the devil his due. There might be a chance that Nance, grieving and frightened, had gone to Lone Lake to seek him. She might even be on her way there or back.

At that fancy he strode off towards the river; it was the easiest road for one to take, and the safest.

Down past the alders he stopped, and then turned back. No! He could not have missed her. The scarlet toque showed too far against the snow.

And the snow? It was falling faster now. All snow-shoe marks would be totally wiped out in a few moments.

Yes, it was François he had to deal with. The man's mind swung pendulum fashion now, between Nance McCullough and the half-breed. Somewhere out beyond, where the spruce grew thickest or the hills hid their secrets, François had lured her, trapped her, and hidden her. So he at last concluded. If one knew where the foxes made their holes, and the coyotes slept, one might find the place.

The man sat down heavily on the edge of the veranda, and a tremor shook all strength from him. Then he tramped again round and about the house for some sign. The snow had smoothed out every slightest mark.

He remembered that he might need much strength; that there were journeys to be made to the hills, and it might mean long searchings. He went into the house and cooked himself food and ate.

Afterwards, as he pulled on his heavy coat again, there came the faint crunching sound of snow-shoes. Wynn threw the door open.

A half-Cree boy of perhaps seventeen made his way to the house slowly, and as though very tired. He was strongly built and deep-chested, and Wynn recognised him as the eldest son of the French-Canadian Factor at the post near St. Elizabeth's Mission.

"Come in!" he called eagerly. "What brought you, lad? Have you come with any word of the old trapper's granddaughter?—Nance, you know! Or have you seen François the half-breed? Quick—tell me!"

The boy looked at him wonderingly as he entered. He was chilled, hungry, and very tired, and never at any time given to many words.

"No," he answered, dropping on one knee to untie the strings of his snow-shoes. Slowly he chafed his moccasined feet. "No—me come bring letters to you."

With benumbed fingers he fumbled in through his fur coat to a pocket in his buckskin shirt. Drawing out two much-soiled letters, he handed them to Wynn. An expression of dull relief was on his face, for he had brought his tramp to a good finish.

"Thanks," said the man; "I will pay you when you are warmed." He dropped the unopened letters into his pocket.

"Me much hungry," said the boy, drawing up to the stove that was fast reddening with a hot fire.

"I beg your pardon," returned Wynn. "I will cook moose-meat for you. Tell me again—are you sure, absolutely sure, you did not meet anyone as you came?" he ended desperately.

The half-breed shook his head with its thatch of black hair.

The man sliced the meat and cooked it while the boy grew warmer. After he had eaten he looked around.

"De old trapper much sick—or him asleep?" he questioned, nodding towards the couch curiously.

Wynn did not answer at once, for there was a queer tightening of his throat at the words.

"Him asleep?" said the other, mellowing in the warmth to the point of persistency.

“No,” answered the man.

“W’at then?” asked the boy. “Him ver’ sick, eh?”

“He is dead!” said the man.

The boy rose as though to venture over and see for himself, then sat down again by the stove where there was great comfort.

“That much sad,” he commented placidly. “But him ole. Him done. Him better so.”

“Perhaps,” admitted the other. Then, after a moment, “Will you stop here and rest? I must go out, and I may be long away.”

“Where?” asked the boy.

“To the hills, perhaps—I am going to find the old man’s granddaughter, Nance. You know her?”

The heavy face brightened.

“She is lost,” the man explained again desperately.

“Where?” the boy asked once more.

“François, the trapper, might tell us,” Wynn answered, leaning towards the young half-breed, his eyes burning. “Do you know of any shack, or teepee, or cave in the hills, that perhaps François might own, beyond the lake? If you do, for God’s sake, tell me!”

The boy nodded pleasantly.

“François him tell mon père he av one leetle cabane in de hill, two—tree mile from de lac maybe. But you not fin’ heem in one honder year.”

“I will try,” replied Wynn, fastening his coat and taking his rifle.

“Mon Dieu! Me not stay with heem!” exclaimed the boy, glancing toward the couch. “Yo go—then me—I go back to de post. But yo—yo bes’ wait here. Maybe dat girl she get way from François; then she cam home. Den wen she not fin’—only *heem*—w’at she do, eh?”

He tied on his snow-shoes rapidly. The man drew some money from a pocket and handed it to him. It seemed a great deal to the young half-breed.

“And you think there’s a chance of escape from François?” queried Wynn, as one who caught at any suggestion.

The dull face lit up for a moment knowingly.

“Yo not fin’ dat leetle cabane of de trapper. No! But Nance—she pretty queek—yes. She watch, an watch, an watch, an play dat game so, an ba-gosh! somtam, she giv heem de slip maybe, eh?”

“I believe you’re right,” the man assented. “I had not thought that possible.” The colour crept back into his face and the lines softened. “You had best stop the night here. For me, I must think—decide what to do!”

The boy shook his head.

“Me pack a blanket,” he said, indicating a roll strapped on his back. “Me sleep maybe under low spruce.” The man gave him some hard biscuits, which he pocketed and then passed out and on his way.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE CALLING OF WANOTA

Dick Wynn tramped over the country that long afternoon, yet never dared to put a great distance between himself and the log house.

Nance might come back. The boy's words stayed. Sometimes he repeated them half aloud.

Often he called, making a trumpet of his hands, and the echoes mocked.

He scanned the white for a patch of scarlet, and watched for it against the spruce-covered hills, until his sight grew blurred and the dazzle of the sun on the snow became an agony.

He comforted his flagging hopes by thinking there was a chance she might come at night, led by the Eskimo dog. When he thought of François, he cursed himself that he had not crushed the breath from him when he had had the chance.

As to what means the half-breed had taken to carry out his plan, he did not dare to question. That way madness lay.

So three days went by. He ate resolutely to keep strength in his body, and haunted the river and neighbouring hills. Sometimes he slept near the grey of dawn.

When the third day broke, he made a great fire on the ground by the red willows, and, after the frost melted, out of a patch six feet long, dug the grave of the old trapper.

At sundown he wrapped him in the grizzly-bear skin, laid him there and covered him over well. He had taken the rosary that Sister Mary Philomena had given Nance, and which hung above the fireplace, and folded it between the old man's hands. That, he hoped, might answer instead of the service for the dead.

The work had taken many hours, and he was tired. A trembling seized his limbs, and he felt light-headed, as one who walks high above the water.

He did not tramp far away from the log house that evening, but, as dusk fell, stood on the veranda scanning the twilight landscape and waiting—for what he scarcely knew.

Then, as in a flash, a thought came to him of Wanota! A disconnected thought. Her dark little face seemed to rise vividly before him. Again in the melancholy eyes he read what he had read often of late—submission to his will and humility blended with what might have been fear.

Where could she be—Wanota?

Had she gone with François and Nance, at his bidding—or did she linger about, watching the old man's house, spying for her son as to what happened there?

A sense of the power that he possessed over the little squaw swept through the man. He knew she would obey him, no matter what the command; he was sure of it.

She might be near. It was possible. Raising his hands to his mouth, he called her name. It rang in a mellow volume of sound far over the wastes, and was lost among the mountain fastnesses.

"Wanota!" he called again. "Wanota! Wanota!"

He listened till the last echo trembled away, half expecting to see the small figure glide out between the trees.

There was no sound. No answer. That strange hush that comes at the end of the day and before star-lighting, the "silver silence" of the gloaming, seemed to close down about him and hurt him with its peace.

The night was clear, and the sky of that deep electric blue that is tinged with green. The stars came out sparkling as though cut in crystal. He went in and closed the door.

It was the hour before dawn that he heard the sharp barking of a dog. He had slept through that hour, and it aroused him, though the sound was far off. Sitting up, wide awake, he listened.

It might be a timber-wolf baying the late moon. No; it was the barking of a dog. A good sound, belonging to the places of men. He went out of doors and listened. Now it came again, still far off, but ringing clearly, and with a note of wild gladness in it.

