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THE BULL MOOSE

by Ridgwell Cullum

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The Bull Moose

Chapter I

The Border Patrol

"A sergeant and four men, eh?"

"Yes, sir. I think that's the minimum—for the present."

Superintendent Richard Ferrers was standing at the window. It was double-glassed and streaming with melting frost-rime. His lean, straight back was turned upon the barely furnished room, and upon the youthful officer seated at the big, whitewood table which was the official desk.

It was police headquarters at Fort Glenach, which was a high-sounding title for a very small cluster of frame buildings and log dugouts dotted about promiscuously on the precipitous cliff banks of the Alikine River. It was at that point on the international boundary where the swiftest river in the whole of the Canadian north rushed headlong on its way to the sea through the southernmost coastal region of Alaska.

Inspector Jack Danvers waited; and the while his chief's back, in its smartly tailored patrol jacket, became a complete preoccupation for his steady but anxious eyes. He waited silently for that decision, which one way or the other, would mean so much in the many-sided work of his detachment.

But the man at the window seemed in no hurry to respond to his subordinate's request. He just remained staring out through the moisture on the window.

It was a grim scene in spite of the glory of blazing spring sunshine. Far as the eye could see it was a world of forest and deep-shadowed valleys; it was tumbled and tattered; it was mistily steaming; and it went on miles and miles into the far distance, to the glacial rampart of mountains set up by nature against the wild fury of northern seas.

The rush of spring was in full season. Life had returned to a moribund world; it was there in a glorious sun that was high in the heavens; it was in the streaming hillsides pouring a liquid flood into the valleys below; it was in the already lightening hues of the dark pine forests. But more than all it was in the legions of waterfowl winging at speed for their remote northern feeding and breeding grounds.

At last there came a negative movement of the dark head. "You know, Danvers, I'd be glad to say 'yes,'" Superintendent Ferrers said quietly. "Very glad. If you'd asked me the loan of a month's pay it wouldn't have given me more worry than to tell you not to get feeble. But a sergeant! *And* four men! Why, Athaba couldn't produce an available boy scout."

The superintendent turned back from the window. He crossed to the unpretentious table, and smilingly flung himself into a chair opposite his subordinate.

"You don't realize the character of the control of our department down at Ottawa," he proceeded. "It's not police; it's politician. Police and politicians don't add up together in the same column of figures in a country's ledger. Police are assets. The only thing that really stirs a politician's gray matter to more than talk is the weighty club the press is just now wielding on the subject of official squandermania. Its bludgeoning is served up at every political breakfast table till its wretched victim doesn't know if he's eating ham and eggs, or the ashes of his own particular political career. Now Fort Reliance has jumped into life. It's full of placer gold, and—other things. It's three hundred miles north of you, here. It's not in your area, nor in your work. Yet you want Ottawa to spend money on reinforcements. Tell me about it."

Danvers held out his open cigarette case.

"That's all right, sir," he said cheerfully. "I know you're tied hand and foot by Ottawa. But I've got to get those reinforcements. So long as I'm just a border patrol my detachment's sufficient. I can hold the game down. But with a dead world resurrected away behind me into ugly life, it's—different."

Ferrers took a cigarette from the case and lit it. And as Danvers did the same he flashed a swift glance out of narrowed eyes at his subordinate.

"And why should a specially detailed border patrol find it—different?" he questioned.

"A police officer can possess a conscience."

The superintendent inhaled luxuriously. Then he nodded.

"I s'pose he can," he agreed.

"That's the hell of it, chief!" Danvers exploded, with a laugh that did not contain much mirth. "The territory back of me has come alive. There's Reliance, with a hundred souls and a bunch of four thousand of the world's meannest neches. It's full up with a welter of human muck that's always boiling over. And there's not a soul to clean up the mess, unless it's me."

Ferrers liked the forthrightness of this man who was his junior officer.

He stood up from his chair and passed across to the woodstove radiating pleasant heat that was wholly welcome in spite of the spring thaw.

"Reliance is going to be a big placer field?" he observed casually.

Danvers' eyes became thoughtful.

"It's that already, sir. It's—it's saturated with pay stuff all the way along the river right from Reliance up to the Valley of the Moose, another hundred miles farther north. You can sluice or pan it anywhere where there's foreshore on the river. It's—it's just alive with gold. It's over five years now, sir, since color was first struck. And in a way it's queer the rush hasn't come before. It would have, only there hasn't been a front door to Reliance all that time. Only the back door over-land from Leaping Horse."

"Why?"

Danvers smiled.

"It's the Alikine River. That's Reliance's front door. And it's been shut tight—till last summer. You see, sir, the Alikine isn't just a river; it's a liquid avalanche. The deepest, swiftest, roughest waters anywhere north of 60°. It's never been navigable from the coast up to Reliance till Noah Bartlet, the sternwheel king of Alaska, heard about it. Some lunatic must have dared him. Anyway, last summer he came along down to Port Curtis with a big blare of trumpets and one of his oil-fuel, sternwheel kettles, and handed Port Curtis a big laugh. He told the folks he was opening a two months service on the Alikine from Curtis to Reliance. And he put it over."

Danvers flung his cigarette stub into a cuspidor.

"He's opened that front door all right, sir," he added. "And he figures to keep it wide open. Master Noah's some boy on the swift waters."

"He should be."

"Sure, sir." Danvers smiled. "It would be humorous if I didn't know Reliance, and just what opening that front door means. I've been up there on three trips. Each one was a police call—for a killing. I've reported them to you, sir, one time and another. And they were all pretty ugly. Those three trips to Reliance told me I'd found the *real* hell. The other's just imitation."

Danvers gestured while his chief helped himself to another cigarette, and retired again to the pleasant warmth of his stove.

"That doesn't say a thing, chief," he cried. "Oh, I know. I haven't your experience. I don't know the north like you. But I know a sink when I see it. And I found one at Reliance. Just think of a derelict old fur post hundreds of miles from any living soul with a spot of civilization in them. Then think of a bunch of folk who don't care a curse, and all of them sluicing gold they can almost shovel on to their riffles. Think of hard men, the sort of jetsam Leaping Horse was mighty glad to see the backs of, with more gold than they can spend. What's to happen?

"That old fur post has been rebuilt into a great store," he went on. "And all around it is a dump of shacks and dugouts they call a town. Jim McBarr, a tough prospector, rebuilt that place. He founded it out of his recollection of other similar places he'd known. And he stocked it with all the things that plentiful yellow dust can buy at extortionate prices. Goods? Oh, yes. All sorts of goods to fill the belly and clothe the body, and to help out the gathering of placer gold. Hooch? The world's worst. Gambling? Every known form from craps to roulette. They can amuse themselves there from daylight to daylight with the lowest down sweepings of the red light sisterhood. And Jim McBarr's handed control of that sump to his granite-hard Scottish dame he calls Marthe, while he and his boy sluice away up the river.

"Can you see a woman who hasn't a thought, or feeling, or sense that isn't yellow dust? That's Marthe. She's as soulless as a bank without its honesty. I've watched her there, standing behind her counter, weighing in the boys' dust in scales a newborn kid wouldn't stand for, and passing them a credit at outrageous prices. There isn't a day or night that shanty isn't crazy drunk. There's no sort of law or order other than they hand out to themselves. There's no bank or gold control. There's not a doc nor a missioner to see after bodily or spiritual welfare. It's just a dump in the heart of the Kaska Indian territory, who are a fighting, murdering, thieving bunch of some four thousand neches. There's all those things. And the—Bull Moose."

"The Bull Moose?"

The eyes of the man at the stove were sharply questioning. But Danvers paid no heed.

"Maybe it's just a living sore that's only itching a fool inspector of police now. But don't make any mistake. It's malignant. And there's coming a stampede over this river that'll make the old rush of '98 over the Skagway look like a kid's tea-party. I tell you, sir, it's bad now. And when that stampede gets into full flood what's it going to be then?"

"Cleaned up—quick!"

The reply snapped back, and Danvers stared.

"But why—why wait?" he stammered.

Ferrers came back to the desk and sat.

"You know, there's a whole heap we folks blame our department for," he said coolly. "Maybe it's the human nature of it. We're always right. And the department's always wrong. You see, we're executive and they're political. Your anxiety for Reliance, your view of the muck there, I'm dead sure is quite right and without exaggeration. I saw just the same in the early days of Leaping Horse. But it's got to be. The thing's historical of this old world of ours. I haven't a doubt those folk up there are all crooks, gunmen, harlots, gamblers. And that being so Ottawa could dump them into penitentiaries and detention homes without a worry. But the world would lose on balance. And lose badly. We'd gain plaudits. But no plaudits could compensate for the loss of the work these poor folk are doing.

"These reckless-living souls are the he-men, and she-women of life," he went on thoughtfully. "They may be uneducated or super-educated. It doesn't matter. But they're creatures of mentality and courage. They're creatures of imagination and personality. They're unquestionably of hell-fire passions, and energy, or they'd never quit the sidewalks of civilization for the dog's lot of the outland pioneer. You've got to look wide, boy; think wide. I know these folk. I've lived with them and watched them. I've laughed with them, and—cried—with them. And, yes, I guess I've loved them. You can believe me it's the iron courage, the reckless impulse, the physical, moral, mental sacrifice of just these that has always prepared the foundations of all the good that has grown up in the world's great countries and civilizations.

"Oh, you're not going to get your moralists, your Pharisees, your cranks to admit that. But it's everlastingly true. Morality, decency, even religion itself, have all been built up on foundations which have been set by the agony and bloody sweat of those whose monumental courage, energy and unquenchable wanderlust have driven them forth into the world's far places to seek their lives and lusts. Muck? Yes; if you like. But there's always litter and muck in the laying of foundations. Up there at Reliance foundations are being built. I've watched it all through your reports, and haven't needed to go see for myself. You see, I know it all so well. I've passed those reports to Ottawa; and when the political moment arrives Ottawa will clean up. But that won't be till the foundations which those poor souls are well and truly laying are dry, and ready to be built upon. Now, this—Bull Moose?"

It was all said with a pleasant humor which did not for a moment disguise the man's earnestness. Danvers smiled.

"That's the real business of all this talk, sir," he said.

"Surely. That's how I thought."

"The Bull Moose is a killer," Danvers said at once. "If you went up to Reliance and asked them you'd hear of a bogey they regard as something almost super-human. You'd hear of a queer figure looking something like the whole fore-quarters of a real bull moose. They'd tell you of a big man whose garments are a parka of moose fur reaching to his thighs. And of a pair of fur chaps reaching to his heels. Then they'd tell you of a headpiece that's joined to the neck of the parka, and which is no less than the great drooping tines of a fine bull moose, with the original fur mask entirely concealing the human face beneath it. That's the description you'd hear."

Danvers paused to offer another cigarette which was promptly refused.

"But you'd hear more than that." Danvers leant over the table with his elbows resting on it. "You'd hear it all in tones that would make you wonder. You know, sir, the sort of tone kids use when they're telling fairy stories. These toughs. Men and women who think no more of gunplay than you or I would of passing time of day. That make-up has got 'em cold. The Bull Moose! They talk of him as if he'd got clean out of the pages of a fairy story and come to life."

"Shall I make a guess at the rest of it?" Ferrers asked with a lift of his even brows.

"You don't need to, sir. It's just sheer 'hold-up'; and 'killing,' when killing seems good. The Bull Moose, up there in the country above the Valley of the Moose, has got the whole four thousand murdering Kaska Indians right in the palms of his two hands. He's got them hypnotized to do his bidding in just the way he's hypnotized the folk of Reliance into a sort of superstitious fear of him.

"His methods are theatrical," he went on bitterly. "Just get the position of those crazy gold men. They're all up and down a hundred miles of that river, and away out on Lake Clare. They're isolated; ones and twos. On claims of foreshore with their home-made sluice boxes. And sometimes only panning a prospect. They go on day after day, week after week, all summer. And their dust piles up. Then comes the moment. They're just beginning to think of making down river to trade with old Marthe and hit some high spots. But before the getaway the Bull Moose suddenly appears out of—nowhere. He's in full view of the claim, but at a point that's safe from gunplay. He just stands there and looks through his mask with its crazy drooping horns. When his victim's seen him there comes a deep imitation of a moose's bellow at the rutting season, or a laugh. Then he goes. And if you listened to those half-wits you'd guess he just fades away. But the signal's been given. And the next the poor fool knows is a horde of neches armed with an arsenal of store rifles. And, to save his fool hide he's got to pay over his stock of dust. If he shows fight—!"

Danvers gestured and sat back in his chair.

"A white hold-up, who's—'taken the blanket.'" Ferrers nodded.

"Sure, sir."

"Some tough from—Leaping Horse?"

"Maybe, sir. But I don't think so."

"Who?"

"It's only a guess. And maybe it's all wrong. Yet—I'd like you to cast your mind back, sir. I've been on this border patrol four years. They've been mining placer up there a lot longer. You remember how you came to have me detailed up here. Sergeant Sam Peele was in charge here with four men. He skipped. But his men are here still."

"Yes. I remember. Deserted over the border. It was the time of an oil stampede in the Irkuk River district. He'd been an oil man, or something, before he joined up. That's what the inquiry told us."

"That's what the inquiry—concluded, sir. You remember. I was on that inquiry."

"And signed the report."

"Yes." Danvers smiled. "That's so, sir. I signed it. But I was very careful to state that our evidence was meager. And our

verdict was more or less an 'intelligent surmise.' Well, Steve Dickson, one of my men, is convinced that Sam Peele never made the Irkuk district. He declared Peele had his eyes always turned on Reliance from the moment color was first struck. He talked of it all the time; thought of it; dreamed of it. And he was a big man, like this Bull Moose. And he'd had years of Indian territory down south. There was a time when he was interpreter to the Indian department in the Blackfeet Reservation. He could interpret half a dozen Indian lingos. He knew Piegan, Cree, Sioux, and Blackfeet. It looks to me as though we shall find the face of Sam Peele under that moose mask—when we get him."

For some thoughtful moments Superintendent Ferrers offered no comment. But at last he nodded at the man across the table with a friendly smile.

"You win, boy," he said amiably. "Four years is long enough for building those foundations. They should be dry by now. We'll have to stir Ottawa into activity. You can write me a very full report and I'll forward it with a strong covering letter. Then you'll have to be ready to go down East yourself. You've convinced me it's time to get after things. And I think you'll be able to convince Ottawa. Anyway it's up to you. The best I can do for you is to give you the opportunity."

"Thanks, sir." Danvers' smile was beaming. "You must have another cigarette," he added, holding out his depleted case. "They're quite good."

Chapter II

Stark Nature

"Maybe there's no real call to tell you—to tell anybody. It's my life and hers. But, you see, you're my father, Jim. And you and Marthe have always been pretty good to me. Besides—I—I wanted to know you feel good about it. Shamus Hoogan's a great feller—her father. And Roskana's—"

"A Dogrib squaw!"

Jim McBarr's interruption came with all the contempt his cold, uncompromising temper could fling into it.

The youth stared. He was lying sprawled on the ground beside the noon campfire, with the chattels of the noon meal they had just eaten littered about him. There was a flush on his bronzed cheeks, a glint of hot resentment in the blue, frank-gazing eyes, as he searched his father's face. But his stirring of anger found no verbal expression. He just stared, breathing hard. And his big body propped itself on a massive elbow pressed deeply into the loose alluvial soil.

But Jim McBarr never for a moment deflected the stare of his far-gazing eyes. They remained peering into the remoteness of the gloomy gorge. He sat there on his upturned bucket looking many sizes too big for it, and blew smoke heavily from his well-charred pipe. There was something frigidly unemotional about him. Something utterly unyielding. His big face was without any softening, and his eyes were granite hard. But that was the man. It is doubtful if life could contain for him any thrill, any emotion, any alarm, that could disturb his outward seeming.

The bore of water was surging down the river. The spring freshet was in full spate. The swollen Alikine was streaming southward, heavily, irresistibly, gloomily. It was pouring between massive, rugged walls of gray granite whose dizzy heights had power to sadden even the happy smile of a cloudless spring day. It was an oily-flowing avalanche of water that was brown with silt. And a low, thunderous murmur echoed dully from wall to wall as it swirled on its way. The flood of it was a-litter with the washout of upper reaches. Whole trees were afloat. They came and passed in almost unbroken succession. And their up-reaching skeleton arms were lifted as though in prayerful appeal against the destruction for which they were riding.

Ten Mile Gorge was an expression of nature in her superlative grim. The vast containing walls, often overhanging by reason of ages of erosion, made for a sense of personal insignificance. The avalanche of its waters spurned the littleness of all animate life. It was without grace. But starkly magnificent.

And in the very heart of it lay the stretch of alluvial which was the gold claim Jim McBarr and his son, Sandy, were working. It was a wide spit of foreshore, some half mile in length, where the walls of the gorge recessed to admit the mouth of a lateral ravine. The latter was a great, broken drainway from the heights above, and the foreshore was the rich silt washed down through the ages.

Jim McBarr's workings were as crudely makeshift, as were all the gold washings up and down the Alikine, from Reliance to the Valley of the Moose. There was the inevitable trestle conduit, fed by the flow of the river; there was a vast dump of tailings, which indicated years of labor; there were implements and two stout wheeling trolleys. It was all very primitive. But it was all that was necessary where the soil was grossly rich and loosely surfaced. Later, when the surface had been all washed out it might be different. But Jim McBarr was not concerned for later. The surface was rich with a color that was beyond his dreams. It would be all sufficient.

Then there was a hut. It was no better than a rough log fronting to a small natural cavern. It had a doorway, and a smoke hole in its roof. It was just a shelter for sleep. Nothing more. For, in the uncertainties in the deeps of Ten Mile Gorge, there could be no telling. There were the devastating ravages of nature. And there were other things.

Jim McBarr, like all the rest of the gold fraternity on the Alikine, was a creature of fortune and opportunity. And his twenty-year-old son had been raised to the same life. Out on their claim they lived from day to day. They slept, and ate, and worked. And withal they watched. And such gold as remained in the riffles of their sluice was carefully harvested and safely cached.

Jim had the wisdom of forty odd years. He had the experience of years of buffeting in the northern wilderness. He had no

trust in man or nature. But he had infinite, cold courage. Sandy had courage, too. But he also had youth in its fullest tide.

The physical likeness between father and son was almost too complete. Both were massively big. They were big of bone, big of muscle, and lean as herrings where superfluous flesh was concerned. The father's thick hair curled crisply close to a well-shaped head, and his thrusting chin was hidden by a short brown beard. The son's hair was of a similar brown and similar curl. The shape of his head was almost identical. And like his father's, his strong face was ungiven to unnecessary smiling. But whereas Jim's eyes were granite hard in their cold gray, Sandy's were blue, and eager, and shining with the unspoilt youth behind them.

At last the dangerous silence which had fallen looked to have reached its full limit. It was the father. It was a wordless negative movement of his bare head. A movement which admitted of no misapprehension. He removed the charred pipe from the grip of his strong jaws, and spoke with harsh finality.

"It's got to quit, son," he said, his eyes boring coldly. "It's got to quit here and now. Else you can pull up stakes, and beat your own trail without your family. Your mother's a Scot from Aberdeen. I'm from Glasgow. And that's wher' you were born. You're a Scot to your backbone, and—white. Your blood's—red. Wanita's isn't. She's the half of an Irishman, who's white all through. Maybe he hasn't the balance belonging to our folk, but he's a man I'm glad for. The other half of her's a—Dogrib squaw. Get that, and all it means. A Dogrib. That low-grade bunch that belongs to the world's throw-outs. If it was just philandering with a half-breed I wouldn't stand for it and call you 'son.' But if I know your fool honesty it's—marrying. And that's a hell-sight worse."

The gesture of spurning accompanying the final words was devastating. And there was the swiftest glance of the hard eyes as the boy stirred convulsively under the lash. Jim McBarr went on at once. It almost seemed as if he had no understanding of the goad he was inflicting, or was eager to drive it right home.

"If you marry Wanita you can forget Marthe and me ever bred you and raised you," he said, deliberately raising a restraining hand as Sandy jolted up sitting. "You've put it up to me. Now get this. You can't mix color in the human body without producing the sort of stuff that belongs to a red hot hell. It's against nature; it's against life. A bitch wolf and a dog father can't sport better than a cur malemute. And a cur malemute needs a club over him from the day he's pupped. I don't care a curse for any angel face and body. That's your kid's foolishness when your blood's hot. It's hell's mask to fool half-wits. It's your head, not your belly, you need to think with. Wanita! That kid's a picture. She's the kind of wench to set any boy dizzy. I know. I'd say she's pure, too. And, seein' she's Shamus Hoogan's kid I'd guess she don't know a thing to make her ashamed. But it's in her. Bred in her. The breed. And it's hell!"

The cold tones ceased and the hard eyes remained on the far distance. Then the man's great shoulders stirred as the silence remained unbroken.

"Well, it's right up to you," he went on. "You're a Scot's twenty, which is another boy's twenty-five. Your blood's rich and hot. And you've a share of our dust to make you forget. If you're wise you won't forget. There's a white world ahead of you. It's waiting. You can buy some of it. You don't need to breed malemutes."

Jim's pipe went back to the grip of his jaws with a gesture. It told of his finish. And Sandy's pent feeling broke out on the instant.

"It's not right, Jim!" He flung hotly. "It's not fair! It's darned lies! Ther' isn't a breath of hell in the whole of Wanita's body. She's as pure as snow—"

"But not as white."

Sandy leapt to his feet. It was the final straw. He was driven beyond all filial restraint.

"And what of it?" he shouted, his voice echoing down the gorge. "Did she do it? Is a kid to be blamed for the lusts of her parents? It's you folk that should get blamed. It's not a thing to me you're a Scot and Marthe's a Scot. I'd still have to be me if you were a black from Africa and Marthe was a yellow Chink. You're crazy talking white and color when it's you folk who do it. Black, red, yellow, or white, nature stands for it. And if nature stands for it who the hell are you to kick? Half-breed! What of your Scots and British. What of your Russians and your Yanks. Every mother's son of us are mixed breeds. You can't put that stuff over on me, Jim. A Scot's a half-breed if ever there was one."

"But he's white."

"Chri—! Tcha!"

Sandy passed a great hand back over his curling brown hair. He was beating back the impulse driving him. He was striving with all his big might to remember that the other was his father. He abruptly gestured, and his tone moderated.

"You've bred me and raised me, Jim," he said, almost gently. "You've had me taught, and I've learned good. You've—you've been pretty good to me. But a feller can't think those things all the time. I stand pat for Wanita if you talk half-breed from now to Eternity. And I'm not thinking with my belly. It's Wanita, if it costs me father, mother, or anything else in the world. That kid's got no hell in her. She's just good from her dark head to her toes. Courage! Truth! Love! I want her. I'll always want her. And it's not just for her body. When it comes to you and Marthe against Wanita there's nothing for me but Wanita. I'll beat my own trail with Wanita wherever it heads me. You've said it. And it goes."

The boy's restraint held. But the cost of it was evident in the eyes that gazed yearningly for a glimpse of any softening in the face that never turned in his direction.

The man on the bucket inclined his head.

"We'll clean up, and make a break back to Marthe," he said, in an even tone that betrayed no feeling. "We'll strike your share of our dust, and Marthe'll weigh it right and hand it over. And we'll do it right away before the Bull Moose and his bunch cuts in on us. You'll get a square deal. You've turned your trick." Jim McBarr drew a deep breath and blew smoke afresh. Then: "I'll stand for no low-grade neche blood in a Scot's grandchildren."

Sandy leapt. His six feet of body stood towering. It was a moment of wild exasperation that was beyond his control; his upraised fist was clenched; it looked about to strike.

But even so the man on the bucket gave not the smallest heed. Gazing afar up the gorge his pipe left his mouth. And it was held out pointing over the water.

"What'll that be?" he asked coldly.

What might have happened in another moment of the boy's headlong rage it would be impossible to say. Sandy's furious impulse was at the border-line of sanity. He was as big and strong as the man who had goaded him. And he was years younger.

But that cold question, that deliberate pointing, that urgent leaning. They were irresistible to a mind haunted by the untold dangers, natural and human, with which it was encompassed. Sandy's fist fell to his side. Its passionate grip relaxed. The flame of his fury snuffed out, smothered by something which stirred all his sanity. It was the urge of that question. He, too, searched the distance.

It was away up where the gloomy walls carried the torrent round a bend to the westward. It was small, infinitely small, in the dim distance. Then it looked to be perilously mixed up in the litter of forest débris washing down on the bosom of the river. It was a goodly speck of vivid color; red and white. And it seemed to dodge in and out amongst the tree trunks and branches as though it were playing hide and seek and enjoying it. It was alive and moving of its own volition. That was evident. A great ruffle of water was preceding its down-stream rush, indicating the outstripping of the great speed of the river.

The two men watched that tortuous dodging amidst the deadly tangle of forest flotsam. And it was an interest that was almost breathless. What was it? Who? No waterfowl would risk that torrential stream when the spring bore was in full flood. Not even the river-loving, powerful loon. It was something human. It must be. But what human would be mad enough, reckless enough, to face almost certain death amongst those speeding, rolling trees. Accident. Yes, that must be the answer. And yet—

"Will it be Shamus?"

Jim McBarr's question came without much confidence. Shamus Hoogan's claim was four miles up river. And so far as he knew not another living soul had place in the whole extent of the gorge.

"Not Shamus, Jim," Sandy replied at once. "Not at that gait. Not at that stroke. That's a boy swimming all right. Shamus can't swim that way. See the stroke of it. Watch it. You see? They're trudging the water same as if hell was hard behind

'em. It's neche! Kaska! Do you guess it's one of the—Say!"

Sandy ran to the water's edge. He stood leaning and peering. And Jim McBarr watched his son's movements. There was something grim in the hard gray eyes. It might have been a smile in any other. The father's urgent interest in the mad swimmer was gone. He simply watched the son who had called his parental hand and defeated it.

Sandy had no thought for anything but that rapidly oncoming swimmer whose skill, or luck, seemed to defeat every danger with which it was threatened. Now the reaching arms were plainly visible, swinging like flails driven at speed. They were beating the water on either side of the raised bundle of color. And they were white arms!

The swimmer shot out of the heavy main stream. Sandy understood. Every chance had been taken for speed. The swirling main stream had assured that greater speed. So it had been adopted regardless of all consequences. The nerve of it. The madness. The urgency. Now the swimmer was heading shorewards. The hither shore. Precisely heading for where Sandy was standing. The boy's big voice came back, echoing down the gorge to the watching father.

"Wanita!" he shouted.

Jim McBarr stood up. Sandy flung a swift glance back at him.

"It's the kid! Wanita, Jim! In that!" he cried pointing. "And their camp's four miles up. Why?"

"Trouble, boy, I guess," was the instant retort. "The Bull Moose!"

She stood up in the shallows and ran up the shore. She was a little breathless but unshivering. A young creature of ravishing beauty, white and glistening with water streaming from a perfect body. She was stark with the nakedness of the day she was born.

The two men were standing together. And the only emotion was in the wide eyes of Sandy. He just stared. And mind and senses were a riot behind his eyes. Jim was staring, too. But without emotion.

There was just one moment of it while the vision of virgin loveliness rose from the silted waters. Slim, tall, straight, with the perfect smooth muscles of young womanhood, and the ravishing contours of feminine loveliness that set the pulses of youth hammering. Then, completely unconscious of the thing she had done, was doing, Wanita cried out the passionate woe driving her.

"It's the Bull Moose!" she wailed. "They murdered Roskana an' cut her to pieces! They looted our dust. And Shamus is way back there facing a bunch of sixty Kaskas at the door of our burnt-out shack!"

There were no tears in the big, dark eyes. But agony of mind looked out of them. Agony, and rage, and a great courage. And even as she spoke the girl's slim hands went up to the long strands of dark hair which secured the bundle of her colored clothing to her head. She deftly released them, and the wet strands fell far below her waist. The next moment, it seemed, the slim body was hidden beneath a single sleeveless scarlet cotton garment that reached just below her knees.

Then it happened. One of Jim McBarr's great hands fell on his son's arm and gripped.

"Don't stand around gawkin' at things that ain't fer a boy's eyesight! The hooch for the kid! Back there in the shack. She's needing a bunch to warm her vitals. Beat it!"

And he almost threw the other as he swung him back in the direction of the hut at the cliff-foot.

Chapter III

Concerning the Bull Moose

Sandy was gone for the precious bottle of Scotch whisky which was his dour parent's remedy for every ailment of the human body. And as he went the youthful optimism in him stirred a feeling of gladness at the concern which his father had shown for Wanita.

His father's temper was strong in Sandy. The youth was headstrong, and no less intolerant of interference. But Jim, for all the hard words which had just passed between them, was his father, and had been good to him. And without any yielding, Sandy hated the thought of their quarrel. He went on his errand with a feeling that, perhaps after all, that quarrel was not all it seemed.

Then Wanita. They had been her instant thought in her trouble. The poor little kid was distraught, and she had come to them—him. And with that thought came a passionate yearning to succor her. In that moment Sandy felt he was ready to face every Kaska devil in the world for her. And the Bull Moose.

And the amazing thing Wanita had done. Her courage! The grit of it! The fierce endurance! He thrilled with marvel, and a lover's intemperate admiration. A great love surged with the fierce pity that filled his young and simple heart. Four miles! Four miles of that hellish gorge! A four mile race with death! And in a torrent whose speeding waters were little short of freezing in the flood of the spring freshet! He hurried laboriously in the ankle-deep loose alluvial of the foreshore.

The father waited while the sound of Sandy's progress came back to him. And the while he just gazed down at the slim beauty before him, clad in its poor garment of flaming wet cotton.

There was no softening in the grim set of his face. There was no approval in his cold eyes; no pity; no sympathy. If there was a single thought of admiration in him he gave no sign of it. He just looked and missed nothing. But the boring of his narrowed eyes suggested intense activity of mind.

He noted the slim young body with its bare, graceful arms; then the shapely legs and ankles; the beautifully molded neck and chest with its suggestion of the soft youthful bosom just below it. All were possessed of the silken beauty of the tainted white flesh of the half-breed, which was anathema to his dour puritanism.

The tint of it nauseated him. Yet he knew it was beautiful. To him it was the work of the devil. So, too, with the appeal of the girl's great dark eyes that were so full of despair as they gazed up into his. They were smoldering with the hated savagery of the Indian.

Then there was her glory of raven-black hair. It was streaming water as it fell far below her waist from a natural center parting. It framed the downy oval of slightly dusky cheeks, the broad, intelligent forehead with perfectly-penciled even black brows; and the ripe full lips, the perfect aquilinity of a sensitive nose, the strength of a well-molded chin. These things had but one appeal for him. They were the make-up of the mischievous whole that was to rob him of a son, who, for some twenty years, had been the whole of everything in his life. A half-breed!

As the sound of Sandy's footsteps died away Jim's voice rasped harshly.

"You quit Shamus!" he accused. "You quit him cold! You left him sixty to one. And with no better than an old Winchester to pull the game."

There was a staggered pause at the brutality of it while the blood flamed into Wanita's pale cheeks. The girl flushed almost to the hue of her cotton frock. And the Indian smolder of her eyes flared as she flung her denial, with her slim strong hands outheld and clenched.

"I didn't quit him!" she cried, something distractedly. "I didn't! I didn't! Quit him? He's my good father. I'd go through hell to save him one second of life."

"Yet you left him to face the Bull Moose—alone."

The goad of it was without mercy. Yet the man's intent was different. He was not seeking to hurt for hurt's sake. The girl's weary body was shaking with the cold of the river. She was swaying on the verge of physical collapse. He must keep her fighting till the story was told.

And he had his way. It was a face of a fury that shrilled back at him.

"I tell you I didn't quit," she cried. "I—I couldn't do but what I've done. We were up there at our home shack on the cliff. Roskana an' me. They rushed us. They dragged us out. They fired the shack. Then they killed Roskana where I could see. They knifed her. They hacked up her little, helpless, brown body till it wasn't human any longer. Oh, they murdered my little—little mother!"

The clenched hands relaxed and wrung, and the outheld arms dropped helplessly to the girl's sides. Her head drooped, and the tearless eyes half closed.

"Go on!"

The cold compulsion of it drove as it was intended it should. Wanita stiffened.

"Why? Why will I go on?" she flung back fiercely. "You don't believe. You guess I'm lying. That I quit, scared, an' made a getaway. Sandy won't believe that. And I came to Sandy. Not you. You hate me because I'm a half-breed. I know. I don't want help from you. Only Sandy. I want him to come right back, so—"

"Tcha!"

Jim McBarr's ejaculation broke with fierce impatience. But the girl's indictment had found its mark. His bronzed cheeks flushed a deeper hue. Then his eyes. They were lit with swift anger.

"Quit that stuff," he snarled. "Ther's not time. Keep talking of the other. Hand it me. All of it. It's four miles beat of hell's own stream to Shamus. And I need to make him quick."

The girl stared. Then in a rush she poured out her story. There was no longer antagonism in her; only lament. Even in her extremity she had glimpsed beneath the man's dour exterior.

"Oh, they've murdered her," she cried. "My little mother, who never lived to hurt a soul. Her poor brown body. They ripped her, and slashed her so her warm blood flooded the ground around my feet. Four of them held me, so I must see it all. Four of them. And I fought them with all I had. Just fool bare hands and teeth. I meant to make them kill me, too. I tried. Oh, God, why didn't they? I'll see it all to the day I die? Why didn't they kill me, too? Why? Why?"

Just for an instant two hands went up to the beautiful face, and the girl's eyes were hidden. Then they flung away and she went on.

"But they didn't," she rushed on. "And now I know they never meant to. I saw her drop in a bloody heap of mangled flesh. Then he came. The Bull Moose. He came right through the belching smoke of our burning shack like a devil stepping out of the heart of a blazing hell. He stood there while I bit and tore at the men holding me. And there wasn't a moment my eyes left him. He was moosehide from head to foot. And his great moose horns drooped either side of his completely masked head, same as if they grew out of it. He didn't speak; he didn't move. An' I could see his eyes gleaming through holes in his moose mask. He was big. Big as you an' Sandy. And even his hands were mitted so you couldn't see the color of his flesh.

"Then he lifted a hand," she went on, spurring herself to her task. "It was a sign. An order. And he made it just as the sound of shots came up from the river where Shamus was working. Maybe he'd waited for that. I don't know. Maybe he'd just meant torture. Well, he'd made it. God! He'd made it. It sounded like hundreds of shots. And I guessed Shamus was dead, too, riddled by his murdering Kaskas. But he wasn't. I heard other shots. Single shots. I knew 'em right away. I knew their zip! It was his Winchester. And I knew Shamus was fighting back.

"Oh, it gave me heart to fight some more," she went on. "But there wasn't need. The Bull Moose signed again. His hand moved and I was free. Why?" Her head moved slowly from side to side. "I don't know. And I didn't want a thing. I ran for the cliff, and no one stopped me. But as I ran the Bull Moose laffed. It was that laff they all tell about. The same as if he was calling you a crazy, helpless darn fool who don't matter anyway. But I didn't stop. I made the cliff, and looked

down for Shamus. Oh, I saw him. He was there right inside our work shack. And it was afire. He was at the window fighting behind a barricade with his old Winchester pulling like doom on a great bunch of Kaskas scattered under any cover they could find. He was fighting every inch of the way, and I know he'd have thousands of rounds before he was through. And the smoke was helping him. Then I knew what I had to do. I stripped. I fixed my clothes with my hair. And I dived for the river where they couldn't get me."

It was the last of the girl's resources. With her final words her remains of strength gave out. She drooped a moment with her arms trailing at the sides of her shaking body; then her knees refused. There was just an instant while her glorious eyes closed; then her body began to crumple. In a moment she was caught, and held, and borne in a pair of arms that held her like some babe.

Sandy had just reappeared in the shack doorway with the whisky bottle and pannikin as his father reached it with his unconscious burden.

"She's dead!"

It came with hoarse intensity. Sandy stared up at his father accusingly.

"Not on your life!" Jim retorted roughly. "Here, take her, curse you! She's yours, I guess. Pump a dram of that hooch into her. And see she gets it good."

Sandy took the precious burden. And he hugged the lovely body to him as if he would impart some of his own strong life to it. He stared up at the other's unsmiling face for further guidance.

"Don't be easy with that stuff," his father went on harshly. "See she gets it if you have to open her jaws and pour it into her darn throat. That's your job, I guess. You can set her in my bunk an' wrap her in my blankets. I'll go fix the double kyak for you, and set our cache of dust into it. An' I'll bring it along and make it fast here, so you can get the kid to it easy. You got to get her down home to Marthe just as quick as you can beat it if you figure to keep her living. If you want her the way you say. It's pneumony, I guess. Pretty dead sure. That darn river would pump pneumony into a tin image. If you get her to Marthe she can fix her. Marthe knows about things. And she'll weigh up your share of dust. You'll need to get the bunch right out on the river after this Bull Moose, quick. See? An' when you've done that, and you've got your half-breed fixed right, why, you can hit that trail we guessed about to—hell!"

The two men stood eye to eye across the inanimate body in the boy's arms. There was not a sign of relenting in either. The granite hard eyes of the father told only of implacable resolve. And the boy's were frowning with the passionate resentment of hot youth.

And then they seemed to move by common impulse. Jim turned away without a word. And, passing down the foreshore, headed down river where their boats were hauled up clear of the water. Sandy turned back into the hut with his burden.

Sandy laid the unconscious girl on his father's bunk. And he set to his task as though every thought of the man who had just departed had been thrust out of his mind. He was young enough, headstrong enough to follow the sex instinct in him to the ends of the earth. Wanita, in those moments, was his whole world. His father? Marthe? Even his promised share of their gold dust? They meant nothing comparable with the dark beauty of the girl who had dared all to reach him.

It was the work of moments only to remove the girl's wet frock, and wrap her naked, helpless body in the rich furs that served them for blankets. Then he knelt at her side, and, with purposeful hands, poured out the treasured whisky into the pannikin. He held it to the unresisting lips that had sagged apart, and poured it into her mouth. Only the tiniest drops at a time lest it should choke her. And he watched with frantic concern for reaction.

There was none. He repeated the operation and still there was none. Then he sat back on his heavily booted heels, and turned to glance at the sunlit doorway where his father had stood. It was a moment of weakness. And he knew it. He was mechanically looking for the help which for twenty years had never failed him. And the realization of it angered him.

He turned again to the beautiful face that now looked so like death. He continued his watch for the smallest sign that life was returning. There was none. At least none that he could recognize. So again he resorted to the potent spirit.

After that he just waited. He could think of nothing else to do. The poor unconscious body was swathed to the neck in a wealth of furs. What else was there he could do? Then it came to him, and he reached his big arms out. He thrust them about that still figure, and laid his head upon the soft bosom in a passion of love and anguish. He hugged her to him for helpless, almost tearful moments.

Then he lifted his head; he leant over her and kissed the lips which were still moist with the raw spirit. And it was contact with their coldness that stirred him to vital activity. He leapt to his feet and passed to the doorway.

He was looking for Jim. But Jim was nowhere in view. He knew well enough Jim was down at the cache preparing his boat. But, nevertheless, disappointment weighed heavily. He knew now he wanted Jim. He wanted the man who spurned Wanita for a "half-breed." Yes, he wanted his hard sense, and the encouragement of his presence. Jim had said Wanita was alive. But was she?

He passed a hand back over his bare head, running his work-worn fingers through his curling brown hair. His fears were paralyzing. Jim! He must get Jim! He remembered that for all his hatred of the half-breed Jim had been concerned that Wanita should be given his beloved spirit to help her. He had given her the use of his own bunk and furs. It was he who had borne her in his arms to their shelter that she might be cared for. Yes. He wanted Jim now.

And at that instant Jim appeared. He was driving the big kyak up against the torrent of the river at a speed that made little enough trouble of the water-race. He nosed the craft on shore opposite the hut door, leapt out of it and moored it fast. Sandy went down to him on the instant.

"She hasn't waked, Jim," he cried. "You guess you're sure she isn't—dead?"

Jim looked into the wide troubled eyes.

"You doped her good with spirit?"

"She's had a big dope."

"You got it—down?"

"Yes. Oh, yes."

Jim nodded. And there was something comforting in the confidence of his movement.

"She's alive," he said, in his hard, matter-of-fact way. "Maybe she hasn't waked. She will. Get right back and dope her more. Scotch'll beat the chill in her. An' then pack her right down into this craft, and beat it the best you know. That's all. So long."

"But you're making home, too?"

The dour face turned from the urgent question of the boy. The granite hard eyes searched the far gloom of the gorge away northward where a lone man had been left fighting for his life against overwhelming odds. Jim shook his stubborn head.

"No," he said. "That's for you and your Breed kid. Go to it. I'm making north. Maybe there's nothing of Shamus left by now. But there's other folks. I'm just passing 'em warning."

Sandy moved swiftly and purposefully. He passed several times between the moored kyak and the hut. The hard practice of the river was his daily life, and he needed no instruction.

He prepared the boat ready to receive its precious burden. He took food and the whisky. And when everything was ready a thick couch of heavy furs was spread out ready to receive Wanita's body. It was a soft, luxurious couch which would impart warmth as well as ease.

And each time he passed between boat and hut he looked for the other who had left him severely alone. But he saw nothing of Jim till his last trip down to the water's edge. He had finally strapped his guns about him and was carrying

Wanita, still unconscious, in his arms. And as he came to the craft where it rocked to the wash of the torrent, the other kyak, the small single kyak which had been his own since his boyhood's days, pressed up stream, darting forward under the mighty strokes of Jim's paddle.

Sandy stood with the girl still in his arms. He watched the bare-headed figure as it flogged the torrent with its heavy paddle. He saw the muzzle of a magazine rifle thrusting over the long tail of the boat. He saw the heavy automatics strapped about his father's middle. And he knew. If Shamus was still alive Jim was for his succor. And Sandy well enough knew that his father would play the game without limit.

In that moment the "So long," he called across the water nearly choked him. And he was almost happy for the voiceless nod that came back to him.

Chapter IV

Marthe

Sandy drove his paddle fiercely. The eager youth of him was yearning. Wanita! The wonderful creature whose beauty looked up at him, death-like, from the flat bottom of the kyak must be claimed back to life. Her brave, tragic soul must know once more such happiness as he could bring into its life. Yes. She must live. And his hope lay in Marthe. He must reach Reliance and Marthe. And all the big body of him was prepared to expend itself on the speed at which he made that goal.

The flood of the river rushed the long, low craft away from the shore on its heavy tide. And, in a moment, Sandy became no more in the general litter than were the lumbering tree boles, and any other "washout" from the river's upper reaches.

But Sandy saw nothing to daunt. The river was monstrously broad. And his skill would carry them safely through the litter of "washout." He was braced for the welcome task that was now his. And as he girded his every faculty there was not even a passing thought for the man who had adventured northward on his selfless errand.

Such was the flood of the river that in less than an hour, the whole of the grim structure of the gorge was completely left behind, and the river had opened out widening into more gracious space.

There were no longer granite walls, but a great fall-back into the heartening spectacle of a reach of glorious hill-slopes. At foot they were bluffed with scattered stretches of woodland. While their rugged heads were capped by the gleaming sheen of melting glacier. There were gracious forest inlets nursing tributary streams that poured into the ever thirsty main river; there were coves hewn in hill-slopes whose lofty walls seemed to darken the noon sunshine searching their obscure deeps.

It was a mountain world of impregnable immensity that piled itself up and up. Yet the avalanche of the Alikine had cut whither it listed through the heart of its stoutest defenses.

Now there was foreshore to either bank. That foreshore of reddish, alluvial which would one day prove a lodestone to half the reckless adventurers of the world. Everywhere there was superb landscape of unspoilt primordial beauty. A glad, sunlit picture to hearten the voyager on his approach to the grim reach of Skittle Race.

Skittle Race was a title whose aptness was characteristic of the northern outworld. No other name was possible for it. It was a mile long bottle neck, narrow and dead straight like a skittle alley.

It was a passage that looked to have been humanly hewn between abutting hills. And the whole length of it was dotted at unprecise intervals with cleanly cut sentry rocks. Nature in Her whimsey had set up fourteen towering skittles. Vasty monoliths whose jet-black stone foundations had defied erosion by the fierce water-race throughout the ages. They were all that remained of the original saddle bonding the two hills which had dared to bar the torrent of the Alikine.

Sandy knew Skittle Race as intimately as he knew all the rest of the river upon which his life was spent. Neither did he fear it, for all its threat. Nevertheless his respect for that queer stone forest was undoubted.

He had negotiated its down-stream passage a hundred times. And the thrill of it was never without its appeal. But now, with the half dead body that was so precious to him in his charge, he found himself in different mood.

He eyed the narrow channel with its first great monolith rearing itself up in the very center of its gaping mouth without any joy. The oily-flowing surface of the river had changed. It had roughened into something akin to the breakers on a windswept sea. His keelless kyak was rocking and pitching. And its sides were being furiously slapped by wavelets that flung their cold spray so viciously.

The first skittle, as bald as the world before vegetation was created, rushed at him out of the distance. It stood up, sharply defined in the brilliant daylight, rising sheer from the deeps, with a white surf hammering, thundering, spuming at its inerodible foundations.

Sandy knew that the might of the stream was a good enough friend if treated with skill. He understood that the nose of his kyak must always point midway of the right opening between the rocks. His hand must at all times be ready for the lurch

of any swinging "washout" plunging its way down stream. No angry surge of water must be permitted to deflect his course. And he must ride every rapid in the full confidence of fathoms of water beneath him. Those were the rules of the game as he had learned them. And the breaking of any of them would mean the certainty of disaster and death.

The rush of it all, the blinding sprays, the surge of litter, the crashing echoes that leapt from wall to wall were sufficient to bemuse the clearest mind. But never for a single moment in all that mad mile was the youth in Sandy affected. And, in the end, he and his rocking craft, with its precious burden, were literally belched out of the chaos of it on to the broad open waters below the Race.

And Wanita? She had awakened from her long unconsciousness. The girl's dark eyes were wide. They were gazing up in perfect comprehension at the swaying figure as Sandy drove down the stream.

"Where are we, Sandy? Where? This boat? Yours?"

Her questions came calmly but rapidly. The first was a mere whisper. But in a moment strength gathered. And with her final question Wanita struggled with the robes that were so tightly packed about her.

A great gladness lit Sandy's eyes. They smiled down at the stirring body as he abruptly shipped his paddle.

"Say, kid, don't shift those robes from about you," he cried in alarm. "You'll get your death sure. You haven't a thing to your poor cold body but them. Not a thing. That swell frock was all mussed with water. So I took it off you."

The girl's struggles ceased on the instant. She lay quite still staring up at Sandy's glad face while memory came back to her.

Sandy, watching, saw the sudden dreadful change in the expression of the big eyes he loved. And he dipped his paddle with a savage lunge.

He wanted to speak. He wanted to pour out a hot tide of feeling. He wanted to tell Wanita of his great love, and his yearning for her in her trouble. But he remained silent before those pathetic eyes gazing up at him. His safety valve was his paddle. And the boat raced on for its goal under vicious strokes.

Then Wanita's voice came again. And Sandy gazed down at her in less grievous mood. Her voice was even, calm. And he knew that she was mistress of the storm he had seen behind her eyes.

"We're making down stream," she said. "Why?"

"To get you to Marthe, so she can fix you right. You got pneumony from the river. It gave it you. Jim guesses it would give pneumony to a tin image. You need to get to Marthe quick. She can fool that pneumony right away. Else you'll die. I guessed you were—dead."

The girl's eyes had a soft light in them which had not been there before.