"Joris!" Wynn said, taking a deep breath. "Joris!" He waited. The barking suddenly stopped.

A wave of despair swept over him, and then—a little rough beast dashed through the scattered alders and came on at a headlong pace till he dropped at his feet.

“Joris!” Wynn cried, stooping over him. “Good dog! Good dog! Where is she? Why are you alone? Where have you been? Where have you been? How far? How far?”

He patted the small, shaking thing, questioning him madly and as though he might answer. He would have led him in to the fire, but the dog was intent on watching the path from the river, and sat up quivering in every limb.

The man followed his gaze.

Softly as a shadow falls, he saw a figure steal out from the alders. It was a woman, and she was bent as though pulling a heavy load.

Dick Wynn did not speak or move. There was thick underbrush near. She might vanish.

On she came, her head bent and shawl-covered.

The fragment of moon had gone under a cloud, and the stars were few. He could not at first see what the woman dragged so painfully.

When close to the veranda she halted, and lifting her head gave a startled cry.

“Me hear you call,” she said to the man. “Me come. Me—not dare come alone.” She pulled the toboggan to his feet.

“Nance!” he cried, tossing back the heavy wrappings. “Nance!”

“You speak now,” said the squaw shortly, then slipped by them and away into the dark.

“Oh! Wanota would bring me this way,” exclaimed the girl, struggling to rise. “And she has blindfolded me that I should not learn the road. And look! I am bound so fast I cannot move. She made me promise I would make no sound till she said I might.”

Then she gave a little tremulous laugh.

“Oh, but I’m glad to be home!”

With hands that shook, Wynn untied the knotted thongs.

“And you are all right?” he questioned hotly. “They have not hurt you?”

“All right,” she assured him. “Only I hated it and fretted so, I could not eat or sleep. The cabin was in the hills, and I was afraid you would never,

never find me—or perhaps that I would never find my way home, even if I escaped."

The straps were undone now, but Nance could hardly stand, so he carried her into the log house and shut the door.

There in the dark his arms closed about her as though they would never let her go.

"Sweetheart!" he said. "Sweetheart!"

She pressed her face against the shoulder of the old corduroy duck coat.

"And—and do you——?" she asked slowly.

He seemed to understand.

"Do I love you? You don't need to ask. You know it. These days have been——" The words broke.

"For me too," she returned.

Wynn drew one of the twisted chairs near the stove and rekindled the fire. That was the first thing to do.

"Gran'dad is sound asleep?" Nance questioned softly.

The dawn would soon creep in; she would see.

"Yes," he answered, as the wood blazed up. "Yes; sound asleep."

There was a tone in his voice that startled her. She rose, but sank back into the chair.

Wynn lifted her two hands and held them against his lips.

"Dear," he said, "he is better—asleep. To-morrow. No! It is to-day. See the sunrise through the window above his couch! To-day, if you are strong enough, we will leave this place and follow the river to the Mission. There is a priest there who will marry us.

"If you would rather walk a little way, all right; but there is the toboggan."

Her eyes were closed, and slow tears fell from beneath the lashes.

"I wish you wouldn't cry," he said unhappily.

"I won't," she answered with quivering lips. "I really won't. Oh! it is just when I think of those last few minutes that I cannot bear it! But he will

never suffer any more. When I remember that, I am glad . . . glad!” Still the man saw that she did not look towards the couch.

The fire raged in the stove, they had breakfast—or pretended to take it—and Dick Wynn persuaded Nance to tell him of those three days. Afterwards, he said, they would think of them no more.

He heard how François and Wanota had come to the log house, and taken her blindfolded to the cabin in the foot-hills. There Wanota was left alone with her, Nance told him, for François shared a moose-hide teepee near by with another trapper, whom she saw but once and did not know.

The half-breed had said nothing to her, but had charged the squaw fiercely to see that she came to no harm, nor left the cabin. He seemed to count on time and silence and loneliness to break her will.

Wanota had been kind. She cooked food, kept the place warm, and brought in snow, and gave her the queer snow-baths that Indians thought would make one strong to endure cold and bear fatigue.

“It was at early dark of that night,” the girl continued, “Wanota came to me. She shook as with a chill, and her eyes were filled with fear.

“ ‘Come!’ she had whispered in Cree. ‘Come softly! François sleeps heavily. I will take you home.’

“ ‘You will really take me, Wanota?’ I asked, hardly believing she dared to.

“ ‘Yes, yes,’ she answered, ‘if you promise to make no sound. That man from Lone Lake—he has called me. I hear. I go. He is not a man; he is more.’

“I had no snow-shoes, and Wanota strapped me on the toboggan and blindfolded me again. We came a long way, and Joris followed.”

She leaned down and stroked the little dog’s rough head. He had been trotting miserably about the room and whimpering, but at last consented to curl down beside the fire, as a concession to the inducements offered him. Now and then he sighed heavily, and his eyes held the old, old questions, “Why?” “Where?” And so Nance patted him.

When it grew quite light, Wynn lifted the stone on the hearth and found the money the trapper had told him was hidden there for Nance.

She would pack nothing but the pictures, Peg Woffington and Romeo, the keepsakes of the Mission children, and the old violin.

She changed the clothes she wore for the best she had, and put together what was needed for their tramp. Then they tied on their snow-shoes and started.

"First we must cross to François' shanty and see if Wanota is there," Nance insisted.

Wynn looked doubtful.

"We may escape an unpleasant meeting with her son by not going."

"He will not be there yet," she assured him. "Wanota knew he would sleep long; she never takes a chance with François."

Dick Wynn smiled, as at things remembered.

"Well, no, sweetheart," he said. "I fancy she would know better."

They found the little squaw in the shanty. She had made a fire, and was brewing tea.

"Wanota," said the girl gently, standing at the door.

The woman lifted her inscrutable face.

"My grandfather has gone, Wanota; gone where your Brave went long ago—to the happy hunting-ground. Now we are going away, the man from Lone Lake and I. Very far away. I give the log house with what is in it to you, to keep."

The squaw did not rise. She bowed her head and spoke a few Indian words. The small brown hands were folded together.

"Wanota says, 'When the spring weaves a web of green across the hills and Wa-Wa comes flying from the south,' " Nance interpreted, "we will return. She asks the Great Spirit to go with us."

Dick Wynn lifted his cap and looked back through the open door.

Wanota had drawn the red shawl over her bowed head. She sat very still.

They went down to the willows and covered the patch of earth with fresh balsam boughs from the trees near the house. The heavy aromatic perfume of them clung to their hands and garments for many hours.

CHAPTER XIX

THE RIVER ROAD

Then began the journey along the river-way to the Post, Dick Wynn pulling the toboggan which, Nance assured him, nothing could ever induce her to ride upon again. He agreed cheerfully to this, yet absolutely refused to part with the toboggan.

As was his way when under the spell of deeply stirred feeling, he kept to the surface of things, touching lightly on one subject after another in apparently gay-hearted, careless fashion. To-day he knew it was the one safe course. The strain of the last week had left its mark upon them both; neither in thought nor words did they dare go back over that trail. So they set out across the white land, determining to put all weariness aside. Perhaps, after all, it was not hard to do, for love is the miracle-worker of the ages.

Some snow-shoe rabbits sat up and watched them go by, seemingly debating as to whether they were friends or foes. They hopped after the queerly etched tracks in uncertain fashion, and then, as if overtaken by panic, scampered headlong into a berry thicket, leaving the question unsettled. Their round, pink eyes shone a moment through the silvery twigs—then were gone.

A lean, grey timber-wolf, with a price on his head, and a frozen foot that kept him from being a thing to fear, followed them as a half-tamed dog might, hunger and pain having broken his spirit.

Dimly he knew that where there was a man there would also be food. There was cooked moose-meat on the Indian sleigh; perhaps he scented it.

"He makes me unhappy," said the girl, glancing back at the gaunt grey thing. "Give him a piece of the moose-meat, please—Dick"—she hesitated over the name—"he is hungry."

"He is always hungry," answered Wynn, pitching a snow-ball back at the persistent follower, "except when he is over-fed. It's a feast or a famine with him, and all his kin. He is a trickster, a thief, and the son of a thief. The spirit of some old Spanish pirate, that for his evil deeds cannot rest, has entered into him. Once, sweetheart, he was a cut-throat villain and sailed the high seas, a black flag at his masthead. Now—well—he is still a villain, without the grace to hoist the black flag of warning. His lame foot gives him no

change of heart, though to-day he will take what food he can get—but, in his full strength, he despises rabbits and such small beer, that would feed him better than he deserves, and brings down the yearling doe, and the fawn that has not lost its dappled coat. To my mind," he ended with a little laugh at her troubled earnestness, "he is not even the remnant of a gentleman—and a pirate here and there was known to be that."

"He is hungry," Nance insisted, still glancing back. "I know he is a loveless beast—but he is hungry."

Wynn stopped, took up the moose-meat, and cut it in two; then he threw one piece out along the trail.

"It goes against my conscience," he asserted, "to serve up such big game to the rascal; but, even if we meet another decrepit member of his family and I am compelled to give up the other half of our lunch, you shall not be unhappy to-day, Nance."

"Except for one thing," she said with a little catch in her voice, and shading her eyes to look far back at the blur of grey that was the log house.

"Except for one thing," he repeated gently. "And now——?"

"Now?" she questioned as they started on again.

"Now, because I followed your wishes instantly, and did not hesitate but humbly obeyed——"

"Oh! but you did hesitate a little," she interrupted. "You did not in the least want to give it to him."

"Which makes it the more virtuous, as anyone may see," he replied. "For that praiseworthy deference to your desires, I demand reward!"

"When one asks for reward, it takes the gilt edge off of a good deed," Nance argued, knowing very well the drift of his words. "And, besides, we have plenty of biscuits, and we will reach the Post in four or five hours!"

"Not this way," he answered unwaveringly. "If you consent to ride, it might be done. Not otherwise."

She shook her head, stood irresolute a moment, and then took her place on the toboggan of unhappy memory.

As Wynn folded the bear-rug about her, she looked into his eyes, and her own grew misty and sweet.

“You wrong yourself,” she said; “if I had not been here, you would have given that starving wolf all of the moose-meat, and gone hungry until you reached the Post.”

“You forget the biscuits,” he answered whimsically; then suddenly bent down, caught her hands, and drew them up and about his throat.

“Ah, Nance! You do not know—you do not know what these days have been—— To leave the house was to miss you if you returned, as the Indian boy thought—and I trust their instincts. A fox hidden in the hills was no safer than François. There was no trail to follow. In either case, the chance was desperate. If you had not come back—if you had not been here to-day—I might have done any mad thing!”

The girl did not answer for a moment; but her face, that these last few days had whitened, grew warm and bright with colour.

“You care—Dick—as much as that?” she questioned softly.

“You know,” said the man. He picked up the long elk-hide thongs of the birch bark sleigh, and drew it onward. It was feather-weight to him, and slipped over the frozen snow as easily as a canoe glides through the water.

“Come!” he said. “We will only think of to-day! And what a day it is! So blue and gold and white out here in God’s country. Sure! we have the world to ourselves, Nance, you and I! See the ptarmigans over yonder—fearless, because they know no evil of us. I can hardly count them, they are so white against the background of white;—six—no, seven;—no, eight——”

“Count the black tips of the tail feathers,” she said, laughing. “They have the same finishing touch as the weasel in his winter jacket.”

“The black tip only looks like a dark shadow following in their wake,” answered Wynn. “It is a deception and a trick—one of Dame Nature’s very cleverest tricks, too, and she has as many up her sleeve as Ah Sin had trump cards.”

“I like her tricks,” said Nance, “they are kind and dear, and all for the bettering of the poor little birds and beasts; but I don’t know about Ah Sin, Dick—tell me about him.”

So she heard the rhyme of that particular wily Chinee, and the morning drifted into noon, and the noon into that hour when the long shadows grow blue as twilight.

They were happy with a happiness that only comes once to any—and to some not at all—and travelled through an enchanted country along a fairy

road that led to the French Factor’s house, and then to the Mission.

CHAPTER XX

WHEN THE GODS INTERVENE

The old priest of the Mission Church of St. Elizabeth officiated at but few weddings, and those usually among the converts at the Indian reservation.

As a rule, he had found them dull affairs, at which it saddened him to observe even the contracting parties showed but a languid interest.

The marriage of Richard Wynn and Nance McCullough, which was solemnised that evening in the rough wooden church crowned by the golden cross, was, he marked with pure joy, of another sort. Not in a long life had he seen two young people more to his mind.

In the heart of the white-haired priest stirred old dreams, and the scent of roses that bloomed in a garden of long ago, seemed to drift to him across the altar as he repeated the well-loved ritual.

A small Cree orphan, much hampered by his cassock, saw to it that no candle failed to burn, and another untiringly swung a small copper censer till the place was fragrant as Araby the blest. The Mother Superior and Sister Mary Philomena and others of the nuns sat in their places in the choir, looking on with mildly wondering eyes; and they sang the bridal hymns and chanted the chants.

The French-Canadian factor and his heavy Cree wife, with all their children, came into the church and listened.

An Indian and a passing trapper entered also, and two of the North-West Police—who had been delayed at the Mission Station by reason of a lamed horse—followed these, their red coats bright against the gloom of the church, their spurs jingling cheerfully.

Joris trotted silently, but persistently, up and down the aisles, as on a quest, and no one thought of stopping him; while the young orphan Crees, and half-orphan half-Crees and otherwise, after escaping from the Mission House, clustered together at the church door, their eyes round with curiosity, for had they not known Nance McCullough, and chased her often around the Mission garden? Yes, and even sometimes caught her; and was she not the very same now? Only in the candle-lighted church her face looked more radiant than ever before, and more beautiful. But never, never had they

beheld such a man as the one beside her! No trapper that had ever come with his dog-train in the early spring was as tall or fine as this one! And when he smiled it was as when the sun shone suddenly out on a dark day.

After the Sisters had chanted their last orison, the bride and groom came down the aisle and greeted them one and all, as old friends.

The factor would have them return with him and his family to the Post, for it was, he told them, verily as if built of elastic, and served as an inn for many a passing traveller.

To-morrow, they had planned to be driven far on the road to the nearest station of the Canadian Pacific Railway—that ribbon of steel that ties the little lonely scattered settlements of the wide continent to the cities of much light.

The factor's wife graciously made ready the wedding supper, and if it was in some respects a trifle unusual—why, so much the better, thought Dick Wynn.

He was as one quite at home there at the factor's table, round which gathered so many dusky heads. With easy mirth he took them into his confidence, and related thrilling tales that were retold in that neighbourhood for many a long day.

The placid-faced mother automatically, as it were, poured a continuous flood of black and bitter tea into the tin cups which were passed and repassed to her by her flock, and Dick Wynn himself drank of that abundant fluid that night as though it had been the nectar of the gods.

If the bride was quiet, no one noticed it except the man beside her, and he was content when he saw the shining in her eyes and the tender, tremulous smile on her lips.

It was when the supper was quite over, and the small half-Crees, by reason of the unusual festivity, or the many potations of black tea, had allowed the French side of their nature to gain the upper hand and were indulging in mad revels without let or hindrance—it was at this point that the factor's eldest son entered, carrying his gun and a brace of spruce partridge.

If he was astonished at the hilarity, or at the presence of guests, it did not disturb his serenity. The eldest son of the factor resembled his mother.

He nodded to Dick Wynn, and slowly smiled at Nance.

"She cam' back?" he said briefly.

The man assured him it was true, though she had not returned quite as he had foretold.

The boy sat down to his supper, evincing no curiosity as to the details of the story. With him, the incident was closed.

The dusky mother, by some bromidic process, quieted her noisy brood, and one by one they vanished into an inner apartment of the elastic house.