"Marthe can't fool any pneumony, Sandy," she said quietly. "There isn't any—in my body. I just want to sit right up and use a paddle. But I can't because you stripped my frock off me. I'm not sick, Sandy. Not in body. I guess I was just beat by that river. That's all."

Sandy smiled as he drove the water with his paddle.

"Maybe it was Jim's whisky saved you, kid," he said.

"Jim? His whisky? He gave it me to—save me?"

"Sure. Jim would have given you most anything he had to save you," Sandy said eagerly. "He grabbed you when you were took bad. He carried you right up to me. He handed you his bunk to lie on, and his robes to warm you. And he told me to give you a hell of a dope of his whisky to get your body alive quick. Now he's gone to save your Shamus."

There was movement under the furs. Wanita's dark head lifted. Her eyes were passionately compelling as Sandy smiled down into them.

"He's gone to save—my father?" she cried, incredulously. "Jim has? Alone? They'll kill him! They'll murder him the

same as they'll murder my Shamus when his ammunition runs out. They're Kaskas. And the Bull Moose. Oh, it's—crazy!"

Sandy drove with all his might as he shook his head.

"There's not a thing crazy to Jim," he denied. "There's nothing on this river to scare him, either. Not even the Bull Moose. Jim's gone after the bunch to save your Shamus. He'll make it. And he's gone with a repeater rifle and his guns. You don't know Jim."

Wanita made no reply. She lay there gazing up at the glad face that now seemed to be all that was left to her in the world. She remained silent for awhile, just gazing. Then of a sudden a storm of passionate protest swept her.

"But we don't need Marthe, Sandy," she cried. "We don't need anyone now but Jim and my Shamus. Make back, Sandy. Give me my old frock so I can paddle, too. We can make the Race back even in this. And maybe will get in time to save them—both. We—"

Sandy shook his head. His smile had gone. And his eyes narrowed in the manner of his father.

"Not on your life, kid," he cried sharply. And again it was the hard manner of Jim. "It's Jim's planning. And Jim knows. You got to get to Marthe quick. Maybe you don't know pneumony when you got it. He guessed you need Marthe. So you'll get her. The other's no sort of use anyway. Jim's got all our ammunition. 'Cep' the ten each in my guns. We'd be fodder for the Moose's Kaskas. Then there's our dust. It's a big bunch. And it's right with us in this kyak. Jim's all for his dust. So's Marthe. No, kid. I got you safe. And I'm keeping you that way. You're all sorts to me. You're just that way if it costs me Jim and your Shamus. That goes."

Marthe McBarr was standing on the wide porch of her store. She was just beyond the door which admitted to the great old room that had once been the living quarters of the fighting men of the old-time free-traders. Now it was everything from a dance hall to a sheer drinking booth.

She was a big, angular creature, famous for her raw muscle rather than for any feminine charms. Her face was lean and gray. But her features were good. In early youth she may have possessed sufficient attraction for a man. Now, when one regarded the definite whisker on her strong chin, and the down of mustache about her upper lip, one felt that comradeship without sex attraction was alone possible.

Her sleeves were rolled clear to the elbows of her muscular arms. Her cloth skirt was covered by a blue linen overall. And her feet were encased in man's-sized boots. She was a rugged creature.

There was an air of hard capacity about her. And the eyes that were big and blue were steady gazing and calculating as they regarded without friendliness Ike Clancy and Joe Makers, two of Reliance's leading citizens, as they sprawled in their hard chairs beside a small table. There was a whisky bottle and glasses between them, which was something unusual.

The men were gazing out over the river in the thoughtful manner of those deeply concerned. They, too, were hard-faced. No less hard-faced than the woman observing them. They were clad in the rough clothing common to the men of Reliance. Trousers belted at their waists, plain cotton shirts with soft collars, their broad backs under tweed jackets, which indicated vacation from work out on the river.

"Maybe you're right, Marthe. I don't know," Clancy said after awhile, in the way of a man hedging. "But you're goin' to get it. An' quick. Joe an' me got word along up river. The gover'ment's goin' to take over jest as soon as the p'lice at Glenach can put it over Ottawa. It'll take awhile, I allow. Ottawa don't jump active. But ther's a p'lice post coming. An' that means a license commissioner, missioners, taxes, banks, and all the rest of it. It means an end to easy money for you and Jim, and all of us. And it means Sunday School manners for all the boys an' gals of this darn burg. Do I fancy it? Do I hell!" The man's dark head shook solemnly. "But we need it. We got to have it. Certain sure."

Ike's big hand descended upon his half-filled glass on the table. And he drank quickly. Joe slanted a shrewd eye as the raw liquor gurgled in the man's throat.

"It'll clean up the Bull Moose, anyway," he said, with a short laugh. "They'll put those Kaskas back where they belong. An' they'll keep 'em there. I'm tired standing aside my sluice with a gat in each hand and a pouch of shell clips weighing me down. I allow there's compensations—sure."

"Which the gover'ment 'll collect to itself."

Marthe's tone was sharp set. Her blue eyes were sparkling angrily. The men waited for more. But Marthe's whole interest seemed to have become absorbed in the squalid limits of the township.

A fury of protest was driving her. This thing she had just heard about. She hated it. It was the last thing in the world she desired. The police, and those others, to be in charge of *her* township! And she knew these men secretly wanted it.

Fort Reliance stood in a wide clearing which had been hewn out of an almost limitless belt of primordial forest. The forest began on the western bank of the Alikine, and only terminated at the glacial line of the great mountain range that backboned Alaska. It was dense and lofty, and deeply shadowed. A wealth of bare trunks and heavy top-foliage. And behind its hoary growth lay thousands of years of the outworld's history.

The clearing was some twenty feet above the river on a great cut-bank where the Alikine swung its course in a big bend. The old fort centered it, squatting there like some immobile hen with her brood of chicks scattered about her. Viewed from afar Fort Reliance was a tiny sylvan gem in a superb setting. Under the search of a "close-up," however, it revealed all the squalor with which homing humanity never fails to outrage nature's most perfect artistry.

Fort Reliance was the joy of Marthe McBarr's rugged heart. She loved it. And, back of her acquisitive mind, claimed ownership of it. Were not she and her man its original pioneers? Was it not Jim who had first struck color in this Eldorado of the Alikine? Was it not they, together, who had reclaimed the derelict fort, and, spending every cent of their limited resources, made life possible for all those assorted adventurers who had since drifted on to the river? Of course it was.

Now it was to be snatched out of their hands. Ottawa intended to reap the rich harvest she and Jim had so laboriously sown.

Marthe did not attempt to remind herself that she and her man had already accumulated a no inconsiderable fortune for their pains. That aspect of the position, though of paramount interest to her supremely acquisitive nature, left her cold. Marthe was a real possessor. Possession appealed to her like nothing else in the world. She was something of a benign buccaneer. Even a "gunman" in her methods. She was the type to break her unscrupulous heart if her grip loosed from anything on which it had been laid. She had set her grip on Fort Reliance. She ruled it with proprietorial despotism. And now she felt it was to be taken from her.

Marthe loved it as a township which had been built on the foundations which she had laid, and out of which her profits were several hundred per cent. That it was squalid, primitive, unholy, mattered not at all to her. Its log shanties and frame buildings afforded her not a qualm. That it was without sanitation and any of the common amenities of life made no impression on her pride in it. She was more than satisfied even though in spring it was a quagmire; in winter it had to be dug from beneath feet of snow; and in summer a fog of dust rose with every wind that blew. Then the flies, and the mosquitoes!

Suddenly she gestured with violently expressive hands.

"What's the use in you boys talking?" she demanded, with tight-lipped harshness. "I know the stuff you're both thinking—wanting. I tell you the police 'll come with their schedule of regulations. Every boy 'll toe the jumping off mark, and God help him if he oversteps it. We'll get every sort of gover'ment grafter from the guy that signs our licenses downwards. We'll have a law court and a jail for every boy or girl who gets gay. And outside financiers 'll scrounge every spot of pay dirt you boys ain't got the wit to hold. Who worries for the Bull Moose and his neches? He pulls the game once in awhile, and the bone-heads have to pass up their chips or get his lead. Has it hurt you, Ike? An' you, Joe, in the years you've sluiced? You've paid toll. Both of you. I know that. But it ain't a thing to the toll the gover'ment 'll take out of you. Boys, it's hell! Once the gover'ment stakes out its claim we're through. I seen it all at Leaping Horse, and other northern cities. There'll be a city here grow up in the night, with hotels, and stores, and offices. And the red lights 'll be bunched outside the town limits. And take it from me, boys like you won't have the cents to quench a full-sized thirst. No. You—Say, what's that?"

Marthe flung out a pointing hand. And the direction was where the river entered the great bend of the clearing. Ike was on his feet in a jump. Joe was more deliberate.

The three of them stared in silence for some moments. Then Joe returned to his chair.

"It's just a double kyak with a single paddle shifting it. It's some boy who's yearning for you to weigh up his dust for him, Marthe. Poor kid!" The man laughed unpleasantly.

"He'll get a better deal with me than he'll get with a bank teller," Marthe snorted. "But who's got a double kyak on the river but my Jim and Sandy? I don't know one. And Jim ain't due along home till summer's out."

"That's your kyak, Marthe," Ike Clancy said, shading his eyes from the glare of sunshine. "An' it's your Sandy whipping the stream. He's putting a punch into it that looks like he's scared what's behind him."

The news was out and the whole township was astir. Every shack and frame house had contrived to produce one or more soul whose eager mind had been shocked by the cry of "The Bull Moose"!

Men and women ran for Marthe's store like filings drawn to a magnet. Sandy had flung his news at those awaiting him at the old landing. And, in seconds only, it had broadcast itself through the township.

The Bull Moose! Shamus! Roskana! The mother of Wanita! The little Dogrib Indian who had captured the reckless Irish soul of Shamus Hoogan had been murdered! Hacked down in her tracks by a howling mob of Kaskas from the hill forests! Wanita had swum the river in a getaway that had nearly cost her life! And Jim McBarr had gone up in a mad attempt to save the Irishman besieged by a horde of blood-crazed neches!

Marthe stood considering Wanita as she gazed up out of the fur robe in which her bare body was still closely wrapped. She was sitting in the chair Ike Clancy had occupied on the porch of the store. She was watching Sandy, towering over the big frame of his mother, while he recounted to her the ghastly horror that had been perpetrated up on Ten Mile Gorge. Ike Clancy and Joe Makers were there, too. And the porch was crowded with men, women, and youngsters whose eyes were popping with the scare of the Bull Moose.

"And you let Jim go right up there lone-handed to pull the game with Shamus?" Marthe demanded, as Sandy reached the end of his story. "You?"

There was a glint in the blue of Marthe's hard eyes.

"I hadn't a chance to do else, Marthe," Sandy came back at once, a deep flush of feeling darkening the tan of his face. "It was Jim's plan. And Jim don't stand for a kid buttin' in on what he plans. Wanita had swum four miles in ice water to pass warning when she'd the wreck of her world falling around her. And he guessed she needed saving alive, which you could do here. She's stark as she come out of that river, and—and needs—Say, she's got but that robe Jim gave her and needs clothes. Jim's gone to help Shamus if he's alive, and to warn folks up river if he's not. He wants the bunch from here with an arsenal of help. Someone had to get it. He reckoned it was up to me. Then there's our dust he wanted you to get. I brought it."

Had it been calculated Sandy could not have served Wanita and himself better.

The glint in the blue eyes died out. Marthe's manner eased.

"That dust," she said quickly. "You got it safe?"

"Sure, Marthe. It's right here."

Sandy held up the stout canvas bag he was carrying, the sides of which bulged heavily. It was full to the neck. And the lifting of it was an effort.

Marthe regarded it. And none of the onlookers but understood. Suddenly the urgency of the moment seemed to take possession of her, and she flashed a commanding challenge at the press of folk about her.

"And Jim's right," she cried sharply. "Say, folks, it isn't any sort of time to stand around gawking! Get after it. Jim's passed you a lead. Follow right after quick. Ike! You and Joe get the boys right out on the river, and beat it up to pore Shamus. Get every gun, and every boy who can handle one. You can claim all you need from me. There's shells a-plenty in the store. And guns too. We got to do the best we can for Shamus. The same as Jim.

"You," she went on, turning on Wanita, who just sat staring up at her like a helpless child wondering for the reality of the things about her. "You just come right in with me and I'll fix you the way Jim said. You'll be sick to death in awhile else. There's warmth and blankets for you, and all the physic you can need. I'll see you don't go amiss, or my name's not Marthe McBarr."

Wanita sat up. The child wonder had gone out of her eyes. In that moment she was the passionate vibrant half-breed of her origin.

"I'm not sick, Marthe," she protested. "Not the way you, and Sandy, and Jim reckon. I don't need physic nor warmth. Only clothes. Pass me a kit to wear. Anything. Loan me a gun and plenty shells. My Shamus! I'm going right back with the boys. They murdered Roskana! They'll murder him. I—"

"Tain't fer you, Wanita," Ike broke in roughly. "You're right here with Marthe to fix you. Jim said."

Marthe eyed the girl's fur-robed figure as she sprang to her feet. She reached out, and one powerful arm closed about the slim shoulders.

"The kid's right, Ike," she cried sharply. "Now beat it. Every mother's son o' you. The boats. And quick. You Ike. And Joe. See to it. The kid must go, too."

She turned on Sandy as everyone hurried to obey.

"That dust," she demanded. "Pass it over. You can get busy with the boys. There's two up that river doing man's work. See you don't do less. You've got to get your father safe through."

She took the precious bag and held it in a grip that spoke volumes. She withdrew her arm from Wanita's befurred shoulders. And she turned back to the store.

"Come right in kid," she cried, over her heavy shoulder. "You reckon to do man's work, too, with those others. Well, I'll fix you. You can wear a pair of Sandy's boy's breeks and a parka. It'll leave you handy that way. Say, I haven't a deal more use for hafbred folk than Jim has. But you've grit enough to shame a white."

The two women passed back into the store. And Sandy, with doubtful eyes, looked after them. Then he set off for the river at a run.

Marthe was standing alone on the porch. Sounds came to her from within the store behind her, where her several helpers were carrying on their labors. There were sounds, too, came back to her from the river, where women were foregathered to speed the inadequate army of fighting men.

Her hard eyes were narrowed thoughtfully. Her face was set and grim. Feeling was a-riot. Anxiety, yearning, hope, fear. Her Jim had called the game as she had known him to call it hundreds of times before in her life. Had he called it once too often?

She saw the boats dart out from under the cut-bank of the river and head up stream. And as they went she hunched her great shoulders. Then she turned back into the store.

For all her stress of feeling she would weigh up her precious gold.

Chapter V

The Battle of the Gorge

The figure remained quite motionless. It was there at the farthest extremity of an overhang of gray rock which thrust out over the river below. The height was dizzy. And the scene below was dwarfed to something infinitely less than its reality. The river? It was no more than a speeding, drab ribbon. And those battling upon it, and about its western shore, were just human pigmies, and their kyaks children's toys.

It was a fantastic figure that was not without awe. It wore a headgear of low, drooping moose horns, with a broad thrust of webbed tines. Then there was the soft-hued, close fur in which it was so scrupulously clad from head to foot. Somehow it looked to belong to its wild setting. The granite hills, the forests, the shadowed valleys, and the mighty Alikine. Was it not the natural home of the moose? Surely. And here was the Bull Moose.

The face was close hidden under a flowing fur mask which reached down to a broad chest. And keenly peering eyes were searching the scene below through the narrow slits cut in the mask for that purpose.

Nothing escaped those searching eyes. Every gun-flash was noted, and its resulting toll. There was no movement in the battle going forward that was missed. The intensity of that gaze, the immobility it involved, suggested an interest not untouched by anxiety.

The Bull Moose was looking on at an orgy of human slaughter, cold-blooded, ruthless. It was as though those engaged in it had no concern but for the lust to kill. Personal disaster might have been a thing of no account judged by the display of utter recklessness. Death! The dealing of it! Those seeking to slay were surrounded on all sides by every natural hazard calculated to destroy. Was not the monstrous flood of the Alikine, alive, threatening, only awaiting its opportunity?

The western half of the river was deep in gray shadow. The rest was open to full sunlight. The westering sun was slanting down out of a clear, steely sky.

It lit a long narrow strip of foreshore, like to the shore that was Jim McBarr's claim some four miles to the southward. Its only difference was its lesser extent, and that it was rockstrewn where the washout of the lateral inlet came down from the highlands. Its soil was the same auriferous alluvial, whose reddish hue was enriched by the golden sunlight. It was Shamus Hoogan's river washing.

It was laid out to the usual pattern. There was the inevitable conduit for the water flush. Originally it had run the whole length of the shore. Now only half of it remained undespoiled. At the northern extremity it had been wrecked and piled to provide cover for those who were there to slay. There was Hoogan's hut. A husk. A charred husk close in at the cliff base. Then there was a miniature mountain of well-washed tailings, where stood the remains of a high-built, riffled sluice.

The despoilers were there in many; full half a hundred of them. Kaska Indians. Undersized, brown-skinned creatures whose upper bodies were bare. Sheltered about the wreckage of the conduit, protected by the mountain of tailings, stretched out in the shadow of granite bowlders, they were all there to be seen from above. They were prone or crouching, grasping store rifles with leveled sights. Others lay sprawled with their own lethal weapons fallen from nerveless hands.

Out on the river a dozen or more boats were darting hither and thither under skillful paddles. Playing on the edge of disaster amidst the tide of flotsam sweeping down the river, they looked to be jockeying for position to head an elusive white man in a hide-built kyak, whose merciless long-range automatic was playing havoc in their ranks.

It was a voiceless battle of wit and daring. And the only sound that came from it, imposing itself on the thunderous murmur of flowing waters, was the vicious spit of gunfire, and the echoes of the gorge.

It was upwards of an hour since Jim McBarr had reached Hoogan's claim on his mission of succor. He had made the trip against the Alikine's stream at a speed of which he alone was capable. And he had found things better than he had dared to hope.

He had found the river open, and Shamus still fighting under cover of his burnt-out shanty. He had found the horde of

besieging Kaskas defenseless against his instant onslaught. There they were in their cover from the Irish sniper, but in full view for his flank attack from the river.

The glimpse of the lean Shamus, half-hidden, but fighting back out of his ruined hut had been all sufficient for Jim McBarr. He needed no other spur. The hopeless courage of it appealed to every fiber in his body. His whole mind and heart warmed to so senseless a courage. He could see no shadow of hope for the reckless creature without outside help. And yet he was fighting. He saw the long snout of the man's old-patterned rifle, and he could have wept for the pathos of it.

A surge of hot blood rushed to Jim's usually cool head. It transformed him into a machine for the whole purpose of slaughter. No savage Kaska in the mob besieging Shamus could have yearned to kill more surely.

Jim began the moment he came within range. He picked off the slim brown bodies just where and how he chose. He had no mercy. No pity. And his blood lust grew with every victim his gun claimed.

There was no more deadly gunman on the river than Jim McBarr, and he used all the skill at his command. He was fighting for a friend's life, and he fought as if that life were his own. And so he made no pause in his onslaught till some twenty of the besiegers lay sprawled out of action. Then he coldly figured. And knew he was precisely twenty points nearer saving his best friend.

That was just the first flush of his success. But it induced no illusion. Jim was far too experienced an outworld fighter to let it upset his better judgment. It had been a surprise, and it had met splendid success. But he knew the Kaskas well enough to realize the swiftness with which they would react. Nevertheless, whatever was to follow, a big satisfaction was his. And the more so that the man in the charred hut, realizing the unexpected succor, had redoubled his own efforts. His gunning was not a whit less in its intensity than Jim's.

But Shamus had none of the Scotsman's canny temper. His impulse was beyond his control. And he gave way to it. In his surge of enthusiasm at unexpected help he forgot the caution of the sniper. He failed even to realize the thing he was doing. Abandoning all cover he stood in his open doorway so that he might the better search his hidden foes.

For one stark moment Jim, from across the water, beheld the man's mad act. He saw the lean, tall figure in its stained clothing fill up the doorway. And he cursed the utter folly of it. Then in the flash of a second he saw Shamus reel. He saw him recover. And then he saw him pitch headlong. The man pitched on his face pumped full of Indian lead. And he lay there without movement in his shattered body while a howl of savage triumph went up from the besiegers.

Jim's grief and disappointment were bitter, and his temper suffered. The thing he had so urgently desired had been snatched beyond his reach. And he silently blasphemed that his great liking should have fallen on so wild and reckless a creature as an Irishman. In those moments he had no thought for himself, no care. He was thinking of the dark troubled eyes of a girl child who had risked everything, all she was, all she hoped for, to save her hard-pressed father.

But the fight was on and Jim discovered the reaction he had looked for. It was a fleet of Indian craft. It came into view, sweeping round a bend of the gorge at the northward end of the gold shore. A horde of Kaskas were on the river descending upon him. And now he knew that the fight was his alone.

He cared nothing for the thing he was up against. The prospect almost gladdened his fighting spirit, and stirred him to a cold sort of joy. Why not? They were seeking the sort of trouble he yearned to deal out to them. Well, they should get it all—these miserable low-grade neches.

They came with a rush, yelling to overawe, confident in their numbers against a single ridiculous white man. Their contempt and assurance were displayed in the furious dash down the avalanche of the river. And they paid for the temerity of it on the instant.

Three of the leaders pitched forward into the wells of their hide craft. And a fourth sagged over sideways. In a moment the light kyaks were caught by the stream and swirled away southward with the rest of the litter from the upper reaches.

But their rush had been checked. And the while Jim jambed another clip into his long-range-automatic. Then he waited, holding against the stream. The war yells of the Indians had ceased and each boat was maneuvering out of range.

Jim's up-take was instant. That maneuvering needed no speculation. The movement was more than apparent in its intent.

These river men intended to surround. They would cut his retreat and bar him to the northward; they would hold him there, prisoned, while the men ashore completed the work of his destruction at their leisure.

Jim's paddle dipped furiously. He drove head on for the kyaks. He plunged headlong into the wolf-pack while the shore men sprayed the granite wall behind him with their ill-flung lead.

Jim had no heed for the shore men. They were a mere chance in the game. A chance against which he could not defend himself. But these others were a concrete fact with which he could deal. And he dealt with them.

He faced them and rushed at them, while his gun ran hot. The minutes prolonged. And boat after boat lost its human control and swirled on helplessly down the river. Jim was killing to his best satisfaction. And he meant to keep on killing for just so long as fortune permitted. He was at bay. And he felt that, so far, at least, all was well. A few more. Just a little longer. Then with Shamus beyond his help he would run northward to pass warning to those in dire need of it.

Then it happened. It came from the despised snipers on the shore. Jim had received the last favor Fortune was prepared to show him. Now full payment was demanded.

Jim was driving up stream between two kyaks scurrying from his path to avoid him. He wanted those two. And he meant to get them. He pulled on the one nearest and saw the brown body pitch forward, and the paddle drift away down the stream. Then he turned on the other.

It was his last effort.

Something scorched the flesh of his great chest. There was a sense of burning. His gun spat, but his shot went wide. Then he staggered where he knelt up in his kyak and coughed violently.

It was the last he knew. His paddle drifted away from him. And his automatic splashed into the river. He drooped over forward. And finally he crumpled, as Shamus Hoogan had done. His boat, like those others, was caught in the stream and rushed southward. But even as it gathered speed it was caught and held by outreaching brown hands.

The watcher on the cliff bestirred. There was a deep breath which was a sigh of relief and satisfaction. Then the antlered head lifted. There was a moment of silence. Then the gorge echoed with the deep-throated bellow of a bull moose.

Ike Clancy and Joe Makers were standing on the inclined shore of Shamus Hoogan's claim. They were near by to the great mound of tailings where the stoutly built sluice stood up. They had been the first of the river party from Reliance to land, and they had found what they sought almost on the instant. With them was the son of Jim McBarr, and the now man-clad figure of Wanita. The rest of the men of Reliance were running to join them as they landed. It was a goodly army. There were some twenty of them. And all well armed.

They were gazing down at two bodies laid on the alluvial of the claim. They were stark dead and laid out as though prepared for burial. Beyond his icy pallor Jim McBarr looked little different in death from the cold immobility which had always been his in life. There was nothing collapsed about his body. He looked as though one breath of his deep lungs and he would stand up from the ground ready to carry on the life that had been his. Shamus Hoogan had far less of life in his appearance. Shamus was ripped with a dozen wounds. And his every garment was bloodsoaked.

The onlookers were profoundly silent, a prey to feelings of awe. This was not new to any of them. They had seen just such as this before, and all too frequently. It told them an old and always painful story. For there was not one amongst them but wondered who would be the next victim. It was the trail of death that always marked the wake of a thwarted Bull Moose.

It was Ike Clancy who broke up the silence. He looked up and gazed at the lowering faces of those about him. He glanced round, up and down, the despoiled gear of the reckless creature who had been always so popular. Then he glanced up at the cliffs as though seeking the authors of the killing that had been wrought. He turned to Sandy and Wanita.

"Say, kids, I guess we'll never know just how the finish came. He got 'em. Oh, he surely got 'em. Ther's a bunch of

Kaskas dead. Say, they must have pulled one hell of a scrap. Those two boys. With all those dead what sort of a bunch were they up against? Hundreds? And—the Bull Moose. Look at that shack. Burnt out. See that Irish boy's conduit and sluice. Man, but it's sheer murder."

Sandy looked into the other's emotion-lit face.

"I'd hate to figure it's just murder," he said, in the cold, hard tones which were so like to his dead father's. "If Jim could tell us I guess he'd hand a big story." He shook his head. "It's not his way to find murder. No, sir. There isn't a Bull Moose or any other tough out of hell could murder Jim. He was the livest gunman that ever pulled. They got him by weight of numbers. It was a fight. Gun-play to the finish. And if I know Jim I'd say he loved every moment of it. Hell! I ought to feel sick to death they got my father—Jim. But I don't feel that way knowing him. If Jim had to pass out I'd say he'd want to go fighting. And I'd say he pulled his gun to the last second of his great big life. I'm glad of my father, folks. And I'm glad he died just the way he'd want to. He was good to me."

Wanita's tragic face lifted to those about her.

"My Shamus," she cried, with a catch breaking her voice. "I don't guess he ever saw the thing they did to my little mother. I'm glad. So glad. It left him with heart for his fight. And I think I know just the way he fought. You folks'll know, too. I'm glad they were together, Sandy. They died together. Maybe they're somewhere sitting around together, now."

Joe Makers hunched his heavy shoulders.

"That's all right, kids," he said roughly. "They belonged you two. An' you've got a big grit with them lyin' there. But I don't work out what comes next. There's a killer around, and he's got hundreds of killers at his call. And he'll go right on with his killing while there's a poke of dust comes out of the Alikine. The police are coming, but they ain't around yet. It's up to us to get after him. I'm for just that, right—"

The sound that interrupted him came from the cliff top, and echoed down the gorge till it sounded like the harsh, deep-throated laugh of a dozen men. It was a queer laugh that had no mirth in it, but a world of contempt. It was that maddening laugh which Wanita had described so graphically. It told the speaker he was a fool, that he, and his ideas and opinions were not of the least consequence. It told the whole of that little human cluster gathered about the dead that it mattered less than a bunch of gophers running aimlessly around their burrow. And it died out as abruptly as it came.

Every face turned upwards. Every eye was turned in the one direction. It was at a great overhanging of rock just to the southward of where they stood. And every eye was widened and staring.

There it stood like a figure about to dive into the river below. At the very edge of the cliff. Tall and burly in its low-reaching moosehide parka; there with its great antlers crowning its head. The Bull Moose!

A howl of execration broke. And in a moment the shore was alive with a racing mob surging towards the broken mouth of the inlet which was the way to the hills above. And Sandy and Wanita ran ahead of all the rest.

Chapter VI

The Warning Patrol

Shamus Hoogan's claim in Ten Mile Gorge had passed from sunlight to deep shadow. The sun had been swallowed up by heavy night clouds. The air was chill. And there was no life apparent anywhere. The only sounds that awoke the echoes were the lumbering murmurs of the speeding waters, and the crash of tree-trunks as they fouled obstructions and hurtled on southwards to their destiny in the far-off ocean.

The headlong pursuit of the Bull Moose had been hopelessly abandoned. Long before the overhanging cliff had been reached the bizarre figure had vanished. And the only thing to tell of the reality of its presence there, to convince that it had not been just a figment of imagination, was the sound of a faint, far-off peal of mocking laughter as the pursuit reached the hill-top.

The men of Reliance had scattered in twos and threes, and set off in a frenzied search. They were fury-driven, and would kill on sight. There was no thought of Kaska ambush, there was no concern for any personal risk. Every soul among those who had heard the man's laughter was actuated by a single desire—to kill.

But after that second peal of laughter no sound or sight of the man was vouchsafed. He was gone, vanished into thin air. Nor was there a trace of the brown-skinned horde of savages he led.

So the pursuers returned to the ill-omened battle ground; an urgent, disappointed band seeking guidance for their next move.

Ike Clancy and Joe Makers were looked to as leaders. Both were men of force and personality. Both were leaders of Reliance by reason of their self-election in opposition to Marthe.

Ike did most of the talk, which was direct and pointed. And when the last of the pursuit had returned to the desolated claim he issued orders in tones that brooked no argument.

"Say folks," he began, "we got to act quick."

He pointed at the still figures with their faces turned up to the evening sky.

"There's not a deal we can do for them but tote 'em back to Reliance where they belong. Jim was a big boy, and we folks owe him plenty. And Shamus had us all on his side. So most of you'll need to make the trip back right away. Them that tote them and them that need to help pass them safely through the Skittle Race. See?"

He turned to Sandy beside him, who was standing with Wanita.

"You two kids," he went on, in his authoritative fashion. "Seems like you best make Reliance with—them."

Sandy raised his eyes from his dead father. He towered over Ike, who was many inches shorter. Wanita, too, looked up. And her dark eyes were without a sign of the grief that weighed so heavily upon her spirit.

"What'll the others do?" Sandy asked, in his blunt fashion.

Ike shrugged. "We got to pass warning all up the river, and out on the shores of Clare," he replied. "We owe that. And we owe it without any fool delay. There's folks out there don't stand the chance of a gopher in hell if that murdering bunch take the notion to get after them. Joe and me'll make out to the lake shore. We'll need to send two kyaks on up to the Valley of the Moose, right up to Faro Neale's washing. They can hand word to the others as they pass along up."

"I guess Wanita and me'll make up to Faro Neale's."

It came without a moment's hesitation. And it came with the same sort of decision that had always been the dead father's. Sandy was not asking. He was just stating his intention.

"Why?"

Joe Maker's eyes were questioning.

"You two are their kids," Ike warned, pointing at the dead.

Sandy hunched his shoulders. He glanced down at Jim's wide eyes. Then he felt the approving pressure of Wanita's hand upon his big forearm. He nodded in reply. And all those looking on saw the determined set of his jaws as he faced round on Joe Makers.

"There's no need asking fool questions, or telling us the thing we know by heart," he said sharply. "Shamus was Wanita's father. Jim was mine. If we'd took our way and stopped around maybe they wouldn't be lying there now. Jim went out to play a lone hand helping Shamus. Wanita and me are going to pass warning to the folks on the river. If Jim and Shamus were alive they'd be doing it. The folks can tote them home to Reliance. It wasn't the way of those two to have their families mulling at their funerals. We're pulling out right away."

There was a moment of complete silence. It was as though the boy's decision had something shocked. As though it were felt there was callousness in it. Then Ike nodded. And the eyes of Joe Makers were approving.

"I guess Jim would be glad to know that," Ike said quietly. "And Shamus."

"You got plenty gun ammunition?" asked the practical Joe.

"All we need, I guess," said Sandy. Then to the girl clinging to his arm: "Come on, kid. We'll make a break right now. We got to make Faro in time."

Sandy and Wanita lost not a moment in making their start. They left their dead. Why not? They knew. They needed no reassurance. They would be carried back to Reliance with rough sympathy and care. They knew, too, that the butchered remains of Roskana, despite her color and race, would be no less kindly dealt with.

So they went about their work under a mask of cold determination. Their loss was irreparable; their sense of desolation was something devastating. But, beyond the muteness in which they set about their preparations, there was nothing to tell of their tragedy.

It was an expression of the life they all lived. They were of the outworld where hardihood alone could serve. Death? Death was just an ugly episode to them all. It was there stalking beyond every blind bend in the trail of life. When escape became impossible it must be met, and faced, and endured. That was all. In death no living help could serve. Help was only for the living. It was the unwritten law of the wilderness.

As night closed down the banking clouds lightened. They thinned out to a haze. Then they finally dispersed. Immediately the gorge was lit by a big, full moon and myriads of stars that transformed the night, and showed the way.

Hardly a word passed between Sandy and Wanita till the gorge began to widen and the sheer walls lost something of their dizzy height. Then came a backward sloping, and the night light increased. Further on the cliffs reduced themselves to steep, clean-cut, wooded banks, and a wealth of ceaselessly moving northern lights changed visibility to something approaching daylight.

They were rounding a sharp bend, hugging its inner shore, when Wanita, forward, shipped her paddle and pointed ahead at a spot of light on a low shore.

"That's Scut Barber's camp," she flung back over her shoulder. "There's a silt bar ahead. We'll need to make round it. Then we'll pull in."

"How far out?" Sandy's question came sharply.

"Mid-stream mostly. Lay her across to the far shore till I say."

Sandy made no reply, but the craft swung out. They felt the full force of the stream which took them abeam. They flogged the water to hold headway. Then came Wanita's word.

"Ahead!" she cried. "Then swing in. We'll lose the stream in awhile."

The maneuver was carried out without question. Sandy had no doubts. Wanita had all the skill of her Indian forbears. The river could show her nothing she did not know from Reliance to the Valley of the Moose.

A few minutes later they were standing over Scut Barber's campfire. And the rugged face of the old prospector, who had once been a surgeon of no mean repute, was turned up to the dark eyes of the girl as she told of the tragedy that had befallen. She told it without emotion; she told it simply; it was almost as though she were telling of a horror that had befallen other than herself. Sandy remained silent; he just stood there beside Wanita.

Scut Barber reached towards a pile of driftwood and fed the fire. Then, as the girl's words ceased, he wagged his graying head.

"I bin wonderin' just when," he said. "I'll make a clean-up and beat it for Reliance come daylight."

"Make it right away, Scut. You can't guess when."

Scut stood up from his blankets. He was a heavy creature, all shoulder and back, with arms muscled like ropes.

"The stream's full of washout," he demurred. "I'll take a chance with daylight. Wher' you kids makin' next?"

"Sid Grover," Wanita replied. "He's next. Then the Peters, George and Alec. After that Kid Pierce, if we don't pick him up on the river going down for a drink. Then Baxter. He's got his woman and two kids. Then Mike Wilson. And last, Faro, right up at the Valley mouth. Ike Clancy and Joe Makers are passing word to the folks on Clare."

The prospector eyed the slim figure of the girl clad in the old garments that had once been Sandy's. His narrowed eyes studied the eyes that seemed bigger and darker, and more unfathomable in the brilliant night light. Then he looked quickly at the youth beside her.

"You're bully kids," he nodded. "I'll make a getaway. Don't worry. Got all you need? I got plenty eats if you're needin'. No?"

Sandy shook his head.

"We're well fixed, Scut," he said, without verbal thanks. Then: "So long."

Scut watched them go. The swift, purposeful movements as they passed down the shore to where their kyak had been hauled clear of the water. He was thinking, wondering, feeling. Two bereft kids who should have been sick with grief. Instead they were out to pass help to those who needed it.

The man's heart warmed to them. He had spoken no word of sympathy. He had offered no verbal thanks. Yet both were in him in full measure. And his thoughts flung back to the days when his mission had been the helping of others in their need.

He heard the kyak splash into the river. He saw the figures man it. Then he saw the craft dart out into the stream and beat up against it.

As it passed out of view he turned to the brilliant night scene. He searched the dim horizon this way and that. Then he sprawled himself on his blankets and drew them up about his heavy shoulders. In a few moments he was again sleeping. Nor was his sleep disturbed by any threat of the Bull Moose.

It was a long night of urgent, wearisome labor, and the dangers were many. Despite the full moon and stars, and the fantastic play of the brilliant northern lights, it took all the watchfulness of which Sandy and Wanita were capable to defeat the threat of the swollen river with its burden of washout.

Yet no disaster befell. And each and every camp received its due warning right up to the great falls which marked the entrance to the hill country of the Valley of the Moose.

The first of the morning light saw Sandy and Wanita landed for the portage. They had made camp. It was the first since they had set out. They needed food and rest. A brief hour over a wisp of campfire to counter the bitter morning chill.

Now their food was eaten and their camp kettle stood beside the fire. Sandy was sipping tea that was scalding hot. And Wanita, close beside him, was gazing out up river listening to the thunder of the great falls which was the portage they had yet to make.

The girl's eyes were somber in the gray light of morning. Tragedy and the long night had left their mark on the sweet oval

of her pretty face. There were troubled lines that were full of omen drawing her smooth brow into a pucker. Her pretty lips were hard set and drooping dejectedly. There were tears in every line which her trouble had drawn. But none were shed. Nor would they be shed. Her grief for the murdered ones she loved drove her back on the nature of her savage forbears.

The squatting Sandy drained the last of his tea and set his pannikin on the ground beside him. He drew a pipe from a pocket, filled it and lit it. And he, too, gazed in the far direction whence sounded the thunder of the falls.

Then of a sudden he reached with an unoccupied hand and took possession of one of the girl's. He did not look in her direction; he did not speak; he just sat there, his big, rough hand telling the girl of the love that filled his soul.

So they sat for long minutes over their fire while the dawn changed to daylight, and the yellowing sky changed to gold as the sun approached the horizon. Two lonely wayfarers in the broad wilderness of life. Each with no other thought or purpose than to fulfill the destiny marked out for them; to journey on to the end whithersoever it must lead them. Death had plundered, ravaged them. But it had left them together, burning with youthful life.

It was Wanita who broke the silence. And she did so as the flaming arc of the rising sun blazed out on the horizon. It lit a world of hill and forest; of snowy crests that dazzled; of woodland deeps that held the secrets of the ages. It lit a broadened river flowing between low-cut banks. A river which, over two miles or more below the great falls, was ruffled and churning with the driving force of the great cataract beyond. She turned to the boy at her side without a smile.

"Why?" she asked plaintively. And waited.

Sandy shook his head.

"Seems like it was meant—in a way," he said, his tone sober and a little hopeless.

Wanita released her hand. She drew up her knees, clad in a pair of Sandy's boyhood's breeches, and clasped them tightly.

"But why Roskana, who never hurt a soul?" she cried. "Your Jim, who was white all through? And Shamus who just laughed and cursed his reckless way through a life that'd mostly kill anyone who wasn't Irish to the bone?"

"I don't know. But it seems like."

Sandy edged himself closer to the girl so that their bodies touched.

"Jim hated you because of Roskana," he went on. "Guessed white an' color was against nature. Said I could up-stakes an' quit him and Marthe because of you. And I told him 'yes.' It was when you came down the river Jim was good to me. But I wouldn't stand for him or Marthe that way. Guess you're more to me than them. Roskana? Shamus? I don't know. Jim said it was against nature. Against life." He shook his head and blew smoke. "They gave me you. So I'm glad for Roskana. Glad for Shamus. Jim's reckoning don't signify—now. Yes. It looks like it was all meant."

Sandy's hazy explanation was all-sufficient. The hands about Wanita's knees unclasped. One moved across and possessed itself of the hand she had released a moment before. And for awhile, while the great sun lifted in a cloudless sky, and the flies and mosquitoes awoke under its warming influence, they sat gazing out over the river and saw only their own thoughts.

"Maybe Jim was right though," Wanita said after profound consideration. "I loved Shamus. But I loved Roskana for her little brown body and the queer wild life she told me. I learned her tongue first, and didn't want any other. I only learned the other when I grew, and Shamus had me taught. It's queer. There was always worry in my mind. I grew up white. And I—I know I'm Indian. And I'm glad being Indian. Yes. Jim was right. It's—it's against nature."

Sandy stirred. He snatched the old pipe from his mouth. And something of the dead Jim was in the harshness of his denial.

"Right or wrong I don't care a curse," he cried. "Shamus and Roskana gave you to me. And there's no devil in hell can take you from me while I've a breath left in my fool body."

The girl turned. Her eyes were melting with the first smile they had known since tragedy had leapt upon her.

"And then they shan't take me from you, Sandy," she cried passionately. "When there isn't a breath left in you there won't be in me either. I'm white because Shamus made me. When it comes to that I'm—Indian. Boy, boy, nothing matters to us now but just you and me. Why should it? Look around. The world's just full of crazy hills, and forests, and valleys, and wonderful, wonderful rivers and things. There's no sort of beginning or end to it. Just as there's no sort of beginning or end to it when folks love. And after this life there's that other that little Roskana always told. That golden hunting ground filled with every joy the heart can dream. The one we don't know; the one we can't even guess. And we'll be there together, boy, just like we are now. And we'll hunt, and fish, and love, just like Roskana always said. You and me. Oh, boy! Nothing'll part us. Nothing. Oh, Sandy, it's so big and beautiful. I feel half crazy thinking. Nothing, nothing can part us ever. Not even—death."

The passion of it was primitive. It was savage in the fury of love sweeping through the girl's young body. The big eyes were alight and swimming. Deep fires were burning somewhere behind them.

A mass of muscle reached about her shoulders as Sandy flung a protecting arm about them. He hugged her yielding body to him.

"That goes, kid!" he cried thickly. "It surely does! And poor Jim figured to make me quit! God!"

There was nothing more. A big intoxication held them beyond mere words. And they sat there in silence, dreaming and gazing, drugged with the passion of their youth. They sat there while the sun lifted higher in a radiant, smiling sky. They had no heed for the swarms of avid mosquitoes, and maddening flies. Nothing mattered.

It was when the fire fell apart, mere white charred ashes, that their dream faded and reality took its place. Sandy's arm gave a crushing squeeze and released the snuggling shoulders. He stood up and passed a hand back over his close brown hair.

"We're forgetting," he barked. "We got to make the valley. There's Faro Neale yet."

Chapter VII

"Faro" Neale

It was Faro Neale's emphatic opinion that physical labor possessed no sort of attraction for him. He undertook it reluctantly when circumstances forced it on him. And, in such circumstances, he did it as he did everything else, thoroughly. But his distaste was there. And he told of it with a good-humored, tolerant laugh, which in no way deceived.

"It's no sort o' use blinkin' things," he would say. "If you're huntin' dollars it's a full-time game that don't leave you play time fer sweatin' around. The way to keep the cold out o' your bones right is to see the other darn fool keeps your stove banked."

Faro was out on his claim. That wonderful claim where the Alikine streamed out of the Valley of the Moose, and which was the envy of every gold man in Reliance.

He was not physically at work. His powerful body was leaning over the tail of his riffled sluice while the attention of his half-closed, sleepy gray eyes was divided between watching the deposits in his riffles and observing the group of low-grade Indians, who were doing the work of loading the sluice box with alluvial.

Faro Neale was counted a creature of nerve and consummate capacity even by the toughest of those whose lives were committed to the struggle for existence in the northern wastes. He had a record for a high, or low, standard of toughness as far back as the first mad rush over the virgin slopes of the Skagway. Forty Mile was known for a better place with his passing. And even Dawson, in its early, wicked days, breathed a sigh of relief when the newer attractions of Leaping Horse claimed him.

In Leaping Horse he looked to have discovered his spiritual home. It found him a throne amongst its gunmen-gamblers. And he sat with a firm grip on it until he was found out. Then it happened that the Alikine and Fort Reliance took up a position of importance on his map.

Primarily, Faro, as his soubriquet implied, was a gamester who looked to the card deck as his principal source of livelihood. He was not a gold man; but he was adaptable; he was an opportunist. And Reliance transformed him.

Reliance! The Alikine, with its abounding natural wealth! The people! The hard-living, slaving, foolish herd of stupid gold men! It was a vision of wonder to Faro. And the man was promptly translated into an amiable, smiling, easy-going spender, who, in the shortest possible time, had contrived to become possessed of the richest claim on the river, and whose noted guns served no better purpose than to ornament his not unattractive person.

Within two months of his arrival he had become one of a community he knew by heart, and an almost popular figure. It was more than admired, that, with reckless disregard for all danger, he had staked his claim at the southernmost limits of the Valley of the Moose, which was the homing territory of the treacherous, warlike Kaska Indians. The claim was nearly one hundred miles beyond the reach of any help at Reliance.

But the isolation of his claim suited Faro's understanding of human nature. White intrusion upon his preserves would be unlikely. The Kaskas were his guarantee of that. No one would jump in on him. All the wealth of his region of the river was his for the taking. The man believed in a lone hand in all matters where gold was concerned. A lone hand, he felt, saved the necessity of homicide, which, in so easy a community of human sheep as Reliance contained, it would be impolitic for him to demonstrate.

So he waxed rich in the shortest possible time. His open season was lived on his claim, like all those others. And winter found him a welcome spender in Reliance where his real calling claimed him. All day, when daylight was reduced to a minimum, and most of the dead cold nights he spent at the green-clothed tables in Marthe's store. And he found it a mere pastime to relieve of such fruits of their summer harvest as the hard-faced Marthe had left to them, all those whose wisdom was less than his own.

It was all so very easy. But, even so, the real Faro showed himself occasionally. The man the Skagway and Dawson and Leaping Horse had known. Once it was at a counsel of citizens in Marthe's great store. It was immediately following upon one of the early raids of murderous violence by the Kaskas and their ruthless leader which had occurred on the

shores of Lake Clare. Ike Clancy had sounded a gloomy note of warning. He had assured Faro that his turn would surely come. And he had talked of the folly of living in the shadow of a "desperately active volcano."

Faro listened, smiled, then gulped down his liquor. Then he bared a set of beautiful teeth such as no dental artist could have reproduced, and took up the challenge. And his sleepy eyes grinned scorn at the Jeremiah.

"Say, boy!" he exclaimed. "What the hell! I'm alive. An' while I'm alive I want the big money at any price. When I'm dead I won't. I get tired listenin' to folk figgerin' this Bull Moose. Get it right here no renegade white livin' under a neche blanket can hand a pain to my guts. An' low-grade Kaskas are just insec's. I've lived on my guns since I cut my wise teeth. An' I'll go right on livin' that way till hell needs me. Then I'll pass without a kick. Till then I'll pull the game the way it pleases me. It's just too bad you folks can't scratch a bunch of nerve together between you. The Bull Moose! Tcha! A renegade white who lets the neches pull the plums for him. I get sick thinkin'. Ther's only one bunch I known who don't ever pass the other feller chances. That's hell's angels. The Bull Moose hands chances all the time. Well, when chance comes my way I'm missin' nothing. Sure not a chance the Bull Moose hands me."

Faro should have been one of life's big men, but his potentialities had been prostituted by warped morality. Life to him was a period in which to crowd all the life possible. The threat of death thrilled him pleasantly. But it also roused a fighting spirit that was like an avalanche.

He was a gambler who stacked the card deck whenever opportunity offered. But he was a gambler. He lived on the hair-triggers of his guns from choice and not necessity. And when he wanted, it was with all his physical and mental might. He was a mechanism of iron nerve with a greed that knew no sating.

He looked the virile creature he was, now, as he suddenly started up from his preoccupation at his sluice. It was a sound he had just heard. A sound in a hushed world of many sounds.

He was tall, magnificently muscled, and in the ripest years of his manhood. He stood there facing the river in an open-throated shirt and hard corded breeches. And his ankle boots were stained and weighted with liquid soil. Between jet-black lashes his half-closed, steel-gray eyes were peering in the direction of the ominous Valley of the Moose.