The factor, having smoked until the air was blue, lay down on a bunk in a shadowy corner and proclaimed himself asleep.

The Cree boy apparently melted away after consuming his supper. There were only the two left alone by a fire that burned low on the hearth.

"That boy, Nance, the one who came in last," said Dick Wynn, in an odd voice, "that is the boy who came to the log house when you were away."

She looked up. "What brought him so far and at that time, Dick?" She still hesitated a little over the name that was new to her lips. "You did not give me any reason for his coming, did you?"

"Oh, he came to bring me some letters, sent through with the Mission post. I didn't open them. It didn't seem worth while just then. Lawyers' letters or bankers' letters—or even publishers' letters—what do they matter at Lone Lake? And anyway I had other things to think of."

"Yes," she cried softly; "but they do matter. Letters always do. I would love to get some letters some day."

"You shall," he said, smiling.

"Why not open them now?" she insisted, answering his smile.

"Not to-night," he returned. "And yet I don't know; the envelopes are atrociously dirty. I don't enjoy having them in my pocket."

He took the letters out gingerly and tore one open, glancing down the page. There was a scarlet seal on it and a mighty crest.

Presently he gave a low whistle, and the paper fluttered to the floor.

Nance looked at him, her eyes wide. It was as she had thought then—his friends were beginning to worry about him.

"By Heaven!" he exclaimed, then stood gazing unseeingly into the fire.

"Perhaps you would rather not tell me," she said; "but I'm simply wild to know."

"Tell you? Rather! It concerns you—you, too. It's a lawyer's letter. My uncle—my uncle is dead. He always would ride dangerous horses."

She shook her head slowly.

"Dick," she answered, "I cannot be very sorry about him. I did not like him. But—it is sad for—for the little twins, isn't it? Of course, they would think he was all right."

"It's very sad for them," he said, with a queer short laugh. "Oh, very, Nance! There was a mistake in that cablegram to me announcing their birth; there must have been. In this letter the lawyer—and I know him; he is a most tediously infallible person—this lawyer refers twice to those twins as girls—*girls*! Do you understand?"

Nance clasped her hands very tightly. She looked intently at the ring on her third finger. It was one that Dick Wynn had always worn till that day, and was an odd wedding-ring, many sizes too large.

"Then you are—you, Dick, are——" she began inadequately.

"Why, yes," he nodded, laughing softly, as he usually did when the situation became too tense. "Why, yes, it does look that way. And you are too—as far as I can see, little lady."

Then Nance laughed with him, though a trifle doubtfully, for it all seemed so like a fairy story.

Afterwards she drew a deep sigh.

"Are you entirely sure things would have been just the same if you had opened that letter at first?" Her voice, wistful, vibrant, tender, stirred him as no other voice had ever done.

He took her two hands and drew her close.

"Sure," he said passionately. "Sure as that I live. I have made port after stormy seas."

The factor's house was very quiet. Through the windows they could see the soft radiance of the Northern Lights. The man looked into the embers of the fire.

"I never did care much for titles," he said reflectively; "but perhaps you may rather like them, so it's all right. Anyway, there's the old place at home. My father lived there—and my grandfather before him; you'll be sure to love the house." A look of remembrance came to his eyes. "There's one thing, though; it will be decidedly pleasant to feel safe among the trees in

the park. That sensation of watching for bullets——” He stopped short, for she had lifted her eyes wonderingly, questioningly. “I’m talking arrant nonsense,” he said, smiling down at her. “And do you wonder at me, sweetheart?”

CHAPTER XXI

FRANÇOIS AWAKES

Up in his teepee in the hills, François slept heavily through the night that Nance escaped, and until the sun was high.

Into the hot and biting tea that Wanota had served to him with his evening meal she had dropped a little of an innocent-looking fluid, bottled and concealed in the deep doeskin pocket that always swung against her skirts.

No Indian medicine-man of all the Crees, Tuscaroras, Sioux, or Chippewas knew more of herbs of the field and roots and bark of trees than Wanota. With old, old simples and lore of wild-growing things, she had wrought many cures among the blanketed folk of her tribe, and she was cunning and quick enough to make capital out of their profound belief in the magic of her voice and touch. A very small portion of that harmless-looking fluid the squaw dropped into François' drinking-cup would have brought him the longest sleep of all; therefore she measured with a steady hand, and counted the crystal-clear drops as they fell, for she could count up to ten. Less than ten had fallen into the tea, but they would serve to make the half-breed's sleep a peaceful one. He had been restless and irritable of late—and there was whisky hidden in the teepee, Wanota knew, and Wanota dreaded the time when he would drink it.

Incidentally, if François slept soundly she would have comparative freedom for a space, and she wearied of being kept close to the shack. When everything was quiet in the trapper's teepee she stole out on the hills, and it was then she had heard the faint echo of Wynn's voice calling her name, and been compelled by some strange force to follow and obey it. She had known her escape with Nance would not be discovered for long hours. François slept peacefully, proving thereby the sleep of the unjust may be quite as untroubled as that of the just. A little distilled nightshade will give them both the same dreamless quiet.

As for the other trapper, he was away tending his trap-line, and days might elapse before his return. He, like François, was a half-breed, a fugitive from the Mounted Police, and a past-master in the Indian art of covering his trail. The two had drifted together in the wilderness, led by common interests and need of companionship. They found each other after the way of

all things created in the same likeness. The law of attraction has never been explained, and probably never will be, to anyone's entire satisfaction. Men know as much or as little of it as was known in the days of Abraham, but they know it is only the weaklings of their kind who are influenced by propinquity or force of circumstances. The strong, either to do right or wrong, find each other, no matter what bars the way.

So it came about, by reason of Wanota and her potion, that François slept late that winter morning. A snow-shoe rabbit pushed its nose beneath the teepee, and, though quivering with fear, was sufficiently overcome by curiosity to inspect with its blinking eyes the man's figure dimly outlined in his furry sleeping-bag; then it loped away. A red-deer nibbled at the hanging moss on a spruce-tree whose branches almost touched the tent; then it, too, scented the air and trotted off; but a white owl, taking blind and uncertain noonday flight, struck against the moose-hide tent, and the soft thud of its heavy body stirred a benumbed sense of insecurity that always lived in the half-breed's brain.

He stretched, yawned, and raised himself on his left elbow.

The teepee was cold and he was hungry. Moreover, a dull, unrested feeling pervaded him, and his crippled wrist ached. Complaining softly, but persistently, he drew out of the warm bag, and, pulling the tent flap open with his foot, stooped, and looked across at the shack given over to his mother and Nance.

He paused in his monotonous anathematising of things present and to come long enough to whistle a bird-like staccato note that was his usual call to Wanota. Much as the Eastern hand-clapping of the master summoned the slave, this brief whistle had for years past brought the little squaw to François to do his bidding. He had ordered; unquestioningly she had obeyed. It was the woman's part in the play of life, as her tribe and people understood it.

Dropping the tent flap again, the half-breed threw himself back on the sleeping bag resting on its springy bed of balsam. The night's sleep was not yet out of his eyes and his thoughts were a tangle. He had not energy enough to go out beyond the spruces and take the snow bath, as was his habit on winter mornings. The need for food was uppermost, and he waited in growing impatience for the quiet, moccasined footstep at his tent door, and the whiff of freshly cooked bacon and bannock.

She was long in coming, this time, Wanota.

François stirred restlessly, and impatience took the short step forward that turns it into anger. The anger seethed after a few moments' longer waiting, and broke into a foam of white wrath across his handsome, evil mouth.

Suddenly rising to his feet, he threw the tent flap wide open. Then he stood as though the cold had congealed his blood. No—no smoke rose thin and blue and comforting from the rough little lean-to a half-hundred yards away. No smoke. The sun sparkled on the snow and the indigo blue of the spruces. A little wind swished with the sound of ruffled silk through the big jack-pine at his tent door. Nothing else was to be seen or heard.

He lifted his right hand and brushed it across his eyes, heedless of the pain that shot through the bruised, half healed tendons and muscles of it.

It had been his order that the fire was to burn night and day in the small sheet-iron stove he had toiled to bring so far into the hills; low the fire might get, but it was never to go out, and Wanota understood his commands and the force of them. No matter how film-like the thread of smoke from the short tin pipe above the shack roof, he would have seen it against the morning air. He stared a moment, then strode across furiously. The place was as empty as a last summer's bird's nest, and the chill of fireless hours was on it.

With a snarl of rage he wheeled out into the open and, shading his eyes against the snow-glare, searched the land. Everywhere the desolate white mocked him. There was but little wind, yet for awhile the moose-willows edging a frozen brook at the foot of the hill where he stood seemed to sway back and forth as though beaten upon by a hurricane, and the earth beneath his feet rocked.

When the world steadied, the half-breed entered the shack and ate of cold bacon and hardened bannock. From his own teepee he took a bottle of the most precious liquid an Indian knows of, and putting it to his blue lips he drank deeply and with reckless disregard of the fact that this bottle was the last of those he had stored. He drank, his dark head far back, his wrathful eyes half closed. Drank till the blood in his veins began to grow hot and race madly, and the old devil-may-care spirit of luckier days took possession of him and drove out racking anger and all fear. He forgot he was François the hunted, the fugitive from justice, François of the crippled right hand, François disdained of the one he loved. A wave of bold assurance swept over him, and he only remembered the young, pretty faces that had smiled at his coming through all the camps of his mother's people in lone hills and in

the out-of-the-way holes and corners of the wild lands he had crossed. He remembered the tears that had fallen at his going. What cared he for banishment or the indifference of one girl? The world was wide, and there were other women, women with as fair faces, as soft arms, as golden and glittering hair. He was again François, the bold young half-breed trapper, with the grace and charm of his father, the soft beauty of his mother, and the strange blend in him of French warmth and vivacity and Indian patience, subtlety, and cold-blooded cunning.

He snapped his slender fingers and laughed a little in his throat. Then he put on his beaver coat, strapped his snow-shoes on clumsily enough with his left hand, and in the same fashion loaded a rifle and slung it across his shoulder. It was a good rifle, and belonged to the absent trapper. When he had made ready he started over the hills.

The moon was bright and high as the half-breed tramped across the ground that had been old David McCullough's, and went up to the little shack below the log house.

A candle burned within and the stove glowed red. Wanota sat on the floor, her shawl pulled over her head. If she heard the shuffling thud of the snow-shoes on the snow-crust and the opening of the door she made no sign.

François went over and touched her shoulder. The exhilaration of the liquor had gone out of him, and his face was dark with passion and bitter purpose.

"Wanota," he said.

She raised her inscrutable eyes to his, and searched swiftly for some trace of what he knew or suspected. If he knew—if he suspected—what would be would be swift and quickly over.

No—her hour had not yet come. Apparently he did not dream that she had aided in the escape. He simply took it for granted she had followed Nance. He did not dream that she would have dared to thwart or break faith with him. She dropped her eyes again. "Wanota—how far did you follow her?" he asked huskily in Indian. "Where has she gone? Tell me what you know, and be quick!"

"There is a double trail of snow-shoes along the river bank—and the old man is dead," she answered.

François exclaimed softly, and nodded.

“So!—They go to the Mission!” he commented, his mind heedless of the old man. “They go to the Mission, Wanota. The priest will marry them then! By God!—No! Not if I get there first! I will follow! They are not done with François yet! What more do you know? Speak, I tell you; then give me food.”

The squaw gave him another swift, furtive glance. No—he did not even faintly suspect her part in that flight. His mind revolved about two figures only. She rose stiffly.

“I watch them go along the river,” she answered, and bent to lay more wood on the fire.

“At what hour?” he asked.

“Three hours past sunrise.”

“So!” he muttered through his teeth. “They have a long start. But I will overtake them—and then——” A short laugh broke from his lips, and the veins on his throat and forehead swelled suddenly. “And then—that man from Lone Lac—I will kill him! Wanota! Make haste—I must eat and go!”

The squaw’s little brown hands shook as she cut the bacon and fried it; her limbs trembled as she set bannock and hot tea before the man.

He ate as a wolf eats, and afterwards thrust some bannock into his pockets. His snow-shoes were still on and his coat unloosened. When he finished eating, he rose, and adjusted the rifle more easily across his shoulder.

The squaw watched him. He touched the gun significantly.

“I can draw de trigger with ma lef’ hand pretty damn quick, maybee!” he said in English.

She did not answer, but watched him swing out of the door and over the moonlit snow. She lifted the candle high, and still watched.

He did not look back. Then, with a low cry as of a wounded animal, she ran back into the room where her snow-shoes lay upon the floor. With shaking fingers she strapped them on her moccasined feet and tied the babiche strings. Catching up a dark blanket, she wrapped it around her and drew the red shawl over her head. Then she snuffed out the candle and went out into the night. François sped along the river bank, following the double track of snow-shoes, and his shadow fell like black velvet upon the silvery radiance of the white ground. Wanota followed silently as another shadow.

CHAPTER XXII

THE MOUNTED POLICE

The people of the Post and Mission House of St. Elizabeth were astir early upon the morning following the wedding, to watch the departure of the bride and groom.

A disgruntled but enterprising young Indian, with a small dog-train and load of musquash skins taken in the early fall, had quarrelled with the factor over the price of them, and was now going to start out for a little settlement to the south-east, known as Blue Rock, where he hoped to drive a better bargain with an agent of another and more modern company than the honourable and ancient one of the Hudson Bay.

Wynn had persuaded this irate red man to give a seat to one passenger on his sledge, and, therefore, Nance was to ride in state, whilst he kept pace with the Indian.

If the going proved good, the settlement would be reached in twelve hours, and there, the Mission priest had assured them, they would be able to borrow from a travelling priest who made Blue Rock his headquarters, a small Canadian sledge and strong pony, that would take them on and over broken roads to the nearest stopping-place of the railroad, and, though the journey might be long and tiresome, it would be comparatively safe if the weather held good. There was no alluring alternative to this course, so they took it.

Weariness slips easily from young shoulders, and the world might have been strewn with white rose leaves instead of snow, as far as Nance and Dick Wynn were concerned. It was a good world to them, and a trifle of discomfort in it here and there weighed just as nothing at all.

The sky was clear blue and the sunrise dazzling, when they started, and the frost-edged wind was sweet with the scent of balsam trees.

The entire population of the place waved them adieu, and Nance waved back and smiled tremulously, for they had all been so kind—so dear. The Indian cracked his long whip, the quarrelsome huskies forgot their bones of contention, strained against their harness, and the light, long sledge with its one passenger enthroned on the bales of fur, slipped over the outward trail, the Indian driver and Dick Wynn keeping a good swinging pace beside it.

They all melted away into the golden light of the early morning, and the Mission people watched them go as though they were fairy folk who drifted off and into another and an unknown world, where, perchance, it might be always summer and where men and women knew little or nothing of snow-storm and rough winds, long dark nights, frost-bound stillness, and the pain of cold and loneliness.

When the figures and the dog-train had become but a dusky blur, the Sisters returned to the Mission school, and the old priest to his house by the church. The factor and his wife took up their daily work, and the few Indians and the passing trapper made ready to journey on.

Only the two men of the Mounted Police, who were delayed by the lame horse, sat by the factor's fire in silence, and something tugged at their hearts that was not all homesickness, but was enough like it to make them impatient of the inactivity that gave them time to think.

One, more restless than the other, rose and paced up and down the room with a jingling of spurs and metal buckles that entranced the smaller of the factor's children, and awed those of a size larger. They all drew away into the dim corners of the room, and watched him in round-eyed silence. Up and down he walked—up and down—his shoulders square set, his weatherbeaten face, with its hard jaw and deep eyes, tense with some freshly stirred feeling. The wedding of the night before, the joyous passing of the bride and groom that morning, had roused within him a thousand half dulled longings and desires. He grew suddenly sick of the wild, unsettled North, and mad for the places of men—the places he knew.