Faro had been startled by unaccustomed sound. And, since he lived in the threatening shadow of a "desperately active volcano" it was towards that volcano he promptly turned. At the same instant a lithe jerk of his body swung his guns forward into a position of greater handiness.

The mouth of the valley at which he was gazing was not unlike a natural gateway. The river flowing through it was broad. It was posted by two graciously-sloping, forest-clad hills. They were barren-crested, riven and scored, and plentifully streaked with unmelted snow. They were the southernmost outposts of a mountain range through which the Alikine had bored from the far glacial fields of its source.

Then below these outposts. It was the same on either bank of the river. A wide region of forest, smiling with every shade of budding green, and seemingly limitless. Like a billowing carpet of soft green pile it went on and on, east and west, until lost in the haze of distance.

It was curious. There were sounds of the laboring Indians. There was the soft murmur of flowing waters. There were the battalions of winging wild-fowl passing their harsh calls from one to the other. Then there were the forest sounds telling of all sorts of hidden life. Yet the beat of paddles, distinct, insistent, rhythmic, had sounded above all the rest.

Faro left his sluice and moved down to the water's edge. He was now gazing southward at a double kyak which had just rounded a distant bend.

Faro's welcome of Sandy and Wanita had all the cordiality of a man who hated his loneliness. His bawled greeting expressed a feeling no words of his would have admitted. His glad smile was good to see in a face that shaped grimly.

"Say, you kids!" he shouted and flourished a welcoming hand.

Then he went on with the geniality he had learned under the inspiration of abounding prosperity.

"You're quite a piece up from your home place. But I'll say you're as welcome as a swill bar'l to a starvin' hobo. Pull right in. Ther' ain't no silt bank to stop you. Just drive them paddles quick an' tell a yearning man our home town still stays put."

He watched the skillful maneuver of it. But his gaze was not for Sandy making it. It was for the girl kneeling up at the nose of the boat. He had coupled the two in his welcome, but he only saw Wanita.

The boat nosed in to the shore. And as it came Faro realized the lack of response to his greeting. His smile passed on the instant.

"What's amiss?" he snapped.

The man-clad figure at the bow gazed up at the gambler with troubled eyes.

"It's the—Moose," she said dully.

"Hell!"

A moment later the boat grounded and slid up over the soft soil. Wanita leapt ashore. She turned and hauled. And Sandy stepped out beside her. Then the two together carried the boat to a place of safety while Faro looked on.

When the boat had been placed the gambler turned abruptly. He pointed his log shanty, farther along the shore, where a wisp of fire was smoldering before its open doorway.

"Come right along up," he said. "You can sit around and eat. An' tell me."

He strode towards the hut leaving his visitors to follow.

They were a group close about the fire, the three of them, Sandy was astride the bole of a tree. Faro was on the door sill within reach of the cooking food. Wanita was squatting cross legged on the hard-trodden ground opposite him.

It was Wanita who was telling the gambler. Just as it was she who had told the story at each camp on the river. And the manner of it was without passion, a cold, calm recital which was the result of constant repetition.

Faro's sleepy eyes were on the girl's face. He seemed absorbed in the horror of which she was telling. It was the strong, vital manhood in him. And it was astir to the deepest fibers of his body. But it was astir for the girl's loveliness in her man's clothing, and not for her story of hideous murder.

Wanita's dark eyes were rarely enough raised from the smoldering fire. But when they were Faro found them full of dark mystery that fired his hot blood. He yearned for the ripe lips so alluring as they moved with her talk; then the softly tanned oval of perfect young cheeks; the graceful contours of her woman's youthful body; the shapeliness of strong young limbs which the old garments she was wearing so frankly revealed. Oh, yes the man was absorbed as the girl talked.

Wanita reached the end of her story. Then came her final warning. And the man listened smiling insolently.

"Knowing you, we guessed it wasn't a deal of use making your camp, Faro," she said, with a lighting of somber eyes that was the vaguest shadow of a smile. "But we just had to. You're here sort of—sort of sitting right under the muzzles of the Moose's guns. He can drive down stream out of his hills, with his bunch of neches, an' be a-top of you while you haven't time to figure the thing amiss. Oh, yes," she nodded emphatically. "It's no sort of use. I've seen. I know. They could carve you up, as they hacked my little brown mother, before you could set a hand to the guns you reckon so smart."

"Could they? I wonder."

"The kid's handed you sense a fool could see," Sandy barked sharply. "An' I'm not guessing Faro Neale's anybody's fool."

"No."

It came with a cold casual glance in Sandy's direction. Then Faro smiled again at the girl's serious face.

"What's the answer, kid?"

He leaned over and reached his cooking pot. He stirred it with its dipper. And the food savored pleasantly to them all.

"We'll eat in awhile," he added.

Wanita raised a pair of appraising eyes. She was gazing through the mist of smoke rising from the fire. She understood the man's mockery. That was the Faro she knew.

"There's just one answer if you're not Sandy's fool," she replied coolly. "You reckon you can pull the game with the Moose sitting in. Maybe you can if you really think that way. I don't know. Shamus couldn't away below. And Jim couldn't, though he was the toughest fighter in Reliance. Whatever you guess you can do in a show down there's one thing sure. If you keep a poke of dust around here that's worth the Moose's while you'll pay it over to him just when he fancies it. We've handed you warning the same as others. It's right up to you."

There was a moment or two of silence while Faro considered. And the while he reached into a box and snatched out three tin plates. He flung them on the hard ground and threw a spoon, one to each of his unbidden guests. Then he dipped from the cooking pot, and slobbed a liberal meal of rich game stew on each plate. He began talking as he ladled. And his manner had a gentleness wholly unusual to it. His tone warmed the girl as she regretted her own coolness.

"Say, you two kids," he flung at them. "Hell! I've padded my hoof from the coast to the Ar'tic. I've padded it back. I've lived all up and down this cursed territory with not a heap more than a one hand grip on life. I've found 'em good. An' I've found 'em bad. Mostly bad. But I haven't ever before found two kids ready to beat up against a stream like this darn ol' man river a hundred miles to save my carcass from the hell yearnin' for it. No, sir. That's a fact. Not till now. Ther's things a boy can't ever forget. An' I've a swell thinking piece to my head. You two did just that—with your young hearts plumb dead inside you."

He pushed the laden plates at each. And his half-closed eyes came to rest on Wanita, who began to eat ravenously.

"You don't need thanks," he went on. "An' thanks don't mean a thing but the words, anyway. No. Your sort don't. But I'll tell you right now you haven't got around on any fool trip." He flourished his dripping dipper. "But I want to make it right now the Bull Moose don't own a place in my nightmare. Any showdown he fancies sitting in at I'll bet my hand to the limit. It's my way. And I can't help it. If he can kill better than me he's welcome to pump me so full of lead they'll start a corporation mining me. He can't. He's a renegade white. An' I wouldn't use the neche blanket he's taken for a grease rag to clean the worst twisted gun ever looked over by a cross-eyed crazy man straight out of the state bug house. No, sir. But I'm full of good yeller dust. I've a poke the size of a house. An' I'm not payin' it over to any Bull Moose. I'm toting it right away down to Reliance the same as you swell kids said. That's so. Hand yourself another bunch of hash, little gal. Fill that dandy body o' yours right up to your swell neck. An' we'll pull out down stream right away when you're through."

Chapter VIII

Frisco Belle

It was incomprehensible, amazing. There in a gathering of rough, uncultured creatures, steeped in the harsh reality of life, driven by raw impulse and selfish desires, the grandeur, the dignity, the tragic beauty of the man's music held every soul in the room spellbound.

The great old room which was Marthe's store had become suddenly voiceless. Those at the well-worn, cloth-topped tables, awaiting the turn of a card as though all life for them depended upon it, withheld their harsh expletives. The drinkers at the bar were turned about from it, their gaze on the drunkenly-swaying, black-haired creature who was playing for them. Their crude senses were ravished. And they stood handling glasses whose contents were momentarily forgotten. Then Marthe. Even the gold-hungry Marthe was standing unmoving at her scales with a pile of crudely washed yellow dust weighting them unevenly. She, too, was absorbed, silent, gazing.

It was Kid Pierce. And he was saturated with raw liquor, and blind to everything but the genius that nothing could debauch. He had to be that way or he would not have played a note on the outrageous piano. He was playing with lean, tenacious, delicate hands of whose cunning no pick and shovel on his claim could rob him. And he was wringing from the battered soul of Marthe's aged instrument such tone, such chords, such golden melody as Reliance had never before listened to.

The man's condition was deplorable. He was so drunk that his bleared eyes saw nothing of the age-blackened rafters up at which they stared. He was so helplessly drunk that he was only held from falling from his chair by the men supporting him on either side of it. He was so drunk that no sheet of music could have conveyed its message to his brain. It was just a feat of drunken inspired memory, which no liquor could confuse. And it was played by hands whose skill was no less beyond its reach.

It was Chopin in his death agony. And it was just such a masterly interpretation as the great master might well have applauded for its brilliant understanding of the story of suffering he had told so wondrously.

Who was Kid Pierce? Reliance had no knowledge, and did not ask. Why should it? It was not concerned for personalities. Dimly it understood that the man was a derelict. That his unkempt hair, his black, oriental eyes, his dead-white face, upon which the northern sun failed to make the slightest impression, did not belong to anyone born to the name of "Kid Pierce."

The music went on in its passionate bitterness, its regret, despair, punctuated throughout by the awesome, deep-toned note which told of the life-blood of a human heart dripping slowly away. And then the end. The final inspiration of a death-stricken master of music.

It told of death. But it also told of long-yearned peace, of that eternal rest that was so passionately desired. And even while the last thrilling chords still held the rough audience there came a jangling crash.

It was the helpless player. He had pitched on to the keyboard of worn and stained ivory. And he lay there where his hands had played so divinely sprawled in a drunken stupor.

Marthe bent at once over her laden scales and balanced them. Harsh voices broke at the gaming tables. Drinkers gulped down forgotten liquor as a first thought. There was no applause. Only a hundred sounds of voice and movement.

The drunken genius was left to his stertorous slumbers on the now silent keys. And none cared longer when he might fall amidst the muck of the floor.

Marthe drew a profound sigh as she handled her scandalous scales. It might have indicated anything except emotion. Her hard blue eyes looked up into the eager, watchful face of the youth beyond her counter.

"It weighs up eighty-two an' two penny-weights," she said, with the finality characteristic of her dealings. Then she asked: "You make it that way, Mike? Count it right, boy. I'd hate miscalculation. You're kind of new to things. Get satisfied good. I'd say your claim's showing good for six weeks of work. And it certainly looks better for you in my balances than in the Bull Moose's pouch. Make it right?"

The youth laughed and helped himself to a liberal four fingers of rye. He drained it neat.

"Sure. An' it's clean washed. Ther's no silt to it. Good red gold, right through."

Marthe's grim mouth hardened. Her big fingers scratched her whiskered chin as she gazed out over the room.

"It's always that way when you boys want to deal," she observed absently. "How d'you need it?"

"Pass me five hundred to blow. I'll take the rest credit."

It was so easy. Marthe counted the currency from a strong box. Then she entered a note of the credit in her book. She emptied her gold into a big old cracker box, and set her lying scales aside.

The transaction was complete. Young Mike Wilson was dismissed, forgotten; just as was the snoring musician sprawled on the piano.

Marthe turned to her custom at the bar. She passed bottles across it, and glasses, which she rarely washed. She gathered up the stained and dirty currency flung on her dripping counter in payment, and rapidly made change for the careless souls who rarely counted it. It was all just the hard practice of years.

Disaster of cruel proportions had descended upon the woman. The man who had been her partner and friend, as well as husband, had been wiped out of her life with shocking suddenness. He was even now lying there, out back, in a rough storehouse awaiting, with those two others, a simple burial on the morrow. Yet her grim face was unyielding. She permitted not a single sign. Her blue eyes were hard and unsmiling. And they seemed to see nothing but the trade that was now more surely than ever her whole life.

The disaster had yielded Marthe a rush of profit in a single day. There had hardly been a half hour when her scales were idle. Every gold man had made his way in from the river seeking to safeguard his treasure, whether small or great.

The woman's heavens had certainly fallen crashing about her sturdy shoulders. Somewhere, deep hidden, there was a direly wounded soul. But she was stronger than any spiritual hurt. Her purpose was indestructible, her cold confidence invincible.

The evening was wearing on. It was reaching towards the late northern night. But daylight still remained streaming in through the few widely set windows in the immensely thick walls of the old fort. After awhile the swinging oil lamps would be lit, and the growing company would settle down to a long night of sordid recreation.

It was a scene of human nature in the raw, unrestrained, without grace. The room was full of men and women, young and old, of every original social grade. There were men of learning and culture, and those of ignorance and brutality. The women, too. But one and all they knew the fighting life of the wilderness and asked no better. They knew what they wanted, and wanted with all their ruthless might.

Faro Neale was dealing a big game at one of the tables. It was far from the bar in a corner of the room nearby to the great stove whose warming services seemed unnecessary. His companions were well chosen. There was that wreck of a mis-spent life, Sid Grover, a small-chested creature with snapping, ferret-black eyes. There were George and Alec Peters, two brothers from just above Scut Barber on the river. Then there was Orton Marvin from Lake Clare. They were all men of rich claims; and Faro liked them that way.

Near by to Faro was Frisco Belle, sitting nursing an iced drink with a straw in it. She was a handsome blonde whose generous soul marked her out for tragedy in later life.

It was always the same. When Faro Neale came in off the river life began afresh for Frisco Belle. Her ample wardrobe was ransacked and set in order, and her carefully displayed attractions warned the whole of Reliance of the gambler's visit. She sat watching the sleepy-eyed gamester now as his skillful hands fingered the cards. She spoke no word, and accepted his cool ignoring. She was there beside him, and the harvest being reaped amongst the spenders by Idaho Kit, Hooch Annie and all the others of possibly less ill-fame, concerned her not at all. She was a sharp-tongued, passionate creature of fiery temper, of whom every woman in Reliance stood in awe. But she readily submitted her soul and body to anything the man she had chosen demanded of it. Faro was the man she had chosen; and without him her world was dead.

She sipped her drink and withdrew her gaze from its watch on Faro's game. It was just as a decayed choreman, trundling

a small-wheeled carrier with a number of lighted lamps on it thrust open a door and chanted his "way-please" as he ambled down the room.

Watching him move through the crowd Belle became aware of the slim beauty of Wanita's neatly-frocked figure, as she bore a tray of freshly-filled glasses from Marthe's bar to a far corner of the room. In an instant she turned to the bar where Sandy was lounging beside his busy mother. And from him she shot a quick look at the sleepy-eyed man beside her.

Faro had thrown in his hand for the jack-pot that had just been opened. And his narrowed eyes were intently following the girl with the tray of glasses. At once Frisco Belle was talking. And it was the first word she had spoken since play had started.

"What can you hope to get out of this bunch, Faro?" she demanded, with a sharpness that suggested scorn. "You can't look for a thing with Marthe standing pat for her play. They'll follow her like a bunch of fool sheep. Your plan to get out after the Kaskas and their Moose feller 'll look like losing her trade with the boys who don't come back. And she'll fight the police being sent for till hell cools down. They've tried. I tell you it's not the Bull Moose you need to worry for. It's Marthe. She's got Reliance. An' she's set her two flat feet on it, an' means to keep 'em there."

Faro turned while those remaining in the pot bid it up. For a moment his half-closed eyes regarded the woman's flaming beauty. She was in the lowest-cut evening gown that could be worn with decency. For a silent moment he appraised her. But what he thought found no expression.

"We mean to pay to see her hand," he said coldly. "And she'll show it to all Reliance to-night. I fixed it with these boys here, an' Ike Clancy, and Joe Makers. That's what we're here for. We're tired picking plums for her to swaller whole. She and Jim have piled a roll that leaves us sick thinking. It didn't hurt while Jim took his chance with the rest of us. It's diff'rent now. She's skinning the game while we stand the racket. Look at her now. She's been stacking dust all day at a price to set a saint weeping. We want a fair market, a straight price for our gold. We'll get it when the banks are here. We got to get a showdown. She's the gold vampire of this burg, an' Reliance is going to know it."

The big brown eyes of the blonde turned to look at the unlovely Marthe. But her gaze never reached their objective. They paused at the child beauty of Wanita talking with Sandy across the bar. She knew Faro was looking at the girl, too. And the thought maddened her.

"I know the answer you'll get before she makes it," she snapped round at him to find her fears confirmed.

Faro remained wholly undisturbed. Alec Peters took the "pot." There were three hundred dollars in it.

"Do you?" he asked. "What?"

"That kid Sandy 'll be sacrificed. He'll be sent in—his dead father's place. So you can't squeal at her. She'll miss no spot of gold even at the price of his life. Look at her. Don't worry with that half-breed kid. She's not for you. Marthe, with her foul whisker. She ain't human."

Faro shot a veiled glance at the jealous face of his woman. His narrowed eyes were alight with a glint of humor.

"You're a hot kid," he said calmly, as he picked up the cards just dealt to him.

He glanced at them. Noted their index figures cautiously. Then he closed them and laid them face down on the table.

"I'm passing," he said.

Then he looked up as the outer door of the store opened to admit two men. It was Ike Clancy and Joe Makers. He watched them move to a far table and sit down. Then, as it came to his turn to call again, he flung in his cards.

A moment later there was a sharp hammering on his table with the heavy glass that had contained the liquor he had just drained.

Chapter IX

A Clash of Wills

Faro was on his feet. There was something dominant in his strong, attractive face, with its lazy eyes, which so rarely widened to reveal their gray depths. He stood there using the guns slung at his hips as a rest for the strong hands accustomed to use them.

His gambling associates had interrupted their game. Frisco Belle was gazing up unconscious of the frank admission of her attitude. Her brown eyes never left his face. And she drank in his words as though they were nectar.

"I guess it's not for me to tell you folks of Reliance just where you get off," he drawled slowly. "Nor for any other citizen amongst us. Maybe it's even less for me than some of you. But it needs someone—and maybe someone who don't care a curse—to set the game moving. That's why I'm right on my hind legs now. I've just seen Ike Clancy and his twin, Joe Makers, come in. And that makes us mostly a complete round up of Reliance. I want to say one thing only. The thing that's just happened on the river has got me so I can't sit around longer. I'm not the feller to sit around while folks pull the drop on me, anyway. No. I'm a gambler, as some of you know. And I'm going to take a gambler's chance. If you folks won't stake me with the guns and things I need I'll play a lone hand for this hell-bound feller that you call the Bull Moose. I've been told I'm crazy. I don't know. But this I do know anyway. The Bull Moose is just one man, white or colored. So am I. And I haven't yet seen any one man to give me a nightmare. As I said, I'm telling you this, and I don't ask a thing. I just want you to know the way I feel for Jim McBarr and Shamus and the mother of Shamus's kid. And I want you to know what I intend, unless there's folks present who can show us a better chance."

It was clear, and said with a downright sincerity that carried instant conviction, and invoked good feeling. And as the gambler flung back into his chair again, and his eyes considered the idle cards on the table, talk broke instantly and became general and animated. He had achieved his purpose. He had caught the interest, the sympathetic interest of the whole room.

It was only a few moments before Joe Makers leapt to his feet. Joe's grin was ingratiating.

"Say, folks, I'm not a gambler," he began pleasantly. "And chances don't look to me the things Faro sees 'em. A lone hand game with this darn Moose, and hundreds of Kaskas with store guns, isn't my motion of a chance. No. I'd count it a sure play for wings and halo fer the feller yearning. Still, Faro makes me feel like a two-cent bid for a thousand-dollar pot. We're certainly up against it. And he's right that something needs to be done right off. Well, I don't see reason to change my ground. There's the police at Glenach. And they're paid for it. Let's have the police as quick as Ottawa can be made to cough 'em up."

He sat down again and the manner of it was that of a man who is doubtful as to the effect he has made. And, as talk broke again in more strident volume, he and Ike Clancy appeared to be caught up in the general argument.

It was play acting. A little crude, perhaps, but nevertheless. But there was no play acting in the rush of controversy amongst the crowd. The great old place became a babel of contention. And some women shrilled their arguments in the hubbub.

Faro looked on coldly. As did his fellow gamblers. And Frisco Belle listened and waited. She was watching the whiskered woman behind her bar, leaning on it with muscular, folded arms. The hard face was grim; and the heavy chin thrusting. And, still absorbed, Belle became aware of Ike Clancy's harsh voice.

"See folks," he shouted above the din. "Faro's hit a big punch. And Joe, here's, taken the line that suits him. That's all right. You've heard and you'll get your own opinions. Well, I've thought this thing days, weeks, and months. I've a big stake. As big, maybe, as Jim McBarr had. And I tell you I don't like the p'lice any better than Jim and Marthe did. Nor no better than I like Faro's punch. There isn't one of us who hasn't paid toll to these hold-ups. Not one. And we don't know from day to day when we'll pay again. We're out there sluicin' with a hand we can't spare on our guns all the darn day long an' most of the night. It's hell! Well, we need to be wise, an' play wise. An' it's the time right now. I'd say Faro's play needs to be cut right out. An' for the reason the Kaskas are hundreds strong an' well fixed with guns, an' well led. We're just a mean handful. Faro's got nerve. He'd face up to anything that could pull a trigger an' maybe get away with it. But we ain't all Faros. No. The way I see it if you pack the whole of our camp here tailing this murderin' outfit haf of you

won't ever see the color of your dust again. Get me? An' even that way ther's no sort of guarantee you've made a clean-up."

He gestured. And his keen face was serious.

"If you don't make that clean-up—" His hands went up expressively. He shook his head. "It's the p'lice. It's got to be. Ther's not a soul of you but don't know I hate the p'lice comin' around like a Dago hates water. But they're coming when they feel like it anyway. So I guess we best get 'em quick."

He paused. Then he went on with a change to regret in his tone. And his keen gaze was on the bar, and on the grim figures of the watchful Marthe, and the boy Sandy ranged beside her.

"Folks," he said. "I just hate to death to hurt a woman by reminding her of things it's good to leave behind her. An' I ask Marthe not to take it amiss me remindin' her. We've lost two swell citizens out of the best fighters on the river in her Jim, an' the good Shamus. Then ther's that little helpless woman butchered to death for no sane reason. That's those swine. An' Faro's shootin's a thing that's a hell sight too good for 'em. Marthe's been dead against having police butt in on us. Right thro'. Same as me. An' her reason's been sound. None of us fancied the crazy rush of haf the world that's sure to follow. But that argument can't stand now. No. You see, Jim's gone. Jim took the same chances all of us took. And he was entitled to his say in things. His say cost Marthe her man. So you see, folk, things look changed that way. Marthe's got her store right here, and she won't get hurt for anything you decide. See? But it's for you to decide the best for us folks who've to face the racket of this murderin' bunch. Get me? It's right up to you. Not Marthe. Jim's gone. He's left his widder. And Shamus has left his little gal. Well, we got to get safety for them as well as ourselves."

"You don't have to!"

It was the bark of a voice everyone seemed to recognize. It was a harsh bark just as the dead Jim McBarr might have flung it. But it was Sandy. He was leaning there on the bar beside his mother, with his dour face unsmiling and his heavy jaws set doggedly.

Every eye was turned on the boy. Even the hard eyes of his startled mother. A frown drew Faro's brows. And Ike stared blankly. The blonde beauty beside Faro wore a smile that was full of understanding.

Joe grumbled to his friend, muttering under his breath:

"We figgered to draw the she-wolf an' only got her cub," he said.

Sandy let his cold eyes dwell on the waiting Ike. He shook his head.

"You just don't have to think of Marthe or Wanita. They're for me. Ther' won't be hurt coming to them. That's my word. Jim took his chances with the Bull Moose, same as the rest. Well, now he's got his I'm taking them. Just the same as you. All of 'em. And I stand pat for Jim's play. Keep the river for ourselves just as long as we know how. Only folk with a yellow streak need the p'lice to hold 'em up. Ther's no yellow in me. To hell with the Moose and his rotten bunch! Be damned to 'em!"

Marthe stiffened. Her angular frame seemed to lift. Her folded arms loosened. And a hand reached and fell on the boy's shoulder.

"I guessed I'd lost Jim," she said, and there was something unfamiliar in her tone. "But I haven't. No. He's left all he was behind him."

Then her voice fell into its Scottish lilt, which everyone knew, and there was no softening in the thing she said.

"The boy's right. Dead right. Ike's put up a spiel that don't belong. Ther's not a soul of you need worry for what Jim's murder means to me. The thing for you, for all of us, is the p'lice, and just what they mean when they bring a gold-crazy haf of the world atop of us. Ike knows. Faro knows. An' ther's only one who spoke to you who believes what he's said. That's Joe."

Suddenly the whole bulk of her big, mannish figure reared itself. The hard eyes flashed cold fire; and the whiskered chin was even more aggressively thrust. One clenched fist fell on the counter and set the glasses ringing.

"You got to get the truth clear, an' right away," she cried with restrained passion that seemed to add lash to her words. "You're being jockeyed. The boys who been talkin' at you guess they're strong enough to stand the rush when it comes, and even make profit out of it. They can afford to see the river swarming with sharps, and gunmen, and all the world's foul trash, because the banks'll hand them better price for their dust than I do, while the p'lice and government commissioners make their claims safe from the Bull Moose. Oh, it's good for them—with rich claims. An', believe me, they aren't thinking for you or me. Only themselves. Have you all got rich pay dirt? Are you all standing with a big roll to see you through? Are you all a match for the sharps and finance corporations looking to skin you out of anything that looks like money? Are you all crazy for the liquor laws to shut down on your play time, and to see your swell girls herded out of town limits? Are you? Do you fancy church sociables an' Sunday closing? Do you want to see the red of a police coat when your highball tastes good? Do you want to see Reliance in the hands of corporations that'll leave most of you eating from the city's garbage cans? You can have it for me.

"But listen, Ike's told me the thing that matters. It's easy. These folk guess I'm handling a profit you make me, at—no risk to me. Well, I don't know. A week back I had a man who's stood beside me all my woman's years. Now I haven't got him. To-morrow maybe it'll be my son. I'm at no risk. I take no chance with you. I just take the profit you make for me. And don't fancy anything cutting into it. Sure I like my profit. Why not? It's suited you and it's suited me. It was Jim and me made Reliance so you could sluice on the river. We came first. You couldn't have lived five minutes on this old river without us. It's still that way. Do I earn my profit? Do I sweat for it? Do I sweat for you? And who's paid more for it than me? You can choose the thing you fancy. But you've got to know the truth. I say nothing to Joe's snivel, and Faro's gunman bluff. But Ike's pulled a bunch of pie on you to smother what lies back of it. My boy's said it. And it's the grit his father handed that made him. To hell with the Moose and his bunch! Be damned to 'em!" She breathed heavily. "And from me there's just this. Get your p'lice. Bring haf the gold-crazy world on this river. It won't hurt me. While the fools pass from one garbage can to the other I'll just go right on taking my profit, and the bigger for it. Don't get any fool notion. I didn't want police on a general policy in which you all figure. I started Reliance. And when I'm through I'll still be atop of it."

There was a queer deep hush in the room as Marthe finished speaking, and leaned again with folded arms on her bar. Her blue eyes appeared not to observe. But her quick mind told her. She had scored as she meant to score over those who had tried to defeat her. She had crashed the impression Ike had created and made the crowd think.

Frisco Belle smiled satirically into the frowning face beside her, and took in the rest of the men at Faro's table.

"Well?" she drawled. "I guess the she-wolf wins. But don't forget. It's that kid beside her. He's Jim again, and then some."

And as her low-spoken comment ceased, soft strains of music floated down from the platform where Kid Pierce had awakened and was sitting up. It was an enchanting melody full of plaintive meaning. It slowly filled the whole room with its haunting cadences. It rose and fell, and it gripped every rude soul that heard it. Again it was Chopin. But it was the Funeral March!

Perhaps its significance was apparent to the quick-witted Marthe. At any rate her gaze was on the unconscious pianist. And Ike had seen the unusual smile in the cold blue of her eyes.

Chapter X

Youth on the Threshold

The evening sky was of velvet softness, cloudless, and still alight with the last of a dying day. The air was windless and warm for the early spring of the year.

There were harsh sounds within Marthe's store. Sounds of laughter and the murmur of a human crowd. Then there was music which was no longer a funeral march, but had the vital force and grandeur of the man, Wagner.

Wanita and Sandy were listening to these many sounds on the great open porch running the length of the fort. They were content to be there alone together, listening and dreaming. And the while the newborn stars twinkled down at them.

Wanita was standing at the edge of the porch where it dropped nearly three feet to the ground which sloped away from it. She was leaning against a stout log upright which was one of many supporting a shade roof. The river streamed away in front of her, deep sunk below the great cut-bank that was almost cliff. And the dark outline of huts and frame buildings dotted the fore-ground, a litter of ghostly hummocks.

Wanita was vivid with the burning life that shone in her dark eyes. There was something reliant, calm, and naturally confident in the unstudied grace of her pose. Her femininity was abounding, and her beauty something devastating to the youth gazing up at her.

Sandy stared and his thoughts were a-riot. But he remained unsmiling. That was his nature. He saw life, and all obtaining to it, as a tremendous reality. And its vital passions as something almost for awe. Wanita had grown into his life until she was a literal part of it. More, she was a literal part of him. Something to be cared for, protected, treasured. A perfect jewel whose hurt or loss must be a calamity unthinkable.

He nursed his knees in arms of vast strength. And his thought was searching amongst the remotenesses of youthful hopes and fears.

Tannhauser finished in a series of gorgeous chords, and nothing was left but the unlovely human sounds that filled the store behind them. Sandy jerked the closely curling mass of his brown head in its direction.

"Sounds raw—in there," he said. And somehow the tone, the simple, uncultured manner of it contained a world of meaning.

"Seems like life's just always that way. Life around here."

Wanita looked down into the upturned blue of Sandy's eyes. And dwelt on it lingeringly, smilingly.

"Yes."

Sandy dropped his big feet over the edge of the porch, relieving his arms of their comfortable task. He pivoted slightly so that his back rested against another post. And he sat facing Wanita so that only the girl came within his focus when his eyes were raised.

"There's things underneath, you don't know about till folks can't stand for silence longer," he went on. "They don't like her. They don't like me. And now Jim's gone there's a whole lot of difference. You get that, kid?"

Wanita nodded down at the sitting figure.

"You mean the thing you told—Jim," she said quickly. Then contemplatively: "Yes. There's a whole lot of difference—now."

"It's sort of tough. Yet I don't know." One of Sandy's hands went up to his forehead as though to smooth out the tangle of his thought. "We just can't quit Marthe now. We can't take my share of dust and beat it same as I said to Jim. Marthe's a woman, a lone woman without us. An' they hate her. Then she's my mother."

There was a troubled gloom in the boy's eyes. And he, too, searched the distance.

"Marthe doesn't want you to quit the same as Jim did because of me. Marthe's a Scot, too, same as Jim. She doesn't like a half-breed any more than him. But you can't quit her."

Wanita sighed. Her eyes were shining. She was thinking of this troubled man. She was thinking of that dream that had been hers when Sandy had told her of his determination to sacrifice his parents for her. It was a moment in which she felt she could repay him. And she meant to do it. She wanted to do it.

"But I said to you," Sandy protested in his dogged fashion. "I said to Jim."

"I know." Wanita's smile suddenly turned on Sandy. And there was infinite tenderness in it. "Would you have me left a lone woman if things happened to you?" she asked. "Would you have me left to a pack of wolves who haven't a thing better to them than the Kaskas and the Bull Moose?" She shook her head. "You'd be worried crazy an' sick. Marthe's big grit. She's got 'em all beat with her wits. But she's a lone woman, and they're tough men. And they hate her like you said. They were scared to silence when Jim was around. But they're not that way now. Marthe couldn't have got away with it to-night only for you. The way you jumped in. We can't quit the river. We just got to wait around. I'll—I'll be glad to wait for you, Sandy."

"Say, kid, you mean that, sure?"

The eagerness of it rewarded the girl. All Sandy's worries seemed to have evaporated.

"You're a bully kid," he added, as Wanita nodded her smiling assurance. "You know I didn't get the way they hated us till Ike pulled that stuff Marthe called 'pie.'"

"No? Yet Shamus always said it. Right along." Wanita turned, and her gaze sought the distance. "You know the way of it with Shamus. That laugh that didn't tell a thing. That queer twist to his Irish lips. The big fist that would come down so mighty hard on anything happening near. 'Marthe's a hell sight better woman than Reliance can think of. Marthe's handing a crowd of folk that can't think right a chance they hadn't a right to get. When Marthe quits her grip on things haf the boys an' girls around this river 'll dream of the good times that'll never come to 'em again.' I know that's so. I don't know how I do. But I just do. It's queer. They surely hate her. Leastways some of them!"

"Faro."

"Ike."

"An' lots more who don't say it."

Sandy drew out a rusty looking pipe. Packed it. Lit it. And smoked heavily.

"Maybe it's sort of natural, too, the folks hating Marthe," he went on in his serious judicial way. "She don't set about to make it different. Seems to me Marthe's the sort who don't worry for folks. She just sees things the way she wants to and goes right after 'em, treading where her great old feet take her without worrying what's underneath. They reckon Jim was a fighter. That was so. But I'd sooner fight Jim when he wanted to kill than Marthe, when the bluff's put up. She said it was Ike's 'pie.'" The brown head shook. "It was Faro. Marthe hates Faro like nothing roaming out of hell. And so do I."

The girl's pretty eyes were tender as they came back to Sandy's.

"Boy, boy, where did you get it all?" she laughed quietly. "You sit there passing judgment as solemn as a screech owl searching the forest shades a full moon can't light. And the worst of it is you're most always right. The folks who've got plenty hate Marthe because she's got more than them. And the folks who haven't, hate her because she'll always loan or stake them when they need. They'll tell you she's a crook, a thief, a vulture ready to pick any carcase that comes her way. Yet there's not a soul in Reliance who doesn't owe her for something that was never meant to hand her profit. They hate her when she pays them the price agreed for their dust; they hate her when they see her hands handle their dust; they hate her that from dawn almost to dawn she's there to serve them the way they want; and they hate her that she stores up her profit instead of drinking or gambling it the same as them. Isn't it just the life that belongs? Shamus always said it was. You know, boy, ther' isn't much to us folk. We just got a bunch of feelings that twist us this way and that." Her eyes widened with a bigger smile that was almost laughter. "We got a hunger that makes us feel good when we've eaten. And then we want most all the time and don't much care the way we satisfy it. Shamus guessed we had nothing on a pack of timber wolves, except we could talk lies, and grin when we needed to hide up the murder we mean to do. That's how it

was with Ike to-night. And," she added slyly, "Faro."

Sandy's pipe had gone out. Now he relit it. And he caught at the bait Wanita threw him.

"You know, kid," he said thoughtfully, "Faro Neale gets me hot all the time. It seems queer folk acting that way on you. I don't ever want to speak to him. And when I do I'd be glad if I could think something to say to him that would hurt. Why? I don't know. But it's that way—always. You mind us up to his claim? Say, I was glad for to pass warning to every boy on the river—but him. I just hated the worry of beating up the stream to make his camp. You know, I'd be glad for the Bull Moose to hold him up. And I'd be gladder still if he left him worse than he left Jim an' Shamus. Or even Roskana. I know. That just means I want to kill him.

"That talk of his gunning the Moose and his Kaskas!" he went on scornfully. "Just hot air. Oh, I know. He's a gunman. And word says he's pulled the game years till folks reckon he's all sorts of a killer. But one man don't go after hundreds full of store guns. Marthe was right. That was Faro's bluff to get the folk for Ike. Marthe's quick. So am I. And I hate to see you carrying liquor to him and his bunch. Even when it's just to help Marthe when she's got more than two hands can do. I can't stand for those eyes of his that never open wide to look up at you when you hand him the drink he hogs without showing it. Say, who made him a big noise to tell Reliance? A killer folks don't want anywhere. Not even where there's police. He's rich. He pulls a big gamble with the folks who sit in with him. And he'll pouch the dust of any poor sump who hasn't sense to keep out of his game. He's got a claim that Marthe says keeps her scales on the balance right along. And it's the best color, and best washed, that crosses her counter. What sets him boosting for Ike's 'pie'? I don't get any of it except he guesses he'll be quit of Marthe if the banks and police come around. And he'll be rid of me."

Wanita's eyes widened to their fullest extent. And a quick mischief leapt into them.

"Oh, boy," she cried, with pretended surprise. "Why, you?"

"Because of you!"

It came with that Jim-like bark, harsh, cold, furious.

And Wanita's mischief passed.

"Tell me, Sandy," she cried. And she left her post and plumped down beside him, and possessed herself of the hand that was holding his old pipe.

Sandy remained silent for some moments. He sat there, his hand prisoned in both of the girl's, which were warm, and set his blood racing. He was gazing out across the shadowed river. He was staring into the darkness that had enveloped the low flat beyond.

"Sandy boy! Just tell me," Wanita pleaded.

"He only fell for your persuading and came down river with us," the boy snapped savagely. "It wasn't he was scared for his dust. It was just you. That feller didn't see me. I just wasn't there. I watched those eyes that don't open. And they saw only you. And they went through and through you. That killer ain't clean. He buys any woman around he fancies. And he figures to buy you. You're a kid. Just a clean kid that hasn't a notion of the filth lying back of that killer's good-looker face. You don't know a thing of the rottenness of men-folk like him. How could you? With Shamus always by to see you got no hurt. You don't—"

"Don't I, Sandy? I know so much it makes me feel old; so old, and—wise."

Wanita drew a deep breath and released the hand she had been caressing. Then a quick humor twisted her alluring lips. It was a reaction of the Irish father in her.

"You forget, boy, I was raised in the gold world where folks don't think of a thing but the color of it an' the time it can buy them. Then it was Shamus who raised me and not my little brown mother. It was Sha who taught me everything. To read, and write, and figure, and to understand all those queer wise things his Irish head was full of. And he just didn't stop at learning. He knew same as Jim did the thing he'd done when he showed the world he didn't covet any woman it held but just a beautiful Indian who'd made him her white god. So he taught me all that meant to me. He told me I was a half-breed with maybe the best of two colors in me. And maybe the worst. He said if I wasn't wise I'd hit the trouble I

was born to. I was his kid, and nothing mattered to him so I was all right. If things didn't go amiss with him it wouldn't matter. But if they did—!"

She gestured expressively. But her eyes were shining with the memory of a man she had loved with all her child's abounding heart.

"Things went amiss—sure. But he'd warned and taught me," she went on, with a quick sigh. "Oh, Sha was a great father to me. And when I told him of you he just threw back his crazy head, with its loose tangle of hair, and flung up those hands, that were like hammers when he was angry, and he laffed with all his big kid's heart. He said the only folk he hadn't any use for, and just loved to death, were those darn pirates who made better 'potheen' than an Irishman, and knew how to sell it. He said a Scotsman would be the better for it if he cut out his 'parritch'—that's how he said it—an' kept a 'dacent' pig an' grew 'Murphys' and he said if Sandy McBarr's got the stuff of his 'fayther,' Jim, in him he hadn't got a worry lying between him and the hell he guessed he'd go to. He said he'd taught me all the things he knew, even to pulling a gun quick and using it right. And so he guessed I was fixed swell to marry even a 'murtherin" Scot."

The two sat there crowded together, side by side, and they chuckled over the humor they found in the girl's little story. Wanita's laughter was whole-hearted. But Sandy's was little better than a twinkle in his fine blue eyes.

But Sandy's better mood passed in a moment.

"Shamus was dead right teaching you, kid," he said, as his smile died out. "But he was teaching you the things he knew and feared because you're a half-breed. He couldn't warn you of the muck there is in men. This killer. This Faro. He wants you same as I do. But with him it's the same as he wants any loose woman living around here who'll sell herself for a bunch of his dust. I'm scared for you, kid, every time I see that man look at you with those eyes he keeps hid. I'm scared for you being around Marthe's store and passing the drinks. It's—got to quit."

"Sure you're scared, Sandy? You?" The girl shook her head and her eyelids hid up her smile. "You're not just jealous? Oh, no. You're just worried for a rich good-looker you're scared I'll fall for. That's so. Oh, Sandy, dear, I just love you for it. But I want to laff. Oh, dear, I want to laff."

"Well, laff!"

Again it was that bark that told of feelings that were beyond expression in words.

Wanita again possessed the boy's hand. This time she seized both of them. And the force of it swung him round to her.

"Listen, you angry Scotsman! Listen to me!" she cried, her laughing eyes only warning of the passionate depths that had been stirred. "I know Faro better than you. I know every thought in his wicked head where I'm concerned. And he don't scare me at all. Sandy, boy, I'm a woman. Oh, yes. I'm a kid in years, but a woman through and through. Cut Faro right out of your figuring. I can smile and talk to him. It's so easy for a girl to smile. It's part of her. I can be all sorts to any man around, and it's no matter. It don't mean more than the worry of talking and smiling. There's only one world for Shamus's half-breed. And only one boy in it. And that's the 'murtherin" Scot, Sandy McBarr, who's worried sick. But say, boy, if things did ever go wrong don't forget Sha taught me to pack that gun. And there's no he-killer around that can use it quicker or—better."

Sandy released his hands and turned away. He raised a hand and ran its fingers through the curls of his hair. It was an obstinate gesture.

"But you just can't stop around Marthe's. An' go on passin' those bums drinks," he exploded. "You shan't!"

"I'm not going to."

"You'll quit?"

The eagerness of it stirred all the girl's delighted satisfaction. She saw the swift lighting of Sandy's eyes. And somewhere in her child's heart there stirred a queer little motherly feeling. She answered him with a soberness hardly to be expected.

"I'm going right back to Sha's claim just as soon as his poor big body's laid to rest to-morrow," she declared. "I got to, or I'd go crazy. It was Sha's, and—and little Roskana's. It—it was their dream come true. They figured and figured.

Leastways Sha did. There was to be a dandy farm, with stock, and grain, and chickens, and things. And the 'Murphys' Sha never tired of talking about in a place where they're so scarce. That claim. Gold in plenty for the washing. Yes, I got to go back. And I got to get that farm. Only there won't be any Sha and Roskana. Only you and me."

Sandy sucked at the pipe that had gone out. Then he drew a quick sigh.

"And you told Marthe?"

Wanita nodded.

"And she guessed I was right," she said. "She reckoned it would be a pity if I just didn't. She said it wasn't good a young girl setting around where men soused, and other women daubed their fool faces to hide up the sort of thing nature reckoned was all they were worth. Then she said the claim was mighty rich, and it was only a few miles from where Sandy would be sluicing his. She didn't believe in folks missing the chances belonging to them because they'd taken the count. No. She was glad I'd got sense, because Sandy had sense. She said she'd trade my dust, and Sandy would see I got from her all I needed to make things easy. She'd just hate to see Sha's claim jumped by some no account, or neche, or even the Bull Moose. So we'll pull right out together to-morrow. And I'll re-fix Sha's sluice, and the home they burnt, and just carry on same as if I'd still got Sha, with his fool Irish wisdom, and my little brown mo——"

"Then you're stark crazy! Both of you!"

The movement was almost electrical. It was completed even while the sound of the harsh, contemptuous words remained on the air. Sandy was standing erect in a single movement that was cat-like in its effortless swiftness. And no puma in the forest could have moved with greater agility than the lithe half-breed.

Faro Neale was behind and between them. Sandy's dour face was scowling the ugly rage that had leapt. Wanita was regarding the gambler with eyes that had borrowed something of the narrowing habitual to his own.

Chapter XI

Stacking the Deck

"You peeking, listening swine!"

It was Sandy. And the bark of it had a snarl. It came through teeth that were white and strong, and sharp. It came with a fury that was murderous. The boy's face was livid. There was no heed in him. Nothing but the hate that he had told of. Faro, the killer, was armed. The light-pull guns were there to his strong hands. But the youth did not care.

Wanita was wide-eyed at that first moment. Faro's silent approach, his harsh interruption. In some way she seemed unconcerned for them. It was Sandy. His recklessly flung insult. Her concern was for him and the consequences of his rashness. And a hand slipped somewhere into the bosom of her frock and remained there. As it did so her eyes sharply narrowed.

Faro smiled at the youth's livid face. It was derision. But somehow it lacked the offense it should have possessed.

"Guess again, boy," he drawled. "You're wrong."

The man's confidence was wholly undisturbed. There was no anger in word or tone. He shook his head slowly from side to side.

"I was back in that doorway," he went on, before Sandy's fury found further vent. "I was lookin' for better air than you get inside. You two kids were just sitting around telling the world the same as you wanted it to know. I was just part of that world. I allow I moved quiet. Sure. You see, it looked good to me to have you see the foolishness of sitting around telling the kind o' stuff that belongs just you two alone. You're a hot boy, an' rough on the tongue. One day maybe you'll learn that a hot tongue ain't a circumstance to light-pull guns. But not now. It don't signify."

He turned to Wanita as though Sandy no longer existed. And, as he did so, the gleam in his half-closed eyes shone in the beam of yellow light which came from the window behind him.

"Don't feel badly, little gal," he said, in a tone almost a caress. "You can quit fingerin' that gun in a place no gun has right. Ther' ain't need to pull. I like your boy's spirit good. I just handed it to you pat so there wouldn't be no mistake to what I said. It's a crazy dope you handed—the world. You just lost a swell father, an' your little mother. Your boy's lost his father, too. One of the best boys on the river. And you—you two—reckon to pass the game to that darn bunch like two kid sheep without better than their bleat to save 'em from the slaughter coming to 'em. It's just crazy."

"Like the boy sitting around the Valley of the Moose, and reckoning to get away with it."

There was a little short laugh accompanying the girl's retort. She was looking up into the face of the gambler without a shadow of fear. Her quick brain was calculating. And, as a result of her calculation, her hand withdrew from within the bosom of her frock.

Faro laughed. It was a laugh of real amusement. And again it was without offense.

"You're a quick kid, too," he said pleasantly. "And I don't know which has it—your tongue or your hand."

He gestured with both hands. And his lazy eyes looked from one to the other.

"Here," he cried. "Let's sit. All of us. Sandy's told me a piece that should make him feel pretty good with himself. You, little gal, have told me another. But they ain't all by a lot. No. You both got a bunch yearning to break away from you. And I'm yearning to hear it."

He glanced keenly at Sandy's lowering expression.

"The boy who nurses a grouch is liable to make it look bigger every time he sees it. And you, little gal, haven't a smile in the thoughts you turn my way. Well, I don't stand for two folks I feel good about acting that way, without calling a showdown. We can sit right here and make it, while the folks inside don't know better than to pickle their vitals. Right here where you made your dandy cat jumps when I butted in. And we can tell each other while I get that air I came for.

It's two to one. Which is the sort of gamble I fancy most. You can both tell me all the stuff you think of Faro Neale, an' just where he gets off. And you can forget light-pull guns and everything else of that nature. I'm here to listen good and to answer. And all I'll ask Sandy, here, is to remember that the two folks who bred an' raised me are entitled to the same respect he'd hand to his own dead."

Faro dropped on his haunches with an agility no less than that of the two youngsters. And he sat with his heavy-booted feet dangling.

The whole thing was magnetic. The gambler was big and vital. His good-looking face was frankly smiling. There was no reservation, no hidden threat. A rapier-like intellect had urged him. He meant to clean up the effect of the defeat which had been so sharply dealt out to him in the store.

Sandy's hate of the man persisted doggedly. He was on the edge of an angry, scornful refusal. But Wanita intervened. She dropped to a seat on the porch beside the gunman. And as she did so she signed to the rebellious Sandy. In a moment the three were side by side on the rough woodwork. And Faro had achieved his purpose. He separated the others so that only one could observe his expression at a time.

An expansive good nature was in the smile he turned from one to the other.

"Say, don't it beat hell the way of things?" he said. "It looks like the whole darn world's full of things that don't rightly belong. You just got to set a rotten seed in the cabbage patch, an' you'll fill your fool barn with the sort of junk a burro ain't foolish enough t'eat. Guess you two ha' got your barns stacked now. An' they want the stuff in 'em dumped right out so we can start fair. I'll set the old ball rollin' by passing it into your four hands. And if you don't handle it the way you most fancy, why, don't blame me. Here it is. I'm a gambler ready to handle the biggest chance the world can pass me. I'm a crook who can't see why he shouldn't do just the things his crookedness tells him, and ain't worried for the schedule marked down to fill the penitentiary. I'm a killer, for the reason that life just don't mean a thing to me, anyway. Not even my own. That's my tally as the folks around see me. And if you can add decoration to my scheme of life I'll be glad to know about it."

He turned quickly to Sandy and gestured.

"You're rough on the tongue, boy. Just pass it to me why you'd be tickled to death to hand out a killing my way as soon as you would to—the Bull Moose. And you can hand it with all the punch I can see those darn great fists of yours yearning for. Come on, kid. Beat me up all you need."

Whatever effect Faro looked to achieve there was a definite difference between the two he sought to impress. Sandy's sheer doggedness stood up to the bland onslaught. There was no lessening in the grim set of his unsmiling face. No softening. His hate of the man remained unabated. He hated him because of Wanita. And he hated him that he had put himself on the side of those who would see the immediate end of his mother's reign in Reliance. There was nothing in what Faro had said to change him. Even if the manner of it had been disarming.

But in Wanita there was almost a smiling response. Perhaps the half-breed in her found humor in the man's self-denunciation. It was impossible to tell. She smiled back at his good-looking face. And the sight of her smile drove Sandy the harder. He had forgotten. Wanita had told him how easy it was for a girl to smile.

Sandy sat up alert vibrant; his face was stony; his manner; his words. These things were meant to hurt.

"No gambler stacks the deck," he spurned. "Only the crook. An' a four-flush killer wouldn't do more than scare jack-rabbits. The only sort of truth in your scheme of life is the crook. No, Faro, your vanity's just got clean away with you. You're just a crook. A poor mean crook, without the guts to take a square chance or make a clean shooting with the light-pull guns you brag about. I can't decorate your scheme of yourself. 'Crook's' the word to cover it. Just 'crook.'"

It was the cold smoothness that carried home the last of Sandy's words. Yet Faro gave no sign. His smile was no grimace. It was tolerant good nature. Wanita sat there watchful. But she still smiled.

"I'm sore I can't decorate that scheme, Faro," Sandy went on deliberately. "I just can't think a thing more beastly than a crook. And not a thing cheaper than a four-flush bluff. Let it go that way. I can't ever get use for the dirt that sets you going around buying your women, same as they're chattels from Marthe's store. It turns me sick in the guts. You aren't clean to sit there near a clean kid like Wanita. No. And just as long as you feel good boostin' Ike Clancy's play to break

Marthe's holt here in Reliance, I'll be yearning to see your rotten body making feed for the coyotes."

He spat. And the manner of it was the epitome of detestation.

Faro turned. His sleepy eyes told nothing of any feeling which Sandy's scathing had stirred. He just looked into the smiling eyes of the girl.

"Wal?" he said.

Wanita gestured. It was a movement so expressive of tolerance that Sandy's blue eyes snapped.

"What's the use, Faro?" she cried. "Maybe we're two kids you reckon you can fool." She shook her dark head. "You can't. Maybe you can beat us up. But not fool us. The way I see it a 'four flush,' as Sandy said, don't matter. None of the things that sicken Sandy worry me. You can buy your women. Most of them do around here. You see, they're ticketed with a price. The women, I mean. But then I was raised to the northern gold world so these things don't come amiss. But we're both for Marthe. Just all we know. And anything to hurt Marthe's goin' to hurt Sandy an' me. If you don't get the meaning of that, why——"

Again the slim hands gestured. And the gambler watched them. Then, as she spoke again, he watched the play of expression in the beautiful eyes that set his hot blood racing.

"Now you best tell us," she went on, her tone hardening. "Your talk of getting after the Bull Moose with your lone guns! Psha! Why? I mean that talk. Not to us! Not to Marthe! The bunch in there," with a jerk of her dark head, "maybe. You boosted for Ike an' quit him when he was sprawled. Marthe sprawled him. But she couldn't do it without Sandy. That's why you're here sitting now. Well, let's hear. We can listen, too."

Faro licked his lips and his smile passed. His smooth brow furrowed between his eyes. It was an expression that told of concern, thought. But not of resentment. His eyes widened; and the gray of them was keen and good to look at.

"You set me sort o' wonderin'," he said, with a patient air. "Can folks quit their fixed notions even for awhile? I mean, can Sandy forget I'm that pore mean crook? And you that I'm against all Marthe stands for? Guess you can if you will. Anyway I'll have to chance it. You see I am a gambler."

He paused. And the far distance across the river held him. The dark of night had settled over it, and only a wealth of starlight broke up the inky blackness. The voices of a million frogs intensified the quiet of the world; while the barking of camp malemutes, and the human hubbub within the store, sought to break it up.

Faro flung out an arm pointing at the jeweled sky.

"What a world!" he cried. "It's big; it's wide; it's great. Till us folks get around to make it—hell. You know, kids, ther's no two folks ever thought the same when it gets to the proposition of life, an' what's best for it. The democratic notion sounds swell. The verdict of the bunch. Mass thought. A hundred eyes running over the sights of one gun! I'd say it's the bummest notion ever came out of half-baked intellec'. Marthe, an' me, an' Ike, an' Joe, we were thinkin' for that bunch in there. We were askin' for a verdict. A democratic verdict. And Marthe won. See? Marthe told 'em what to think, an' they thought. They'll tell you in awhile they were having none of Ike and Joe, with their police to see they didn't drop their wads. They weren't having Faro with his shooting play at other folks' expense. They'll tell you they decided quick. They didn't. It was Marthe. And Marthe because of Sandy. That's why I came along now and heard the crazy foolishness you were talking to each other."

He paused. But he was not looking for comment. His eyes had narrowed again to their natural sleepy look.

"I guess Sandy here's handed me the toughest punch I ever took without a kick," he went on. "It was good. Oh, yes. The way he felt. But it was no knock-out. He was wrong. He needs to learn that the biggest gamble lies with the boy who stacks the deck. That don't matter. What I want to tell him is I'm sitting on the tail of the Valley of the Moose waiting for the Kaska bunch to leave me lying around with Shamus and Jim McBarr."

His smiling gaze sought the dogged face of Sandy.

"No gambler?" He shrugged. "Well, maybe."

In a moment he had turned again to the girl, and his whole manner was transformed.

"That talk in there," he said, jerking his head back at the store. "Not for you! Not for Marthe! No. It wasn't. Lone gunplay! A light-pull gunman! Hundreds of Kaskas! An'—the Bull Moose! 'Four flush'! Brag! Bluff! It wasn't. It isn't. Say, kid, that goes to the last darn shell I can pump into my guns. I'll fight the game through; clear to the end, lone-handed, like your Shamus and Sandy's Jim. You didn't think them four-flushers. Need you to think me? I've lived years on my guns, an' come through. The North knows that. But it's as you guess. I was helping Ike and Joe to their play. The only thing is I meant just every word I said."

He spread out his hands dismissing the whole thing.

"It don't matter," he said sharply. "But what does is the crazy foolishness you two have got planned." He turned on Sandy. "Boy, you're worth better to Reliance, to Marthe, than to lie around, your bones rotting on a pay dirt shore. But you're a man, an' you can pull a man's game. If you feel that way, an' Marthe needs it, why go to it. Maybe you'll have to be as quick on the draw as you are rough with the tongue. But it's a man's game. An' that sort of game looks good to me. But your little gal, this kid. If you let her make Shamus's claim an' sluice it you aren't crazy, you're just—a killer!"

Sandy stared. And some of the hatred of the gambler had passed out of his blue eyes. He was questioning. And his hate was forgotten in the stress of the moment. Faro had jolted his confidence in no uncertain fashion.

Sandy had visualized the two of them together, he and Wanita, working at their common task for their common interest. And the vision of it had intoxicated his youthful senses. It was the work they knew, the work of their dead fathers, of those others on the river. And the joy of the thought of it had robbed him of any appreciation of the risks.

"That's just darn foolishness," he denied roughly, but without conviction. "Would I leave her around for them? Would I —?"

"Stand to pass her the same sort of help Jim passed—Shamus?"

The gambler looked squarely into the eyes searching his. His own were steady; level, and coldly regarding. He shook his head. And the seriousness of his attitude carried the conviction he intended.

"That Skittle Race," he said, with a gesture at the river before Sandy could find his answer to his challenge. "Your kyak. You best set a rock fast to your bodies, hold hands, and dump yourselves into them crazy waters. That way looks easier than just scratching dust on those two darn claims waitin' for the Kaskas to practice their elegant notions of homicide. Quit them babe notions, boy. An' get a hunch for the word of a four-flush. Act as crazy as you need for yourself. You're all sorts of a man, an' I gather you're the sort who yearns for the med'cine comin' to him. I haven't a kick comin' if that murderin' bunch pumps your darn hulk right plumb to the neck with store lead your Marthe's sold 'em one time and another. But you haven't any sort of right to murder the little gal that don't know better than to guess your fool head's full of jewels of wisdom. Her place is around Marthe's store, right here, where she can live easy an' safe. You got to remember she's young; she's a picture kid. An' the Kaskas are a low-down bunch of disease-ridden neches that think through guts that's no better than a wolf's."

He stood up. It was a movement that was completed almost before those watching him were aware of his intentions. He stood back from them gazing down at the upturned face of the girl. He was good to look at, a finely proportioned creature which no store clothing could disguise. The grin on his keen face was alight with humor. But his last words came with a ring of retaliation.

"Maybe that hands some of it back to your rough-tongued Sandy, little gal," he said, ignoring the troubled youth. "We've each told a bunch, but we've kept to the rules of the play. It's most gener'ly the gal with the wise head when it's for the things that really mean. An' I'm hoping, and believin', you're fixed that way. I allow I can be wrong like most folks. But I been years now on this river with Jim an' Shamus an' the others. I've listened an' I've seen. There hasn't been a moment when my eyes haven't been fixed looking for this darn outfit to come along an' pass it to me. I've watched, because I've had to. And if any boy has ever learnt it's me. The thing I've learnt sets me telling Sandy, here, if he stands for you sluicing Shamus's claim he's worse than any cold-blooded killer. That hell hound didn't kill you when he had your mother hacked down in her tracks. Why?"

Sandy leapt to his feet. He stood there staring with the horror which Faro's challenge had invoked.

"God!"

It broke from the big youth unconsciously. And Faro turned on him.

"Sure," he nodded.

Then he turned back to Wanita who was still sitting. She was gazing up at him with her unscrutable smile. She was a figure of unconcern, of derisive amusement.

Faro stood for an instant while incredulity mastered the gravity of the expression which his warning had provoked. Then he turned on his heel and moved back towards the store. And, as he did so, his laugh came back to those behind him.

Wanita gazed after the retreating figure. And her smile remained. As he passed into the store she sprang to her feet and came to Sandy. Her slim hands grasped him by the upper arm, and they squeezed it. She was laughing.

"Oh, Sandy," she cried. "Can you beat it? Oh, he's a gambler, sure. He's no four-flusher. He took us on. Two of us. Two to one. And he beat us up—cold. It wasn't us who told him. It was him who told us. Say boy, we know just where both of us get off and—belong. And I—I want to laff."

Sandy shook himself free of the caressing hands. He stood apart, glowering down at the laughing eyes, the slim graceful creature who found amusement in defeat. Then he barked.

"Beat us—cold?" he cried. "He didn't. But he surely told us. Didn't you see, kid? But you must. It's his dirt. His foul, loathsome dirt. It's you. He wants you right here. Just you. Why? It's easy. While I'm out on the claim you'll be here where he can get at you. He reckons to buy you; the same as those others. The swine!"

Wanita came to him again and refused to be rebuffed.

"An' while he's buying me," she laughed, "maybe he hopes the Bull Moose 'll leave 'your bones lying rotting around on a pay dirt shore.'"

Chapter XII

The News

Marthe leant her angular body against one of the roof supports of her porch. She scratched at her downy chin with fingers that were none too clean. And the while she stared out over the unkempt township with frowning discontent. She was suffering from an acute attack of leisure, a malady she deplored, and sometimes even feared.

She detested all leisure because it was sterile of those profits she yearned. She feared it because it left a busy mind groping amongst memories she desired to leave behind her.

It was the hour following Marthe's midday meal. An hour which every soul in Reliance, who was not at work on the river, reserved for a digestive laze. Everything was still; everything was hushed like a world without life. It was the sort of thing Marthe abominated. How could she extract profit out of a completely dead world?

She stared up at a sky that was without a cloud, and saw the brazen, late-summer sun beating its furious heat on a virgin world it was fast ripening. It gave her no joy. She sought some living, moving thing. There was none. Not a prowling camp cur seeking offal. Not even a single, unchurched child playing its senseless game. The quiet of it all gave her a feeling of impending disaster. It was like nature's hush before the breaking of storm.

She stirred irritably, a movement that disturbed the legions of sticky, black flies and ravening hordes of blood-letting mosquitoes. Then she settled herself to her post again and let thought hold sway.

Marthe was a creature whose vision of life was at once single-minded, and characteristic. To her it was just a period of conscious years in which to acquire all the things, material possessions, which she, and the world, accounted as desirable. There was nothing beyond it. Nothing before it. Birth was the beginning, and Death the end. Death would come in its season. If it came early it would save much fretting and anxious labor; if it came late it would leave more time in which to acquire possessions.

Wealth. It was the goal she yearned with every fiber of her mind and body. Her will for her task was adamant. She and her man had planned together. They had labored together; and together they had seen the loom of their goal. Jim had always driven hard. But Marthe, being a woman, had abandoned herself body and soul to her task with all the recklessness of her sex.

There was something almost inhuman in the will that possessed her. Time had been when she had been different; when she had known the softer emotions belonging to her woman's life; when she had yearned for all to which her sex entitled her. It was when she sought and found her man. But the iron-hard of her up-raising would not long be denied. She loved her man in her own calm fashion. But after she had produced her only child, Sandy, and had thus satisfied the sex in her, with the passing of her one great thrill, she had fallen back on all those instincts, those calculating proclivities which her squalid childhood had bred into her.

It almost seemed as if the moment Sandy had opened his wondering eyes upon the world Marthe had gathered up all that was feminine in her, opened the most secret place in her woman's soul, packed everything into it, closed and locked the door, and then, deliberately flung away the key. She had transformed herself into a sort of female, wealth-seeking robot.

Soulless as Marthe's little world regarded her, soulless as she strove to make herself, she, by no means, had everything her own way with the original nature in her. There were odd, inconvenient moments when humanity would not be wholly denied. There were times when it tripped her badly. It was so when Jim paid the penalty for his reckless loyalty to Shamus Hoogan. It was a blow that smote the woman crushingly. None saw its effect. But she was left reeling, desolated, and only her cold, inhuman will salved her. Then when the boy, Sandy, had rallied headlong to her defense, when her reign in Reliance had been threatened in the first moments of her widowhood. And again on that impulse against all her prejudices which had made her take the orphaned half-breed girl into her fort and array her in the old, hoarded garments which had once been Sandy's.

Marthe was under no illusion. She was fully conscious of the weakness these things implied. But they daunted her in no wise. They only seemed to add temper to the steel of her will, and aggravate her ungracious mood.

Marthe sought consolation for the momentary stagnation of her trade now, as she gazed out at the hazy horizon beyond the river. She, and Reliance, had endured three months of peace since that first terrible week of her widowhood.

Peace. It should have sounded good to her that the river had known three months of absolute peace and respite from the marauding Kaskas and their murdering leader. But did it?

Peace to Marthe meant a long period of waiting with only the mean domestic trade of the place to satisfy her. The trade of the women and children awaiting the boom time when their men returned from the river at freeze-up. And she wanted more. Much more.

Oh, it was pleasant enough to know that her great son Sandy had jumped into his father's place, and was out there on his claim with three months of gold washing to his credit. It was well to know that Wanita was similarly occupied on the rich claim which the dead Shamus had left behind him. And that every man of Reliance, owning a patch of pay dirt, was busy accumulating precious dust that would gravitate ultimately to her tenacious hands.

These things were all to the good. But none of the stuff had reached her scales yet. And there was risk; of course there was risk. The very fact of three months of unbroken peace made it all the greater. She felt in her bones that the Kaskas under their villainous leader would make another desperate raid before the freeze-up.

No. Without the smallest scruple, or shame, Marthe coldly assured herself that the immediate necessity of the moment was another Bull Moose scare!

A scare now, or perhaps a serious raid on an outlying claim, would save many ounces of precious stuff in the long run. One or two might suffer. It might even cost a life or two. But at least it would send every man out there on the river racing into Reliance to cash in at her store.

That was what she wanted. She wanted her scales to be busy all the time. She wanted the walls of her store to echo with drunken laughter. She wanted to hear the harsh voices of men shouting, quarreling, cursing. She wanted the foolish women of the place to be spending every cent of the wealth their still more foolish river men would lavish on them.

Nothing else mattered to her. Reliance had been duly brought to her heavy heel. She had convinced it beyond any peradventure that the government and police were undesirable, and must not be urged to activity. She had even silenced those persistent partisans, Ike Clancy and Joe Makers. Faro? Faro Neale? He was just a "hard-shell" gunman and gambler on the top of his wave of prosperity. He was just an incident in the affairs of the place. She was content enough with everything but—the waiting. A scare! It wanted that fillip to boom her—

Her musing ceased. The keen blue eyes widened with a startled question. It was the sudden appearance of a hurrying figure which had just appeared over the steep bank at the river landing. She recognized it at once in its diaphanous summer frock, which was without the smartness it would have displayed had the men of the river been in the township. It was the beautiful Frisco Belle. She was hurrying, almost running. And behind her was the buckskin clad figure of an undersized Indian.

Marthe straightened up from her post on the instant. The woman was agitated. And she was carrying in her hand what looked like a sheet of white paper. Then that neche. Marthe recognized him as a small Dogrib creature. And she knew Faro Neale employed Dogribs to do his work for him. Was this what she had been looking for, hoping for? She waited for this fair creature, whose generous frailty was a by-word in the camp, to come up.

The woman called to Marthe as she came. And she flourished the paper she was carrying. By the time she reached the porch she was panting with her unaccustomed exertion. Her big, soft eyes were wide with terror. And a threat of tears frowned in her troubled brow. She dashed on to the porch in a distraught fashion and flung herself into the chair which Marthe had set for herself and had left unoccupied. Marthe considered her with cold disfavor.

"What's amiss?" she snapped in a manner reminiscent of her dead man.

Belle sat up. Then, of a sudden, she flung up her hands and covered her eyes without making any attempt to reply. It was theatrical. And Marthe snorted as her patience gave out. She advanced on the troubled creature with the threat of a sergeant-major on a recruit's parade. One big hand descended on the girl's shoulder and gripped it. And she shook her without concern for any hurt. Again she spoke; and it was menacingly.

"I haven't time for no tantrums, my girl," she cried. "Get a grip on those fool nerves of yours an' hand it me. If you're goin' to throw a bunch of foolishness you can beat it right out of here. If there's things amiss you can tell me—an' quick."

The effect was salutary. Belle sat up. And a flame of anger lit her eyes and dyed her cheeks even through their paint. She shook herself free of the gripping hand and glared up into the cold eyes.

"Well?"

Just for a moment Belle looked on the point of giving way to reckless temper. But the chill of Marthe's monosyllable dominated her. Still without a word Belle thrust the paper into the other's hand.

Marthe took it. And as she did so turned and scrutinized the Indian now halted just short of the porch.

"Whose?" she snapped round at the girl, indicating the Dogrib.

"Faro's."

"Huh! I guessed that way."

Marthe looked at the paper. It was a brief note written in a scrawling hand. It was addressed to no one in particular and was signed "Faro Neale."

She read—

> "Kaskas on the move. Outfit passed down river in the night. Another bunch moving in direction of Clare. Fear big raid. Bull Moose seen making west of the river. Sending this warning by Dogrib. Keeping close tab. Further warning if need and can.
>
> "Faro Neale."

Marthe looked up. And her expression had lost something of its displeasure. The blue eyes were almost good-humored as they regarded the troubled girl waiting for her comment. She jerked her head in the direction of the neche.

"What's he say? Can he talk 'white'?"

Belle gestured helplessly.

"Oh, I got as much as I could out of him. He's been to every claim on the river passing the word. Another letter's gone out to Clare. Oh, yes. The warning's out all right. And Faro's done his best. But it's Faro. He's way up there. Right up at the valley mouth. Don't you see? He can't get help. There's what he says. If he 'can.' That means—"

"He's yearning to get the Bull Moose lone-handed with his light-pull guns," Marthe broke in derisively. "Well, what's amiss with that? You don't have to worry. He's yearning. But he's done right. I'd say he's 'white.' He's passed warning. And the boys ain't fools. They'll be along in with their stuff."

Belle moved. She sprang to her feet and stood confronting Marthe, almost as tall as the trader herself. All her weakness was gone. Her shock had passed. Flaming anger looked back into the eyes that were almost smiling satisfaction at the thing happening.

"Have a heart, you—you—!" Belle blazed furiously. "You don't care a curse so long as the boys chase in with their dough. You, with your own son out there. Isn't it enough you've got your own man buried here back of your rotten store? Isn't it enough they killed up Shamus and butchered his little brown squaw? I want Faro back—whole. He's something to me if your menfolk aren't to you. You kept the p'lice out of here when they could have helped us. An' now—now you're just tickled to death because you think the folk 'll get along to cash in. Oh, I hate you. You're a blasted vampire. You belong to hell, an' I hope it gets you!"

The girl stood panting with anger. And Marthe considered her.

"And what 'ud you fancy us to do?" she asked, with a frigidity that was worse than any violence in its reaction on the stormy impulse of the other. "Would you have me round up every lazy, loafing dame around the shacks, an' every senseless kid, and send 'em up in a bunch to nurse your gunman, Faro? Get sense, my girl. Get something into your fool

head besides the feller that'll drop you dead cold when it suits him. Faro's passed warning along down as is his white man duty. We're all right here to get through with such sense as we've got. If the boys have sense they'll cut in quick. If they haven't they can get the med'cine coming to them, my son as well as your gambler man."

Chapter XIII

The Silent Figure

All up and down the river the work of the open season was full swing. The intensity of it was tremendous. It was ungrudging, too. Even enthusiastic. But that was the way of it. No man knew the extent of the fortune awaiting him in the riffles of his sluice; no man knew when the Kaska horde would break upon him and loot his all, even his life; no man knew when the country's law would step in and control the lawless freedom that was being enjoyed.

So, from daylight to dark, the work went on, with scarcely a thought even for the food necessary to stoke the human furnace adequately for the task to be accomplished. And each day the "clean-up" had to be pouched and cached before the toil-worn body could be permitted its due rest.

Three months of peace and uninterrupted work. Was it a wonder that a spirit of optimism prevailed on a river that had known such disaster? Men counted their gains with every waking moment; they counted the time yet to pass before the freeze-up, and estimated their further possible gains. And the while they contemplated with a great looking forward to the long months of winter when they would be free to mire themselves in the questionable delights of Reliance.

Gamblers! They were just a handful of life's most desperate, reckless gamblers. They had life; they had luck; they had an abounding bodily vigor with which to confront both. And they had the real animal appetite with which to enjoy.

Into the midst of this supreme content, and wonderful anticipation, came Faro Neal's Dogrib messenger.

It was a shock. It had a double effect for the prolonged immunity since Jim, and Shamus, and the little Roskana had been so ruthlessly murdered and despoiled. It flung panic broadcast. The whole of the little community crashed from it contented assurance to watchfulness, and preparations to counter the threat. That is, all but Wanita and Sandy McBarr.

Wanita was at work alone on the claim that had been her father's, and which she and Sandy, together, had restored again to working conditions. It was early in the day's work when the air was still cool and the shadowed deeps of Ten Mile Gorge were still without the blazing intensity of summer heat. She was up at the head of her primitive conduit, where she had just opened the water flush. She was standing beside it watching the stream melting down the rich alluvial in the laden box. And she was watching it with something of the gold man's greed which had taken possession of her in the brief time of her apprenticeship to the craft.

It was while her eager eyes were searching a glimpse of dull color that the plash of a dipping paddle came to her.

Her reaction was instant. She had turned in a flash. And it was a movement with all the alertness that belonged to the life of nature's wild.

It was a kyak. A small Indian kyak. And it was manned by a single, half-nude, brown-skinned Dogrib. The girl's eyes were watchfully questioning. That was all. There was neither fear nor anticipation in them. And she waited till she saw the light craft swing across the river's stream in her direction. Then she moved to meet it.

It was a voiceless encounter. Wanita stood stock still watching while the Indian nosed the kyak on to the shore. She waited while the under-sized creature leapt ashore. She looked on curiously while he opened a beaded buckskin pouch and drew from it a folded white paper that was none too clean. He offered it to her, and she opened it and read. It was Faro's note of warning. And while she read the Dogrib's narrowed black eyes hungrily devoured her slim figure in its sadly-fitting mannish garments.

Wanita was wholly unconscious of any incongruity in her appearance, or of any charm she might possess for a low-grade Indian belonging to her mother's race. That the cord breeches, that had once been worn by Sandy, were far too big for her mattered not at all. That they sagged voluminously over the tops of her soil-stained ankle boots, were soaked, and infinitely long, gave her no concern whatever; that her open-necked cotton shirt, with its sleeves rolled high above her elbows, revealed the contours of her bosom, was a thought that never entered her head; that her shining mass of black hair was loosely wind-blown, framing her face in a night-like setting, was something so far removed from any consequence as to be a matter of no account whatever.

The little man with his coldly boring eyes knew her for one who was largely of his own race. He just gazed.

It was the loveliness of her dark eyes, the slightly olive tint of the silky flesh, the perfect oval of her cheeks and the vividness of her purposeful lips. These things ravished the savage heart of this low-grade creature while he awaited the return of his written message.

Wanita looked up from her reading. She eyed the Indian. Then she glanced up river whence he had come, as she abruptly handed back the paper.

"You showed them all?" she questioned, using the man's own tongue. "You make Reliance? You tell them all?"

The man gestured and inclined his head. His only reply was the expressive grunt with which the girl was familiar.

Wanita pointed down stream.

"Sandy McBarr? You show him this?"

Again the man grunted.

"See you do," she said sharply. "You make say I tell you show him." She turned and pointed at the great headland from which, in her stress, she had once dived. "This Bull Moose. I see him. Yes. He look. Say nothing. All time look. Yes. I see him, too. You make tell all man."

Wanita watched him go. And as the small creature dipped his paddle, and the kyak slid away from the shore, she turned again to the great headland she had indicated.

Somehow Faro's warning caused Wanita not the slightest disturbance. She just stared up at the headland as the kyak flashed down the river on the speed of the stream. Then, after awhile, she went back to her sluice box and became absorbed in the pursuit of treasure with all the eager zeal of the most obsessed gold man.

The wash was finished. And Wanita was at work with a shovel that looked far too big for her sunburnt hands. She was clearing the tailings from below the mouth of her sluice.

It was laborious work. It was more laborious than the original filling of the sluice. It was work no experienced prospector would have under-taken. He would have shifted the box as the easier operation. But Wanita knew her limitations. She could clear the tailings easier than she could have moved the trestle work. She could, of course, have claimed Sandy's help. But that made no appeal to her independent spirit.

She paused from the struggle of it and smeared a careless hand across her sweating forehead. She flung back her luxuriant hair with an impatient movement. The heat was intense. The air of the gorge was reeking with humidity and the stench of decay. It was alive with flies and every stinging insect which haunts the northern rivers. But the whole thing was a glorious slavery. Gold slavery. A servitude more compelling than that under any human taskmaster.

The girl considered the work already accomplished. Then she looked at that which yet remained to be done. Then, on the impulse, she decided to eat. She flung down the tool and started for the little shanty tucked under the cliff which she and Sandy had built out of the ruins of that which had been Shamus's last defense.

It was curious. The Dogrib messenger had come and gone two hours back. And in that time the girl had known no qualm of fear. She had scarcely thought of him and his message again. Yet less than half-way to her quarters she not only knew fear, but was possessed of a feeling that she was not alone.

The feeling swept over her suddenly. And it was overwhelming. It was so irresistible that she swung round to the river, and her right hand shot into the bosom of her shirt.

Her searching gaze was on the headland, and she looked for that which she had seen there several times before. But only the gray granite of its riven face stared back at her. There was nothing and no one there. And, amazingly enough, she experienced a feeling of disappointment.

A quick sigh escaped her, and her hand withdrew empty from within her shirt. Then she turned to the lateral inlet to the gorge, where the trickling summer stream cascaded from the heights above. Instantly a thrill swept over her. Her big eyes stared unblinkingly.

There were the great lolling antlers she knew so well. They spread wide and reaching with their webbed tines drooping forward above the fur-masked head. There was the heavy-shouldered figure in its moose-hide parka, which reached almost to its knees. It was complete, even to the heavily mitted hands, and the fur-clad legs that looked to be be-chapped. It was soft-hued moose fur from head to foot.

The girl stared at the figure which remained unmoving. She was alone and helpless, except for the precious gun she packed and could use so skillfully. She was quite unafraid. Only fascinated by a sight that might well presage the direst disaster. She knew only too well the savagery of this masked creature. She had seen her home burned out, and her mother hacked to an appalling death. Yet here, alone, and almost defenseless, she knew nothing but a thrill of fascination.

Suddenly the great horns swayed. Then the whole figure bestirred. In a moment it was on the move. It turned swiftly. And Wanita saw it begin the ascent of the broken cliff which formed the north wall of the inlet. It moved swiftly. So swiftly that Wanita hardly realized that it was already far beyond the range of her gun.

Then there came back to her a sound. It was the deep, mocking laughter that told of a world of contempt and derision.

The Bull Moose was gone!

Chapter XIV

The Gunman Stampedes

Wanita went about the routine that was hers as though nothing had interrupted it.

She continued on up to her hut, prepared and ate her food with an appetite wholly unimpaired, cleared up in her usual careful detail, and returned again to her mound of tailings. It was an expression of nerve and single-mindedness that was illuminating. Jim McBarr had said: "You can't mix color in the human body without breeding the sort of stuff that belongs to a red-hot hell." Wanita was so bred.

Everything that Jim had claimed for the half-breed should surely have found expression at a moment when fundamentals might well have been stirred. But the only sign she had given was of perfect moral balance. A nerve of such consummate temper, that no strong man, whether white or colored, could have out-matched, and a glimpse of her woman's natural curiosity for that which was bizarre. Perhaps it was the reckless white father in her dominating those darker passions of her savage forbears. At any rate there was no sign in her of the derogation implied in the dead gold man's scathing indictment.

But long before the mound of tailings had been disposed of the Dogrib's warning produced its inevitable result. Sandy appeared on the river; and Wanita met him at the water's edge.

Sandy's feelings found instant expression in response to the girl's radiant smile of welcome. He leapt ashore the moment his kyak grounded, and the girl's warm body was held in an embrace that was well nigh suffocating.

There were wild, stormy moments when both gave themselves up to the love between them. Then it was the girl who released herself and laughed happily up into the anxious face above her.

"I just knew it," she cried, her eyes shining. "I knew you'd get around just as fast as your big arms could make it. Say, does every feller act that way for his woman?" The dark head shook, and the smiling eyes were melting. "I guess not. Only Sandy." She laughed. "You saw me dead. All mussed in a pool of my own blood. And you were crazy with worry for it. So you came."

Sandy held her by her shoulders and gazed down into the provocatively laughing face.

"We got to get down river quick, little kid," he said. "I got to get you safe with Marthe. Sure it set me stark crazy to get to you. You're here alone. We can't wait around with Kaskas breaking a war-trail."

Wanita breathed a sigh of content. The wonder of this big creature was all-sufficient. He was hers, and it was all that truly mattered. He had come to her in the moment he had believed to be her need. All the woman in her reveled in the thought.

But in the joy of it all there came the impulse to tease. She eyed the laden boat beside them. Then she raised her smile to him.

"And you came right along, Sandy, boy?" she said slyly. "You didn't worry for a thing but—me? Your work? Your own safety? Your—cache? They didn't count? Nothing mattered but—me?"

Sandy released her and his face fell. He pushed his visored cap back on his head. And he laughed a little shamefacedly.

"You came first all right, kid," he said. "But I had to think of things, too. You see, I didn't know the way I'd find things here. So I just loaded my stuff." And he nodded at the boat.

Wanita chuckled. She loved the downright honesty of it.

"You're a wonder, Sandy, dear," she nodded. "You got your dust. All of it. And you've got me. All of me. Now, I wonder which?"

Sandy's eyes widened.

"Why, you surely," he protested.

"Sure?"

"Of course. But you wouldn't have me quit and leave three months of gold behind, with the Kaskas breaking on us? Would you?" Sandy cried almost indignantly. "That wouldn't make any sort of sense. I toted it, and packed my outfit. And I set the sluice right out of action so they wouldn't use it. They're pulling nothing on me. Not a thing."

Wanita nodded.

"And while you were figuring and packing—he came," she said. "The Bull Moose. His third 'party call' since he murdered my little mother."

Sandy stared.

"He—he's got around already," he stammered.

"Just came. And stood. And laffed. And quit."

The girl's eyes were brooding somberly. All the mischief of the moment before had vanished.

"I—I can't make it out, Sandy," she cried perplexedly. "I wish I could. I'm wrong someway, I think. And don't know what to do. Oh, I ought to be scared of him. That ter'ble killer. I ought to be scared so I want to make that break, and beat it down river away from here anywhere. But I'm not scared. He doesn't scare me a thing. Why? There's not a night I don't lie awake and see it all again. Roskana! My little dead mother! The terror of it eats clear through me. It sets me crazy mad and shivering. Then he comes here. Just the same, with his fool horns and his moose mask and clothing. And he stands. And looks. And his queer laff dopes me with a curiosity I can't be rid of. It dopes me so I haven't will to pull on him the way I want to. And I just feel glad peeking at him, the same as if he wasn't a—cold killer. It scares me, Sandy. Why am I that way? Why?"

The girl's trouble was real and Sandy considered heavily. He was startled; he was laboring to fathom, to understand; and he failed as he was bound to. But the heart in him was all protective. If he could not understand, he could yet serve this girl he loved with all that was in him. He turned at once to the simple solution that was bound to occur to his practical mind.

"That's just foolishness, kid," he declared, with a brusqueness of which he was unaware. "You need to be scared. You got to be. And—and you got to pull on sight of him. But there's going to be no chances. We quit here and now. That's what I came for. We'll make that break for Reliance and Marthe."

But Wanita had turned away. Her eyes were on the rocky inlet where the trickle of summer water was tumbling and splashing amongst the jagged bowlders. It was the spot where she had discovered that ominous figure with its drooping horns. Her dark head shook negatively, and her pretty lips were pouting obstinately.

"I won't stampede on a Dogrib's warning, even though Faro sent it," she said, in a level determined tone. "Why? I can't see sense to it, someway. It won't get me away from—myself. As for him—psha! Then think. All this." She scraped her heavy boot in the soft soil. "It's here for washing with only weeks to the freeze-up. This gold's got right into my blood. Same as it was with Shamus. And your Jim. You. I've figured. Three months. That killer has been around with his fool outfit of horns an' things three times. Why? He could have cleaned me up without a worry. Same as he did Shamus. Roskana."

Sandy stared. The slim queer figure in his old boy's garments. The quiet argument of her tone. There was no excitement in a word she had said. But there was determination that alarmed him. Even it stirred him to impatience. With a great effort he suppressed the inclination to sweep aside what he felt to be the madness she contemplated.

"Just when did he get around?" he asked sharply. "Where? How?"

"Right after the Dogrib passed on down. Two hours I'd say, after. There." She pointed at the north wall of the inlet. "He stood right there. And he beat it up over those rocks. He wasn't in range for me to pull anyway."

Sandy flung a gesture. Impatience and anxiety would no longer be denied.

"It's no sort of use," he cried hotly. "I just can't stand for it. We'll beat it. We've got to. If it's not your dust it's—you."

The girl turned on his last word. It compelled all the woman in her. And her smile was very tender.

"I just love you to death for that, Sandy," she said, her eyes shining. Then she raised a hand to the bosom of her cotton shirt, and it stayed there. "But there's no Moose, or Kaska, ever bred 'll get me—alive."

"Do I want you dead?" Sandy exploded, barking his words in his hot agitation. "Sense? Sense? It's you need sense, kid. The rotten gold don't matter a curse. Nothing matters but you. We're going to make that break."

Wanita shook her head. And her little smile warned Sandy that he had completely failed.

"No, boy," she denied quietly. "I won't stampede. If you fancy that way you can pack your stuff down. And mine. I'll wait for that next 'party call.' And maybe next time I'll get him in—range."

The madness of the girl's decision drove Sandy. A torrent of protest leapt to his lips. But it remained unspoken. The sublime, foolish, reckless courage of it first staggered, then thrilled him. He flung up his big hands helplessly. And his smile was the happier for its rarity.

"We'll get right up to your sluice, kid, and make a clean-up while we've got the sun," he said.

Then they turned from the river and one big arm was clasped over the girl's shoulders. They moved away up the incline of the shore.

It was three days later. Three days of heavy labor and perfect companionship.

Every moment of each day was shared. Sandy and Wanita worked side by side at the laborious task of loading the primitive sluice while the shortening days afforded them a sufficiency of light. They stood side by side in a thrilling watch, hoping, waiting, while the flush of water washed down the conduit, melting away the red soil and leaving behind it the precious specks of golden color. Then there were those moments of satisfaction or disappointment while their deft fingers cleaned up the minute treasure from the well-worn, roughly-cut riffles.

They ate together; they talked together; and together they kept watch for the threat overshadowing them. And on the river they watched for the passing of each fugitive seeking the safety of which they had refused to avail themselves.

It was only at night they parted. A parting which came as naturally as did the intimate companionship of day time.

It was all an expression of two young creatures whose ideals were wholly unsmirched by the mire with which their lives were surrounded. They had both been bred to the ruthlessness of the outland gold world; they knew it for just what it was, and were prepared for the parts to which they had been born. Life and death meant no more to them than to any of those others. The lust of gold was theirs, and their appetites for it were similarly insatiable. But the instincts of sex in them had something of the purity of childhood. The hot passion of abounding youth was in them both. They had no example of restraint to guide them. There was nothing in their world to give them pause. On the contrary, there was passionate, furious love to urge. Yet, without a thought or hint by look or word, they accepted the promptings bred into them, and clung to ideals of which they were wholly unaware.

It was a flat denial of all Jim McBarr had claimed for the breed of Wanita. And in the Scot's youth it was the almost puritanical dour which came from those who had given him his big body and clean manhood.

At night, when the last of the daylight was gone, and the gorge was black with a darkness almost impenetrable, they sat over their tiny spark of fire while Sandy smoked, and they discussed the day's labors, and the wide and many possibilities the future held for them. Then, when weariness told, and sleep overcame her, Wanita would go to the makeshift bunk in the little hut. And, on the moment of her going, Sandy would spread his blanket roll across her door, which was left wide open. There he would sprawl himself, a huge watchdog, caring only for her safety and well-being. And, like his canine prototype, even in his slumbers his ears and nerves were alert for any sound or movement which might herald danger for the woman he loved with his whole being.

And to these two came Faro Neale.

It was noon of the third day, while Sandy and Wanita were preparing food at the campfire. They heard the faint plash of

paddles. It came from beyond the big bend of the river to the north. A moment and two laden kyaks appeared.

Sandy grunted, and Wanita gave a little audible chuckle. And the two sounds told of a common thought that flashed in on them at the unexpected sight.

Faro! The light-pull gunman! The gambler ready to take every chance. The man who had told Reliance that he was yearning to tackle the Bull Moose lone-handed. The man who had sent warning to others, hinting his own intention to see the trouble through and remain where he was. He, too, was stampeding. He was playing for safety like all the rest.

The savor of cooking came to the gambler as Faro Neale stepped ashore. He saw the two crouching figures over their fire. He saw the trickle of water streaming from their sluice, and the tailings pouring from its mouth to the huge mound below it. There was no sign of any preparations for flight. And as he hurried up the shore he bawled his concern in a greeting that was forceful and urgent.

"Say, folks," he cried at them, his lazy eyes widened out of their customary droop, "ain't that bum Dogrib passed it to you? Ain't you wise? The neches are out to raise hell! An' the darn Moose! You got to beat it, an' quick! Or you won't get time to think the 'Amen' that'll pass you on to the lone trail."

Wanita was standing up when Faro reached the fire. She searched his good-looking face. And the while Sandy crouched over the cooking. Sandy believed this man to be his personal enemy. And his obstinacy refused to permit of pretense. Wanita challenged the gambler on the instant.

"What's your worry, Faro?" she asked coolly. "You making your getaway?"

Faro flashed a glance from the girl to Sandy. Then his eyes came back to the girl.

"Worry?" he echoed harshly. "What's the use? I sent word on the jump because it was needed. The Moose an' his neches are out for murder an' loot. They're making down this west bank. Wher's the sense settin' around cookin' feed that don't matter? They're liable to jump right in on us while we're makin' fool talk. I tell you it's down river as hard as hell 'll let you. It's that, or—"

The man's gesture was graphic. But Wanita's quiet remained.

"That's swell, Faro," she nodded. "You're right on time to eat our cooking before the killing starts. You'll sit in? It's the sort of hash Shamus taught me. Called it Irish stew. And guessed it was good to put heart into a yellow cur."

Wanita watched the flush slowly spread over the man's sunburnt cheeks. An angry gleam flashed into the hard gray of his eyes. Then the lids drooped to their customary laze, and a soundless grin answered her.

"You pulled that one on me, kid," he protested, with an amiable headshake. "But the bunch don't worry me the way you reckon. It's my dust, that does. Oh, yes. I got a full poke after three months. And it worries me stiff. It's back ther' in my outfit. An' I got to set it safe."

For a moment he turned to the crouching Sandy whose huge silence seemed to worry him. Then he went on.

"Sure I'll sit in," he said, with a short laugh. "An' I'll feel good eatin' with a dame of your nerve if there was a thousand Kaskas around yearning glory. Irish stew, eh? Well, I'd say if it puts the heart of Shamus into me I won't have any sort of kick."

It was a queer meal eaten under the restraint of three wills in conflict. Wanita was derisively challenging. In her woman's way she sought to lash the gambler under a smiling amiability. Faro accepted the position and laughed at it. Sandy made no pretense at all. He addressed not a single word to the man he hated. And only answered him in little better than monosyllables when a reply was unavoidable.

The meal went on to its end. And, in spite of the odds against him, Faro did his best to persuade. There could be no mistaking his real anxiety for Wanita, whatever he felt for Sandy.

Once he endeavored to pour indignant scorn on Sandy that he countenanced the risk of remaining in a place which had been the slaughter-ground of Wanita's father and mother. But it brought down upon him such swift resentment from the girl herself that he was forced to abandon all further attempt. He just spread out his hands in a gesture of yielding.

"I pass, kids," he cried with a grin. "I throw in my hand. I haven't a darn word to say further than just to hand you this. They're out. An' they mean loot as they always have done. If you've stuff by you cached you're goin' to get it. It don't need any sort of brightness to figure that. There's not a blamed digger left on the claims north of here. And I don't guess there's a boy left on Clare. You're right here. An' ther' ain't a soul around but a thousand murdering Kaskas. I don't have to tell either of you just what that signifies. I'm through. An' I'm beatin' it. An' beatin' it quick. I've eaten good of the hash Shamus reckoned would set heart into a yeller cur. Well, I allow it's made me feel so good I'm pulling out right away, and yearning to weigh in my dust on Marthe's crazy scales."

The man stood up from the bucket on which he had been squatting. And he looked down at the huge Sandy. Sandy made no move. He never even looked up to bid farewell. But Wanita stood. She gazed into the gambler's half-closed eyes, and her own were measuring.

"That's all right, gunman," she said cheerfully, but without laughter. "You've said quite a bunch one way and another. Maybe when you got quit of your dust we'll see you beating up river on your lone-hand chase of the Bull Moose."

Chapter XV

Alone on the River

The day's labors were over, and Sandy and Wanita were side by side over the fire which was burning brightly with a final heaping of green fuel.

Above them was a brilliant pathway of stars where the towering cliffs of the gorge cut from their view the rest of the cloudless night sky. There was no moon or sheen of northern lights to lighten the darkness. And the result was that their little blaze of fire intensified the blackness of the world about them.

From the moment Faro had taken his hasty departure until now neither had spoken of him, or referred to his warning. It was almost as if he had never called in at the claim and eaten with them. They had just absorbed themselves with their work and their own individual thoughts.

But the whole time the man was in the mind of each. Wanita, in her woman's way, was thinking of his strong, hard, good-looking face; of those sleepy eyes which were so curiously fascinating; of the man's reputation as a killer and gambler, which she knew to be founded on pretty ominous fact. She was trying to reconcile his flight down river to salve his gold with all their world understood of him. And, again in her woman's way, she was spurning him for joining in the stampede which he had been instrumental in starting.

The whole thing puzzled her, troubled her, and left her wondering. And her trouble was for the thing she had done in compelling Sandy to remain against his will.

With Sandy there was no concern for any of these things. He just hated the man for one thing only. And that was all sufficient for him. Wanita! A fury of jealousy hammered through his obstinate head with a persistence that was bound to find outlet in the end.

That outlet came as they sat there over the fire gazing deep into its flickering heart.

He was sucking his charred old pipe which had long since burned out. And it bubbled under his unconscious inhalations. At last he snatched it from the fiercely gripping jaws that held it and stuffed it in a pocket. And Wanita realized the violence of his feelings from the movement.

She slanted a sidelong glance. His face was frowning. And she waited for what was to come.

"I just can't help it, kid," he burst out suddenly. "He's after you. He means hurt, or—dirt. It's in those crooked eyes of his that try to hide up what's behind 'em. He's gone down to Reliance, and he wants you there. He wants you where he can get at you. So he can buy you, like he buys the others. He'd make you like Frisco an' the rest. You know, Wana, kid, I'll have to kill that feller. I'm going to."

Wanita stared into the fire without a vestige of a smile. She was thinking of the generous heart of this boy who knew no limit to the love he gave her, or to the sacrifice he would make for her. He would kill for her. Outlaw himself that she might know no hurt. It gave her a moment of ecstasy. But it gave her a desperate moment of real fear.

She turned to him. And her voice was very soft. Her eyes were shining.

"There isn't need, Sandy," she said. "I know, boy. It's the big heart of you. My, it sets me crazy glad for it. It's sort of wonderful, too. I mean a woman knowing a love like you're handing me. It sets me feeling nothing in the world can matter ever; can hurt ever. I guessed the world, my world was dead when they killed Shamus, and—and murdered my—my Roskana. But you've shown me since. It's not. It never will be with you around beside me. No. It's, it's all wonderful. A sort of great big dream I'm scared to wake up from. But if you killed for me I'd wake up. And I'd find a nightmare. No, boy, there isn't need. True, true. Listen. A woman's got right to defend herself. I'll defend myself. You don't have to kill Faro. I will, if he needs it. There's big truth to get, if you will. There'll never be any man in my life but you—ever. Faro? Psha! A low-down gambler-gunman!"