From the chair by the fire his companion glanced at him uneasily; then took a little book from his pocket and tried to read.

A long half-hour dragged by, and still the clanking steps passed and repassed the hearth.

"Settle down, old chap," said the man by the fire. "Come and have a pipe; or I'll go out with you again and have another look at the horses."

The soldier paused in his restless walking. "Settle down!" he echoed. "I don't feel as though I ever would to this life again—I want to leave it all—all this," he said vaguely, waving his hand towards the window through which showed the bleak wintry landscape. "I want to get away from it, boy, and go home—home, do you understand?—where they have gone—those two!" He looked out and down the trail the Indian's dog-train had taken. Then he took up his pacing again.

The soldier by the fire knocked the ashes out of his pipe, filled it slowly and smoked alone. Furtively he watched the moving figure, but said no word; for when these attacks of restlessness came to any one of the men their comrades granted them the grace of silence.

“By George!” the man said to himself, as he drew at his pipe, “I wouldn’t like to cross him when he’s in that mood. It’s a madness he has on him; a madness for something, or someone, or some place he wants, and till it passes, the Lord help him!”

Then he turned to the children. “Hi there, you little kiddies!” he said softly, taking some coins from his pocket, and holding them out. “Take these pennies, and then run out to your mother beyond there. Sure, he’s a big man and he needs lots of room to walk! Besides, ye all have such eyes, and fix them on a fellow so, maybe he feels them. Scatter—with you! Maybe there’s bread with treacle on it waiting for you where your mother is!” And, so persuaded, the brown babies stolidly departed.

CHAPTER XXIII

FRANÇOIS PASSES OUT

The sun was noon-high when François came up to the factor's house. He had broken a snow-shoe on the river road, and been delayed. The last few miles he had tramped in his moccasins. Fatigue and anger had worked their will with him, and he moved now as one who was dazed and uncertain; yet this was but an outward seeming, for his purpose had not wavered.

At the factor's door he stopped to knock the snow from his feet and leggings. Then he entered the trading-room.

For a moment the factor did not know him, for his tangled hair had blown about his face, his face was lined and looked old, and his eyes blazed out of it wildly.

"François!" he said, after a moment. "What has come to you, boy?"

The half-breed ignored the question. A certain dignity about him kept the garrulous agent from following his question up. He stared at him in silence.

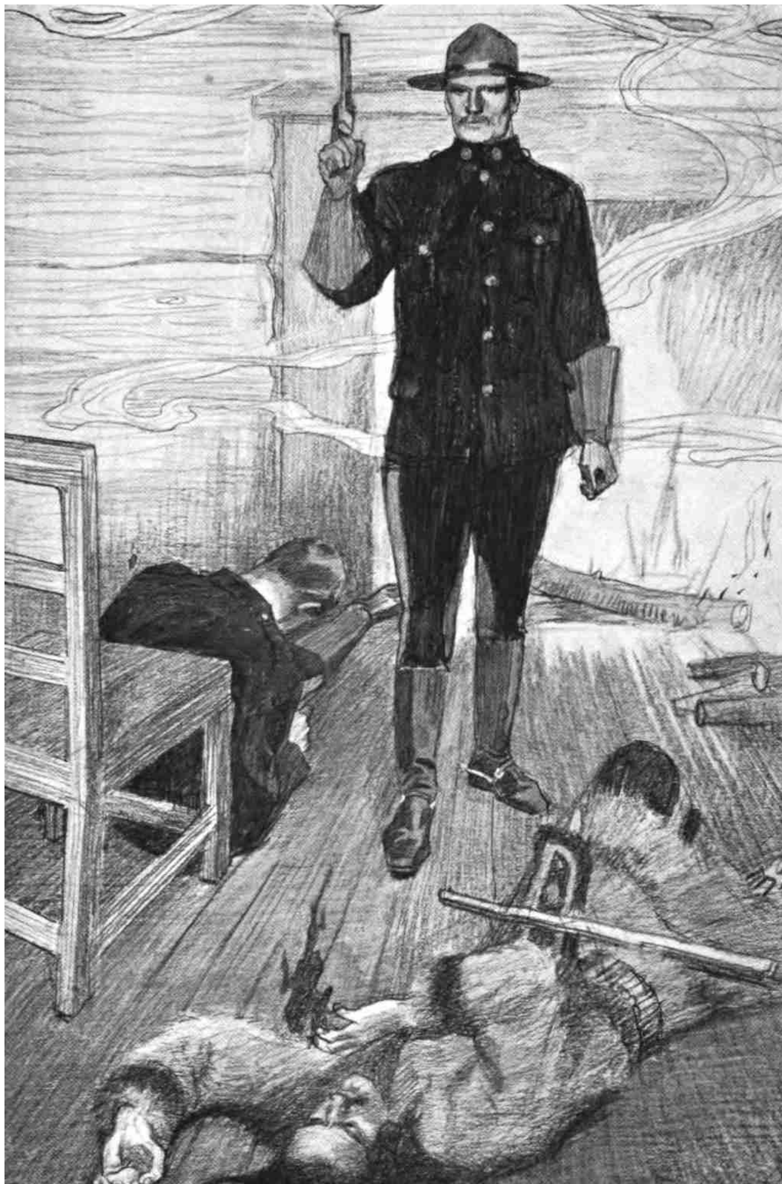
François swung his rifle down from his shoulder, and laid it along his arm loosely.

"Where is dat man from Lone Lac—an—and de ole trapper's granddaughter?" he said slowly, sighting down the rifle barrel and adjusting it a little awkwardly.

Some tone in his voice set the factor's slowly moving mind to work. His ideas, which were usually nebulous, drifted together and took shape.

"W'at is that to you?" he answered François, with a little indifferent shrug; then, his manner changing, "but come by de fire; we get you breakfast. You are dead-beat by your looks."

The half-breed swung his rifle loose, strode across and caught him hard at the throat by his rough flannel shirt. He twisted it tight and held it.



“The room was blue with smoke, but the factor saw one man standing stiffly by the fireplace, his revolver still in his hand.”

“Answer!” he commanded, his dangerous eyes on the face that grew slowly purple.

The agent, stout and short of breath at best, gasped and attempted to reply.

"Dey are married! Married and gone! The priest can tell you."

François threw him off, and swayed a little where he stood.

"W'at time?" he asked hoarsely. "W'en did they go—an' where?"

"Dis morning by sunrise," the factor answered obediently enough now. "Dey went with Oppapago de runner. He took a train load of musquash skins on farther; to Blue Rock maybe."

François made no comment. A slight trembling ran through his limbs, and he unfastened the collar of his beaver coat.

"I rest now by your fire," he said, nodding towards the inner room. "Tell your squaw to bring meat. I pay."

He strode through the low door leading from the trading-room to the living-room.

A fire of pine knots burned on the hearth, and the air was warm and heavy with the perfume and smoke of tobacco.

Before the fire, and with his back to the door, sat a man in the uniform of the Mounted Police. He leaned forward, his chin on his hands, and sat still, as though drowsy from the scented warmth.

Another man in the same uniform paced the floor, his cartridge belt swinging loose, his spurs clinking at each step. Two rifles and a Colt's revolver lay on the rough mantelshelf.

François walked to the centre of the room, unseeingly, or as though confused. Then, on a sudden, and as one sharply awakened, he looked up and took in the situation in every detail.

It was a trap he had blindly strayed into! The trap of the law. The trap that had been set for him cunningly, and had waited long for some chance or arrant folly of his to lead him into it.

Instantly, he raised his gun, though awkwardly enough—covered the man by the fire, and laid his left forefinger on the trigger. Then he stood stock still.

The man who walked stood still also. He scanned the half-breed from his rough fur cap to his moccasined feet, and recognised him.

With a lightning-quick movement he reached the mantel, but before his hand touched the revolver, François fired—and the man who seemingly dozed in the chair before the hearth, and had not roused or noticed who entered the room, swayed a bit farther forward and slipped to the floor.