Sandy kicked viciously at the fire.

"Hell!" he cried, "What sort is the man that let's his woman fight the game herself. That's not my way. I tell you I'll kill that feller. He'll keep his dirty hands clear of you. Or I'll—"

The hush of the night shattered. It was like a fusillade of rifle shots. And they played from one granite cliff to another, fading away in the distance. They came from near at hand, but how near it was impossible to estimate. Sandy thought they were at almost point-blank range. And he knew they were for him and Wanita.

He leapt, and his hand went to the bulging pocket at his hip. It grabbed the heavy automatic he packed there. Wanita, too, had pulled her gun, and was standing beside him. They stared out at the river into an unrevealing blackness. And they were thrown into sharp relief against the firelight.

It was the mad urge of unreasoning, unthinking instinct. And its impulse was pathetic.

Again shots. And again their echoes. They rattled furiously down the gorge. This time a bullet's flight warned them. It sung on the air. And it spat viciously on the green woodwork of the hut behind them.

"The fire! They can see!"

It was Wanita. It was a cry of panic. And it was accompanied by a protective gesture. She tried to thrust Sandy out of the firelight. But even as she did so two shots in swift succession echoed and re-echoed down the walled river.

There was a shudder in the arm under the girl's clutching hand. The great body of the man wavered. Then it stood motionless. Sandy was leaning, peering, and his gun was ready for instant use.

Again came the girl's urgent cry.

"The hut, boy. It's cover. They can see. An' we can't."

But Sandy shook himself free of her gripping hand.

"Don't worry, kid!" he barked back at her.

"I tell you they can—"

But the girl's protest remained uncompleted. There was another shot. Another, and another. And the echoes rattled till it seemed like a dozen shots.

Then it happened.

Sandy lurched. He staggered. And his great knees doubled up under him. In a moment he was sprawled on the soft soil face downwards.

Wanita flung herself to her knees and her arms were about the man she worshiped. In that dire moment she saw the end of all things. Sandy! He was dead! Shot to death! Nothing less could have dropped him in such fashion.

But even as a despairing wail broke from her Sandy's voice came reassuringly.

"It's all right. Just my leg. Maybe it's broken. Beat it quick to cover, kid! The hut! They'll get you!"

The girl's reaction was instant. Sandy was not dead. Only—only wounded. In a flash she was on her feet again. But she made no attempt to reach the protecting shelter of the hut. She just stood there over the man who could no longer help himself. And the inspiration of it was that of a desperate mother sheltering her defenseless babe.

Sandy stirred. He rolled over and tried to sit up. But agony made him desist. He looked up at the standing girl. And he flung a further order at her.

"The hut, kid!" he cried.

But Wanita made no move. She stood there peering, peering, her gun ready. All the blood of her reckless father was aflame, all the savagery of her colored forbears. She was there to fight. To fight for that precious all lying at her feet.

But she could see nothing. And now she could hear nothing. There were no more shots. No more echoes. The stealing

enemy was silent. It was almost as though he were satisfied with the thing he had achieved. The girl was sharply outlined in the firelight, an easy target. And yet no shot came.

Alert, palpitating, ready, Wanita's quick brain was busy. And as the night hush remained unbroken she suddenly remembered. She had been held, and made to see, while her little mother was slain at her feet. Then she had been released at a sign from the Bull Moose. Now they had shot Sandy down and left her—unscathed.

In a moment she had abandoned her watch and her gun was returned to its place in her bosom. She believed she knew. They had seen Sandy go down. And it was the thing they intended.

Why Sandy? And leave her alive? Why?

She turned to the prostrate man.

"Don't move, Sandy, boy," she implored. "Not a move. They mustn't see. Just lie right there. You're hit twice. You're bleeding. I'll go get things to fix you."

She was gone before Sandy could make protest or even reply. And she was back again at a speed which told of her urge. Then she set about her task with all the courage of her youth and desire. Sandy!

There were two wounds. One was a mere flesh wound in the thick muscles of Sandy's right shoulder. The other was more serious. It was just above his great knee, and its full damage she could not tell. She laved both with hot water from the camp kettle. And, for lack of better treatment, she had flung into it two handfuls of salt. Then she bandaged the wounds lightly with such material as she had been able to tear from her own intimate garments. At least she had been able to staunch the bleeding.

Then she sat herself where she could nurse the man's head on the lap she formed for it. And she prepared for a long vigil.

"We just can't do a thing till daylight, Sandy," she explained, stooping to kiss the forehead facing up to her. "We got to wait, an' hope. An' we'll take whatever chance comes along. Maybe you'll sleep in awhile. I'll watch."

Chapter XVI

Marthe Reads the Writing on the Wall

Marthe had had her way. She had asked for a "scare" to stampede the river. And for two whole days she knew no respite from the labors that so deeply satisfied her. The stampede started hard on the heels of Faro Neale's messenger. And it produced a steady stream of urgent, cheerful, light-hearted business, where before had only been the doldrums of stagnation.

Had Marthe designed the whole thing she could have suited herself no better. And she found a sort of grim amusement in the fact that Faro Neale, who had no great love for her, had been responsible for the boom she was enjoying.

Of course Marthe was only anticipating the rush that would have come at the freeze-up. She was quite aware of that. But the brightest prospects which the future might hold out were, in her understanding, incomparable with solid, tangible possession. Gold in her scales was a concrete proposition. So were the tables filled with reckless gamblers and sincere drinkers. Then those others. The women, whose money came easily and as easily slipped through their be-jeweled fingers. Theirs was a lavish trade, and immensely profitable to—Marthe.

In spite of the harsh make-up of Marthe's material mind, and the cold indifference of her attitude towards all that might have been accounted worth while in life, she was not without a certain appeal. The courage of the woman was superlative. Fate had scarred her with many blows. And often they had been blows that should have crushed and broken her spirit. But the case-hardening which armored her had withstood every one. Like the real fighter when hard pressed, she knew how to avail herself of the "count." And always "time" would find her standing four-square to her opponent.

That was her attitude when she accepted her widowhood; that was how she faced the challenge to her authority in Reliance immediately following it; that was how she had regarded Faro Neale's urgent warning in spite of her only child being out there in the heart of the danger-zone.

And that, too, was the way she stood up to the coming of Noah Bartlet's oil-fed "sternwheeler" from Port Curtis, carrying amongst its few passengers the ominously significant person of Jan Pienart, the Dutch-Hebrew trader from Leaping Horse.

The coming of Jan Pienart at such a moment was the severest blow which Marthe had had to withstand. It was a worse blow than her widowing because it threatened her material objective. And, coming at a moment when the wealth of the Alikine was laid bare for him to see, and the story of its treasure could be heard on all sides, it was doubly crashing.

Jan Pienart represented not only the whole wealth and enterprise of Leaping Horse, but probably of the whole northern world. Marthe saw in his coming the writing on the wall. And she read it unflinchingly.

It was at the landing on the river. The sternwheeler was lying out in mid-stream. Pienart and Noah Bartlet landed together. Noah grinned at the unsmiling Marthe as he presented the newcomer.

Marthe nodded.

"Howdy!" she had greeted. Then as an after-thought: "Pleased to meet you."

The calm of it was inimitable. But Marthe knew that at long last her supremacy in Reliance was really threatened. Jan Pienart was the worst that could happen to her. Infinitely worse than the coming of the government and the police.

The little man had looked up into her unsmiling face with mildly friendly eyes.

"I've heard of you, Mam," he said. "And they told me that Reliance, with its golden prospects, wouldn't exist to-day but for you. I'm a man of adventure myself. And it makes me feel good to meet a woman who could put over the sort of thing you have."

It was flattering. And sounded like frank sincerity. But Marthe was impervious to both. She knew the man's whole history. His urbanity, and the scheming brain concealed beneath it. She was not blinded for a moment. The man had made the fierce journey up from Port Curtis not to pay compliments, but for business just as hard, just as driving as her own.

Marthe endured an unpleasant hour following that greeting.

Then again later.

It was after he had taken up the best sleeping quarters in the old fort which Marthe had hired him at a suitable price. After he had cleaned off all reminder of Noah Bartlet's oil-fed sternwheeler, and eaten the raw sort of fare which Marthe supplied to her custom. Just when, as ill-luck would have it, three men had packed in from Clare with a stout haul of precious dust, and Scut Barber had toted in from above Ten Mile Gorge.

These were taking their turn at Marthe's scales. And Pienart, with a far-away look in his mild eyes, was lounging at the bar in close proximity to the scales.

It was a great moment for a stranger's observation. Especially a stranger seeking indications. And Jan Pienart found it interesting.

The great hall of the old fort was full, almost to overflowing. The human freight of it was making babel of laughter, and talk, and traffic. Two helpers were at work serving behind the stout old counter, and the demand on them for drink was unceasing. The games at the tables were in full swing and would only terminate with the next morning's daylight. And the reek of liquor and tobacco was almost stifling. Women, masked under heavy war-paint, were flaunting and sharing in the life of it all.

Pienart was old in the northern gold world. He had shared in the early rushes, and had known Leaping Horse from the day of its birth. He knew every sign, and needed no telling. And here it all was again. The same wanton, reckless debauch of men and women who saw no bounds to the splendor of the horizon before them.

But Marthe and her scales intrigued him, and he dismissed all the rest. He watched each man unburden himself, and he watched the hard-faced Scotswoman with her casual methods. The weighing, the loose calculation. They staggered him. He remembered nothing comparable to them. He watched payment in cash, and saw the ledger. Then he saw the gold, the precious dust and astonishing nuggets, shot into a vulgar old tin-lined chest, as though its value was no greater than that of the edible commodity it had originally contained. His mildly observing eyes widened with the wonder of it.

Pienart had heard big stories of the Alikine. But he had looked for nothing quite like this. It seemed to him he had jumped back through several decades. The whole thing was monstrous to his scrupulous mind. Here was a virgin and obviously supremely rich field with no control. Here was a shack township with a single woman who alone counted commercially in a community of gold seekers and gold spenders. It was all too outrageous.

Marthe's gold chest had been flung aside, and she had passed each of the four men a drink "on the house." And as they gulped it down and drifted off into the crowd, hungry for the playtime about to begin, Marthe shot a keenly appraising glance at the lounging man from Leaping Horse.

"Souse!" she observed. "Souse, and women, and 'draw,' till the last nickel's found a fresh owner. Then back to the clean air of the river where they're just men instead of—hogs."

Pienart absorbed the cynicism of it and produced and lit a long Dutch cigar.

"It's the north," he said. "The same old north I remember twenty-odd years back." He indicated the array of bottles lining the shelf behind the bar. "I'll buy a drink."

Marthe scratched her whisker.

"Ther's rye, and French brandy, and champagne. Which?"

"Don't use 'em. Something soft."

"No use." Marthe shook her head. "The boys like it quick. It's bubbles when they start. French brandy to clean the morning up with. After that fire-water. And they like it best. You can have water. But it's no better than to clean with."

Pienart spread out his hands.

"No," he said, rolling his cigar across a capacious mouth. And he indicated the old scales now set aside. "They'd cost

you thousands of dollars fine in Leaping Horse. And maybe penitentiary."

Marthe's eyes glinted. Then she folded her bared muscular arms and leant on the counter.

"I'm not worried," she said.

Pienart's chuckle was quite amiable.

"You're not in Leaping Horse."

"No. When you jumping in?"

There was no mincing of matters. No attempt to escape or even delay the "clinch" she knew must come. Marthe could leave her custom to her assistants. She wanted the measure of this little man who could jump into Reliance with millions to back him. He owned all that was worth while in Leaping Horse. Well, she owned all that was worth while in Reliance.

"Quick!"

Marthe nodded in a pondering fashion. Her cold eyes were on the noisy crowd with a far-away look in them. All the money that crowd of spenders represented would come to her. How long was it to continue?

"Trade, or booze, or—what?"

Pienart blew a thin vapor of fragrant smoke from between pursed lips.

"You ever made Leaping Horse?" he inquired. He removed his cigar and considered it. "It's quite a wonderful city when you think twelve years back it hadn't more than a bunch of shacks," he went on, as Marthe slowly shook her head. "There isn't a road in the city to hurt the back axle of a ten-cent automobile. The folks live in ten-floored apartments with steam heat and elevators. There's elegant hotels with dance floors, and cabarets, and soft drinks as well as the other. And I guess my department store could match up with anything New York could show."

"I've heard."

"Sure. Pap Shaunbaum's Gridiron. That's how they call it. He calls it Elysian Fields—has fifteen floors."

"We're on rock foundations here. Guess we could make twenty without a worry."

The man's good nature beamed.

"Why, sure. Twenty floors would be good advertisement. Then so is a swell department store."

Marthe nodded.

"All under one roof. Sure. Wher' you can outfit everything. An' I guess the folks here 'll come to apartments in awhile—an' baths an' things."

"They mostly do—after awhile. It's a matter of dollars mostly. Wonderfully educating—dollars."

"I've noticed. Leaping Horse must be quite a city. An' it's done it on two cents of gold."

Marthe flashed a look into the man's smiling face. And she was smiling, too.

"Would you know gold when you see it?" she asked blandly.

"It's been a big part of my job."

"It's all mine."

"Yes."

"I've handled all the gold on the Alikine years. I'm going on handling it."

"With those scales?"

"They'll serve till the government says 'no.' Say, Mr. Pienart, I'm mighty glad to meet you and make this talk. It'll be good to have you jump in, too. Yes, I'd make it quick if you want a picking. You see, I'm right here and my years have handed me a stake that'll out-match Leaping Horse. We've gold here—real gold. When the scare on the river passes, an' the Bull Moose gets back to the hills, I'd say make a trip out amongst the boys. You'll see gold."

"I figure to—after Noah hauls my outfit of surveyors and engineers from Port Curtis. Noah's hauling to my orders now. I bought his transport."

Marthe's eyes snapped.

"That's a good buy," she said, and nodded. "The Alikine's a great river and—wide. I'd say sternwheelers are unhandy and slow. You need motor craft against a stream like the Alikine. It's my notion anyway."

"And sounds good to me." Pienart dropped ash into a cuspidor at his feet. "It looks like—between us—we ought to send Reliance boosting quick."

"How—between us?"

"Well it looks like a man's built for one place at a time. My stake in Leaping Horse needs personal control. A strong combination here before other money gets in? It looks very, very good to me."

"I'm sure it does."

The set of Marthe's lips was full of omen. Pienart dropped his cigar into the cuspidor and rested his arms on the counter. His manner suddenly became sharp and businesslike.

"Let's quit beating," he said. "Here's a clear proposition, Mam. Will you join with me in putting Reliance and this river on the map before the government takes over?"

"No."

"It just means cutting each other's throats else."

"I like it that way."

"But you don't realize what you're turning down, Mam," Pienart said, with mild impatience.

Marthe's arms unfolded and her hands clasped, the knuckles of her fingers showing white through the dirty skin.

"Just a feller yearning for me to make profit for him on capital I don't need. And the while he'll set around in Leaping Horse with a big corporation that don't concern me. No, sir. I guess Reliance is my pigeon. And when you try pluckin' it you'll learn that's so. Your millions don't worry. And you can buy every old kettle Noah fancies setting on the river. If there's any throat slitting to be done in Reliance I'll be right into it; and maybe I'll be doing most of it. Meanwhile—"

Marthe broke off. Her quick eyes had seen the door across the room open. She pointed. And a grim smile played as she glanced down at the man from Leaping Horse.

"Guess I'll need those scales again," she said, in a queer sort of raillery. "That's Faro Neale just come in off the river." Then her brows drew together in a sudden sharp frown. "That leaves only my boy Sandy and that breed kid to get through."

The unexpected coming of Faro Neale had instant effect. There was a break in the clatter of the room. And there was swift question in the startled faces that turned towards the door. Then greeting broke out and there was laughter and even derision. Every soul in the room had read the warning message in which the gunman had declared his intention of remaining on his claim.

Frisco Belle rushed across to her man. But Faro scarcely heeded her. Ignoring his greeting he thrust his way amongst the closely packed tables and chairs and came to Marthe's counter. And his manner was urgent and disregarding.

"It's those fool kids, Marthe," he cried sharply. "I can't beat sense into them. You couldn't with a club. They're way out there on her claim, both of 'em. Sha's claim," he added significantly. "And they're standing pat for a showdown with the Bull Moose and his cursed bunch. There's a thousand of 'em broke out of the hills. And they ain't all Kaskas. There's Yellow Knives, and others too. Do you get that? Kaskas and Yellow Knives running in a team." He threw up his hands. "The world's best enemies. He's got 'em together. And it looks like he's out for a big play. It's that sent me beating quick. I pulled in on those kids when I see they hadn't quit, and I ate with 'em. And they passed me the laff like these folk here when I came in." He shrugged. "They're alone. They're standin' pat. And there's a thousand neches on the west bank with all the store guns you've traded out of this post."

There was not a sound in the room while Faro talked. They had jeered his return. But that was forgotten. The man's urgency gripped them all. They knew Faro.

"Well?"

There was no sign in the cold regard of Marthe's blue eyes.

Faro jerked two tied sacks of gold dust on to the counter and his hands covered them.

"We can't leave 'em to it," he cried harshly while his lazy eyes widened at the woman's frigid stare. "They're crazy. Why you can't tell even now. I ate with 'em yesterday. Maybe—"

Marthe's angular shoulders lifted as she set her scales in position.

"It's up to them," she said coldly.

An early morning crowd was gathered on Marthe's porch. The heat of the day was already making itself felt, and tempers and moods were in the depths, somewhere about zero. That was the way of it at boom time in Reliance. The "night before" was unfailing in its reaction.

The hard old ruffian Scut Barber was squatting on the porch floor with his back against a roof post. He was hugging a long, yellow drink for the possession of which he would have fought with all his enormous strength; he was not saying a word, or listening, or thinking; he was just nursing a head that somehow did not seem to belong. Alec and George Peters had come-to more easily. They had greater resilience. They were younger. Their thirst was avid, however, and the four fingers of French brandy in their glasses had more value to them just then than the yellow dust that had paid for them. There was no Faro Neale. Faro was not likely to put in an appearance till noon. Frisco Belle would see to that. But there were several others. And among them a deadly sober Ike Clancy, and a moody Joe Makers. Ike had possessed himself of the only available chair. Perhaps he felt his sobriety entitled him to it.

Marthe was there, leaning her angular body against a roof support. She displayed not a sign of weariness, even though she had been behind her counter nearly all night.

Ike and Joe Makers did not suffer from the early morning complaint. They were there for another purpose. It was an attack on Marthe. They had come there to let Marthe understand exactly what, in their opinion, Reliance felt at her reception of Faro Neale's anxiety for her foolish son and the equally foolish orphan of Shamus Hoogan. Ike, particularly, was full of his own virtue. And he finished up his indictment from the chair-throne upon which he had seated himself in the hectoring manner peculiar to him.

"It ain't no sort of use, Marthe, we're men-folk in Reliance if we ain't much else," he said hotly. "We got feelin's, human feelin's. And them kids has to be got right in safe. They got to get reason. An' it's up to you to hand it 'em. You guessed it was up to them—him, Sandy. You! Say, I get hot thinking! That boy's Jim's son. An' you're his mother. God A'mighty! When a mother says just the way you did it leaves a fool man hollerin'. It does more. It sets him thinkin' of a live oak and a rawhide tied right. Faro's no scarifier. If he said the Moose was out with a thousand, I guess that's so. An' you? You'll just leave them two cold. It's up to them, is it? You can't pull that on Reliance and hold your place. It ain't up to them, I tell you, it's up to you."

The man had lashed himself into rabid denunciation. His eyes were hot, and his cheeks were flaming. And with his last

word he crashed a fist on the table beside him.

Marthe looked round from her contemplation of the river where the streak of the sunlit waters vanished round a distant bend. She considered him coldly. Then she turned again to the river as though she had seen as much of him as she could stand.

"Sure you would," she said calmly. "You'd tell anybody. You'd tell the world just what's up to it. You got a big mouth. And it ain't pretty. One day, when the government takes over, they'll set you mayor of the city. Then you'll tell Reliance. Say, if I knew other folks' business like you I wouldn't have room for my own. But I don't; so I know my own. Don't let any 'rawhide tied right' get tangled up in your poor head. It might start confusion. You want your little bit of 'sap' to reason right. I told Faro it was up to them kids. And I meant just that. It's two days back when Faro see them. How you going to pull them in if they don't fancy that way? That boy's his father again, an' I'm glad for it. You big-mouthed yap won't save him. And nothing I can do will either. Then there's a thousand neches, like Faro says. Well, you'd need all Reliance to clean them up; and then some." She shook her head. "I can't see Reliance quitting the game here for two lone kids who've figured the thing they're set on. Faro told them just where they got off. And they—laffed."

There was no heat in her retort. Marthe spoke with a world of contempt for the man. None could have said the thing behind her words. Her face was kept studiously turned away. She stood there as though inviting a further attack.

But Ike made none. He just gestured at those about him as though telling of the impossibility of dealing with such a woman.

"I'm through, Marthe," he told her. "I—"

"I'm glad," Marthe observed, still without turning. "I'd say it's the first time since I've known you. I can like you better that way. Now you're through hangin' a mother on a live oak maybe you'll get sense. Sandy hasn't call to wait around on the river for murder. Nor that half-breed neither. Well? I brought that boy into the world because I wanted him. I raised him for the same sort of reason. An' now he figures to sit around while the Moose and his bunch shoot him up the same as they shot up his father, I can't see reason to change my want of him. You, Ike! You best get on with that hanging."

She leant forward peering. Then she flung out an arm, pointing.

"That's their kyak, Ike," she said sharply over her shoulder. "It's coming down stream—quick. And it's that Breed kid at the paddle—alone!"

Chapter XVII

Wanita Alone

It was not Ike, or Joe Makers, or any of the men, who were at the landing when Wanita ran past it, swirled her kyak about in the heavy stream, and nosed up to the great platform of chained logs. It was Marthe.

She stood there watching the skill of it all in her unemotional way; she offered no greeting; she attempted no directions to the girl for the hazardous approach in the river's heavy stream. Perhaps she understood that that slim creature in Sandy's old clothes knew infinitely more of negotiating a landing than she could tell her.

It was done to a hair's breadth. It was done without seeming effort. And as the light, hide craft slid up to the logs, and Wanita grabbed and held one of the chains, Marthe looked down and saw.

Sandy was lying in the bottom of the boat. Only his face and his big shoulders and chest were visible. The rest of him was under the hide decking of the vessel's long sharp nose. The girl was unheeded. Marthe only saw the pallor of the sunburnt face of her son. His eyes were closed and he looked like death. If the sight shocked her none could have told. Her eyes considered. That was all.

But Marthe knew on the instant. There was no death in that face as there had been in the face of Jim when they brought him back to her. The closed eyes. The closed jaws, which were tight gripping. Then the young cheeks were full and round. No, Sandy was alive, but sick. And her concern was just how sick.

She stooped and gripped the side of the boat, holding it against the stream. Then to the girl:

"Step ashore," she said sharply. "You can make fast while I hold."

Wanita obeyed. She made fast. And Marthe stood up with her gaze still on the only human creature in the world who remained to her.

"Tell me," she demanded, without turning to the girl at her side.

Wanita, too, was gazing down into the boat. Her eyes were full of trouble. The strain of the river journey she had made single-handed was there in them, and in the shadows about them. If Marthe realized these things she ignored them. Her gaze was solely for the contents of the canoe.

"It was the night before last," Wanita said, and her voice had a weariness in it that was pathetic. "When the Dogrib came through with Faro's warning Sandy came right along so we'd be together in case—in case—Well, we were just sitting at our fire after supper when the shots came. Maybe there was a bunch. I—I don't know. It was night. There wasn't a light but our fire. Sandy was hit—twice. He went down, and they quit. They didn't worry for me. I—I wished they had. And then I didn't. It left me so I could fix Sandy good. Then when day came, and there wasn't a sign of the Moose and his bunch anywhere around, I got—I got Sandy down to the kyak and made along for here. I made camp right after the Skittle Race. I guess I had to. You see, it nearly got me. And I was beat. So I just made night camp so Sandy could rest awhile. He—he was warm under the blankets there."

"And you?"

"I? Oh, I had the fire so I could see him."

"See him—all night?"

"Why, I wasn't sure, Marthe. He was hit twice. It was best that way, in case—in case he died."

"Huh!"

Marthe turned and surveyed the drooping figure. There was no kindness in that hard face. But she looked, and considered this frail thing who had brought her son down to her—and safety.

Presently she turned away and looked over the squalid township as though seeking help. But the huts, and cabins, and

frame shanties were without a sign of human life. She turned back and pointed down at the boat.

"Pass me a hand, kid, while I get him out," she said.

The two women crouched down on the swaying logs. It was difficult. They removed the tightly packed blankets. They cleared everything about the still, half-unconscious figure. And between them they managed the whole thing. Once Sandy opened his eyes and tried to smile. Then, as he was moved, pain twisted his smile into sharp, facial contortions. But he submitted to their efforts without complaint. And even he helped them.

In a few minutes he was lying full length on the wet and swaying logs.

Marthe stood up. But Wanita remained kneeling. The girl was holding one of Sandy's limp hands clasped in both of hers. As Marthe's big body straightened up Ike Clancy's harsh voice made itself heard from the bank above them. Some men had come down from the porch.

"You don't have to do that, Marthe," he cried roughly. "We'll get that pore kid feller back up to the store. It's up to us."

Marthe made no reply. But there was a light in her eyes as she stooped over her son.

Her muscular arms reached about him. They encircled the big body till the hands met and clasped. Then she heaved with a strength that was almost incredible. She staggered ever so slightly in her supreme effort. Then she stood up with her monstrous burden squarely shouldered. Just for a moment the kneeling Wanita stared at the wonder of it. Then she leapt to her feet. She flung her young arms about the man's legs and lifted them to ease the other's burden. And together she and Marthe moved across the unstable logs to the roughly hewn steps cut in the high river bank.

At the edges of the bank they encountered a staring row of the men who had looked on. Stark amazement at Marthe's prodigious feat held them silent. Even Ike Clancy.

They were in the small room which was at once the living and sleeping quarters of the frugal Marthe. It was immediately behind the store. And the two were connected by a short, unlit passage that was yet sufficient to shut out the riot of noise usually prevailing where Reliance spent its playtime.

Sandy was stretched out on the bed. His clothing had been recklessly removed for his mother's examination of his wounds. His wounds had been washed and casually dressed. One was a bad flesh wound in the thick of his shoulder, and suggested a soft-nosed bullet. The other was even more ugly. It was in the mass of flesh just above his right knee. And again the flesh was torn by an expanding bullet. Marthe was considering her completed treatment.

Sandy was faint with pain, and weariness, and blood letting. He had submitted to his mother's ministrations without protest or shrinking. But his ordeal had been punishing. Now he lay quite still, and his eyes were half closed, and his breathing heavy.

Wanita waited for the older woman to speak. Whatever her feelings for Sandy's mother her confidence in her capacity was complete, and she was there to do her absolute bidding. Sandy, her Sandy, was in dire need. He was sick and suffering. There was nothing in the world she would not do for him.

Marthe raised a hand that reeked of antiseptic and its fingers raked her chin whisker thoughtfully. Then she turned to the girl beside her.

"We'll need Scut," she said. "When he ain't in liquor he's a whale on truck like that wound. He was all sorts of a doctor-man before hooch took him, an' they found him out. Go, fetch him right along. He's out there with those other bums."

Marthe waited till Wanita had passed through the passage, and she heard the door into the store shut behind her. Then one hand took possession of the wrist lying near her. She held it for some moments. Then she released it, seemingly satisfied.

"You're a crazy pair, boy," she said, in her rough way. "An' you—you haven't better sense than your father had. That kid I guess, eh? Well, she's a live one anyway. An' I can't think how she did it. She just thought for you an' not a thing else."

Sandy's tired eyes lit. Even the pallor under his sun tan assumed a tinge of natural color.

"She's an angel, Marthe."

The woman sniffed.

"I ain't see the wings," she said coldly.

"You wouldn't."

The light passed from Sandy's eyes. They almost closed. But it was only for a moment. Suddenly they opened wide, and a queer, half smile crept into them.

"She toted the dust along down. Hers and ours."

Marthe nodded.

"Maybe I'll locate them wings in awhile," she said. Then sharply. "How much?"

"The biggest yet. It's back in the kyak."

Marthe turned sharply at the sound of a closing door. A moment later Scut stumped heavily into the room. And he was followed closely by Wanita. It was almost as though she feared he might escape her.

Marthe looked hard into the whiskered face. And what she saw seemed to satisfy her. She nodded at him.

"You best take a holt of this, Scut," she said. "It looks like soft-nosed bullets. An' you can't never tell. Ther's most all you need on that desk there, an' a boiler of water on the stove. Fix him good, an' I'll be thankful to you. Wanita an' me'll quit you so you can get through. I guess we'll need to set the kyak snug down at the landing."

She turned to the girl.

"Best come with me," she ordered coolly. "Women ain't no use till a doc gets through."

Marthe and Wanita were down again at the landing. Out in the stream Noah Bartlet's sternwheeler lay moored. Two men, a nigger and a white man, were leaning on its rail, gazing idly at the shore. Otherwise there was no sign of life in the queer old vessel that had dared and vanquished the fiercest river in the whole northern world. Nor were there as yet any signs of wakefulness on the shore, and Marthe was content enough.

Wanita was unshipping the treasure the kyak contained. One bulging canvas bag was already ashore, and of which Marthe had instantly possessed herself. She had recognized it as one of the bags Jim had always used in which to store his dust. Therefore it was Sandy's. Therefore it was—hers. Its weight was sufficient, and felt good in her hands. And her queer mind took fresh comfort that the loss of her man had left unaffected the profit from their claim.

Presently Wanita scrambled up from her further groping under the kyak's forward decking. Hers was a buckskin bag of Indian workmanship. And Marthe, eyeing it, thought of the little dead Roskana. The girl stood holding it in both hands. And Marthe held out a hand to receive it.

"I'll tote it, kid," she said.

But Wanita made no attempt to yield up her little possession. She made no attempt to reply to the invitation.

"We'll get right back to Sandy, Marthe," she said quietly. "Maybe Scut 'll be through, an' Sandy 'll be needing us."

There was a light in Marthe's eyes that was almost a smile as she surveyed the girl from her greater height. She had recognized something in Wanita's tone and attitude that almost amused her. It was rebuff. This pretty creature, with her slim body and big eyes, had warned her she was mistress of her own.

"What you fixed to do?" Marthe demanded suddenly. "You'll need to stop around till the folks reckon the river's clear of

'em."

"Sure. I'll stop around till Sandy gets through. We fixed that."

Marthe turned from the questioning eyes, and stared out at the sternwheeler, the coming of which had so grave a significance for her.

"You can help around in the store," she said, in her downright way. "It'll leave me so I can see to the boy. He'll need a deal of fixing."

There was a sudden setting of the girl's pretty lips. And a quick veiling of her dark eyes.

"I'm going to fix him," she declared on the instant. "It's for me. He's my man."

Marthe's gaze remained on the hated sternwheeler.

"No, my girl, you'll not fix Sandy with his mother around," she said sharply. "It ain't for you anyway. He ain't your man till you're married right. Get that. I'll stand for no young girl playing her fool tricks on my boy, under my roof, with him so sick he don't know how to think right. You can help around an' wait, or—"

"Or what?"

The dark eyes were wide enough now. There was a hot light in them that told of those reckless fires belonging to her breed.

If Marthe understood she allowed no concern to deflect her. This breed child was of no consequence. And her storms or smiles mattered not at all. The cold eyes remained on the river boat as she snapped her reply.

"Get out."

The harshness of it was brutal. It was Marthe at her very worst. But it brought forth nothing of what might have been looked for. Wanita turned from her. She, too, looked out over the river. And her reply came swiftly, incisively, but with a coldness that matched the others.

"You're Sandy's mother," she said. "And he's sick. Maybe you have right. I don't know. But I won't help around in the store. Sandy said 'No'—Sandy won't have me around with the men, passing them their liquor. Sandy's so sick he can't be around to see I'm acting the way he'd have me. So it goes with me the way he said. I'll go live in Sha's old shack up in the town. It's the way he left it last winter. I'll come and trade my dust with you at the store. And I'll wait for Sandy. His mother can't stop me doing just that."

She turned abruptly. She moved across the landing without a backward glance at the woman she had defied. And Marthe turned and looked after her.

Whatever the cold eyes and grimly set mouth refused to admit, her fighting spirit knew nothing but admiration for this child of a hated parentage.

Chapter XVIII

Wanita Faces Her World

Wanita moved quickly amongst the queer litter of habitations that still showed no sign of any wakefulness among their occupants. The camp dogs were stirring, but that was all. With the exception of those who sought their morning "eye-opener" at Marthe's store Reliance usually came to as noon approached, and the process was generally sluggish, ill-tempered, and grudging.

Wanita was unconcerned for the habits of the township. But she was glad enough for the absence of curious eyes; and more curious tongues. She wanted time to think, she wanted to figure out just where hot impulse had placed her; she felt that, so far as Marthe was concerned, she had burnt even her boat. And Marthe was not only Sandy's mother. She was a hard, powerful creature whom she had deliberately antagonized. So she hurried up to the little old barricaded cabin, which had been her winter home for so long, with her blanket roll shouldered, and her strong young arms loaded with her camp outfit.

She found the two-roomed shanty, with its added leanto, just as it had been left when the ice went out of the river, and a melting world had summoned a gold-hungry people to its summer labors. She tore down the boarding nailed over glassless windows, and forced the heavy door. And now she was alone in the little living room with her outfit strewn about her feet, an addition to the general litter left behind them at the time of their spring exodus.

Her eyes were gazing somberly. They glanced slowly from one squalid detail to another. And as they did so it all came back to her. In those poignant moments the little place was peopled with the shadows of two loved souls who were gone.

There was the small rusted cookstove at which she had prepared so many frugal meals for those she would serve no more; there was the stout old chair to which her dead father had added a pair of roughly made rockers, and which had always been his; there was the little three-legged stool upon which her brown-skinned mother had always squatted in her Indian fire-worship; then there was the backless windsor chair where she, herself, used to sit listening and laughing while Sha's cheerful Irish brogue poured out its easy flow of half humorous philosophy, which was the very essence of the man. It was all crude, mean, and devoid of grace. But, oh, it was friendly to her.

Makeshift? How could it have been otherwise? Wanita saw nothing in its squalor to hurt. Were they not of the human flotsam of the northern gold world, always on the move, seeking, ready on the instant to move on, to migrate to any new field offering better prospect? It was just shelter, temporary shelter, in a life in which any week, or day, or even hour might bring them change. Makeshift? Of course. But with those two it had been—home.

It was a moment for Wanita when the full of her disaster swept in upon her. Sha dead. Fighting back with the last breath of life against odds his reckless nature had refused to consider. Roskana murdered. Slaughtered with fouler inhumanity than would have been meted out to a jack-rabbit. And now Sandy. Sandy sick and wounded. And needing her. Wounded by that crazy creature who had so wantonly slain the others. Sandy who was now snatched from her care by an adamant mother who detested her for her breed. It was all cruel, hopeless, unjust.

There came a brief moment of childish weakness. The finely marked brows drew together in an ominous frown. The luminous eyes filled with tears that threatened to overflow. The pretty lips trembled, and a sob caught her breath. But of a sudden a slim brown hand was dashed across her eyes. She would not weep; she just would not; nothing should make her. Sandy was still left to her; Sandy was needing her; Sandy was hers in spite of Marthe. And she wanted him more than all the world.

She stooped and gathered up her blanket roll and bore it away into the leanto sleeping quarters her father had built for her when she had outgrown her childhood. She collected her camp outfit and bestowed it for the service of the days of waiting for Sandy to come. She removed her man's work-stained garments and clad herself in the flaming cotton frock which lit up her dark beauty and transformed her. Then she loosened her masses of hair and re-dressed them with cunning fingers. Once more returned to her sex she flung herself into the work of cleaning and re-conditioning the home she felt would some day be shared with Sandy.

Her work brought her the relief she needed. Her spirits cheered, and hope and purpose became reality. She was making ready for Sandy; everything was for Sandy. She felt he was there directing her, showing her, telling her. He was beside

her all the time. And, even, she could almost see that silent nod of his approval.

She cleaned the place to its remotest corners. She re-arranged. She lit the stove and set food cooking as she had done hundreds of times before. And, as chaos and litter gave place to order and cleanness, the warmth of renewed life came back to the home, and a sturdy contentment took possession of the girl's passionate soul.

It was noon when Faro Neale's woman, Frisco Belle, made her descent upon Wanita, and invaded the home made ready for Sandy.

Wanita was at her stove stirring the contents of the pot which contained her midday meal. It was savory. And the girl had just "shooed" the prowling camp dogs sniffing at her open doorway. Even as she returned to her stove her doorway darkened, and Frisco Belle hailed her.

"Why, say, kid, you fixin' up your Pop's old shack same as if you meant stoppin' around? Has he beaten you, too? The old Bull Moose? The same as the rest of 'em? My, it's a stampede. Wher's your beau?"

It was a greeting of calculated friendliness. It came with a smile, and in a manner. But the woman's eyes somehow missed the smile that the rest of her face seemed made to wear.

Wanita turned at once, and her eyes lit with swift interest. It was that final question that betrayed the other. And the girl's quick wit fastened on it. There was a suspicion of irony in the smile that responded to the somewhat tarnished blonde beauty.

"Sandy's back up at the fort with Marthe," she said. "Guess you've heard tell. He's been shot up. Shoulder and leg. It's the Bull Moose all right. He's beaten us. Oh, yes. But Sandy's not through. Nor am I. I'm stopping around till Marthe and Scut Barber have healed him right. That's all."

It was cool. Almost indifferent. But so it was intended. It was Wanita's woman's attitude towards another woman, whom she knew well enough had little love for her. She turned again to her cooking. And Frisco Belle moved over to Shamus's old rocker chair, and flung herself into it.

She sat regarding the girl bending over the cookstove with none of the friendliness her smile had pretended. But the hardness had gone out of her fine eyes. It had gone out of them on the moment she had realized that Sandy was to be healed by those caring for him.

She feared this girl, whose face and body had all the beauty of early girlhood, and needed none of the elaborate embellishments to which she herself was forced to resort. She had come there hastily, when she had received the first exaggerated story of Sandy's disaster. She had come because of her fear. If Sandy were dead, or to die, this girl would be without a man. She would be thrown on the sex market of Reliance to go to the man whose bid was the highest. And she knew just who that man would be.

Faro. Her man. She had seen it already many times. He was slipping from her. He was attracted. She had watched with jealous eyes, and a mind alive to her own fading attractions. Oh, yes, she feared this young thing. But she was ready to fight to the last ditch. Meanwhile a living Sandy was her salvation.

"He's goin' to come through, kid?" she said amiably. "Why, that's fine. It's tough on a dame when she stakes her all on a boy, to have him done up before—before—It's just a wound in the shoulder and leg? Well, they don't kill a boy as tough as your Sandy. And Scut Barber and Marthe to fix him. I'm real glad for you. And I'm glad for him. My, you been hurt enough already. It's just cruel the way it follows you all the time. Why? I—I don't get it."

Wanita considered the ample creature in the chair. It was early for Faro's woman, and her appearance betrayed the fact. That, and her haste in coming. She was clad in a waist that had seen cleaner days. And her cloth skirt was one that had been made over to a more modish style. Her face was thick with the make-up of the night before. And it had become patchy. Her blonde hair was snatched with pins and had lost its overnight wave. But, even so, she was a beautiful thing. And only advancing years were her detriment in the camp life she lived.

"Yet it's easy," Wanita said meditatively. "I know it now. I didn't before, when Sha was alive and worked our claim. You see, Sha never said about our claim. I'd say there's nothing on the river so rich. Not Sandy's. Or Faro's. No one's. It's thick with gold so a fool kid like me can stand around washing it without knowing a thing. That feller knows. And that's

what he's after. He's been around many times. I've seen him standing there with his horns, and his mask, watching me at the sluice, as though he was scared I'd clean up all the dust. He killed Sha, and he killed Roskana. Maybe he didn't count me. So he didn't kill me. He guessed that claim would be left when he got the others. That's why he was after Sandy when he saw us sluicing together. That's the way it seems."

"But why not you, too?"

It was the tone that startled Wanita. There was a laugh in it. And it was full of meaning. The girl shook her head.

"I don't just know, except—"

Belle stood up from the rocker chair. She came and set a pair of heavily be-ringed hands on the girl's shoulders. She was taller. And she looked smilingly down into the dark eyes.

"Yet it's easy," she cried, mocking with the girl's own phrase. "Sure you're a fool kid. But you're just as beautiful as the Arctic blossoms that break out when the spring sun shines. You guess it's the claim?"

The worldly-wise creature, who knew woman's values to the last fraction of a cent, shook her head.

"He comes around with you there sluicing. For the gold? Is he scared to lose it? It's not the sort of gold he sees you pouching. He didn't let you make a getaway when he killed Sha because you were a no-account. He didn't leave you living when he shot up your Sandy because you didn't matter. I guess you matter so much with the Bull Moose you don't have to worry for your life out on your claim. Not for your—life. They reckon he's a renegade white. They figure he's that fellow who made a getaway from the p'lice at Glenach years back. You're a half-breed. You're young. You're beautiful. He's a man who's taken the blanket. Well? He reckons he's killed up all belonging you, and you're—alone."

Wanita was wide-eyed. She stared incredulously. And her cheeks had suddenly paled.

"You think that? You mean that?" she cried at last, and a little gasp of breath came with her words.

Belle shook her head.

"I haven't fought to keep my man these years without learning, kid," she said bitterly. "Your father and mother were killed for you. Your Sandy was shot up for that reason, too. I tell you that just any man who trails around your red skirt is going to get his. I think just that. And I'd stake my last nickel I'm right. Now I must get back home, or I'll have Faro out tailing me."

Wanita was in her doorway looking after her retreating visitor. She watched Belle out of sight. And her gaze remained on the vanishing point for many thoughtful moments.

A great disquiet was agitating her. Was the woman right? Was it that her father and mother had been murdered—for her? Had Sandy been shot up for her? Somehow Belle's reasoning seemed unanswerable. If that were so then there could never be safety on the river for Sandy again. She could never let Sandy—

She turned abruptly. She dared speculate no further. She went back into her home, that home she had prepared to share with Sandy. And she ate her midday meal with an appetite that was wholly unimpaired by these alarms.

Wanita was leaning forward hunched on her backless old chair just within the storm porch of her cabin. She was in full view of the great old river where Noah Bartlet's sternwheeler was moored, and was still slowly discharging its variegated freight. Away beyond, gleaming like alabaster, rose the snow-clad peaks of the distant hills where they reached the south-western horizon and dropped below it. The tired sun was dipping towards them, its beneficent labors nearly ended for another day.

The air was still, and crisp with that chill which belongs to any evening when the northern summer is past its maturity. The flies and mosquitoes had lost something of their aggravation. But in the evening hush there were those many companionable sounds of life which are so full of appeal. There were voices softened by distance, there was the rattle of chains and winches at Noah's sternwheeler; there was the yap of prowling dogs, and the shrill of children still at play.

Then there was music. And it was to the music which the dreaming girl was listening.

It was Kid Pierce at Marthe's old piano up at the store. And Wanita knew by the manner of it, the brilliance of the playing, and the splendid gloom of the sublime melody he was extracting from the bowels of the decrepit instrument, that the boy was probably blind drunk.

Wanita had no knowledge of that to which she was listening. She had no understanding of classical music. But she heard, and the hot youth of her was stirred. Her soul thrilled responsively to the sublime tones that reached her. Her whole being was held in thrall, and she drank in the beauty of the music.

She was weary of work, she was weary of thought and speculation. And so, as she listened, her mind drifted on visioning all that most appealed. Sandy. Her wounded man. He filled her whole dream.

He was there lying sick and needing her. And she was shut out of his presence. But even so they could not shut him out of her mind. He was going to be hers. Oh, yes. Neither Marthe nor the Bull Moose should rob her of her love. All she must do was to wait, and to watch. She would trust no one. No one but—Sandy. She had plenty gold. And Sandy had his share in Marthe's claim. If the river was no longer safe for them the world at least was wide, and they were young and strong, and full of the will to do.

No. There was no need to concern herself for the thing Belle had told her. In spite of all that had gone she could not bring herself to fear that mystery creature of the river. The sight of him held a queer fascination for her, but that was all. In her strong reliance she felt she was infinitely capable of protecting herself, whether it was life or that other at which Belle had hinted.

At any rate there was nothing to fear just now; nothing to concern but Sandy's well-being. It would be lonesome waiting, it would be dreary passing long days and nights without him. But all the time she could plan for that—

Wanita sat up with a start. And she found herself gazing up into the sleepy eyes of Faro Neale.

The man had approached almost without a sound. She had been listening to the distant music; she had heard nothing else. And now she was looking at the man's smile as he lounged against the porch doorway. And listening to his drawling tones.

"Well, I guess that yeller cur was wise, anyway," he was saying. "A getaway's a good thing to make when the time's right. I passed you word when it looked good to me. The folks got through on it. They're mostly washing their back teeth in Marthe's hooch. All but your Sandy, who's sick to death for stakin' your word against mine."

The girl's eyes flashed hotly.

"Yes," she snapped. "The yellow cur was surely wise."

The lounging figure remained unmoving. Wanita had meant to hurt. She waited watching.

Faro remained gazing with half-closed eyes and with a smile of amused tolerance. He almost filled the narrow doorway, and his wide-brimmed hat only just missed brushing its crown against the roof of the porch. He was clad in belted moleskin breeches, and a loose cotton shirt that left his hairy chest almost bare. And on his thighs were strapped those light-pull guns so deadly in their repute. The manhood of him was rather magnificent, and Wanita found the spell of it something irresistible.

The heat died out of her stormy eyes and a derisive smile replaced it. And as the gambler saw the change his eyes opened wider.

"Say, can't we quit the criss-cross and make a straight spiel?" he asked smiling. "I like grit, kid, an' yours suits me. But I get sick playin' at words that don't get you anywhere. I got to get friends with you and your boy. An' I'm worried you won't stand for it. Well, there it is. The woman calls the play, an' a man needs to stand around and only sit in when she says so. I'll wait standing. I came along to tell you Sandy's all fixed up, an' is goin' to get through quick. That's Scut's word. An' he's dead sure. I guess that smile you got looks good to me."

The girl's antagonism went out on the instant. She stood up from her chair and passed back into her cabin. And her movement was an invitation Faro was prompt to accept.

Inside the hut he gazed about him. And the order and cleanness he beheld caused his smile to pass. It was just a glance. Then he turned to the waiting girl. And something of his usually harsh tones had gone out of his voice.

"It wasn't this way with Sha an' Roskana around," he said gently. "It's for—Sandy?"

He saw the melting that instantly possessed the dark eyes. And he knew that the card he had played was a master.

Wanita nodded.

"Tell me," she cried eagerly. "Just tell me all Scut said. Don't miss a thing, Faro. Sandy's all I got."

The gambler shook his head and his smile was wry.

"I'd hate to, kid," he grinned. "When Scut starts on his game of bones an' things, why ther' ain't a head north of sixty to take his meaning. He said a piece to me that set me nigh to stampeding. And when he was through I just set it up to him cold. I said that boy's sick and shot up. I don't know a femur from a vertebra. Is he goin' to pull round quick, and can I tell it to them that's interested. And Scut reached out a hand and soaked up the liquor he'd bought for me, and told me in the talk an' or'nary gambler knows about. He said that Sandy would be crawling in a week. Limping around in ten days. An' fit fer the race track under a month. He said that Marthe had the poisonous tongue of a rattler. But she'd forgotten more of fixing a sick man than he ever knew. He said if I knew anyone who was yearning to lose their poke in a bet they'd need to chance it he was a liar. And I'd say Scut could take the dead bones of a graveyard an' build 'em into an army of sports who'd dance on their coffin lids like a bunch of crazy coons."

The girl's joy was a wonderful thing to see. It shone in her lighting eyes. It was there in a smile that set the gunman's pulses hammering. It was in her instant laugh at the jest of the man's faith in the ex-surgeon.

"A month! Less!" she cried, and her hands came together in a gesture Faro understood and hated. "Marthe can't stop him when he can put foot to the ground. She can't. She just can't. Why, why can't she quit hating me? Why can't she let me go to him? It—it makes me mad thinking. His life's his. Not hers. He's got to live it. And he'll be living it when she's dead and forgotten. Psha! It don't matter. It shan't matter. I'll wait. I'll wait forever."

The man's half-closed eyes were turned from the sight of it all. He gazed out through the doorway, where the last of the sun fell athwart the river beyond. Those veiled eyes concealed the furious stirring that would have betrayed him. And his smile was a sufficient mask confronting a creature so completely absorbed as Wanita.

"And he's just all that to you, kid?" he asked. And his tone had lost its earlier gentleness.

"More!"

Faro shook his head at the open doorway.

"It's crazy being that way about anyone in the world," he said. "You're bettin' your last nickel on four aces when you're playin' 'royals.' You can't ever tell. You're just askin' the sort of trouble that can crash you like a blast o' dynamite. I wouldn't stake my last dollar on the deck I'd stacked myself. There ain't a thing sure till the cards are faced. Does that boy feel the same—with Marthe standin' back of him?"

"He told Jim he stood pat. That neither father nor mother, nor all the gold lying between them, figgered with him."

The girl's reply came with a thrill of eager triumph. But there was unease in the eyes that watched the profile turned to them.

Again came Faro's ominous headshake.

"That was to Jim," he demurred.

Suddenly he turned. The narrowed eyes searched the face he coveted. They passed from the face to the body so slimly rounded, so seductive in its youth.

"It's Marthe. An' she's diff'rent," he said. "Don't fool yourself, kid. You've seen Marthe with bare knuckles. There's Pienart, the biggest noise north of sixty when it comes to trade and dollars. He's here on a prospect and figgers to jump in on Marthe. Well, when he's through jumpin' I want to say Marthe 'll still be just wher' she's set her two feet, and it won't

be her who's worried. Marthe 'll heal your boy. She'll pass him the sort of care only a mother can hand to her own kid. And when she's through you'll know as much of Sandy as hell does of icebergs. You'll never get your Sandy."

"But I will."

It was low. It was thrilling with fighting spirit. There was that in it, too, that was furious anger against the man who had dared to warn her of the thing she knew she already feared. Suddenly Wanita gestured and her words came with a rush.

"Why do you come here to tell me that?" she cried. "You don't know. You haven't right. You haven't even reason for what you say. Sandy! Do you think Marthe can turn him? Sandy! You don't know him. You can't know him. You're not the sort to understand. There's not a thing but Death to come between us. Sandy and me. I'm not scared for Marthe. I'm not scared for anything. Not even the Bull Moose and his murdering neches. You can quit right now and keep your stuff for those who need it. I thought you came to tell me of Scut Barber, and—and of Sandy's getting well. But you didn't. That was just excuse. You—you came to say the other. Why? You don't know. You're just guessing. I should have known. Sandy hates you. He's always hated you. It's only I who was fooled. Quit. Quit right now before—"

"That just raving. There ain't sense to any of it, kid," Faro's eyes were unsmiling. "I've told you just what you know is the whole darn truth. I don't care a hoot the sort of boy Sandy is. It don't signify. All that does signify is Marthe. And you know that's so. You're not scared." He shook his head. "Well, I guess it's time you were. Sure I'll quit, kid. I'll make that getaway before—before—It's the same old yeller cur."

He moved and was gone in the same noiseless fashion as he had come. For a moment the girl stood unmoving, precisely where the gambler gunman had left her. She had her back to the cookstove and she was staring after him through the open doorway.

She remained gazing for many moments. Then, at last, she turned again. And in a few minutes she was on her way to Marthe's store carrying her well filled buckskin poke.

Chapter XIX

Faro Neale Plays a Hand

When Wanita had finished her long day's work, and set out for Marthe's store, she was no longer the reckless child who had swum the spring torrent of the Alikine in search of succor for her hard-pressed father; she was no longer, even, the eager creature who, with Sandy, had pored over the riffles of her father's old sluice, hungrily seeking the treasure she was now about to trade. Something of youthful gladness had gone out of her. She seemed suddenly to have become weighted down with centuries of knowledge and bitter understanding.

She was going to make her trade. But that was not her main purpose. She meant to fight the redoubtable Marthe for her woman's right, which was to serve Sandy in his need. Faro's warning had sunk in deeply. It had left her with the sort of fear no woman can resist. Her lover was to be taken from her. She was to lose all that now counted in her life. Well, she would fight. She would fight with all the passionate fury of the breed for which Marthe hated her.

But in the gloom of her troubled mood she forgot Marthe. Marthe was simply an open enemy with whom to contend. She was a hard, usurious creature without humanity, without mercy. She had been flouted, defied. So it must be a furious pitched battle in which she was fought to the last ditch.

But Wanita came to the busy store to receive the shock of her life. The place was full. Marthe's bar was crowded with drinkers. But as the girl came up with her swollen bag of dust the whiskered creature, who missed nothing in her traffic, promptly set her scales and hailed her with a cordiality that seemed too warm to be real.

"My! I was wondering to see your pretty face around, kid," she cried, while her shrewd gaze considered the bag Wanita lumped on the old counter. "I don't get you young folks, anyhow. When my Jim was sick, which wasn't often, I hadn't ever time for the chores around this layout. An' they didn't ever seem worth fixing, anyway. Maybe your shack needed a deal. But Sandy's been sore for you to get around ever since Scut got through dopin' his wounds till he hated himself."

Wanita stared. She stood there holding the old buckskin poke making no attempt to unfasten its securely tied neck. She forgot everything. Even the men at the counter, the din of talk in the great room, the rattle of chips, and the harsh, explosive laughter that told of the liquor being consumed.

"But you said I wasn't to—nurse him," she stammered stupidly. "You said you weren't standing for any young girl playing her fool tricks on a feller who couldn't think right. You—"

"An' I meant just that," Marthe's strong jaws snapped together. But she still considered the securely tied bag. She pointed. "Best make your trade. An' when you're through you'll find your fool beau lying around back in my room crazy for you."

There was no doubt about Wanita's agitation as her fingers struggled with the knotted rawhide lace. Marthe came to her rescue with a knife, and her cold eyes looked on and twinkled as the girl dumped her gold into the waiting scale.

Then followed the old familiar process. The testing balance, the added weights. Marthe was at once the hard trader with her humanity buried deep.

"It's fine color, an' well washed," she commented approvingly. "Maybe Sandy showed you, an' helped, eh? It's quite a bunch. The biggest yet. How you needin' it? Cash an' credit?"

Wanita stood without making immediate reply. And when the balance was struck, and the figures counted, she looked up. Her dark eyes were shining. And all fear of Marthe had suddenly gone out of her.

"I was going to take all cash," she said, with simple downrightness. "I didn't want your credit again—ever. I wanted to be quit of you, an' handle my stuff the way I chose. But it doesn't signify that way now. You can book it all credit. And I'll pack out a big bunch of dry goods and food truck, and load up my shack. I'll do that after I been to Sandy."

The gleam flashed again into Marthe's eyes as she shot the precious dust carelessly into her old chest. When she turned to her counter again she was almost smiling.

"You were sore, kid," she said. "You guessed I'd hurt you. You figgered that way." She shook her unattractive head. "I hadn't. It was your own fool girl notions. It was them hurt you. Sandy's not your man yet, though maybe you reckon he is. You were raised where they don't figure a deal of diff'rence through marryin'. I was raised where they do. When you're Sandy's woman, an' a minister says so, you can play all the fool tricks on him you're entitled. And, seeing you're a Breed, I guess you will. But you won't till."

Marthe looked out over the noisy room, where the spenders were responding lavishly to the blandishments of the women. And she indicated the crowd with a jerk of her hand.

"Still feel you can't help around feeding that bum crowd booze?" she asked.

The way of it was harsh, unsparing. Marthe had no thought for it to be otherwise. She never had. But Wanita shook her head in a fashion there was no mistaking.

"No, Marthe," she said decidedly, but with friendliness. "Sandy said that way. And it goes. And always will. Maybe you'll figure it a fool girl trick on him. It's not. It'll be that way just—always."

An unclean finger thoughtfully scratched Marthe's whiskered chin.

"Sure," she said. "I'd say women are all born dead foolish, an' don't ever get sense till a man teaches 'em. But I can't stand around. The folk here were raised on sea water, an' there ain't liquor enough in the world to fix their thirst. You can pack right along, and tell Sandy his Ma ain't a penitentiary turnkey."

All those weary days and even weeks of waiting to which Wanita had so gloomily looked forward had disappeared from her horizon as if by magic. When she had listened to Faro Neale she knew she had believed in spite of her passionate protest. But then she had defied Marthe only that morning. Now her days were almost wholly spent with Sandy. And it was Marthe's doing.

But, even so, Wanita had been shocked out of her trust and faith. The child in her was dead. And in its place was a watchful woman. So she wondered. She wondered at that deliberate change of front in Marthe without any compensating return from her. Marthe looked to have yielded to Sandy. And it was not Marthe's way to yield to anybody. Then what did it mean? What was to come?

Wanita asked herself these things but made no attempt to find the right answer. She just snatched at everything that came her way, and gave herself up to her woman's happiness. Every moment spent with Sandy in his sick room was gain and happiness. And she wanted it all. She was with him on any and every pretext. She went further. Without the least regard for Marthe's strictures she nursed her man like a sick child, and ministered to his every whim and want.

So the happy days passed. Long days of tireless service while Sandy's wounds healed under the skillful treatment of a sober Scut. And the one-time surgeon's pledge, of which Faro had told, was nearing fulfillment. At the end of a week Wanita supported Sandy tottering about the room Marthe had given up to him.

Several days later, when Sandy was stronger, he was sitting in a chair, a little slumped with weariness. He was thin. His big body seemed to have shrunk. And his cheeks had lost their ample flesh. His eyes looked tired as they gazed back at the girl's anxious face.

"It's fine, Wana," he said. "You just don't know how good it is to get your fool legs under you again. I can't stand lying around like dead meat. Why, even Marthe kind of looked pleased the day I got my pants on."

"She wouldn't have if she'd known I set 'em on you, Sandy, boy," Wanita laughed contentedly.

She sat herself on the empty, unmade bed and considered the tired face.

"Sure you're feeling good, boy?" she asked, with some doubt. "You been about nearly four hours. It was Scut said you were to do all you could."

Sandy nodded and raised a beckoning hand.

"I just feel so good I can't stand for you sitting around that darn bed. Come right over and sit, kid. Sit where I can reach you."

Wanita laughed happily. She stood up at once glowing vividly in the red that Sandy insisted on her wearing. The spartan furnishing of the room admitted of no second chair, so she sat herself at her man's feet. Sandy set an arm about her shoulders and his fingers clasped the warm flesh under his hand. And so they remained silent for many moments.

It was a silence Sandy would have left unbroken. That was his way. But it was different with the girl. Wanita was eyeing the unmade bed in front of her, and the thing she had had in her mind and had kept to herself all these happy days found sudden and startling expression.

"I'm wondering about Marthe," she said, without any preamble. "She sent me to you that first night. She *sent* me! And it was after she'd refused me to come near you that morning when she packed you along from the landing up here. She hates me. I know. So do you know. I just can't think. Then Faro came along that day. I was cleaning up our shack. And he told me. He said I'd never marry you. Never. Marthe would see to that. He guessed when Marthe was through I'd know as much of you as hell does of an iceberg. He said a lot that way and made me mad. But—I think—I believed."

The hand on her shoulder had tightened its grip. It was clutching almost painfully. Sandy had stiffened.

"Faro? What brought him around?" he cried. "You never said."

"You were sick. I—"

"Say, has he been around again—since?"

Wanita gazed up at the angry face.

"No. An' never will again," she cried savagely. "I told him I hated him. I told him you did. I told him nothing, just nothing—Marthe, nor anybody else—could ever take you from me. I told him to quit. And—and I guess he knew he had to, or—"

The hand on her shoulder had clenched into an angry fist and it beat heavily on the flesh under it.

"You're just a kid girl an' you can't see—or won't see," Sandy cried again. "It's you. I told you before. I was sick, maybe to death. So he came around quick. And he told you Marthe would fix you. Tell me. Just pass me all he said. God blast his dirt, the swine!"

Wanita reached up and possessed the angrily drumming fist. She held it still.

"Not if you get mad, Sandy, boy," she said, with a short laugh. "You'll get fever that'll lay you back on that bed if you get all hotted. Listen an' I'll talk. It's best that way. I'd say you're wrong. Faro came to hand me Scut's promise. What was it? You'd be crawling in a week. Limping in ten days. And fit for the race track in a month. The other came after—"

"Sure!" Sandy broke in with impetuous heat. "That's Faro! He needed excuse first, so he passed you Scut's dope. Oh, I'll pass that lousy 'four-flush' his!"

The man's anger was blazing. And curiously enough the anxious Wanita did nothing to check it. She just sat there gazing straight before her with darkly brooding eyes.

"Playing the good friend! Faro!" Sandy went on, with a furious sneer. "Bringing a poor lone girl good news! Faro! Jumping right in to tell her quick so she'll feel good! Faro! Then the other. No doubt it was sort of regretful. Sort of eased down. And all lies! Darn lies! I can see him telling you. Hear him. And with those eyes half dead so you can't ever see the thing lying back of 'em. They're like that for 'draw.' And he's playing 'draw' all the time. He was playing it with you. You, a kid girl, sitting in with him. I tell you he was just playing you like the darn tiger he is."

Wanita's fingers squeezed the angry fist and she nodded.

"I got that," she agreed, in a low, thoughtful tone. "I got that, and—other things. But—" suddenly she turned and looked up into his face appealingly, "—it doesn't matter—now. Sure it doesn't, Sandy. Oh, he's bad. So bad. But he won't ever come around again. Psha! We don't have to worry. Let's quit him. I got you. And it's all I care. But Marthe gets me wondering. Why does she hate me, Sandy, boy? It's my breed. I know that. But why? Why?"

Sandy took complete possession of the hand clinging to his fist. He squeezed it so fiercely that he hurt.

"Marthe's just Marthe," he said, with a sigh. "But it doesn't matter either. I told Jim where he and Marthe get off when it comes to you. And that goes just the same now. Don't worry for Marthe, little kid. There's no quitting between us. But watch that hell swine, Faro, till I get around. Then I'll fix him cold."

Chapter XX

—And Loses

As Wanita, loaded down with household supplies, passed through the store on her way to the little home she had made ready and was keeping for Sandy, she found the evening revels in full swing. The place was packed out. And the air was thick and noisome with the reek of liquor and smoke.

Somehow it was a goodly sight to her. But that was her new mood. These people were part of her life. They were her friends, any of them, all of them, except Faro. And she nodded, and smiled, and had a pleasant laughing word for anyone sufficiently detached to claim her.

The world seemed very good to Wanita with Sandy striding on to good health again. And there were always her thoughts of that little home she was even now stocking.

The lamp choreman had just completed the illumination of the room, and she saw him standing, a bowed, disheveled, aged figure, over Faro Neale's table. The old man's inflamed eyes were greedily peering, watching the speed with which the men in the game "sweetened" a rich jack-pot.

She understood. The aged creature was an old northerner who had doubtless in his time sat in at just such games. And the fascination was still real to him, for all he had nothing but the "sundown" trail, and an unmarked grave in some city's wast ground lying ahead of him.

For a moment the girl knew pity, and a quick sympathy. But almost as it came it passed, lost in a fresh interest. It was Faro. The gambler had flung in his hand and turned on the choreman with brutal ferocity.

"Beat it! Get to hell out of here!" he roared threateningly. "Your blasted whisker 'ud hoodoo a graveyard out of its rotting bones!"

There was a movement as though the gunman were about to strike the helpless creature. Wanita caught a sharp breath. Then she smiled as she heard the whiskered man's retort.

"Sure I'll beat it, Faro," he snapped, his rheumy eyes blinking more furiously. "But it won't keep the other feller from collectin' them bones."

He shuffled off leaving a furious man to endure the laugh at his expense. Wanita watched the hobbling figure, and rejoiced in the man's old spirit. Then she turned to glance at Faro to enjoy his discomfiture.

But her enjoyment entirely missed fire. The man's narrowed eyes were on her with that queer searching gaze of which Sandy had spoken. He was smiling. And it was a smile the girl hated and even feared. So she turned and hurried on to the outer door. Her going was almost flight.

Thus it was she missed the hawk-like descent of Frisco Belle upon her man. The woman's jealous eyes had seen. Where Faro was concerned little enough escaped them. She had seen Wanita, and seen Faro's smile. So the gambler looked up to discover her standing precisely where the choreman had stood, smoking her cigarette through an inordinately long, be-jeweled cigarette holder.

"Out of luck, boy," she beamed down at him tauntingly.

Faro understood the double meaning of it, and his good-looking face flushed darkly. His nimble fingers creased shuffling the cards, and he flashed a furious look up at her.

"Beat it!" he jerked his head at her. "I'm through with hoodoos. That other cost me two thousand bucks."

But Belle neither replied nor obeyed. She drew up an empty chair and sat herself behind his elbow. And she continued sitting there half the night.

And it was a bad night for Faro. Belle followed the game with all the interest of one who knows she must share in the luck, whatever it was. Faro winning was generous. Losing he was a fiend of meanness and cruel humor. And she sat

there watching the luck set hard against him. She saw him buy chips at Marthe's bar again and again, and she hated it. At the fourth time she could stand it no longer.

She abruptly stood up with a jarring laugh that had no mirth in it. And she flourished her cigarette holder indicating her man.

"You boys are a hot bunch. Too hot for my feller."

The smile baring her even white teeth was a shade tigerish as she took in the men at the table.

Alec Peters, the chief winner, grinned back at her derisively. His brother grinned down at the cards he was shuffling. Orton Marvin, of Clare, fingered a great stack of chips affectionately, while Mike Wilson chewed vigorously as he considered the woman's splendid shape.

"Guess you'll skin him between you before the night's through," Belle went on, as no one replied to her. "I'm not sitting in to see that. I'll beat it and hit the hay. So long folks. Leave him a grub-stake or I'll go hungry."

She had no word for Faro. But it was a maddening laugh that came back to him as she moved away. He just looked after her with unsmiling, narrowed eyes, watching the beautifully gowned figure make its laughing way amongst the tables.

Then, as the cards were dealt, and the ante was put up for the new pot, he went on with his game.

The night's gamble was finished and Faro was alone on Marthe's porch. Everybody had left the building. And even the tireless Marthe had gone to her blankets for her well-earned rest.

The store behind him was without a single light and its door was soundly secured. Not a sound came from within. And not a sound but the sigh of the river waters disturbed the hush of the world about him. The straggling mass of the old fort suggested some ocean derelict lying high and dry on a lee shore. It sat there a black, dead hulk sprawled under the streaking flames of a perfect aurora.

Faro was leaning against one of the roof supports. He had no inclination for sleep. He had no desire to hurry to the woman he knew would welcome him. He just stood peering out of half-closed eyes at the ghostly shifting lights that were never still.

He was bareheaded to the chill of the northern night. His thin cotton shirt was widely agape over his massive chest. Then his strong nervous hands were resting on the butts of the guns holstered low on his thighs. The attitude of his hands was suggestive.

He was in savage mood. All the worst in him was uppermost. He had lost heavily and nothing had gone right with his game. And now his temper had duly reacted.

It had been the sort of ill-luck Faro hated most. It had been one of those nights when he had come to his game full of winning confidence. From the outset cards had come his way and his luck in the "draw" had been all he desired. Then he had bet with all his wonted skill and astuteness. That skill which was a lure, a bait for unwary opponents. But these things had availed nothing. And the whole night long it had been the same. However good his hand there was always better out against him. The night had cost him thousands of dollars.

His loss, though heavy, hurt him little enough. He was rich in a community which only counted wealth in very large figures. Then it was to the men with whom he always gambled. He knew it would come back to him with more added. That aspect of it was a simple swing of the pendulum. And sober, so he would have regarded it.

But Faro was not sober. That had been the reaction of his temper. He had consumed quantities of raw liquor and it had savaged him as it always did when he abandoned himself to it without restraint.

Now he had lost all sense of balance, of proportion. And all those primitive passions which had first made him a killer were stirred to their depths. He hated; he hated everybody and everything; he hated the men who had despoiled him, and the whole miserable life of a place like Reliance; he hated Belle, and the wretched choreman who foolishly he claimed

had "hoodooed" him; he hated even the ghostly lights whose fantastic movements in the sky held his drunken gaze fascinated. He was yearning for that swift violence that was part of him; he wanted to hurt; he wanted to hurt to death. These were the only things to calm the fury of his mood. And he asked himself blankly, who? What?

Memory served him on the instant. His woman. Belle. He remembered her taunting, jeering. She had held him to ridicule before those others. She had made him a laughing stock. Venom battened on the memory of it. He would hurt her. He must. He would hurt her before daylight broke. How?

Of a sudden he stood up from his leaning. And his teeth bared, and he grinned. Again he was gazing upon a red-clad vision loaded down with store goods. Again he was looking into wide, smiling, child-like black eyes which had always suggested to his lewd mind unplumbed depths of woman's hot passion. Wanita. And she was alone in that old cabin. And then—then afterwards the jeering, faded Belle should know it all.

She should know it to the last detail. Belle with her mask of paint concealing her years. He would teach her. And it would be a lesson for her to remember in the days when he was through with her, and she was reduced to the hospitality of the garbage cans of some unsavory city.

He slipped down from the porch and stumbled. Then he headed off quickly amidst the litter of scattered habitations. And his direction was for the little cabin that had once been the winter home of Shamus Hoogan.

The leanto was small. It was just a stout, rectangular, slant-roofed accommodation for the simple bunk on which Wanita slept, and the table where stood a tiny oil lamp radiating a spot of yellow light just sufficient to banish complete darkness. For the rest there was room to move about but nothing much more.

It was windowless. It communicated with the living room by a doorway that had no door. It was crudely built of lateral logs, with a hard, dry, dusty floor. But Wanita had slept in it ever since the days of her childhood, and she slept in it now.

The Indian in Wanita, the life to which she had been raised, had made her a creature of the open. The wilderness was her world, and in it she knew not a shadow of fear. The daylight was her joy. The blackest night, with its profound hush, and its many unfathomed sounds, was a cradle wherein she found complete and restful sleep. The hills, whence her Indian mother hailed, the limitless plains, reaching from sky to sky, the lakes, that could storm like the ocean; these things, like the gloomy canyon of Ten Mile Gorge with its grim walls, and its everlasting threat of the Bull Moose and his Indian terror, gave her not a moment of disquiet.

Four walls and a roof, however, shuddered her with a queer phobia that was irresistible. She hated darkness with four walls about her, and a roof crowding down above her head. Hence the little lamp which burned on the table near by to her bunk. It had been so in her earliest babyhood. And it was still so for all she realized the absurdity of her fears. It was a queer kink at which the girl could always laugh. But it was real, and she could not be rid of it. So she meticulously filled, and trimmed, and lit her precious guardian against night's shadows. And, as a result, she slept with the calm repose of any babe.

So she was sleeping now, while the long night crept on towards that dawn which would set the ghostly dancers of the northern sky scuttling to their daytime hiding. The lamp was steadily burning, faithfully keeping its watch and ward against terrors of imagination that would disturb.

Its light shone mainly over the bunk with its well-worn blankets which gently rose and fell in response to the girl's easy, regular breathing. It lit the beauty of her face, where it smiled in her sleep framed amidst a sprawled mass of raven hair. It even dared to discover the neatly folded frock, and a small pile of more intimate garments, which had been carefully set in place on the foot of the bed.

For all the unpretentiousness of it, for all the crudity, the bareness, the lack of luxury, it was a picture of vital human beauty, of innocence, faith and trust. A young creature, passionate, vital, alone, lying there without a thought for the mire of human muck with which she was surrounded.

And into the night hush of it all there came a sound. It was a sound whose omen was unmistakable. It was just audible and that was all. It was the creak of a door opening.

It was the creak of the outer door of the living room beyond. It came as it opened. And it came again as it closed. There could be no mistaking the manner of it. It was opened and closed with stealth. Then followed further faint sounds. The slow, cautious shuffle of the feet of someone groping towards the light that shone through the partition doorway.

It was at the first faint creak of the opening door. It was at the very instant of it. The rise and fall of Wanita's blankets ceased. They seemed to fall to the stillness of a brown pall spread over a lifeless body.

But the girl was alive, awake, listening. And the marvel of it was that the faintness of the sound should have awakened her. She was awake and desperately alert; she was gazing, too, though her eyes appeared to be closed with the deep fringe of her curling black lashes still resting on the soft down of her cheeks; she was breathing through parted lips lest her ears should miss the faintest sound. And the while she remained tense and rigid.

She was watching the open doorway, searching the shadows beyond it. She was under no misapprehension. Someone had entered the living room. Someone was out there moving, groping towards her with a stealth that told its own story. And she lay there under her blankets wondering, guessing, but calm with complete fearlessness.

It was moments only before her guessing ceased. A dim outline slowly crept into view as it encountered the rays of the lamp. It was vague, uncertain. And it stood there for a moment or two on the edge of the lamplight. Then it moved forward again and Wanita knew. It was a man.

The faintest movement stirred beneath her blankets. It was the sort of restless movement of an uneasily dreaming sleeper. Her head moved amidst the mass of her black hair. When the movement ceased the girl's right hand was thrust deeply beneath her pillow and remained there.

The man came on and quite suddenly stood framed in the open doorway. The whole of him stood clearly revealed in the soft light of the lamp. Wanita beheld the familiar, curiously-smiling, half-closed eyes as they peered down at her. And in that moment of recognition her pretense of sleep nearly failed her.

Now she knew the full measure of that with which she had to contend. Faro Neale. And the man was in drink. He was swaying in the narrow doorway which his big body almost filled. He had stolen into her room in the dead of night. All the woman in her was roused to defense, and she faced the situation unflinchingly.

Again there was that sleeper's restless movement. This time Wanita's hand was withdrawn from beneath her pillow.

Faro Neale came through the doorway. He paused for a moment, and Wanita saw him steady himself. There was a movement of his body as though he were making an effort to throw off the effects of liquor. Then his narrowed eyes passed from her to the lamp that had so staunchly stood her friend. He moved. And he reached out towards it.

"Quit it, Faro! Quit that lamp and beat it. Just get right out while you've the chance!"

There was no trace of heat or excitement in the girl's swift command. It came with the cold, calm confidence of one who is deadly sure. She was propped on her left elbow, and her right hand remained hidden. And the movement had bared her soft white bosom as the blankets dropped from about her shoulder.

Faro stood stock still, still reaching towards the lamp. But his face was turned. And that which the fallen blankets had revealed widened his eyes and filled them with an ugly light.

"So you're awake, kid," he said thickly. Then he passed his tongue across parched lips in a manner conveying hideous suggestion. "Well, I'm glad," he leered. "But we won't need a light. A swell kid don't need light when she makes love to her man."

He moved. His fingers contacted with the lamp. And as they did so the room crashed with ear-splitting violence. The shot came from the girl's bunk, and the man's arm dropped to his side and hung limply.

There was a moment of silence. Then a wild light blazed up in the man's eyes. With a furious oath the big body lurched towards the bed. And one outflung hand was raised threateningly.

The room crashed again. And the shot came point blank and unerringly. Faro crumpled. He pitched on his head and sprawled face downwards on the ground within inches of the bunk.

Wanita had flung off her blankets. In her flimsy night-garment with her white limbs bared to her knees, she sat huddled on her bedside gazing starkly down at the dead heap of the man she had shot and killed.

Chapter XXI

The Hue and Cry

Wanita's automatic was there beside her on her bunk, just where it had fallen from her hand. Its dark, shining metal gleamed in the soft lamplight. It was big, and ugly, and looked far too heavy for the slim hand which had used it with so much deadly swiftness.

The girl only had eyes and thought for that still heap, sprawled on the dust-dry ground at her small white feet. She was gazing with eyes widened. And emotions stirring such as never before in her life had she known.

There was no pity; there was no horror; there was no satisfaction for the thing from which she knew she had saved herself. Here was death. And it had been dealt out by her hand. It had been dealt out without a second thought. She had slain with an ease and sureness that roused in her a queer feeling of uncertainty, unreality.

In those first moments she strove with all her might for steadiness, for clear thought, for a measure of calm. And she failed to achieve any one of them. Revulsion and horror slowly came to her, and a wave of panic threatened. She found herself asking, with the helplessness of a child, what must she do? What could she do? What should she do?

There was no pity for the man she had slain; there was no regret for a life so suddenly, so remorselessly blotted out; there was no thought for anything criminal in what she had done. She could only wonder at the horror of a dead thing, that had once been a man, lying there at her bare feet, and ask herself what next she must do.

But these thoughts, these feelings, lasted only for the briefest space. Then came swift and strong reaction. All that her Irish father had taught her, and told her, came back to her with a rush. She understood just why he had bought her that wonderful automatic, and taught her so much skill in its use. It was that she would have defense in the untamed life with which she was surrounded. She had defended herself as he had intended she should. This dead thing had threatened the woman in her, that woman that she had given to another man. And she had done the thing which was her perfect right, her absolute duty. She had slain the foul thing that had once been Faro Neale. Now what?

The girl's staggered brain had steadied. It had calmed. It had become frigid in its swiftly calculating processes. She knew she must act without a moment's delay. She knew that what she had done was a deliberate killing. In the eyes of a censorious world it was murder. And she knew that the world's penalty for murder was death, or at best the penitentiary.

Instantly there flashed through her mind a swift review of her chances amongst the people of the river. The men would comprehend. All of them, except such as the self-righteous, self-satisfied Ike Clancy and his friend Joe Makers. But there was Frisco Belle, the woman she had injured. And then there was Marthe. Marthe was the mother of Sandy. And Marthe hated her.

She dismissed all thought of Faro's woman at once. She believed without any doubt that Belle would scream for the life of the one who had robbed her of her man. She felt that Belle would never rest till she, the killer, had paid the last penalty of her crime. That seemed deadly sure. But Marthe. What were her chances with Marthe?

The answer came without a shadow of misapprehension. This thing would be the very chance that would serve Marthe. She, Wanita, had killed. She had murdered. Marthe hated her for her breed. Hated her as her son's woman. Then Marthe would—

Wanita sprang from her seat on the bedside. And, in that moment, she knew all that she must do. She must do it to save herself. She must do it for Sandy, who would have no blame for the thing she had done. She could count on Sandy to the last drop of his life's blood. And the thought added a great uplift to her courage. All she must do would be to defeat Marthe, to defeat the vengeful, screaming woman who had been robbed of her man.

She glanced over the room, avoiding the dead heap on the ground. She considered the neatly folded garments on her bunk. From these she turned to another heap which was stacked under the table on which stood her brave little lamp. And her decision was instant. She set about clothing herself in the woman's garments which Sandy loved. And left the old mannish things untouched.

It was all with the speed of urgency. She knew that dawn would break in an hour or so. And she knew that the two

crashing shots she had fired might well have awakened some curious sleeper. Her plan must go through now or never.

Next she rolled her old blankets and lashed them. Then she turned to the store of food that she had laid in when she had made her trade. And a great gladness came with the thought of the chance by which she had made such provision. She selected with care, but haste, and filled a stout sack with all she needed. Then, loaded down with her blankets and the bulging sack, and with her automatic safely bestowed in the bosom of her vivid frock she put out her friendly lamp and opened the outer storm door. Then she stood peering into the aurora-lit night.

She searched amongst the scattered habitations. She could just make out Faro's hut, where Frisco Belle would be sleeping. She could see the dim outline of Ike Clancy's in the soft twilight. Then there was Joe Makers', just opposite it. Further on she could make out Scut's mean cabin. Each was in darkness. Not a soul belonging to them seemed to be astir. Her shots had remained undiscovered. And the race of her anxious heart steadied.

But her confidence received a jolt. It was the sudden night howl of a dog. It was long-drawn-out, like the night-cry of some prowling coyote. It came from the direction of Faro's hut, and she knew it was the howl of the savage husky that was the dead gambler's dog.

The sound stirred all her latent superstition. She warned herself that it was the dog's death-howl. The creature was howling for its dead master.

She steadied herself. But it was only to endure a further shock. In response to the howl of the dog, it seemed, three lights appeared in three separate huts. There was Faro's hut. A light behind the cotton-covered window of Ike Clancy's. And another in the window of Joe Makers'.

Panic rushed upon her. She waited for no more. Without a thought for anything but escape, without even closing her door behind her, Wanita set off headlong for the river landing.

With the swaying logs of the landing under her feet the girl recovered her nerve. She moved to the water's edge, and set down her sack and the roll of blankets. Just for a moment she considered the great hulk of Noah Bartlet's sternwheeler, moored out in mid-stream. It had two lights burning on it, a hurricane lamp forward and one aft. She wondered if there was a watch being kept. She knew the vessel was due to set out on its return journey for Glenach and Fort Curtis in the morning.

Glenach! That reminded her. Glenach was a police post.

She turned at once to the moored boats which lined the hither shore, and picked out the double kyak which was Sandy's. She drew it in shore and secured its paddles. Then she selected the single kyak which she knew to belong to Scut Barber.

It was for the reason it was Scut's, and that it was stout and roomy, that she chose it. Scut would make no outcry when he found it gone. Scut was a good friend both to Sandy and to herself. He would know. He would understand. And, even, she felt she would have his voiceless "God-speed."

The rest was simple and swift. She hauled the boat up to the landing and loaded it. Then she took her place in its capacious well, and shipped her two paddles. After that she clung to the landing and listened intently.

It came to her faintly, but quite distinct and definitely recognizable. It was a far-off hail in a man's voice. Someone was hailing! Who? Why? And with Reliance sleeping off its night's debauch!

She cast adrift on the instant. The kyak slid away on the heavy stream. Then she picked up a paddle and dipped it strongly.

Ike Clancy had pulled on his pants over the heavy lamb's-wool underclothing in which he always slept. He groped and found his knee boots, and thrust his big feet into them. Then he stood up from his bed, moved across the room, and lit his oil lamp. As it burned up into full flame he left it, and passed to his door and flung it open.

The sound of two shots had disturbed his sober sleep. He had lain awake listening for more. And he had also speculated

as to whether or not he had just been dreaming. The shots seemed to him to have been fired somewhere close at hand, and had been real. That was how it seemed.

But he could not be sure. Then, as he had lain awake listening for more, he had heard the dismal howl of Faro's dog. It was that which had finally decided him. He was a creature of intense suspicion. And all of it had been vitally aroused.

The dog's howl had convinced him that the shots had been real. Nor could he have said why. But it did. And his rabid curiosity must be satisfied forthwith.

Faro's house stood next to Ike's, about thirty yards distant in the direction of the river. And it was always a sore point with the most sober creature in Reliance that his house faced directly on Frisco Belle's water barrels and garbage cans. Just now, however, he was satisfied it should be so. He had made up his suspicious mind that Faro was about and shooting. And if Faro was about and shooting, then—

But instead of Faro he discovered something much more significant and even interesting to his own peculiar manhood. He discovered Frisco Belle standing in the back doorway of her house in a transparent night-robe of wonderful texture, and with the light of a lamp shining behind her. She was staring searchingly out into the night, and he noted her superb figure. But then, across the way to the westward, he became aware of the unattractive presence of Joe Makers standing in his lighted doorway, and was reluctantly forced to give it his attention.

It was only with an effort Ike resisted the attraction of Belle and concentrated on his friend. He determinedly moved out and hailed the man with unnecessary sharpness. Joe left his doorway. And they came together well out in the open, though still in full view of the woman who seemed to have a brazen disregard for the necessity of adequate covering.

"Shooting!" Ike flung as the two came together.

And Joe, with his gaze on Faro's house, nodded assent.

"Two shots," he admitted. Then as an after-thought: "And Faro's lousy malemute howling like a bitch coyote in snowtime."

Belle had retired from her doorway, and Ike's whole attention was given to his friend.

"Looks like we'll need to get around," he mused. "It's an hour or more since the folks quit and Marthe shut down. Shooting. I wonder."

"Who'd be shooting around?" Joe asked, after profound consideration.

Then he turned in the direction of Faro's house as the patter of hurrying feet made itself heard, and Frisco Belle ran up a little breathlessly.

"Shooting!" she cried. "Faro ain't to home. Where's Faro?"

The two men considered her frowningly. Belle had donned a long fur coat which she hugged about her beautiful body. Her soft brown eyes were full of alarm, full of trouble.

"Ain't he to home?" Ike's question seemed unnecessary.

"Should be," observed Joe. "Marthe's been closed down quite awhiles."

Belle gestured with impatiently expressive hands.

"Hell!" she shrilled. "Would I be yapping fool questions that way with Faro home? Get sense."

Ike nodded without friendliness.

"We got sense, my gal," he snapped. "There's shooting. An' Faro ain't to home."

"And his darn malemute howling same as if its owner was dead," Joe gloomed.

"Dead?" Just for an instant Belle was startled. Then she scorned.

"For the Lord's sake! Who could pull on Faro an' get away with it? Where's that sense Ike guessed about?"

"Maybe it's Faro done the shootin'. It's likely," Ike retorted with venom.

"Or the other," contributed Joe.

"Who?" Belle turned on Joe in a flash.

"Why the Moose." Joe spat viciously. His heaviness leapt into hot argument. "I've always wondered when," he cried. "What's to stop him? What in hell? Ther's the open river. And every drunken bum in Reliance with his back teeth floatin' in Marthe's raw liquor. What's to stop him making Reliance, I say? They're sleepin' it off now. I'm sick to death of the river. I'm sick to death of Reliance, an' Marthe, an' the Moose, an' the folk around. We need law. An' order. We need—"

Ike flung out an arm pointing.

"Get a peek," he cried sharply. "There. Yonder. Sid Grover's shack. An' the two Peters boys. They've both lit up. See 'em? They heard, too. They surely did. Same as us, only they're kind of slower."

The others turned to look. Sure enough two more lights were standing out in the litter of squalid habitations.

Ike suddenly dropped his arm and faced Belle with the sort of cold censure he intended should hurt.

"Say, you beat it, my girl," he ordered roughly. "It ain't for you to stand around with folk the way you are. Beat it an' fix yourself like a decent woman, an' don't run around same as it don't matter. 'Tain't wholesome showin' the boys your shape. Us men don't stand for that. Faro ain't—"

But he had overreached. Belle's fur-clad arm shot out with all the force of the lovely body he had admired in her lamp-lit doorway. And the slap fell full on his still open mouth. Before he could avoid further blows the hand smote three times. And each blow came stingingly.

"You don't stand for it. You!" she cried, her eyes ablaze under the soft light of the aurora. "You just can your pie, you white-livered psalm smiter, and get to hell out of it, or—!" She flung round on the silent, startled Joe. "And you, too," she shrilled. "You, with your Moose talk, and the rest of it. You're a pair. And no better than mean deuces. You guess Faro's out shootin'. You hope so. You! Tcha! Beat it yourselves. I'll find Faro if I search this burg from Marthe's showdown to Noah's bum freight. And you can both go plumb to hell!"

Chapter XXII

Shadows in the Night

It was a wholly unorganized search that only acknowledged the whim of Frisco Belle. But it was prosecuted with energy. Belle led it. She ordered it. No one attempted to gainsay her. And, strangely enough, Ike Clancy and Joe Makers followed at her heels like well-trained gun dogs.

Belle had set off at once full of hot impulse and real anxiety. And after the first few visits to nearby shacks she had developed into something like the shining nucleus of a first-class comet with its tail spread out straggling behind it. She started with Ike and Joe in her wake. She was caught up by Sid Grover and Alec Peters. But long before half the huts had been visited a noisy, urgent crowd of men and women were hard on her hurrying heels.

There was neither plan nor system in her search. Belle asked no one, and heeded none of the many suggestions offered. She just moved from house to house with a keen, brief questionnaire on the subject of Faro, and, regardless of all angry protest from rudely awakened sleepers, insisted on reply. She was possessed of one idea only. Faro. Something was amiss. There had been shooting. And Faro was missing. She must know. She must know—the worst.

It was late in the search when Belle at last came within sight of the little house that had once been Shamus Hoogan's. She saw its door standing wide open. And the place was in complete darkness. In a flash memory leapt. She halted and pointed.

"I'd forgotten her," she flung over her shoulder. "The door. Open. And where's her light?"

It was a subdued and persuasive Ike who replied to her.

"Aw, say, what's the use, Belle?" he urged. "Ther's just that pore lone kid gal sleepin' there. She won't know a thing. We don't have to worry her for Faro."

Belle turned on him savagely.

"Don't we?" she cried. "I'm needing to find Faro. And I'd say that dame's shack looks a likely place to locate him. We'll get right in."

Ike looked round at the crowd behind him and made a helpless gesture. It caused a laugh. And Belle heard it and resented it. She turned in a flash.

"You folks guess I'm crazy," she cried hotly. "Maybe I am. But why's that door standin' open? Where's the light we all know that kid sets burning when she sleeps? Have you ever known her sleep without it? Of course you haven't. If she's in there she isn't sleeping. And if she's not asleep she's—Come on."

It was an awed and silent group standing over the dead heap that had once been Faro Neale.

Faro, the gunman-gambler. Faro, who was reputed to have shot his way from one end of the northern gold world to the other. Faro, shot to death, with a ghastly cavity gaping in the back of his fine head, and lying face down in an ugly pool of his own congealing blood. It was the last thing that had been looked for. And it was there, a thing of unutterable horror.

Then Faro was lying close, so close, beside the bunk from which the blankets had been hastily snatched. There was the old palliasse still retaining the impression of the slim body that usually slept on it. What did it mean? What was the answer to the hideous picture of such a slaying?

Ike had re-lit the little lamp on the table, and was standing close beside it. Sid Grover was blocking up the dividing doorway, and holding back the crowd in the living room beyond. Joe Makers was just in front of him, staring down at the dead thing with a gaze of complete bewilderment. Frisco Belle was standing over all that remained of her woman's hope and dream of life. She was still, rigid, staring.

Voiceless moments sped. It seemed as if no one dared to break the silence. As if none had words with which to do so. Then someone out in the living room protested sharply at the crush, and the spell was broken.

"We need Scut," Joe suggested, in a subdued tone.

And Ike nodded at him affirmatively.

"He'll need to look him over," he agreed.

Belle stirred. She raised her eyes from the sprawled body, and they gazed at each man in turn. Then came a deep breath. There was a tense moment while she seemed to swallow something. Then a flush dyed her painted cheeks.

"I'm tired listenin' to you two boys," she cried. "Ain't you wise to a stiff when you see it?" She flung out a shaking, be jeweled, pointing hand. "That! That's dead. You know. It once had life and reckoned to do the killing. Now it hasn't. An' the killing's been done by a sniveling kid scarce out of her baby clothes. See that mess all splashed around? That's Faro's brains—the little he'd got. Guess he came to rob that girl of something my sort don't have to worry about. An' she killed him to save it."

She caught her breath, and the pointing hand clenched into a fist with the skin of her knuckles gone white with pressure. A wild burst of hysterical laughter broke from her. And it died out as abruptly as it came.

"She got him, and—I'm glad," she ground out savagely between clenched white teeth. "Oh, I'm glad. Crazy glad. Wanita. Hoogan's kid. He's wanted her. Wanted her weeks—months. I've known it. Seen it. I'm not blind. And all the while I've kept tab on him till—to-night. I quit him at his game in the store when I should have sat on. And the fool man was in liquor. Just enough to set him gettin' after that kid. D'you see? He jumped in on that kid to satisfy his filth. And—and he got it."

The brown, hot eyes narrowed. Then they opened wide rolling queerly as they looked into the hard face of the man beside the lamp. There came a cackling titter of laughter from her painted lips. Then came a gust of merriment that was almost insane.

"It's so crazy funny I got to laugh," she cried. "That kid! That babe pulled on Faro and scattered his bit of brain till you couldn't locate it with a spy glass. Faro. Light-pull Faro! O—oh!"

It *was* insane. Sheer insanity. The laugh pealed out in the silent room and shocked even the hardened men looking on. Gust after gust of laughter came. And it went on while the beautiful body shook with it. It seemed as though the woman was incapable of checking it.

But it ceased as suddenly as it had begun. There was a gesture of clenched fists. Then there was a choking catch of breath, and the fine eyes lost their fever and became deadly in their cold dullness. They looked at the man in the doorway. At Joe. And finally they came to rest on Ike, whom she frankly detested. A frigid derision took possession of them.

"See. Listen you," she cried. "I'll tell you so you wise folks 'll know. Wanita. I've nothing on that kid for—this. Not a thing. Faro was mine—till he came around this shack. He came for that kid, though she hated him. It was his dirt. But he didn't get her. That's clear. And I could thank that kid on my knees that she shot him to the hell he belongs. I'm through."

She turned. And her movement was unsteady. She stood for an instant and seemed to stiffen herself with a great physical effort. Then she thrust Joe aside as though she failed to see him. She swept Sid Grover out of the doorway as though he did not exist. And she drove her way through the press of folks craning and crowding in the little living room beyond, and passed out into the twilit night.

It was over. The storm of it all had passed. That furious storm of human passion, which seems so monstrously devastating, so cruelly heart-shattering, and it's yet no more than a gusty breath over the grim surface of life, with scarcely power even to ruffle it. An aging, erring, wanton woman had witnessed the complete destruction of a wonderful dream she had nursed and fostered, knowing how few hopes remained to her. A young girl of innocence and childlike

purity, had, in desperation, branded herself with the direst of human crimes without a second thought for consequences. An infamous man lay stark and dead in the litter of his shattered brains, gone to his reckoning with the fires of the outrage he had contemplated burning hot within him. Yet nothing seemed different. Nothing seemed changed.

The lights in the northern sky shone never more brilliantly. They came and went, rose and fell. Nothing so small as human affairs could disturb the ghostly measure of their fantastic dance. The profundity of the night hush, too, with its soft murmur of flowing waters, its queer night sounds that echoed and died out in the far distances, remained supreme.

And the little habitation which had been the scene of such human drama had only changed in that its outer door was shut against the camp dog scavengers of the night. The squat building with its tarred walls stood out black and funereal, a crude mausoleum sheltering the dead thing that would be duly dealt with in the morning light.

The little crowd of men and women that had thronged the building had dispersed to their several homes. They had gone swiftly, almost eagerly, glad enough to leave behind them the waking nightmare they had endured. Roused out of liquor-inspired slumber, disgruntled and unwilling, they had nevertheless yielded to Frisco Belle's importunities in a grudging spirit of adventure. A man-hunt had a natural appeal, and they had followed the trail she had broken like hounds in full cry. Then they had witnessed. And then were glad enough when the time came to escape from it all.