Two more reports rang out together—a second from François' gun, and one from the revolver of the officer of the Mounted Police. From the trading-room the French-Canadian agent came running in with short excited cries, and beyond, somewhere, a chorus of children's voices, frightened and clamouring, was raised suddenly.

The room was blue with smoke, but the factor saw one man standing stiffly by the fireplace, his revolver still in his hand. On the floor lay François and the other soldier of the Mounted Police.

He ran from one to the other frantically. He was a man of peaceful habit, slow to anger, and with sympathies easily wrought upon. He raised his voice now in loud lamentation, and protested to Heaven against such fierce and tragic happenings as these taking place beneath the roof of his house.

His squaw stood passively at the door, keeping the brood of children behind her and she watched the scene in silence.

Still the officer waited with raised revolver, his finger on the trigger, his eyes fixed upon the half-breed on the floor.

A thin line of red ran from the breast of François' beaver coat, and widened, and widened, as it ran across to the warm hearthstones.

The fur cap had fallen off, and the man's tangled dark head moved from side to side—mechanically, it seemed. His lips were drawn back a little from his teeth, that showed strong and white as a wolf's, but he made no sound.

The soldier who had slipped from his chair, lay where he fell, absolutely still.

Slowly the officer of the police lowered his revolver. Kneeling down by his comrade, he bent over him and listened. The room grew strangely quiet for a moment, and the factor stayed his lamentations and listened also.

Presently the officer arose. "Dead!" he said shortly. "Stone dead! He never even knew——" The words trailed into silence.

He crossed to François. The half-breed looked up, the restless moving of his head stilled.

“It makes a good way to go,” he said through his stiffening lips. “A queek, ver’ short portage. Merci, m’sieu! I thank you, with ma heart. Dieu! Yo clevar fellows—Yo grand seigneur! With yo bon rifle, bon revolver—Yo damn fine horses—Yo cannot tak one French-Indian alive, eh?” Along with the rattle in his throat sounded a short, scornful laugh.

“So!” he went on after a pause. “François de trapper—de outlaw—he walk into de trap. An’ François—crippled of hees right arm, starved as coyote in spring, an’ dead with weariness—he get one of yo—So!” The mocking voice ceased, the red line ran more quickly.

Then with a sharp movement the half-breed raised himself up on his left arm. The light of reason had gone from his eyes, and a wild delirium filled them. Something he saw before him, or someone, for he gazed hard and smiled. “She es made of de snow—an’ de pink of de wild rose—an’ de gold of de frost-touched leaf——” he said softly. “Ah! Le bon Dieu! She will nevar love François!—Nevar!——” He fell back, his eyes closed.

The factor knelt beside him and muttered prayers, and told his beads between anathemas towards all men that this thing should have happened beneath the roof of his erstwhile peaceful house.

He had sent his squaw for the priest, and the children, awed and curious, peered in at the door.

The half-breed looked up again, and caught the factor’s hand in an aching grip.

“That man from Lone Lac!” he said. “I would have killed him, mark yo! But,” with a little shrug, “w’at it matter? Nothing matters, mon ami—jus’ nothing. He is gone. Ver’ well. François also goes. So! Wish him—bon voyage!” The words passed and the light in his eyes; his limbs straightened a trifle, and were quiet.

At the door was the squaw with the old priest. A woman brushed past them and entered first—a little Indian woman, blanketed and with a red shawl covering her hair.

With a cry she crouched beside the dead half-breed, and then lifted his head and gathered him against her heart.

CHAPTER XXIV

HOMEWARD!

Oppapago the runner was not a cheerful Cree at best, but hard luck had dogged his steps since the first snowfall of this winter, and to-day he considered the task of having to carry his load of musquash skins on to Blue Rock as decidedly the last straw.

He had consented most ungraciously to give Nance a place on his sleigh, and allow Dick Wynn to travel beside him.

Oppapago was a red man of the red men, and one in whom was ingrained the race prejudice of the early Indian. Still, time had taught him that not all of the ways of the white man were bad. On occasion he had been forced to admit that they knew how to extract comfort and pleasure out of life as none of his own people could extract it, and that existence with them was an easier thing—at least for their women and children.

Along with his prejudice, therefore, had grown up a certain respect for the dominant race, though he made small concession to it, and spoke and understood its language but indifferently.

A feeling of dull resentment against all white men burned as a slow fire in the pagan heart of Oppapago the runner. He would have none of them. He would not take his sick to them to be healed, nor his children to them to be taught, and further, he would not have their God for his God.

Now, through the blue-white of the morning, his dog-team, meat-fed and rested, pulled the sleigh briskly, while he went beside it at the swift, tireless trot that had earned him his name.

Wynn, a few paces behind, swung along as swiftly, talking and laughing in the way that was his own, and that often went from philosophy to nonsense with seeming inconsequence. No Indian mind could follow such rapid change of voice and face without risk of losing its balance.

The Indian had so small a knowledge of English that he did not grasp even the fringe of the conversation that drifted to him. But one talent he possessed in great degree, and that was an ability to follow the fine shading and colour of sounds and tones.

He knew now that joy was the keynote of what he heard; that delight rippled and ran through the girl's voice when she spoke, and his keen ear detected and caught the soft undertone when sometimes the words broke, or a sentence was left unfinished.

There was a little squaw up in his teepee in the hills, whose voice at times took just such tones. Moreover, Oppapago had heard the birds in the spring, and had learned much that they alone can teach. There was, indeed, no wild thing in all the North whose voice he could not understand and interpret.

Still, when this Englishman spoke, he did not catch the essence of his meaning easily, for no brave he had ever known spoke so to a woman. The women of his race had learned to be content with few love-words.

That one Indian allowed her to follow him, to serve him with food, to keep the teepee fires burning, to wait for him, that was enough for any squaw.

If a child kept close to her skirts, or a small, placid papoose swung against his cradle-board from the low branch of a near-by tree, she was satisfied and did well.

No Indian wasted time talking to a woman. To tell her often she was beautiful and to be desired was but a loss of words, and words were precious. They were things not to be squandered, but to be stored up against the time of the councils of men.

This tall, tireless Englishman, following in his snow-shoe trail, was a spendthrift of words, the runner concluded. He undervalued them as the blue jay or coyote their voices. The blue jay who told all things to the woods-people, and the coyote who was the world's gossip.

So Oppapago trotted on and listened, casting now and then a sidelong glance over his shoulder at the two, an unpleasant glance, in which there was, nevertheless, some blending of curiosity with resentment.

Through his mind crept a faint envy of the man who could gain so much happiness from what appeared to be the very simplest and most usual things in life. To be travelling across the snow with a woman beside one, with many miles yet to go, and hard fare to stay one's appetite, what was there in all that to so stir the blood and bring into a voice so many cadences?

Over the swart face, pock-marked and heavy, flitted an expression half of wonder, half of contempt.

He flicked the leader of his train with his dog-whip, and went on faster, to test the man who followed.

Wynn took the pace without comment, but Nance noted the extra speed, and her eyes grew troubled.

"Oppapago is making up time," she said. "It is not necessary; he will tire you out."

Wynn leaned down, smiling a little.

"The silent savage is not very friendly to me," he commented in a low voice. "But do not trouble; I believe I can keep any pace he sets. If not—well, then, I will have to reason with Oppapago."

"He would not reason," Nance answered dubiously. "But there is another way, Dick—we must make him like us!"

"Oh, Oppapago!" she called after a moment.

The runner half halted and looked back.

"The furs have all shaken down and are uncomfortable," she said in Cree. "Would you be so kind as to put them in place? Only you can do it as it should be done. I will run a little way, for I am tired of the low seat; but I will come back, for your dogs will have to carry me, Oppapago. No woman could go as fast as you do—and hardly any man."

The Indian grunted his reply. He had not known she understood or spoke his own tongue. With some awkwardness and more unwillingness he turned, helped her up, and gave his attention to the packs of fur.