It was Ike Clancy who had dispersed them and closed the door for safety. And for once, at least, they had been ready enough to yield to his unpopular authority. They cared nothing for the killing of Faro Neale. They pitied the tortured woman to whose denunciation of him they had listened. But the thought of the orphaned child of Shamus Hoogan was something that harrowed the most case-hardened soul amongst them.

Ike Clancy, in his cold rectitude, had warned them of the morrow. Ike had pointed the consideration necessary when daylight came. Ike had left them filled with a sense of apprehensive uncertainty. Wanita! It was Wanita. The wild half-breed child of Shamus. The poor pretty creature had obviously fled in panic at what she had done.

Whither? Where could she hope for safety in flight in such a region? And what might daylight show them? Then, even at best, what was awaiting her with men like Ike Clancy, and Joe, concerning themselves? And with the shadow of the uncertain Marthe lurking in the background?

It was a subdued and troubled people that went back to their broken rest. And so the night was left to meet the dawn.

It was just before that dawn that life again bestirred. The rampant specters of the northern heavens had lessened the speed and extent of their fantastic movements. The streaking flames had shortened down. They had paled to a vague, soft sheen. And as their radiance faded so the star-world came into its own. Then there was a pale tinge that sharply marked the eastern skyline. It was the silhouette against this that revealed three figures noiselessly moving towards the door that Ike had so carefully closed. They came from the direction of the river landing.

They reached the door of Wanita's home. They opened it. They stood peering within and listening. Then they turned and searched every shadow of the night. A moment later they had passed within.

It was many minutes before they reappeared. And when they did so their movements were slow and awkward, and immensely labored. But whereas they had entered the hut empty-handed now they were heavily burdened, and the doorway was narrow.

At length, however, the task of it all was accomplished, and they stood clear of the doorway. They paused again to peer and listen. Then they shifted their burden shoulder high, and, in single file, bore it away towards the river.

Chapter XXIII

The Morning After

Marthe learned the story of it all at daylight.

It was out there on her porch practically waiting for her. All unguessing, unsuspecting, she had turned out at daylight, as was her custom. She made ready for her early morning trade. And when she appeared with her bottles, and her glasses, and set them out before a group of urgent, waiting thirsty clients, it came at her from every direction.

It came in scraps, and without continuity. It was flung at her in lurid lumps, decorated according to the fancy of the individual speaking. It came with every sort of contradiction and exaggeration. And out of the chaos of it all she grasped the salient facts.

The killer, Faro Neale, had been slain, murdered, shot up, and his brains broadcast in the leanto back of Wanita's cabin. He had gone there pursuing the foulness for which he was notorious when sober, and over which, when in liquor, he had no control. Wanita had taken no chance at all, but had shot him to death on sight. And then, presumably in panic at what she had done, she had fled no one knew whither.

Marthe listened to the story of it in the patient, unquestioning, stony fashion that was hers. She served the required drinks the while, and then stood regarding the unusual proportions of the crowd which had foregathered.

The men were in strong force. And many were those who made no habit of the "eye-opener," preferring a solid to a liquid breakfast; then there were as many women who notoriously hated facing daylight till the world had been well aired, and they had had time for careful preparation before facing a battery of male eyes. Hooch Annie and Idaho Kit were there in faded wrappers, and all the jewelery they possessed. And Marthe's disgust was real as she considered the overnight make-up with which their faces were plastered, and the signs of its hasty renovation with powder carelessly applied. But her cold gaze betrayed no feeling, no astonishment, no disapproval. She just took in the disheveled crowd, understanding the meaning of it, and fired her questions.

"An' Belle? She ain't around. An' wher's that white-livered Ike Clancy, an' his fool shadow, Joe? Ain't their noses deep in the muck that seems to have been going on around while folks were sleeping?"

It was Hooch Annie who replied, since Marthe's cold eyes were still considering her.

"Belle's bug, anyway," she laughed heartlessly. "She's lost her bank, an' guesses she's glad. She's set herself behind her door, that's so fast shut you couldn't pry it with a can-opener. Ike?" She sniggered again and sipped her liquor. "Him an' Joe have gone to inspect the corp. An' measure it fer the funeral he reckons to read the prayers at."

"That's better," Marthe nodded. "That boy don't miss chances. I'll gamble good gold he told the folks all he knew. And then some. He's the sort of mind that owns the earth. An' morality's a 'corner' he's made fine. That corp surely belongs to him, or he'll have to know about it."

"Don't worry for any corp but mine, Marthe," Scut grinned up from his seat at the extreme edge of the porch. "An' mine needs drink. Say, dope me another an' I'll feel good."

Marthe looked down at the burly, good-natured creature with a gleam of friendliness in her cold eyes.

"Just the one more," she warned. "Sandy's still on your hands. An'—"

Kid Pierce flung out a delicate hand, pointing. And it was shaking.

"Ther' they are, Marthe," he laughed. "An' they're making here as if Faro's corpse was right after 'em."

Marthe turned. And every eye followed the pointing of the shaking hand.

Ike was hurrying. And Joe was almost on the run. They were coming from the direction of Wanita's hut. And their hurry impressed the gathering to expectant silence.

They came up. And Ike halted short of the porch. His smooth face was flushed, and his eyes were hot with anger.

"Who's done it?" he snapped, searching the faces staring down at him. "We got to know right here and now. Us folks in Reliance ain't got a deal to be proud about, or to make the world reckon we're better than hogs. But we don't stand for folks monkeyin' around with our dead. Faro was killed, shot-up, murdered. Where is he?"

There was a moment of profound, staring, incredulous silence. Expectancy had passed out of every eye that watched the men standing waiting. Blank amazement alone answered the man's vicious challenge. And it was without a word.

It was Marthe who finally spoke. One hand stroked her hairy chin as she regarded the man she so cordially disliked.

"Come clear," she said quietly. "You're talkin' riddles, an' we don't know the answer."

"Someone does," Ike snapped. "We left him just as we found him, and shut the shack up to keep him safe. The folks know that. It's murder. Cold murder. And it needs dealing with right. He's gone. There ain't a sign of him except the muck of his brains on the ground where she shot him down. The body's been stolen clean away. Why? Who? It don't need guessing. If there's no body, there's no murder. Who wants no murder? It's easy. Shamus's kid did it. She made her getaway last night. Who don't want her to stand trial for murder? Tell us that."

Marthe's big angular body seemed to grow visibly as she squared herself. Her hard face became even more set as she stared frigidly down at the man on the ground below the porch. Somehow the contrast between them reduced Ike to angry insignificance.

"There's only one I can figure who'd reckon to save that half-breed from the rope. An' he's sick. It's Sandy. Well?"

Morbid curiosity had cleared Marthe's porch. Orton Marvin had lounged off to verify Ike's angry announcement. And Idaho Kit had joined him. It was sufficient. It was like the leading of a flock of sheep. And in two minutes all the morning drinkers had moved off. Only were left Marthe, and the thwarted Ike with Joe supporting him.

The two men watched the woman's masculine figure as she moved about collecting the emptied glasses, having already carefully deposited her bottles in safety behind her bar.

Marthe appeared to heed them not at all. She seemed to have forgotten Ike's deliberate challenge of her. And the swift and fighting retort she had made. But from the tail of an eye she was watching. And she understood that more was yet to come. The thought warned her. It was Marthe's nature to fight. And her belligerency was always of the waiting order.

Ike knew her method and respected it. Not only that, he rather feared it. It was all very well shooting a strong left at Marthe. But you could never be sure just how she would, or could, hit back.

But Ike in bad mood was something reckless. He was reckless now. He stepped up on to the porch with Joe at his heels. And he forced the woman's attention from her labors.

"See here," he cried hectoringly, his eyes fiercely alight. "It's got to be spilled right here between us. You quit them fool glasses, Marthe, an' come across. We got to know. And we're goin' to. See? You can't shout murder without a body to prove it. Wanita's your Sandy's woman, and he'll stand by her. He's still sick. Did you sleep good the night through? You packed your boy up from the river same as if he was a babe. Well, Faro ain't a tougher proposition for haulin'. Wher' you dumped him?"

Marthe considered the collection of glasses assembled on her table as though counting them. Then she looked up. And her level gaze looked squarely into the man's smooth face.

"We could spill a big bunch between us, my man, but it wouldn't be the sort of stuff you'd fancy," she retorted. "One day, if someone don't kill you, I'll tell you where you get off. And when I do you'll about wish you hadn't."

Marthe collected her glasses one by one, and set one inside the other. She built four small towers of them preparatory to removing them. Then she squared round on the two men, and her brilliant blue eyes narrowed.

"Say, you're full of that shootin', Ike," she said. "Full right up to your gills. You didn't love Faro. An' you don't care a curse he's dead. But your mean mind sees a chance. You see a chance at me, through mine, when you found him shot up by that half-breed kid. I know you. You are crazy glad because ther' was murder done, and it was done by my boy's woman. You figure your own coming back to you plenty. You'd like that kid girl roped on the limb of a live oak. So you could hurt me through Sandy. You know that's sort of dirty Dago meanness, an' don't belong to a white man. But the only white ther' is to you is your rotten liver.

"Well, you got your chance. You an' Joe there. Why not take it? Faro's murdered. You've all seen his corpse. You've seen it there by Wanita's bunk where she shot him down. You can all swear to that. It ain't there now. But that don't matter in law. If I'd took that body an' dumped it it wouldn't be more than stealing a murdered body from the mortuary after the p'lice had set it there. You want to hurt us. Well, why not get after that kid? An' when you get her pass her to the p'lice. You've half Reliance to witness. Of if you don't feel you're bright enough matchin' your fool wits against that kid's, why not get the p'lice along to do it for you? You've always wanted them here. There's Noah pulling out his old kettle for Glenach this morning. It's a swell chance. A boy of your meanness should take it. There's a kid gal to hang. There's Sandy to hurt. And there's me to set in penitentiary for stealing and dumping Faro's dead body. Why, I'd say you'd be getting your own right along the line."

The manner of it was full of scathing. It's very quiet made it the more devastating. But Ike seemed impervious. He felt that for once he had the redoubtable Marthe where he wanted her. He could afford to ignore any abuse to which she resorted. And foolishly he sought to drive home his charge.

"We won't have to look far for that kid," he sneered. "She's not quit the township. Her old kyak's lying right there at its mooring. Maybe she's just changed her location. What about searching this old fort? I've heard you tell of its cellars an' things."

Marthe gathered her stacked glasses into her arms.

"Sure," she agreed. "But you can't search 'em without the police. At least not with me and Sandy around."

Marthe was smiling. Definitely smiling. And it told Ike in no uncertain fashion that the cards he had thought he held were not in his hands. His temper leapt. He flung all caution to the winds.

"You reckon to get away with it," he snapped viciously. "You won't. I'll see to that. I'll take you at your word. Wanita won't leave Reliance, she won't leave this fort till the p'lice take her. Say, you've pulled your game on us folks just too long. You've bet just once too often. There's going to be a clean-up. You've said it yourself. It's the p'lice. And word'll go right down to 'em on Noah's sternwheeler. Don't you forget those who help after murder are accessories. I don't care a curse if it's you and Sandy, too. You've set your darn flat foot just a day too long on Reliance. I'll have the police here just as quick as they can get."

Marthe's eyes shone. Nor was it with anger.

"Sure you will. And I'm glad," she said. "Get right after it. I can see the steam blowing from Noah's kettle right now."

Marthe turned. She strode across the broad porch and passed into the store. The door, the great heavy, bolt-studded door, closed after her. And Ike heard the old wrought-iron bolt shoot into place, and knew it to be an expression of her woman's detestation of him.

Chapter XXIV

Sandy Faces Disaster

Sandy was a shadow of his former self. His rough clothing hung loosely on a big frame that lacked so much of the vast muscle that rightly belonged to it. Marthe watching him realized to the full the havoc which the boy's wounding had played. It was reasonable to suppose she deplored the wrecking of her own flesh and blood. But there was nothing in her steady regard, as she set his breakfast table, to tell of it.

Sandy was at the narrow window, so deeply set in the heavy wall, gazing out frowningly at the far-distant hills. He was watching the submersion of their snow-capped peaks in a wrack of storm cloud.

But he was not thinking of them. He was thinking of the mother behind him. He was thinking of Wanita. And he was thinking with all the irritation and rebellion of one who realizes his helpless dependence on others.

So many things had power to hurt him since he had been confined to Marthe's room, and to the surgical skill of Scut Barber. Much of it was unreasonable. The peevish irritation of a sick, dominant youth. But much was justified by the facts. And amongst the latter was Marthe's attitude towards Wanita.

As he stood there at the window he was making up his mind to a final protest. He meant to clear the air. He felt that without doing so he could not remain where he was. He would have to get away. He would go at once to Wanita, and they would throw in their lots together once and for all. Marthe's crazy prejudice against Wanita's breed could not be allowed to play any further part in their lives.

And Marthe observing him from the little breakfast table fathomed the atmosphere between them. There was a gleam in her eyes, which, though not a smile, was something very nearly akin. She knew that before she left that room a lot would be said. All of it—and more. She knew that this great son of hers, who was so like to his dead father, was not likely to spare her when his storm broke. Nor was she greatly concerned. She knew that when the conflict between them had reached its final stages the chief hurt would not be with her, Marthe.

She gave a final glance at the table.

"Sit in an' eat, Sandy," she ordered, in that masterful tone that nothing seemed to soften. "Ther's griddle cakes an' sirup. Ther's a cereal. An' ther's coffee. Scut won't stand for you getting meat. Sit in."

It was the match to the powder train. Sandy flung round from the window, and his eyes were hot.

"Where's Wana?" he barked. "Why can't she be around and eat with me? Why do you make that poor lone kid live out by herself? It's her saved my life. And it's only that I raised hell with you you ever let her come near me here. I tell you I won't stand for it. You're crazy for her being a half-breed as though it was something she'd done herself. It gets me mad thinking of it. You and Jim reckoning that way. It's not our blame what our fathers and mothers do. They do it. And then they figure we've to stand for the thing they say. I'll eat none of your darn breakfast without Wana."

"Then you'll starve."

Mother and son. The tone of it all was amazing. There was all the strong natural regard between them. But each was ready to hurt with all the might they possessed. Iron-willed, both of them, they knew only the desire for its expression.

Sandy's eyes narrowed.

"You mean she shan't eat with me?"

"She can't."

"Talk sense."

Sandy's gesture told Marthe his contempt.

"That's what I'm doing." Marthe poured out a cup of coffee, ignoring the boy's refusal to eat. "She's quit," she went on.

"Made a getaway last night after she done it."

"A getaway after she'd—What d'you mean?"

Sandy was staring something bewildered. There was fear in his eyes, too.

Marthe held out his cup to him, and he took it unconsciously.

"Murder! It's Faro Neale. She done him up. Last night. Or maybe it was this morning. She shot him to death right at her bunkside. He was there with her in her leanto—where she sleeps. And she murdered him right there."

The implication was deliberate and careful. And Marthe watched and saw that it sank in.

"Murder! You're—lying!"

Marthe saw the swelling veins on the broad forehead thicken like stout cords. She saw the gripping jaws with their muscles distended. She saw the dreadful look in the clear blue eyes which told of the devastation wrought behind them. And it was all as she intended it should be. She was without pity, or even truth, in this thing. She meant to drive home an advantage and gain her way.

"I don't have to lie," she retorted coldly. "Ther's no need. That's the word they've passed along down to the p'lice at Glenach, by Noah Bartlet. A wench can't have a man with her all night in her shack and shoot him at close range without it's murder. They hang for murder. And it don't matter, man or woman."

The coffee cup was set down with a clatter, and the hot liquid spilled. The youth's eyes shone in a thin, livid setting.

"You're lying because you—hate her," he snarled, the words seeming to grind out between clenched teeth.

Marthe shrugged.

"I told you I don't have to lie," she warned. "The folks can tell you. They heard her shooting. And they found Faro with half his head gone, an' his fool brain scattered. And she was gone, bolted with her blankets an' her truck. Ask 'em."

Sandy moved. Suddenly he slumped into the chair Marthe had set for him. And he sat clutching the little table as though for support. It was an attitude of sudden and complete weakness.

"What else?" he asked dully.

Then happened a thing that was complete anachronism. It was Marthe. She came to his side, one great hand found its way to the man's shoulder. It was no more than a touch, however. On the instant of contact it was flung off by a movement there could be no mistaking. It was revulsion at something detested.

"Ain't it enough?" Marthe's words snapped back viciously in response to the rebuff. "Do you need more? Your woman. The Breed you reckon to make your wife. You sick here. She quits you to pass the night with Faro Neale. An' then she murders him. Murders her man when she's through with him. Oh, they'll—"

The chair crashed over backwards behind him. Sandy had leapt. His great fists were upraised. He towered over Marthe, who never stirred a muscle.

"You! You!" he almost choked. "It's lies. All lies! Every word! Faro! Wana! Get out! Get right out of here while I can still remember you're—my mother!"

The final dressing had been made. And Scut Barber sat back on the bed watching while Sandy readjusted his clothing. Scut was studying the hard set of the youth's grim face, and wondering if the moment was ripe for what he intended.

He knew of the storm that had swept the man he was studying. Marthe had warned him. Telling him only that which had suited her. And even now he wondered how much of it had been the literal truth. He had found Sandy a smoldering furnace of scarcely repressed fury. And only with the greatest difficulty had he induced him to submit to his offices.

Now he was thinking, puzzling, wondering. And all the remains of his one-time professional conscience were in stark rebellion against a purpose he had designed and knew he must carry out.

But that was not all. It was Sandy. It was the man's mood. Dared he risk some furious, headlong action in one whom it was his job to completely heal?

Yes. He must risk it. He had liked Sandy's hard-headed, loyal father. He liked Sandy no less. But above both of them he loved the child of Shamus Hoogan, with her big tragic black eyes, and her courage and friendlessness.

Scut's grizzled face creased itself into an amiable grin as he sat back nursing a single knee clad in a stained moleskin pant leg. There was a kindly humor in his twinkling eyes. And the great chest, and vast breadth of sturdy shoulders, added to a picture of easy good nature.

"You know, Sandy, I got to let you out of this darn ol' prison fort," he said.

And Sandy nodded.

"I'm going anyway."

"Sure. That's how I guessed. That's why I'm lettin' you out. It don't do a doctor-man having his authority defied. Yes. You best get out. *And quick.* Ther's good air on the river. An' you need good air. Those gunshots are healed good, and won't go amiss with reasonable care. You want strength. You want to get good blood in you. You want to get so you ain't sore when things get criss-cross. Now I guess the best I can tell you is to get around right here in Reliance for three or four days. Just get out and stop out. And stop around. Then, when you're feeling good, just beat it up river to your claim and keep active, even if you share it with a murdering Moose and his outfit. Just do that, and I'm through with you. And if things go amiss why I'll be around anyway."

Scut released his knee. He sat up. Then he stood up. And he watched while Sandy rolled up the sleeves of his cotton shirt baring arms that were sadly thinned. Then he encountered sharply questioning eyes that were hard and unsmiling.

"I need to get out—quick?"

Scut yawned and raised his massive arms stretching himself.

"Sure you do," he agreed. Then: "Gee, I've a thirst. Well, seeing your wound's fixed Marthe won't have any kick passing me one. You know, Marthe's all right under those fool prejudices of hers. They don't need to be taken seriously. I'm figuring about that, boy. He's gone down with word for the p'lice. They'll be along up before the freeze-up. Certain sure. They're quick movers—the police. Guess Noah'll make Glenach in three days on this stream. It'll take all a week against it. Ten days? Two weeks? I'd say so. Two weeks the round trip," he mused with heavy pretense.

"The police'll be quicker than that," Sandy said.

"Maybe. Ten days at best," Scut nodded.

Sandy turned from the gaze of the shrewdly twinkling eyes. He glanced over the room he had learned to hate so bitterly. He looked at the window with the gray light of day beyond it. He looked over at the door, where he had watched the going of his mother at his orders, under his threat. Then his gaze came back to the friendly, dissipated creature who had served him so well.

"Why do you reckon the river air's so good for me?" he asked, in his downright way. "The boys aren't making back to their claims."

Scut's grin broadened.

"Too swell a jag around here for that," he chuckled. "Then we haven't heard tell the Moose and his bunch has packed up yet."

"The Moose! I'd almost forgotten." Sandy pondered, and Scut saw him suddenly stiffen. He waited.

"The stream's easy now," Sandy went on abruptly. "I *could* make the Skittle Race."

Scut shook his head.

"Not for days, boy," he said, his grin passing. "Here. I'm all for you getting out. But we got to use sense. You've got valuable days to spare. Use 'em right. Stop around. And you won't have to wonder about Skittle Race. Ten days. Take a week and you'll be clear ahead of the p'lice. An' she'll be safe from the Moose as she always has been."

"You're sure she's made up river? Dead sure?"

"Sure."

"How?"

"She left your old kyak at its mooring and took her paddles, the one's she knew good. She just helped herself to my craft the same as if it belonged her. And good luck to her, anyway. It's a good stout craft and 'll see her through."

Scut yawned with a great pretense of weariness. And Sandy watched him.

"You're quite sure?" he asked urgently. "You know she took it?"

"I didn't see her. But she took it. Oh, yes."

Scut wagged his gray head confidently.

"She took it," he went on. "And I've forgot to tell about it. There's no one knows but me. The folks are all guessing around here. She made her getaway with your old kyak still down at the landing." He chuckled. "But they're guessing a whole lot. They're guessing Marthe got her hid up here in the fort. They're guessing Marthe took an' dumped Faro's rotten carcase so no one could shout murder against that kid. Marthe! Gee! But it's queer, too," he added puzzled. "It's got me guessing. They heard those shots, and found Faro stiff in her shack. And there's not a guess but what that bright kid put it over. Haf the town saw him lying there with his headpiece scattered. Then they shut up the shack leaving it till morning. And at morning that corpse has vanished. They guess it was Marthe to—save her!"

He gestured and shook his head.

"Marthe wouldn't raise a hand to make her safe," he added slowly, noting the other's startled look.

"I didn't know," Sandy flung at him sharply. "I hadn't heard his body had been stolen. Marthe didn't tell me that. Not a word. Why? Tcha! It's like Marthe," he added with bitterness. "No. They can go on guessing all they fancy, Marthe wouldn't pass Wana standing room around. Marthe wouldn't touch Faro's carcase to help her. Not on your life. And I—" He held out his attenuated arms and finally dropped them dejectedly to his sides.

Scut nodded in agreement.

"That's so," he said. "But it's stole. The body. And—" he added thoughtfully, "someone took it because they wanted it bad. It couldn't be Belle, neither. No. I just can't guess anyway. But it's queer. And there's got to be an answer. You'll stop around till I pass you word?"

"Ye—es."

It was grudging. And it left Scut dissatisfied.

"You've got to, kid—for her!" he said sharply.

Sandy nodded.

"Thanks, Scut," he said simply. And Scut grinned.

"It's all right, boy. Don't worry with thanks. Just stop around till I say. That way you'll get a bunch of guts into your mean carcase. You're goin' to need 'em—when the p'lice get around."

Chapter XXV

Scut Trumps the Trick

Sandy was gazing out over the gray waters of the river. He was standing on the cut bank above the landing. And his body had returned again to that splendid bulk which had been the counterpart of his dead father.

Down below him there was much activity, much work going on amongst the boats that lined the shore. They were being made ready. And he understood. In a while the police would be in Reliance. In a while they would be speeding northward in grim pursuit of the slayer of Faro Neale. And hard in their wake would follow the river men returning to their claims. They would be returning in the confident assurance that the presence of the police would set the Bull Moose and his marauding Indians in headlong retreat for the fastnesses of their northern hill territory.

He turned away hastily, oppressed by a feeling of his own impotence. These people were looking forward to the coming of the police in their own interests. While he—!

He passed up into the township. He moved straight up to Wanita's closed and deserted home. There, at least, he would be away from those preparations the sight of which hurt him. There he would be alone without the obtruding of unpleasant reminders.

Sandy came to the black-walled building, which, queerly enough, since the killing of Faro Neale, and the subsequent stealing of his dead body, was shunned by everybody as a place of awe. He sat himself down on the sill of its little storm-porch. For seven days it had been his resting place when bodily weariness overtook him. Nor had he found its associations in any way fearsome.

On the contrary. It was Wanita's home. In his mind it was only associated with her; had she not set her heart on it as a place to share with him? Had she not prepared it; outfitted it? To him it was a place about which her spirit hovered. A place that somehow brought him very, very near to her.

Sandy lit a pipe and smoked thoughtfully. He had much to think of. For this was the seventh day, the day prescribed by Scut Barber when his weary inactivity was to cease.

Sandy had obeyed Scut's orders, but by no means willingly. His obedience had been forced upon him in a wholly unanticipated manner. It had been his first movement out into the open. His weakness. It had been appalling. And instantly he had known beyond any doubt whatever that no alternative was left to him.

But with the realization of his helplessness there had come a nightmare which had remained with him ever since. Somewhere out there on the river, Wanita was voicelessly calling to him, appealing for his help. Looking to him to save her, as she, in his time of need, had saved him. And he could do nothing. Nothing but crawl about the township a helpless hulk, a mere frame of himself, lounging, feeding, resting, sleeping. And always unheeding.

He had known complete despair; he had known that riot of feeling when reckless impulse drove him. A hundred times he had spurned himself for a weak fool, a cold-blooded fish, without courage or capacity, without will, and had flung all sanity to the four winds. Then, a hundred times, that sanity had come back to him and held up crazy impulse while it forced on him the doubtful quietude of feverish impatience. Under it all he knew that Scut was right.

Now, however, there was no longer any bloodless weakness in him. Only active purpose that would be put into operation forthwith. It was the great day of the new life about to begin for him. The ordained seventh day.

It had worked out as Scut had foreshadowed. He was fit. There was no word as yet of the police. His kyak, down at the river, was ready with his outfit stowed. Food. Arms. Everything he and Scut had been able to procure that could serve Wanita. Then his going would be secret. None would know of its time or direction. And more surely than all Marthe would be left in complete ignorance.

It was all planned and ready, and Sandy found a world of comfort in reviewing his preparations. It was a time of dreaming, with his nightmare lost behind. Keen anticipation. Soon now he would be at Wanita's side never to leave it again. She was his; she belonged to him by the right of a love that had no limit. All, everything he was, was for her. And as long as he had a breath of life left in him no hounds of the law should set their fangs to do her hurt.

Sandy had all an outlaw's fear of the police. But it made no difference except to urge him further. Now he looked neither to the right nor to the left, nor back over his shoulder. The path of his life had never been straighter, or more clearly marked before him. It was out there reaching northward. And in the very center of it Wanita was standing, a slim, dark, forlorn and helpless child-woman of infinite sweetness, and courage, and beauty. She was beckoning him, urging him, calling him.

Sandy snatched the pipe from between his strong jaws. He knocked it out with blows that told of his feelings. He stuffed it in his pocket and sprang to his feet. Then he stood staring.

It was Frisco Belle. And she had approached without a sound. Frisco Belle who had remained hidden behind the close-shut doors of the home she had shared with Faro Neale; who had completely cut herself off from the life of the township since the night of her man's killing.

She stood there before him tall and gracefully mature. She was arrayed in her best splendor, with the care of a woman who knows its value. And she was gazing up at him with that brown-eyed smile which had contrived the undoing of many a man before the ruthless gunman had thrust himself into her life.

In that moment of startled wonder Sandy questioned. Why had she suddenly emerged from her self-imposed imprisonment? Why had she come to him; to Wanita's deserted shack? He knew her story, the story of her hunt in the night, and the finding of Faro. What was it that had brought her to that scene of her disaster?

He considered her beauty without one single thrill. Oh, yes. In her way she was a lovely thing. Those brown eyes, which he knew could so blaze with the devil behind them, were alluring, fascinating. But, even as he eyed her, his mind was full of a girl's dark child-beauty. And he felt he was gazing at a work of artifice incomparable with Wanita's pristine loveliness.

"Don't look at me that way, Sandy, or I'll have to hit you."

It came with a laugh that played about the woman's carmined lips.

"You're telling me I'm a poor fish beside your half-breed," she went on coolly. "You're telling me the mill of life has worn my face, and you'd hate to see under the 'slap' I have to set on it so thick. You're telling me that you can't blame Faro for fancying your kid to the wreckage he'd likely find looking at him from its pillow beside him when daylight peeked into the bedroom of our shack. I know, boy. You can't hide it out of those blue eyes of yours, because they're sheer honest. But I didn't come along to bleat. I'm through with that. I did that back home. And it wasn't for him. No. It was for the bank now gone into liquidation. I came because I've only just heard tell. They haven't buried him. Someone's stole his filthy carcase. Why? Who?"

Sandy's head shook slowly.

"It's got us all guessing, Belle," he said. "Who'd want to steal it? Faro! He hadn't a friend on the river, unless it was Ike Clancy. And it was Ike who raged around when he found it stole, and sent word down for the p'lice. I can't see 'Who?' or 'Why?'"

Belle's smile deepened.

"Yet the p'lice are going to see," she said shrewdly, but gently. "You don't know about p'lice, boy. You haven't got up against 'em, same as I have. Police don't ever see things like other folks do. They'll locate both 'Who?' and 'Why?' And it'll be dead easy to 'em. You see, Wanita did that filth up. She's gone off and hidden up. Who'd want to help her out? You were sick an' couldn't steal it. But ther's not a thing to say you didn't pay someone to dump it where the river 'ud pass it on down to the sea. I can hear those red-coats saying just all that."

"Well?"

There was a bite in the manner of it. Sandy was striving to fathom this woman's purpose.

Belle turned away. And her eyes were gazing out over the river at just that northern reach that had similarly held Sandy before her coming. She seemed to be considering something that needed decision before she replied. Suddenly she turned back to him and gestured. And her reply came with a queer laugh that sounded flat.

"Oh, hell, kid! It's all so damn queer an' foolish," she cried. "Why don't I hate the sight of your fool face, with your blue eyes and curly hair? Why don't I rage and roar for your Wana's blood? Why don't I sit around plaiting a rawhide for the p'lice to strangle her with? Why ain't I bellowing for my man like an old cow around a breeding pasture? I ought to be doing all that and a hell sight more."

She paused. Then she went on hurriedly.

"No, kid, I'm doing none of 'em. Say, I loved that feller. I was crazy for him. I'd have seen him sheer through his life, an' nursed him like a helpless babe. I didn't want his bank roll, though it was useful. I just wanted him, with those haf-closed eyes of his, and to get a smile from him when he felt like it. That's how it was. But I don't belong to the muling bunch for all that. No, sir. He wanted another woman. And it's enough for me. I hope he's right deep in the hell he belongs, and stays there—put. That's sheer truth. Faro hasn't a place in my life now. Not even a fool thought. He's out. Right out."

She gestured with outspread hands.

"That's why I'm here now," she went on. "I've done with foolery. I haven't a thing on that kid girl who was ready to kill to save herself from Faro's filth. I haven't a thing on you if you had his body stole and dumped to help her. But Marthe drove Ike to sending word down to the p'lice. I got that right from folks who know. Marthe wants 'em to get after Wanita to be sure you don't marry her. That being so it means a hell of a time for you and her before they're through with you. You won't get the p'lice only. You'll get Marthe. Say, if I'd killed I'd sooner have the whole crush of the Mounted P'lice on my tail than Marthe. Your kid girl's made a getaway. It don't mean a thing. If she's yours, and you want her, get right after her—quick. Take your luck while you've got it boy, and put it through. There's the wide far spaces. Thousands of miles of 'em. An' they're your only hope."

Belle turned away to the river again, and her movement contained something that was left unexpressed. It was a movement with a jolt in it. As if she were hastily turning away to hide the feeling she knew her eyes would betray. Sandy watched her, thinking hard. He felt in that moment that the plastered cheeks and painted lips did not matter in the least. He was seeing underneath. And that which he was seeing was something more beautiful than he had dreamed. Belle had lost her all. But, in losing it, she had found a soul he could be glad for.

With an impulsive gesture he thrust out a hand.

"I'm glad for you, Belle," he barked a little thickly. "An' it's the only way I can tell you. Will you—"

The woman's eyes were smiling straight into his as she took the hand out-held. Sandy smothered her soft, white, beringed fingers in both his palms, and released them almost reluctantly.

"Say, kid," Belle laughed happily. "You're all a boy. And your Wana's lucky."

Then she was gone.

It was night time on Marthe's porch, and Sandy was sitting at its edge with his legs dangling below it. His big body was supported against a roof post. He was in the favored seat, which, of a morning, Scut Barber found to have good strategic value. Just now, however, Scut was forced to occupy a seat without any artificial support for his sturdy back.

The lights of the store were shining in the windows behind them. And out there, in front, was a night that was lit by a brilliant full moon appearing and disappearing amidst a wrack of storm cloud. It was without any gleam of northern lights; only stars in multitudes, and the moon. It was chill, too. The light breeze that was stirring came down out of the north, and warned of the lateness of the season.

There was music in the store behind them. It was a drunken Kid Pierce. And his playing robbed the night of its bleak, unrelieved hush. The two on the porch listened to it whilst they talked. They knew it was wonderful music. Nor did they know why they knew. And in some queer way it soothed and even helped their talk.

"Oh, yes. It's to-night kid," Scut said. "You don't have to worry arguin' on that. It 'ud need to be to-night if your backbone was rattlin' like a jazz band. Say, Prov does act decent now and again. Look at that sky. I'd say it's full of storm one way

and another. But there's a full moon shining to show you the way and a bunch of stars. You got to make that getaway to-night, or—not at all."

Sandy had been watching the cloud movement with his thoughts far away. Now he turned to the twinkling, deepset eyes reflecting the yellow lamplight which fell athwart them from the store window.

"That 'or—not at all.' What d'you know?" he questioned sharply. "Have I waited too long? Have the p'lice—?"

The graying head inclined slowly, deliberately.

"Sure. They're camped below the swift waters a day down river of us here. They'll hit Reliance, an' set things humming, by dark to-morrow. That's Ike's word. An' he's right up in the air he's got his way at last. You know, Ike's a sort o' nasty disease that don't quit till it's got you good an' dead. He passed the news to Marthe, an' she never said a word. She just looked and said nix. Marthe!"

Sandy nodded.

"She would," he said gloomily. "It was she told him go get the p'lice."

"Marthe?"

Scut's eyes were searching the big thing beside him.

"I got word from Belle to-day. She got around to pass me warning that was so. Marthe! My mother! Makes a boy wonder. Sort of sets him crazy mad."

"Sure."

Scut drawled the agreement thoughtfully. And then silence fell between them. The music went on. And they listened to it. Then at last Scut began searching a pocket.

"We'd fixed it to wait for Marthe to close down. I mean when the time came for you to make your break," he said, as he groped. "That was so Marthe wouldn't guess till you were clear away. 'Tain't safe waitin' for that now," he went on shrewdly. "They reckon that boy Danvers is slick. Why should he let the folks here reckon he's a day off, and going to make the town to-morrow night? Why would he get that word to Ike? Did he? You can't just tell. He might get here before Marthe closes down. And if he did—"

His words tailed off into another thoughtful silence while Sandy watched him eagerly. In seven days Scut, disreputable, drunken, had become something of infinitely greater importance to Sandy than a mere healer. For no better reason than sheer goodwill Scut had become adviser, helper, and downright confederate. All unconsciously Sandy had come to accept his verdict on nearly everything to do with his planning for Wanita.

"You reckon—now, right away?" he asked sharply.

"Why not? It's just a matter of hours—an' Marthe. With Marthe packed to her bunk she wouldn't know till morning. You'd be hours on the river. If you go now you'll still be hours on the river when she knows about it. Yes, kid, now!" he went on urgently. "It's got to be. That way you'll make the foot of Skittle Race by daylight. You'll set it between you an' the p'lice before noon to-morrow. The way I figger you'll pick that kid gal right up, an' be away off north before Danvers 'll have passed us folk the time of day. Now see," he went on, holding out a gnarled fist grasping a thick roll of currency. "When I found Ike shoutin' his swell news at Marthe I guessed we'd need to get busy. I just cashed all the credit I'd got on her book. You see, it sort o' flashed on my fool intellect you'd likely need cash, and wouldn't get it from Marthe without she made a mighty slick guess. Here, take this. There's two thousand dollars. You can't tell where you two 'll hit up that dollars won't be needed plenty."

But Sandy made no attempt to take the money.

"Won't Marthe guess anyway? You cashing on her?" he argued.

"Why would she?" Scut's eyes twinkled with shrewd humor. "No one ever guesses just where Scut's going to break out. He don't need currency for liquor with plenty credit. He don't need it to buy chips for his game, neither. But ther's things

in Reliance a boy has to pay for in bills, an' big bills. And Marthe knows all about that being so. You see, they mostly come back to her paying for the sort of truck women don't eat. I cleaned out my credit, and Marthe wasn't glad. But that's all. Take it."

Sandy took the roll with a nod that said more thanks than could any words of his, and set it into the breast pocket of his heavy pea-jacket.

"I hadn't thought of currency," he said. "Say, we'll make over to your shack on the way to the landing. I'll make you an order on Marthe. You can push it at her to-morrow when I'm clear away. She'll cash it; she'll howl at you; she'll curse me; she'll hate it. You'll need to call her right down. I'm a haf share partner in Jim's stake, and I haven't spent a hundred bucks in years. Marthe 'll cash it. She's like that—whatever else. Let's get going."

In less than half an hour Sandy had taken his place in the well of his loaded kyak, and Scut was on the landing crouching over the rawhide mooring to release it. Just at the moment it was quite dark, and Sandy, with his paddle lying across the stout thwarts, was a mere shadow for all his proximity. Scut fumbled and cursed profoundly for some moments. Then the knot yielded, and he turned, grasping the rawhide firmly.

"Say, boy." There was a note of anxiety in his tone. "That darn Skittle Race. It needs a big punch. You can make it? You can drive it home? I feel like I want to see you through it."

But Sandy's voice came back to him full of a smile the other could only just see.

"You've seen me through enough, Scut, like the great big white man you are. You don't have to do a thing now but sit around and pass it to Ike when his darn police come back to him with empty hands."

"An' Marthe?"

There was a moment's silence while the stream set the mooring straining in Scut's gnarled hand. Then Sandy's voice came back to him without any of its earlier smile.

"No," he denied, with the harsh abruptness characteristic of him. "Just see and have her pay over that credit. That's all. You see, she's—my mother. So long."

Scut let the mooring drop from his hand. He stood up. The paddle dipped. And in a moment the kyak shot out into the full flood of the stream.

Chapter XXVI

Sandy Hears the Call

From the day of his birth Sandy had been raised "hard." It was the way of his Scottish parents. Marthe had never known other than toil, heavy, unremitting. And her man had never found anything in life more worthwhile. In their days of hardship and poverty they had taught Sandy out of their own text-book. And the youth had learned in no uncertain fashion. Then he had been physically equipped for the sternest life could show him, while his moral make-up fell nothing short of his bodily quality.

Sandy had the full measure of the task lying ahead of him. Under normal conditions of strength and well-being it would have been part of the daily toil, though demanding his best manhood. But he had been down to the bone of physical weakness. He had just seven days of regathered strength by way of resource. Nevertheless, not for one moment did he doubt.

Then there was that supreme will urging him. He wanted the task of it; all of it. He wanted the consciousness that his whole being, all that was in him, was for Wanita in her need; he wanted her; he wanted the sweetness of that fair young body crushed within his encircling arms, and to know the warm delight of her soft lips tight-pressed against his own.

So he set out with the determination that he would beat the game at any cost to himself. And the swift, unfriendly Alikine was the broad highway to his achievement.

It seemed as though the Fates had ordained for him. As though, in their wayward fashion, they had reached the decision that he must be helped. For hardly had the old landing, with its solitary watcher gazing after him, dropped away out of sight behind him than the storm sky abandoned its darkening threat. The cloud-wrack rolled up higher and higher, thinner and thinner, till only a haze drifted over the face of a brilliant full moon. Then, finally, even that dispersed. And the bosom of the river became a brilliant silvery pathway inviting him to follow it.

Sandy was in no canny mood. There was the glory of light to show him the way. It might betray his presence on the river, his direction. What of it? It would save mean groping, and give him speed. It would help him to ward the many lurking dangers with which the journey at night was beset. And these things were of incomparable advantage. He jumped at the opportunity with which the night had served him, and flogged the stream in an ecstacy of thankfulness for an unanticipated mercy.

It had been early night when he set out. And for seven hours he drove his way against the stream without pause or rest. He was wholly merciless to his weakened body. He called on its every resource without scruple or limit. And it responded to every demand. But only it responded because it must. His will was steel-shod with the ardor of his purpose.

And the whole way he seemed to hear that call that was completely irresistible. His fancy filled it with the persistence of despair. And its appeal stirred his passionately willing soul with a world of tender pity and iron determination. Nothing now should stop him. Nothing should defeat him.

It was the seventh weary hour that brought him within sound of the swift waters below the Skittle Race.

He had performed a miracle of speed and achievement for a weakened body, and muscles soft from inaction and sickness. None but a creature of Sandy's dour determination could or would have accomplished it. He had planned just to do that, that he might have three clear hours before daylight.

His kyak nosed the soft alluvial of the low shore. And in moments was hauled clear of the streaming waters. Then, with a body well nigh dead from fatigue, he rolled into his blankets beside his boat and slept. With daylight he would accept the challenge of Skittle Race.

He ate hastily at dawn, and broke a camp he had not troubled to make. It was all sheer necessity. He had slept because he must. He had eaten cold food to avoid delay. And his drink had been the ice-cold water he had dipped from the river. Then, as the golden arc of a rising sun broke the eastern skyline, he headed for the plunging waters.

Scut had doubted. He had even feared for the endurance of Sandy's weakened body. The Skittle Race against stream he

knew to be a test for the fittest; the strongest. Amongst the river men it was a channel of fear and anathema, with its forest of rocky monsters, worn, torn, and fiercely jagged, waiting on the service of their swirling ally to drive helpless victims within their malevolent reach.

But he need have had no fear. In his headlong race to Wanita's succor Sandy only regarded the Skittle Race with friendliness that it might serve as an added defense against the hounds of the law seeking their "kill."

Sandy knew it all by heart. He knew its every trick and hazard. The boisterous chaos of churning waters left him cold. As his rawhide craft shot into the narrows, and was seized upon by the tempestuously heaving waters, he abandoned every effort other than to keep nose on to their stream, and drove with all his might.

It was the simple skill acquired through long experience. For Sandy understood the bluff of it all. Against the stream the Skittles need hardly be counted for their danger. Such was the surge of furious water splitting itself at their timeworn bases that no floating craft could resist their pressure and approach the rocks they washed. The yawing boat, rolling like an unpiloted log adrift, was simply flung aside clear of the rocks into the main channel and—safety. It was all a matter of headway. Keeping headway. And so long as Sandy's strength served him, and he kept it, his danger was negligible.

Foot by foot, yard by yard, he fought the rage of the waters. However slowly, it mattered nothing. Headway. To lose it meant inevitable disaster. He would have been hurled down stream, a derelict, helpless to save himself. And some grimly waiting skittle would have done the rest. He just fought every inch of the way, and the battle of it went on to its inevitable end. Nature's insensate might was no match for the will of man to survive.

It was a three hours' battle, and with final victory Sandy sought a brief hour's respite on a low shore several miles above any danger from the hurrying stream. He sat there in the clear, shining sunlight hugging his lean knees while life flowed back to his exhausted limbs. He was weary but utterly undismayed. And the call, which had been muted during the struggle of Skittle Race, had come back to him.

He gazed about him as though searching whence it came. To his simple fancy it was everywhere. It was up there floating amidst the foam of billowing summer cloud. He turned an ear northward as though seeking in that direction. He knew it for a figment of imagination, but it did not matter. He liked to think it a reality. So he turned and searched the northern distance.

He peered. Started. Then he peered again.

The fantasy of that call no longer held him; it was gone; it was forgotten; it had never been. Far away, northward, rose the grim walls of Ten Mile Gorge breaking up the broad level of a misty skyline. And there, short of them, in the middle distance, where a rising ground approached a woodland bluff, there was movement. Figures moving. Many of them.

For some moments he watched, straining to discover identity. But he could not be wholly sure. It might be caribou. It might be "black-tails," moving down to water. But he did not think so. It was someone, or something, moving on the *west bank* of the river. And he remembered.

He hurried down to the water and his kyak.

It was early evening. And the blaze of the westering sun was slanting athwart the world when the grim shadows of Ten Mile Gorge engulfed the weary voyager. The sudden passing from flaming sunlight into the gray gloom of the gorge was like a headlong plunge from the top-most pinnacle of abounding hope to the bowels of the pit of despair. Sandy found himself so affected under conditions which, in years, had become almost native to him.

But then Sandy was gravely disturbed. A new and greater menace than any threat of the law against the girl he loved had leapt at him.

The Bull Moose's Indians were still roaming the western bank of the river!

There was no doubt. He had seen them. That which he had first glimpsed distantly had been neither caribou nor any other deer. It had been a band of Kaska Indians. And in ominous numbers. He had discovered them again later, from the river,

as he flogged his way northward.

There had been at least fifty of them. Mean, under-sized creatures, but, so far as he could judge, fully armed with their long store rifles. They had been approaching a windswept spruce bluff quite a mile back from the river. And he had seen them vanish within it.

What did it mean? Was it hiding? Had they discovered him as he had discovered them?

The incident of it had crashed all the optimism which had upheld him so far and for so long. Now he knew the full measure of the need in which Wanita stood. Even he wondered and feared for what might have already happened for her hurt. At best she was now beset on two sides. And her hope must lie in him.

There were only a few miles of the gorge till the first of the two claims would be reached. He had made up his mind he would find Wanita sheltering at his claim, or at her own, higher up. Somehow he favored the idea that it would be his claim. Nor did he know why. If no disaster had befallen her she would be waiting there for him, looking for him, hoping for his coming.

He told himself these things, and it helped him. But he was oppressed with an apprehension he could not shake off every mile of that final lap.

He could do nothing but beat on to the end and watch lest he led the Bull Moose's horde to the girl's refuge. That was the tragedy of it all. Nothing. He could do just nothing to help till he found her. And in finding her he might bring about her undoing.

But even in the depths of his worry he took heart that since his discovery at the spruce bluff there had been no sign of the neches anywhere. Not a sign. And from the moment of entering the gorge he had found a dead world.

Oh, he knew. It was easy enough for them to remain hidden and to trail him step by step somewhere up there along the cliff-tops; it was their way of approach to his claim, as he had reason enough to know. But he felt that in some way their presence would have betrayed itself. Yes. He was sure of it.

Mechanically he dipped his paddle, mechanically he watched those towering heights. He was weary, utterly weary, in body and soul now. But his urge kept him unflagging. Whatever befell, whatever had befallen, another two miles would tell him all.

Two more miles. Just two. He figured the exact distance from landmarks he knew by heart. There ahead was the great abutment which sheltered the rift in the granite wall which had been the cache which the cautious Jim had always used for his boat and his gold. There were the deep scorings on the face of otherwise smooth granite which had always made him wonder how they came to be. Then, below, at the water level, were the great crevices which he had once explored only to find them shallow and meaningless indentations cut out of softer rock by the water race of ages. There was the great bend where the river swung away to the north east. It was beyond that. Just beyond it. The long, low foreshore where Jim and he had worked and quarreled, and—Wanita would be waiting for him.