Wynn applied himself to lighting his pipe. Into his eyes came a glimmer of amusement as Oppapago beat up the furs and made a better seat of them, for he knew perfectly how little the runner enjoyed rendering such service.

The dogs quarrelled a bit, as is their usual way of enjoying themselves during a rest. Nance ran down the trail and back again, a wild rose colour in her face, her scarlet toque and sash vivid against the snow.

With a slow wave of his arm, the Indian presently indicated that the sleigh was ready.

Nance held out her hand, as plainly expecting him to help her up and into the sleigh.

"You are very good!" She smiled. "I thank you greatly."

The runner folded the rugs about her, and for the first time really looked at her face. In the camps of his people he had never seen hair of a golden colour or eyes of so strange a blue.

Some gleam of a smile answered the one Nance gave him. She did not dislike him, he saw; neither did she mind his buckskin garments, or the scent of the teepee that clung to them—the bitter, pungent scent of drying game, and pine smoke mingled with tobacco. He went back to his dogs and lifted the long whip.

"Oppapago!" Nance called again. Again he turned while the team fell into place.

"You are called 'the runner,' are you not?" she asked in Cree.

"Yes," he answered shortly.

"I call you Oppapago, 'the whistler,' " she returned, nodding.

"Where have you heard?" he questioned quickly.

"One morning from a window at the Mission school I saw you pass, and you called to your brother, the blackbird. He sat on a tree and answered, and you called back again, and I listened, Oppapago. And there was a little, half-asleep, mottled-grey owl on that tree also, and you called to *him* in his own language, and *he* answered, as the blackbird had done; and up—far, far up among the leaves, there was a blue jay. Oh! a very saucy fellow! And he mocked at you, and you mocked back until he grew angry and ruffled up all his feathers and flew away! And you laughed and went on, and Sister Mary Philomena called me to my lessons, and I heard no more. Please give the whistle of the blackbird *now*, Oppapago," she ended.

The Indian glanced at Wynn to see how much he understood of all this, but the Englishman was busy tightening a moccasin thong.

"There are no blackbirds to call now," said the runner half sullenly.

"Oh, no!" Nance answered. "No. But it will bring the spring back for a moment if you whistle their song. Please, Oppapago!"

He touched the leader, and the dogs started ahead. In a moment he had taken up his steady trot beside them; yet the pace was not so hard as he had made it before.

For half a mile they went on steadily. Then, softly at first, but with a clear, rising sweetness, from out some snow-covered shrubs they were passing seemed to come the May song of a blackbird.

Nance drew her breath quickly. Wynn slowed up to listen. The dogs pricked their ears, and a rabbit sprang from its form and loped away.

The song ran its short cadences twice over, then trailed into a few broken notes and stopped.

“Oh, Oppapago!” Nance cried softly, “you told me the blackbirds had gone! One has been left behind. Call to him quickly!”

“It was Oppapago who whistled,” answered the Indian with a short backward glance.

“But the song came from the bushes yonder,” she returned doubtfully. “There might be one blackbird left, perhaps—just one!”

He shook his head. “That was a trick,” he said. “I whistled——”

“Then you are very wonderful,” said Nance seriously. “I would give a great deal to be able to mimic the birds so.” Then, in English: “Is he not wonderful, Dick?” she insisted.

“Very,” he said warmly, nodding acquiescence. “Very, indeed!”

The runner understood.

“Oppapago is no longer unfriendly,” Nance said after they had travelled on awhile. “When he looks back his face is different. It must make him feel happier not to hate us, I should think—you know what I mean?”

“I fancy I gather the drift of your meaning,” the man said, drawing at his pipe. “In future I feel I may safely leave my enemies to you to deal with, and they will fare better than at my hands. Now, look ahead! When we reach those jack pines, we will stop and take lunch. The hill with the jack pines—so the factor told me—stands for a half-way house to Blue Rock.”

After the noon rest, they went steadily on, reaching the rough settlement by night. In the night a wet snow fell, that by morning was frost-hardened, and it made the trail too difficult for the priest’s sleigh and pony.

It was the runner who came to their rescue. He and the Post-agent had bargained far on towards morning over the musquash pelts, but Oppapago had held out longest, and so obtained his price.

The winter world at dawn, therefore, did not appear so bad a place to him, and, strangely enough, within his heart some old hardness against all white men seemed to have melted.

To their amazement, he offered to take Dick Wynn and his wife on to the next stage of their journey.

This time the three set out quite as old acquaintances, and the conversation was at times in Cree as well as English, for Nance insisted that the Indian should not be left entirely out of it. She felt that long silences were not altogether good, even for Indians.

After a stormy night, the morning was sun-gilded. The scent of the frost was in the air—a faint illusive thing as impossible to describe as the breath from a so-called scentless flower. Oppapago caught it, and Nance. Wynn agreed with them that it existed—though not for him.

He had some time conceded that there were more things in heaven and earth, for those who had lived long in the wilds, than were dreamt of in his philosophy.

When they could, they kept in the blue shadows of trees to lessen the snow dazzle that now hurt their eyes. Mile on shining mile they left the hills behind and the country of My Lord the Moose.

Two nights were spent on the road, one in a cedar shelter in the open, the other in the shack of a solitary settler, who welcomed them with the blessed hospitality of the pioneer.

Next day they reached a station of the great railroad, and Oppapago waited until the train bore them away.

Shading his eyes, he saw it vanish like a smoke wraith down that narrow road of steel that led into the unknown; the unknown—where they belonged—those two—but where he, the Indian runner, could never follow.

For a short moment a fierce desire rose within him to go where they had gone—to taste a fuller life, to drink a draught such as Fate had never yet lifted to his lips. Fiercely, blindly, for that moment, he desired—he scarce knew what. Then he dropped his hand, swung around, and whistled to his dogs the sharp clear note that always brought them to their feet.

Gathering up the reins, he flicked the wise grey leader, and the gaunt beasts went forward.

A letter from the Mission of St. Elizabeth reached Sir Richard Wynn some weeks later, and on the day before he and his wife sailed for England. It was from the Mission priest, and told of the death of François, the half-breed, and the officer of the Mounted Police.

It further said that Wanota, the Indian woman, who had followed her son and been with him when he died, had been stricken with illness caused by exhaustion and shock, and the Sisters had taken care of her. The priest assured him he could tell Lady Wynn they would take care of her indefinitely, for she would need care. Wanota was better, but her memory of late happenings was quite gone. Indeed, she seemed only to remember and speak of the years when she was a child in the teepee of the chief, her father. However, she was very content, he concluded, and the Sisters were well, and he himself and all sent them good wishes.

Regarding this letter, Sir Richard kept his own counsel, though on the homeward voyage he mentioned it to Nance.

They were on deck, and he had just pointed out to her a low cloudy line on the horizon that he said was their own country.

She leaned forward, her eyes wide and shining.

“I shall love it!” she said. “I know I shall love it, Dick. Scotland—that was my grandfather’s home; and Ireland—my mother was born in Ireland—did you know? And England—that is where you belong; how could I help loving it?”

The sea-wind blew its salt fragrance in their faces, and on the crest of one of the waves a gull rocked to and fro with a flash of silver wings.

“We seem very, very far from the north country of the foot-hills,” Nance said, after a moment. “I often wonder how Wanota fares, and how life goes with the Sisters, and if things are well or ill with François. After all, I was sorry for François!”

The man looked out across the water and to the cloudy line.

“I did not tell you, sweetheart,” he said, “but I got a letter from the old priest of St. Elizabeth. I left it in New York, I think, that letter.”

She caught his hand. “How were they, every one, Dick?” she cried eagerly. “Was all well with the Sisters and little Wanota?”

He smiled down at her.

“All was very well with the Sisters,” he answered. “And with Wanota—and, yes—yes, I think, with François also.”

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TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled 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.

Illustrations have been relocated due to a non-page layout.

[The end of *The Man at Lone Lake* by Virna Sheard]