It was the end of the journey. And he was apprehensively glad. Now his whole watch was on the bend where the sheer cliff shut off his view. Poor little kid! Seven days. They must have been seven days of sheer purgatory. Without a moment's relief from thought of the thing that had driven her to flight. Without a moment's relief from the nightmare of the possible consequences of her act. Then alone. Just alone. No one to share her troubles. No one to help her. Well—

Every stroke of the paddle carried Sandy nearer to the great swing away of the river. And as he approached it the cut of the eastern cliff dropped back. Now he could see the low line which marked the extreme limit of the alluvial washout which was his claim. And his whole attention was caught and held, and his watch on the river was completely forgotten.

At last! Yes. There it was. Steeply inclining upwards to the foot of the cliff. There was the great rift which was its source. It was just starting to show itself. In a moment he would see the old hut. In—

Suddenly Sandy barked a great shout of joyous greeting. It broke from him without heed of any possible consequences. And the echoes of it came back to him again and again as it smote the cliffs. As he shouted he saw a tree hole drifting down towards him. But he gave it no thought. A slim figure was standing at the water's edge watching his approach. And it was clad in the flaming garment he knew and loved. Wanita! At last. And again he shouted.

But even as it came the second shout died in his throat. There was a moment of ugly ripping at the side of his kyak. There was the violent jolt of impact, and his craft heaved. Just for an instant Sandy had a vision of upstanding tree roots bearing down on him. Then something smote the side of his head, and the streaming waters closed over him.

Chapter XXVII

The Rescue

Sandy was a stout if unshowy swimmer. He had become a swimmer in self-defense, and for no reason of any delight in the pastime such as Wanita found. Wanita's half-savage origin was responsible for her love of it. It had made the river her playground from the days of her babyhood. And no creature of the waters could have possessed greater love for them, or, for that matter, become very much more native to them. Sandy, however, saw necessity in becoming a reasonable swimmer if the rivers of the north were to become his permanent working ground. And so, without enthusiasm, but with characteristic thoroughness, he had duly equipped himself.

How his swimming served him now Sandy never really discovered. The crushing blow on his head which had flung him from his submerging boat, had robbed him of more than half his senses. And it was only the natural instinct of the swimmer that made him strive to reach the shore where he had discovered the flaming red of the girl waiting for him. There was just that glimmer of memory in his bemused brain. A vague idea of direction. And, as he came to the surface again, he automatically strove for it.

But it was hopeless from the start. Sandy was buttoned tight in a heavy pea-jacket, and was without thought or ability to release himself from it. Then his feet were encased in half knee boots of which he could not have rid himself even had his dulled wits so suggested. His feet were weighted as with lead. And his restricted arms were as though they were half dead, and well nigh useless. Then his whole effort was against an overwhelming stream. But in spite of all these unrealized handicaps his tenacity was superb. He struggled mightily, and most insensately. And it was just those precious minutes of his desperate battling that gave him his life.

He saw nothing of it. That black head, almost submerged in a wave of water, as it came rushing to the scene of his struggles. Nor had he any knowledge of the racing gait of that slim, eel-like body as it "trudged" its way to his succor. He just blindly fought and floundered, knowing only the water about him, and a destination he must make, and which seemed to elude him; knowing only he must swim or drown. It was all of which his stunned brain was capable. Then, as the last of his strength faded out of him, and he gulped and sank, he had no more knowledge of what was happening to him, than he had of the clutching hand that smote against his submerged head and remained with its tenacious fingers embedded in his thick hair.

The first thing of which Sandy ultimately became aware was a struggle. It was going on about him. He was part of it. In a vague, dreaming sort of way it seemed quite a painful struggle. And the pain was with him. It was particularly in his legs, which he thought to be dragging and hopelessly bumping.

Then the dragging and the pain ceased, and he was relieved. And soon he became aware of hands moving gently about him. That was comfortably pleasant, and he did not mind them in the least. There was no hurt in them as there had been in the dragging and bumping.

Presently he felt someone lift him. He thought he was rolled over. And again it was those hands that seemed so gently strong. The next thing he knew was a wrapping. Something was wrapped about his body. And after that there was neither movement, nor dragging, nor anything else.

Sandy awoke suddenly. He woke to full consciousness. His brain was acutely alert. He knew just all that had happened. The floating tree, which he had seen and forgotten, a late summer "washout" he had been too absorbed to consider seriously. He remembered the half hundred or more Kaska Indians skulking into the spruce bluff on the west bank of the river. He remembered the glad, red vision of Wanita down at the water's edge on his claim. He even remembered dimly that of which in his daze he had been quite unaware. The black head racing down the river towards him. The clutching hand which had grabbed his hair and held to it.

And now he knew that he was lying on Jim's old bunk. That, stripped of every stitch of his clothing, he was wrapped in Wanita's blankets. And that Wanita, with her smiling dark eyes, and her red frock gone, re-placed by another of milder

hue, was squatting on an upturned box beside him.

He should have known a happy wave of content; he should have reached out to reassure himself that Wanita's seductive smile was not a vision mocking him; he should have closed his eyes, and rested wearily after the grueling of his hot-foot journey, and its disastrous termination. But he did none of these things.

A great urge drove him. He dismissed everything that concerned himself. He forgot the wonderful thing, which, in his struggle for life, Wanita had done for him. He thought only of the girl herself. And of her extremity.

His eyes were full of urgent anxiety.

"Gee! It's great I made it an' you'll be safe," he cried exultantly. "I was dead sure I'd locate you right here at the old claim, or at yours, kid. I didn't lose a minute. I had to find you quick, and I've done it."

A soft humor played in the dark eyes regarding him.

"You surely have, boy."

Wanita reached towards him, and her brown hand caressed the curling hair. She laughed. A small, happy laugh, free of any shadow of disquiet. It was the carefree laugh of a creature without a worry in the world.

"It was good you got plenty curling hair, and no barber's cut it off in months," she smiled. "If it hadn't been thick and long I couldn't have held to it. My, you're a great lump of a man, for all you haven't got half your muscle back. That limb found your blind side all right. And it made me sore to think you'd beat it right through to here to find it."

Sandy shook the head she was caressing.

"To find you kid," he corrected.

Wanita nodded. And her eyes lit, while Sandy's gaze turned to the flame of the oil lamp of which he had only just become aware.

"That's what made me so mad," she cried, a little vehemently. "If I hadn't been standing around like a fool image it wouldn't have had a chance at you. You wouldn't be hurt again. Oh, Sandy, I don't want you hurt. I just want you to feel good, and strong, like—like you've always been. But I got you, boy. My! I'd have got you to shore if—if you'd been going right over the great falls back up river."

The girl's passion was flaming. And Sandy possessed himself of the caressing fingers. He breathed deeply.

"Ther's not a soul else in the world could have done it but you, kid."

His hand squeezed. It was the best Sandy could do. Perhaps it was all sufficient. But, if that were so, the girl had no scruple. She bent over and hid her brown cheek against his. Their lips met while Wanita felt an arm slip its way about her body and hug. Long moments passed without a word.

The girl finally released herself. She sat up. Then she stood up, radiant with a happiness that knew no shadow.

"But the rest was worse," she chuckled softly. "I tried to act like Marthe. I tried to pack you up here from the water." She shook her head. "Marthe's a horse!" she declared. "The best I could make was to drag you same as if you were something dead. Then—" Her chuckling smile became real laughter at the humor of it. "Oh, if Marthe could have seen. I had to strip you like the way you were born to get you dry! My! Marthe would have gone around the camp yapping among the garbage cans like a crazy malemute. I had to laugh while I fixed you. And now you're feeling good?" Her laughter went out under swift concern. "You got to eat. I fixed it. Plenty hot food while you were lying around, and your clothes baking out there at the fire."

"Fire!"

Sandy was shocked out of the moment of happiness into which Wanita had lulled him. Everything came back to him with a rush. Her desperate need.

"Say, go beat that fire out, quick," he cried urgently. "Right away, before—before—You mind, kid? It was that fire

before. It's the Moose. His neches were right south of the gorge when I came through. I saw. A big bunch. And all with their store guns."

"The Bull Moose with them?"

It came quickly. The girl's eyes flashing their question.

"I didn't see his darn horns around. No. I guess not."

Wanita's head shook thoughtfully.

"No-o. You wouldn't." Her abstraction passed. "The Bull Moose don't matter," she went on. "There's other things."

"Of course there are," Sandy cried, mistaking her meaning. He sat up in his concern, and the blankets exposed his hairy chest. "You had me forgetting. It's the p'lice. They were only a day below Reliance when I started out. They're coming for you. Marthe made Ike send for 'em. They passed them word you shot up Faro."

But Wanita's reaction to his alarm was only a smiling negative movement of her dark head, the raven sheen of her hair catching the gleam of yellow lamplight as it moved. Then she leant over him. And her action had motherly gentleness in it. She thrust him back on his pillow and covered him with the blankets.

"If there's all the p'lice in the world want to hang me for murdering that skunk man, if the Bull Moose is standing right outside this door waiting to serve me like he served my little brown mother, you'll stop right there till the fire's made your fool clothes so you can wear them. I gave you back your bit of foolish life, Sandy, dear. And now it belongs me. Just lie around and tell me all you know. And I'll sit and tell you all I don't."

It was full of sweetness. But it was full of downright decision; it was there in the light of her eyes; in the firm set of pretty lips; in the thrust of a strong chin.

Sandy caught the meaning of it. He had suddenly become aware of the translation. Wanita was no longer the child he had always known. Suddenly he cried out with a world of regret.

"Say, kid, why? Why?" He frowned at her. "Why you done up that rotten four-flush? Oh, he was for me," he cried. "You, a kid girl. And now they want to—"

"And I don't care what they want, Sandy, dear." Wanita's smile had lost its gentleness. "I pulled on him when he reached my bunkside. He was reaching to put my lamp out so—the night shouldn't see. He was drunk. He was crazy drunk with what wasn't—liquor. I shot him as I'd right to shoot him. The right the whole world hands a woman. Oh, Sandy, your love's a great big thing to me. It's so big. All my whole world. And it's all I got. All I want. And, just as long as I live I'll be ready to kill so—so I—I'm fit to claim it."

"God!"

Sandy looked into the smiling face with a great new understanding. A strong, passionate, sentient woman had taken possession of the child he had always known. And this beautiful young half-bred creature, body and soul, had been given to him. One hand was withdrawn from under the blankets and passed back over his forehead, and over his mass of brown hair, in a gesture almost of bewilderment.

"And so you were full of worry for me, boy," Wanita smiled, watching him. "And you were still sick, an—"

Suddenly Sandy's helpless hand clenched into a fist as it dropped to his blankets again.

"Oh, kid, get it," he cried. "But you can't. There isn't a thing in life for me but you—either. I just love you to death. To death. That's true. And I'm there, set in a sort of prison by Marthe, with Scut to heal me. I'm sick an' can't get around. And Marthe comes telling me you've shot that four-flush, and you'll hang as soon as the p'lice can make it. That you'd made a getaway in the night, but it wouldn't save you. Well, I had to get out and beat the river as quick as I knew how. And—Scut helped me."

"He would."

Sandy nodded.

"Sure he would," he agreed. "Scut got me out with those gunshots healed. He got me right out of that darn fort. And Marthe didn't dare try tricks. You see, she'd done all she could to hurt you. The air did it for me, and getting around. I got new life quick. And I got it so I could act. It was for you, kid. I had to reach you and get you clear away before—Anyway, if they hanged you they should hang me."

"But they couldn't hang you, Sandy. I shot him. And you were sick."

Sandy shook his head wisely.

"They call it 'accessory,' Scut says. You see, folks reckon it was Marthe and me stole his body and dumped it to save—"

"Stole—his body?" Wanita broke in startled.

"I'd forgot to tell you," Sandy explained. "His body was stole right after the folks found it in your shack. They were dead after Marthe and me for it. Ike was."

"Stolen!"

Sandy lay back on his pillow watching the thought frowning in Wanita's eyes. Nor was he prepared for the words that followed mutteringly.

"Then it—was."

On the instant his question barked.

"Was—what?" he asked.

But Wanita only shook her head.

"Tell me, Sandy, dear," she said, and her eyes were steady and unsmiling again. "You came to save me from the p'lice." She shook her head. "Can you? Is—there need?" She leant over to him, and sat with her arms folded on the side of the old bunk, and smiled deeply into his astonished eyes. "You know, boy," she went on quietly. "I've thought hard since I got that scare for what I'd done and made a getaway. I've been waiting around here seven days, thinking. I don't think I'm scared now. I'm sure I'm not. No. They won't hang me when they know. You see, Sandy, I had right. I—I'm not a camp woman. They can't fix that on me. I killed because I had to. Because he broke in on me. The p'lice don't stand for that. I don't guess even the law would."

"You don't know the p'lice—the law!"

Sandy lay there gazing moodily, and remained unconvinced. Then of a sudden he exploded.

"It's hell, kid!" he cried. "It's just come back to me. Of all the cursed fools creation ever knew I guess I'm worst. I'm here. And now I can't do a thing. Say, I'd got it all fixed swell. And Scut had helped me plan it. I figured we'd make it by way of Lake Clare. We'd head through to the Mackenzie Valley, and on to the Dubawnt territory. Make the river and Hudson's Bay. South of it. Then drop down through to the lumber country, where we could make our home for awhile. After that—But what's the use? We can't do a thing of it. That old kyak. It was stowed with an outfit to keep us months. Guns. Ammunition. Food. Everything. Everything you could need, too. And now it's at the bottom of this cursed river, and—"

"No, Sandy, dear, it's down hauled up on the shore clear of the stream. It's got a bad rip in its side that's waiting for us to fix right when it comes daylight."

Wanita's eyes were shining with a little happy triumph. And Sandy's stare of incredulous amazement was her ample reward.

"But it sank when—"

Wanita reached out a hand, and again it caressed the mat of curling hair.

"There's no 'buts,' Sandy," she cried, with a sigh of great happiness. "It's there, sure. Just as I said. Oh, it's ripped. But we can fix it good. And the stuff's not hurt a deal either. Maybe some of the flour. You see, it's mostly canned truck. And the ammunition's sealed. And the guns 'll need kerosene. You left a can of it right here. We're going to make that trip the

same as you planned. I'm crazy for it."

Sandy gazed incredulously.

"But how—?"

Wanita set her hand over his mouth, laughing in her delight.

"It never sank. You just didn't know. How could you, being so full of water? It was hooked up on that fool tree. And the tree brush was grounded on the river bottom. It was just there lying rolling around in the stream waiting to beat you over the head and hook up on your kyak—the tree I mean. I saw all that when I got you. So, after I'd set you right here, I slipped down in the boat I'd stole from Scut and got after it."

She stood up abruptly. All her laughter was gone as she looked down into the eyes that had become the simple heaven of her life.

"I think I want to get away," she said. "I—I don't want the police to get me." She shook her head. "You see, if they didn't hang me they'd stand me right up in a court where folks could see and point. One feller would tell the world I was a killer. He'd say I was a camp-filth who'd rolled Faro for his gold, and killed him when I was through with him. The other?" She shrugged her slim shoulders. "He'd say I was to be pitied and let go. Then a judge would talk pie at me. He'd pass me the sort of sermon the same as if he was a canned god, and me some poor darn scum. No. I'll not stand for it —'less I have to. There's about an hour to daylight now. You can eat right now. And when sun gets up we can fix things. Then we'll be ready to pull right out for Clare against the p'lice come. We'll do just that, Sandy, dear. You and me. And we'll be together for—all our lives."

The quickness of her outdistanced the slower Sandy. Even as he opened his lips to reply she was gone. He was just left staring after her at the door that closed behind her.

Chapter XXVIII

Towards the Dawn

It was a day of feverish preparation, of intensive labor. Sandy had calculated, so far as the police were concerned, that day to be safe for Wanita. And the night, too. But they must be on the river with the following dawn.

Sandy, in dried clothing, was none the worse for his buffeting on the river. And he set about that overhaul on which so much depended in no uncertain fashion. He found that all Wanita had claimed to have resulted to his boat from the disaster on the river was as she had said. Its hide had been badly ripped by the tree limbs. But it was quite capable of repair. Nor were the means of repair lacking. There was Scut's kyak, which Wanita had stolen. And neither of them had the least scruple.

So, together, they set about their task with all the skill which years on the northern rivers had given them. Half the day was spent on the boat. And by noon it stood up to every practical test to which they could submit it. Then came a midday meal of hot food, which they shared ravenously. But it was a silent, preoccupied meal, for both knew they were passing out of the old life that had always been theirs. And neither knew that which the new world was to hold for them.

Then came the overhaul of the outfit. The sorting of it. The cleaning of the guns, which might mean so much to them, with the precious kerosene. Then the re-stowing of everything. It was all a work of heavy thought and keen debate. They were setting out with winter only a few weeks hence. And they were launching themselves upon a world they knew only by such likeness as it might possess to the northern gold world to which they had both been raised.

It was all blindfold planning. And in their youth they cared nothing that that was so. Their whole big thought was that at last they were together; they would always now be together. There was no Marthe, nor Jim, to deny them. There was not a soul in the world to oppose their youthful desires. The shadow of the swift-moving police hovered. So, too, at least in Sandy's mind, was there the shadowy threat of the Bull Moose. But these things only urged them the more.

They labored on till the fall of the early darkness. And when they crouched over the smoldering embers of their wisp of fire—which was all Sandy would permit—for their evening meal, the feelings of both were in full riot. They were bodily weary. Sandy as a result of his gruelling journey, and Wanita from the heroic task she had accomplished the night before. But both were athrill in their different ways. For Sandy it was the sense of his glad new responsibility. For Wanita it was that precious moment which meant the crowning of her woman's life.

The murmur of the summer stream droned pleasantly on the chill night air. Flies and mosquitoes had already abandoned their maddening summer irritations. The darkness in the deep heart of the gorge was profoundly hushed. Sandy, squatting on lean haunches, smoked with great content surrounded by a litter of food utensils. Wanita was on the door sill of the hut within arm reach of the man who had become her whole focus of life. She was gazing out into the darkness over the water. But Sandy was within the range of her gazing.

Sandy unclasped the hands about his knees and removed his pipe.

"We're taking a chance even with that smolder," he grumbled, nodding at the fire at his feet. He glanced up at the night sky in an endeavor to trace the light spiral of smoke which was rising straight up on the still air.

Wanita was only dimly outlined in the darkened doorway.

"We don't have to worry," she said contentedly. "You figure the p'lice can't make here till after we pull out."

"I wasn't thinking—p'lice. It's the Moose and his bunch. They're around."

Wanita moved from the doorway. She sidled over and took up her position close at Sandy's side. She linked an arm through his.

"The Moose won't get around," she assured confidently. Then she gave a little laugh. "He fancies daylight so folks can see his swell make-up. He couldn't set folks on the run at night. They wouldn't see him. He wouldn't be more than one of his neches—that way."

"It was at night he shot me up," Sandy protested quickly.

Wanita shook her head.

"Those were his neches. I guess if he'd been there you wouldn't be along with me now. No. I'm not scared. We won't get him. We won't get his neches either. We've just got to beat the police. And they aren't likely to jump in on us in the night."

Sandy set his pipe between his strong white teeth again.

"No. They'll make camp. But we must make a start the first streak of dawn."

"Yes."

Wanita tightened her arm on Sandy's and pressed it close against her warm body.

"My, it's good!" she said softly. "Think of it, Sandy, boy. There's just the big wide world where there isn't a thing that nature didn't set there, and we're going right out into it—together. We can just make trail where and how we please. And—and no one matters. No Moose, no p'lice, no law, nothing. We're just our two selves with the life that's been handed to us. And we can make it just what we reckon to. You know, Sandy, I've killed a feller, and I'm not feeling bad about it. I was sort of scared one time when I saw him all dead and mussed. Yes. I was scared in a way. But I was glad I'd killed him. Oh, you don't know how glad. I was glad it was me, and not you. And—and now I'm gladder still. It sounds like I'm a killer. A born killer. But I'm not. I don't want to hurt. I don't even want to hurt a buzzy fly. But Faro? Oh, Sandy, he was bad. I don't guess anyone but me knows how bad. Not even you. And when I killed him I knew I'd killed something that needed killing, same as a crazy trail dog. It's queer I'd always hated Faro. Yet he was a good-looker, too. And—and friendly with that laff of his. That laff. Yes. I think there wasn't a thing in the world so bad. I'm glad I killed him. And—I'd be crazy glad to do it again if they hanged me for ever and ever."

Sandy possessed himself of the slim hand clutching his forearm where it had rested. The clutch was almost savage with feelings that had found no expression in the quiet tones of the girl's voice. He squeezed it lightly. And it responded.

"Why you talking that way, little kid?" he asked gently.

Wanita smiled into his steady eyes.

"I don't know, Sandy. Maybe I want you to sort of know me the way I am. You see," she added naïvely, "I wouldn't have you reckon I'm just—a killer."

Sandy came as near a derisive laugh as his feelings would permit. His clear blue eyes grinned.

"I hadn't a thought that way," he protested.

"No. You wouldn't. You're big, and strong, and clean, and honest. That's what makes me so glad for you, Sandy, dear. And I want to be that way, too. I will be. I am."

Sandy crushed the warm fingers he was holding.

"Sure you are. And you belong to me. That's—sort of wonderful. It makes me so I just can't think anything else."

"I don't want you to think anything else. Nothing."

They sat on, the smoke of Sandy's old pipe scenting the air. The smolder of fire just outlined them sitting close to each other's side, like two perching birds at nesting season. Their hearts were full, and their love was without a shadow. They knew that any moment might possibly bring them face to face with disaster and even death. But those things were incomparable with the immensity of the love between them.

Wanita would have sat on till the dawn claimed its tasks. The passion in her was content—utterly content. But Sandy was obsessed by his wonderful new responsibility. And suddenly he removed his pipe, and, reaching forward, knocked it out on the ground. His hand tightened on the one he was holding. And, as he sat up again, his queer bark came sharply.

"Beat it, kid," he said. "Beat it to your bunk, and make a good sleep. We got to make the lake to-morrow, an' haf way over it. You don't need to fix the lamp. I'll be lying outside across your door." He grinned in the firelight. "There won't

be a thing to pass me."

But Wanita made no move to obey the kindly mandate. Somehow her sun-tanned cheeks had paled as she sat gazing down into the smoldering ashes of the nearly dead fire. A queer little smile flickered in her eyes. It was something a little humorous, and yet a little shy.

Suddenly she turned. Her eyes were melting. And the smile in them deepened as they looked into the questioning of Sandy's.

"Tell me, Sandy, dear," she almost whispered, "does a husband always sleep outside his wife's door to keep her safe?"

There was a sudden movement. Sandy's bulk heaved round. And the girl's body was crushed in his arms.

It was nearing the dawn.

The late risen moon had broken its way through the drift of heavy night cloud. The deeps of the gorge were lit by the shaft of light that transformed the river into a broad pathway of silvery radiance. The inky blackness had given place to a twilight that was something awesome by reason of a thousand shadows that might contain untold perils.

The river murmured on. And only the lightest zephyr drifted over its bosom. There was no other sound but the whispers of nature. But there was movement. And it was movement whose soundlessness was full of omen.

Shadows passed down the rift from the heights above, where the last drainings of summer still trickled musically; they were small shadows, and there were many. And as they moved no sound came. Not even the sound of the dislodgement of soil or rock. They were undersized human figures, and they moved with the caution of secrecy.

The leaders reached the level of the shore near by to the mouth of Jim McBarr's old sluice, where his trolley lay upturned as Sandy had left it when he ceased his work on the sluice. But the great rift behind them was still full of moving shadows. It seemed almost as if there were hundreds of them.

At last a crowd clustered on the shore. A large and soundless crowd.

Then came fresh movement; and movement that had even more secrecy, more caution in it. The leaders went first. And the crowd gradually spread out behind them. The direction of the leaders was the little old hut set at the cliff face, where the moonlight showed it to be in darkness with the door shut fast, and the dead ashes of a fire directly in front of it.

The leaders moved up to it. And the straggling crowd followed. And as the leaders halted just beyond the doorway the rest closed up on them.

It was all completely soundless with the sort of stealth that only the Indian can produce. It was the stealth of the hunter whose whole life is spent in competing with nature's acutest instincts and senses. These shadows were hunting now.

The old door began to move. It opened soundlessly just sufficient to admit a slim, half-naked body. One vanished within. And the manner of it was on hands and knees. Then another followed. Another and another. At least ten so vanished within. For the rest the crowd squatted circled about their carion.

Then came a shout from within the hut; there came a scream; then came shots; then came fierce cries. In a moment the door flung wide and a great figure rushed out bearing a slim white body in his arms.

It was then the vulture ring closed in. It closed in on the door, and the man with his burden. And the man went down with a shout that was like the bellow of a maddened bull.

Chapter XXIX

The Bearding of Marthe

It was Scut Barber who witnessed the arrival of the police in Reliance. And it was Scut alone.

But then after Sandy's departure, which he had watched with some concern, Scut had gone on up to Marthe's store for his evening's entertainment with a clean-cut argument in his shrewd head; and one which entirely convinced him. He knew a great deal of police methods; and he had a wholesome appreciation of them. His simple argument warned him that unless the police intended a rush arrival, calculated to surprise, they would never have caused their whereabouts on the river to reach Reliance the day before.

That night Scut surprised his blankets with a wholly sober body. It was an act of great self sacrifice in a man of his disreputable habits. But he wanted to wake early and without a thirst. He wanted a clear eye, and an even clearer head. And Marthe's liquor was conducive to none of these things.

He was out before the dawn. And the first pale tinge of daylight found him hunched on the top step of the roughly timbered stairway from the landing to the twenty-foot cut-bank above it. He was seated there gazing and listening. But mostly listening. For, if his estimate of things was to prove, his ears would be needed long before his eyes.

And so it was. While yet he gazed into the vault of a clouded night, in a direction where he knew the river to be streaming heavily between high deeply wooded banks, he heard the far-off, faint "chug" of an oil engine. Its beat was regular, persistent, and there was no cross wind to carry the sound away. Then, as he continued listening, he heard the fainter sound of a second engine. At his second discovery he blew a low whistle of astonished interest. The police were arriving. And in two motor patrol boats!

As the first gleam of a rising sun flashed its brilliant light upon the morning world Scut found himself down on the gently swaying logs of the landing. He was very correctly observing the approach of two stout, and magnificently built motor patrol boats manned by no less than ten men. The size and power of the boats astonished him. But the number of their police crews filled him with grave concern. Then, to his amazement, he watched the boats nose into the landing against the Alikine's stream, without any sort of maneuvering. Against the power of the police engines that stream did not exist!

It was startling. And watching it, the thought passed through the gold man's mind that the power of those engines was symbolic of the force employing them. He promptly congratulated himself on the rightness of his judgment. He was very glad of it. For he was missing nothing that might serve those "two kids" for whom he had conceived a wholly unreasonable sense of responsibility.

The man's broad, squat personality quite belied him. Behind Scut's grizzled face and deep-set eyes there lurked a reckless determination that if opportunity could be made to serve Sandy and Wanita he was ready to "jump in" with both his heavily booted feet.

That was why he had passed a sober night. That was why he was there on the landing in the bleak of a late summer dawn. That was why he called a greeting calculated to ingratiate to Inspector Jack Danvers sitting at the tiller of the leading boat.

"Say, Inspector," he cried. "I can't think of a gladder sight for Reliance than your two swell boats, and the bunch of boys in 'em. It looks like us gopher boys won't have to hunt our holes again for any darn Bull Moose."

Reliance awoke to the startling presence of the police in its midst. It had prepared itself for their coming. It had almost got used to the idea. Being what it was Reliance hated the law and those who administered it. But it had seen the inevitable, and, with characteristic indifference to that which could not be avoided, it had resigned itself.

But even the most pessimistic had not foreseen two great patrol boats so powerful that they made nothing of a stream which was something Reliance held in profound awe. Nor had there been ten uniforms looked for, which included the

uniform of an inspector famous for his energy and hard sense of duty. The result was perturbation; an awed and silent questioning; a grave personal consideration of just how this invasion was to affect the individual. Every man and woman gazed askance, watching every movement of Inspector Danvers, and counting up a long list of past delinquencies for which by some ill fate they might be called to account.

Reliance forgot to sleep late. It forgot much of its morning thirst; it forgot to air its views. But the landing where the patrol boats were moored, and the movements of Danvers and his men, were things that preoccupied it for the entire day from sunrise to sunset.

Inspector Danvers' methods were quite unshowy. There was no bluster, no weight of authority thrown about. While his men remained at the landing, with the gently insinuated aid of Scut Barber, he sought out Ike Clancy who had been responsible for the story of Faro's killing. He spent two hours with Ike and his friend Joe Makers in the former's hut listening to the whole story of Reliance from the break up of winter down to that precise moment.

It was a story that told much of Ike's peculiar characteristics, but much more, and much more frankly, those of other people. Everybody suffered under the lash of the man's self-righteous venom. Marthe. The dead Jim McBarr. Their son Sandy. And Wanita, who had killed Faro. Faro himself got the full of it with a story of crime in which reality and fiction were indiscriminately confused. Then the story of the Bull Moose, and the mental sweat every man on the river endured under the threat of him. Ike told it all and was abetted by his friend. And Scut, who had contrived himself present at the interview, felt that the only honest and reputable people in Reliance were these two. The rest, including himself, belonged nowhere outside the penitentiary, or a mental hospital.

Scut watched Jack Danvers closely, and could not be sure. Danvers was a good listener. Ike was a ready talker. Somehow Scut thought Danvers was passing the story through a close-mashed sieve, and would not offer the result to public inspection. And he was right.

At the finish of the story Danvers made no comment on it. Apparently he accepted it at its face value. He regarded Ike, who was just as he had risen from his blankets, with the addition to his underclothing of his outer pants. He considered the unwashed, unshaven face, and the uncombed hair as the man sat on his blankets. And there was nothing cordial in his regard.

"That's all right, Clancy," he said coolly. "I'm obliged for the stuff you've handed me. I'll be getting along."

He rose from the only chair in the hut and prepared to depart without another word. But that was not what his hosts had looked for. Ike stared. He wanted to talk some more; he wanted his advice sought and taken. Joe Makers, with his back to his friend's stove, was frankly annoyed, and his anger found instant and incautious expression.

"But what you goin' to do about it, Inspector?" he snapped.

Danvers turned in the doorway, through which Scut had preceded him. His reply came with a studied coldness there could be no misinterpreting.

"Just clean up a muck-hole that you boys don't seem to reckon contains much else but filth."

Danvers left Ike and his confederate with a sound working knowledge of Reliance, if it was something confused with the personal views of those who had provided it. The latter concerned him not in the least; he had measured his men on the instant; he had gleaned a lot of grim facts which he must verify before taking the necessary action he saw looming. That was the work of the day, and he felt it would not be difficult. So, accepting the willing guidance of Scut, he went through the whole collection of miserable huts that made up the township until he was well nigh nauseated.

But he persisted to the bitter end checking up the whole time. And by the time he was ready to interview Marthe at the fort he had collected the complete story of the Bull Moose, the wealth of gold contained on the shores of the Alikine, and the more or less intimate history of every soul in the place.

The dealing with the killing of Faro Neale, which was the ostensible object of his descent upon the place, afforded him little satisfaction. He had gleaned the whole meaning of that killing. And he understood it, and, in his heart, sympathized with the killer. But his personal sympathies had no place in his police activities. The girl Wanita must be dealt with. And the information he had gleaned suggested that she had braved the river with the Bull Moose's Indians out, and, being half Indian herself, perhaps it was for that reason she had done so. The following up of that trail might lead him to the Bull

Moose, and to the unmasking and capture of that fantastic renegade.

Danvers had prepared for many many months for this descent upon Reliance. And by the time he had received Ottawa's authority, and his reinforcements, and the necessary patrol boats he had planned to make a very complete job of it. But the killing of Faro Neale had rather precipitated his action, and, to a certain extent, complicated his task. That killing must be dealt with first. Then he would establish his police post directly afterwards and take official charge of the whole region. It was the order laid down by his superintendent.

Danvers put in a day of tireless inquiry. And it was not until the late afternoon that he bearded the redoubtable Marthe in her old fort. He had saved her for last for a clearly defined reason. Her antagonism would be certain. And he wanted to be in a position to meet her on her own battle-ground. And the way to do that was to have every fact relating to the place at his fingers' ends. By the time he approached Marthe's porch he had learned everything he could discover, and which his self-constituted guide and informant, Scut, could tell him.

Scut realized something of the purpose and astuteness of this officer as they approached Marthe's porch. Instead of stepping on to it Danvers stopped short and turned on him. He was smiling shrewdly as he considered the rugged face with its quick, twinkling eyes. And he spoke in that sharp staccato which seemed part of his uniform.

"I'm obliged to you, Barber. 'Scut' they call you, don't they?" he asked. "Anyway I'm obliged. You've helped me a deal in locating things. But why were you waiting for me at dawn on that landing?"

The twinkle of Scut's eyes deepened as he looked back into the keen young face. His mind was made up on the instant.

"Because I didn't reckon to miss a thing that might help those kids on the river. That gal was dead right shootin' up Faro. I guess if you'd been around you'd have shot him up for her. I'm glad she made a getaway. She stole my boat to do it, so I know. That boy, Sandy, has gone after her to save her from you folks. And he'll do it. That's why I'm telling you. I helped him to get away last night. The folks don't know it yet. But I guess Marthe will—by now. He's had twenty-four good hours' start of your kettles. And he knows the river same as if he was born to it. If you can pick him and her up, I guess you're welcome. Do you want to—now you know about that killing?"

There was a moment before any reply was forthcoming. Then Danvers' head moved negatively.

"It's not what *I* want," he said quietly. "That killing needs to be cleaned up right."

Scut gazed abstractedly out over the river.

"Sure," he agreed.

Danvers laughed. And somehow it told Scut the thing he wanted to know. His abstraction passed, and he watched keenly.

"I like you, Scut," the Inspector said quietly. "Now, see here. You don't reckon to miss anything that might help 'those kids.' You know the river. I want a couple of boys along with us to-night, if it's clear and bright. We're going up after your 'two kids.' Will you make one of them?"

"Sure."

There was something very cordial in Scut's prompt agreement.

"Who else? Not those two, Clancy and his partner."

"No." Scut grinned. "I'll get Sid Grover. Say—"

"Yes?"

"If I can help those kids I'm doing it—if it sends me to penitentiary for the rest of my life."

Danvers nodded and smiled.

"Sure. I get that. I'll go hear Marthe."

"Yes-es."

And Scut moved away as though the prospect had no personal appeal for him.

Marthe had waited most of the day for Inspector Danvers' visit. Nor had she been greatly troubled at the delay in its coming. She knew exactly what was happening. Her customers had taken care of that.

It was a day of early and continuous trade for Marthe. From the moment Reliance had become aware of the police invasion the store became a general meeting ground for discussion. It became more than that. It afforded a sense of community, and so security. Herding together, and with the support of liquor safely tucked under their belts, the folk of Reliance acquired to themselves a reckless, laughing confidence that was comforting, if purely artificial.

For once Marthe took only the most casual interest in her trade. She was there hovering cumberously about her bar with her cold eye watchful. She listened, too. But she left the work of service to her helpers and kept a silent tongue.

All that Marthe hated most had come to pass. She knew of Jack Danvers, and the man's reputation; she knew of the wonderful patrol boats lying down at the landing; she knew the number of police who had invaded her kingdom. And these things told her the rest.

It was of no real interest to her to listen to the story of the Inspector's doings, combing the place with Scut Barber at his heels. His questioning of every soul in the place mattered nothing to her. She knew Reliance would lie heartily to him. And the man would know they were lying, and contrive to sort the truth out for himself. That, to her mind, was all elementary. The thing that did matter was that Danvers had arrived with ten men. Ten! It meant that henceforward Reliance would remain under police control. She had never heard of a police patrol on the trail of a killing consisting of anything more than two men, and perhaps a non-commissioned officer.

But even so it was not that which kept Marthe so grimly indifferent to her trade. So silent and unapproachable. It was something of which none of these people knew. And had they done so would never have credited as being a matter that could influence Marthe detrimentally where her sovereignty in Reliance was concerned; or even damp her ardor for acquiring profit.

Marthe had been shocked when she had lost her man. Her almost life-long companion, lover and friend. She had survived it. She had put it behind her, and carried on. And now she had been no less shocked by reading a brief note which Sandy had left for her in the room she had given up to him, and, in which, last night, he had not slept. It was the tone, the brevity of the boy's note. The case-hardened soul of the woman had been hurt even more than she knew. The note ran:

"Dear Marthe,

"I'll likely not see you again. You've done all you know to rob me of the girl I love, even to having Ike send to the police so they should hang her. I'm going to her now to save her from just that. You can keep my share of our claim. You like gold. And it looks like the only human thing I've ever known in you. Maybe someday, though, you'll get the idea that gold can't do better than buy.

"Sandy."

Marthe had read that note twice over. Then she had laid it aside. Later she had read it twice again. And now it was folded, and stowed somewhere within the old-fashioned waist that concealed her substantial bosom. The hurt Sandy had inflicted was overwhelming; it was more devastating than had been the loss of her man. But again she would survive it. Oh, yes. It would ultimately be laid aside and buried with that other. And she would go on driving straight ahead to the goal she had set herself.

Late in the afternoon Marthe saw Jack Danvers enter the store. And she braced herself. Had she not seen him she would have known of his entry from the sudden hush that fell on the noisy gathering of drinking souls at the tables. Every eye had turned without scruple on the slim figure of the man as he crossed at once to the bar, where the men standing there made way for him. He addressed himself to Marthe without any preamble.

"Is there a place we can talk, Madam?" he asked coolly, his appraising eyes studying the strong face with its hard gazing eyes. It was the chin whisker and downy mustache that finally held his attention. "I've been around and collected most of the stuff I need to know. But there's maybe things you can tell me."

Marthe glanced over her counter. She saw her helpers busy fulfilling orders. She saw the men lounging there watching her. And she knew that the hour of her deposition as despot of Reliance had struck. She nodded.

"You can come right in back, in—Sandy's room. We can talk there, I guess."

In a few moments Inspector Danvers was considering Marthe from the chair she had made him occupy in the bedroom she had given over to Sandy. And he found her interesting, if unattractive. The whole force of the woman was looking out of her blue eyes while she waited for him to put his questions. She remained standing, with her bare arms folded across her waist. She was the epitome of cool preparedness. Danvers began at once.

"First I best tell you we're taking over this—camp—right away," he said. "I'm going up river to-night, leaving a corporal and two men in charge while I'm away. Meanwhile there's several government officials leaving Port Curtis for here. There'll be a Gold Commissioner, and an Indian Commissioner, and—several others. You know just what that means. It means that from the moment we take over, the gold industry of the Alikine is under government control. There'll be no promiscuous traffic in dust. The whole thing will be carried on under the same regulations as Leaping Horse, and Dawson, and every other field. That's quite clear, Madam?"

Marthe nodded. Her face remained expressionless.

"Now this boy of yours. I understand he's gone after the half-breed woman with the idea of getting her clear away from us. That's pretty serious. You understand that? Then there's the matter of the murdered man's body. It was stolen after the folks found it. I need to warn you there isn't any law that requires you should make any statement. And anything you say can be used as evidence. But, if you like to tell me anything, I'm here to listen to it."

Danvers was watching for a sign, striving to read that expressionless face, trying to fathom the thing behind it. But no Sphinx could have had more immobility. As he finished speaking a steely glint flashed into Marthe's steady eyes. That was all.

"I don't see there's a thing of use I can hand you, Inspector," she said coldly. "The folks tell me you been around. And likely enough you know most things just as good as I could tell you. Maybe better. You've seen Ike Clancy, and I don't guess he let you escape without hearing it all. You see, he's glad for you. And I'm not. Did he pass you his notion of that stolen carcase? Of course he did." As the officer nodded. "He told you I'd stolen it and dumped it—to save Sandy's half-breed! Say, I wouldn't save her from the rope for all the gold on the river! I wouldn't lift a hand that way. Anyway, what's the use stealing it? The folks had all seen. They knew Wanita had done him up. The whole thing was dead sure. No. I didn't have to steal dead bodies an' dump them. And surely not to save a half-breed who's got my white and foolish son in the palms of her Indian hands."

Watching, Danvers became aware of a change. Suddenly he saw the mask of immobility yield. He saw the blue eyes widen and a frown gather on the brow above them. He saw a queer little twitching about the hard mouth. And he felt that this reputedly soulless creature was nevertheless capable of feeling. Then came her gesture. Her workworn hands clenched. They dropped to her sides and remained there gripping.

"That boy," she cried, and the veins of her forehead swelled and stood out. "Yes, he's gone after that half-breed. He's crazy mad for her, and he's gone to get her away from you. Say—"

She broke off. And Danvers became aware of her sudden heavy breathing. Then she rushed on in a manner almost demented.

"I haven't wanted p'lice around," she cried harshly. "I've always hated the sight of their coats. But get my boy back so he can't marry that wench. Set him in penitentiary for helping her. Keep him there till he's cured of his craze. Do that, and I'll bless the day you folks set foot in Reliance. Man, I want him. He's my boy. An' he's all I got."

Danvers stood up. And his official attitude relaxed. He shook his head.

"There's no place on this river where they can fix up any marriage so far as I know," he said soothingly. "Just wait

around. We'll pick him up before they can make any place where they can."

Danvers turned away; he wanted no more; he knew much of the ugliness of outworld human life. But a mother asking him to have her only son sent down to penitentiary to save him marrying the woman of whom she disapproved was something that confounded him. He left the room; and his outraged mind carried away with it a picture of that hard, relentless, working face with its unwholesome tuft of chin whisker.

Chapter XXX

Crucified

There was no delay in Inspector Danvers' pursuit of his quarry. His plans were made with a swiftness, a clarity of vision which marked him out the efficient officer his chief, Superintendent Ferrers, knew him to be.

A swift calculation had warned him that he could safely leave the charge of Reliance in the hands of his corporal for some days. The officials were not likely to reach the place for quite two weeks. And his own presence would not be necessary until they arrived. Two weeks. He could cover a lot of ground, a lot of water, in that time. And who could tell the value of the time so spent?

Then luck seemed to be with him. The weather seemed to be running into a patch that was not unlike an Indian Summer. The gray threat of coming winter, with its chill northern air, seemed to have abandoned its unpleasant omen. Night fell clear and warm, and a blaze of aurora filled the northern sky.

His two motor patrol boats left the landing immediately after he had installed his corporal and two men in the temporary quarters of a disused shack that needed considerable repair. Scut Barber and the narrow-chested Sid Grover had taken the places of the men left behind.

Danvers took Scut with him in the leading boat. There was something about the frankly spoken, cool determination of the disreputable remains of what once had been a surgeon that appealed to him. Besides, he had formed the opinion that he could absolutely rely on the man's knowledge of the treacherous Alikine and its many pitfalls.

Danvers realized the rightness of his judgment the moment they reached the swift waters below the Skittle Race. Danvers was at the tiller. His mechanic was at his engine. Three men and Scut were forward keeping a look-out under the gorgeous radiance of aurora. With the first pitching of the powerful craft Scut made his way aft and sat himself beside the officer.

"There's a mile or more of boiling hell lying just ahead," he observed casually as he took his place and swayed to the roll of the boat. "But I figger these craft 'll drop it to no better than a simmer. Will you take the word from me, Inspector? I know it like my home city."

Danvers smiled at the grizzled creature.

"There's nearly ten thousand dollars of government property under us. There's the lives of five good men, whose calling I guess you don't approve, at stake. You can do your worst to drown the lot so your killer and her man can make their getaway."

Scut chuckled voicelessly.

"Bully!" he grunted. "Swing her left of that darn Skittle," he went on pointing. "Then go dead ahead till I say."

And Danvers obeyed without a question.

Scut's prophecy was at once fulfilled. And it was almost with a sense of disgust he realized that Danvers was laughing quietly to himself as the boat plowed its way, in something considerably less than half an hour, beyond the last of the fourteen bogeys of Skittle Race. He felt he had let himself down in the eyes of this black patrol-jacketed "red-coat." He felt the Alikine had let itself down, and he did not like it.

"Is that the worst it can show us?" Danvers smiled quietly.

And Scut was reduced to a nod.

Danvers handled his boat with a cool skill which evoked Scut's ready admiration. But the gold man said nothing. Only he registered the thought that if Sandy were to escape these red-coat trailers he would need to move. Not only would he need to move, but he would have to dodge into regions where a motor patrol could not follow. He was perturbed.

Danvers set his tiller and packed a pipe. Cigarettes were only for his office. He lit it and turned to his companion.

"Now see, Scut," he said sharply. "I want first that claim that belonged to McBarr. Then we make that other claim of Shamus Hoogan, higher up. And if we draw blank, we're making that Badland show you folk call the Valley of the Moose. This is all a preliminary try-out. I'm going to put the fear of God into those Kaskas, anyway. And if there's any darn renegade white with them I'm pulling him in." He smiled. "If we draw a blank on that boy and girl, and you don't have to double-cross me, why, I'll pass you my thanks for making this trip, and you're free to commit any felony you fancy on their behalf. I'll only pull you in when you've finished acting that way."

Scut's disappointment had passed and his eyes twinkled in the precious twilight.

"That goes," he said good-temperedly. And he, too, smoked.

He smoked for some thoughtful moments.

"I guess you'll draw a blank both claims," he observed presently. "I've got it figgered. You see, it's a matter of time."

"But he was a sick man?" Danvers said quickly.

"Not too sick," Scut demurred. "Then it was for her."

"Yes."

"Are we doing your best speed?"

"All we're going to."

Scut warmed to him.

"Then it'll be dawn at Jim's claim."

Scut's tone was one of huge relief.

"Yes. Blank at both claims," he went on a moment later. "But the other? I wonder."

Danvers laughed.

"I could double this speed without a worry," he said.

"Don't."

"No. That other. You feel good about it? The Kaskas, I mean."

"I'm with you after 'em all I know." Scut spat. "Every back tooth I got."

But the dawn was not to show them the blank Scut had hoped and upon which he had figured. And it was at the first of the two claims. In the gray light at daybreak, Scut eyed, with something akin to despair gnawing his sturdy old heart, the double kyak lying moored at the water's edge. It was loaded down with Sandy's outfit right opposite the tight-shut door of the old shack he remembered so well. It was lying there obviously ready for the getaway of those two, poor, foolish kids for whom he had hoped so much, done so much. And his quick eyes, and quicker brain, interpreted what he beheld.

There was the heavy repairing on the big craft. Then there was the wreckage of his own kyak, which had been stripped of its hide, lying near by. The thing told its story of delay. Clearly Sandy had met with disaster on the river which he had had to make good. Scut felt that nothing worse could have happened.

He looked up at the closed shack, and Danvers was watching him.

They were standing on the shore just out of earshot of the officer's men who were drawing the motor boats up clear of the heavy stream. Danvers was unsmiling. There was no look of any elation that he had run his quarry to earth. On the contrary.

"I think I'm sorry, Scut," he admitted. And he, too, turned considering the closed shack.

But his moment of feeling passed. The policeman re-asserted himself. There had been a killing and he was trailing the killer. There must be no yielding to any weak, human sentiment. His duty was clear, no matter how it came that the half-breed girl had shot the gunman-gambler. He turned on Scut in no uncertain fashion.

"You'll stop right here, Scut, and some of my boys 'll see you play no monkey tricks. They're up there at that shack. And I'm going to get them. You need to be good. Don't forget we're the law. And the law can be—tough."

Scut made no answer. He just stood there gazing up at the ominous closed door. Danvers signed to one of his men.

When the man stepped up he indicated Scut.

"Watch him," Danvers ordered sharply. "If he makes any break you'll know just how to handle him. You'll stop right here with Jarvis and Reed. And you'll keep him, and the other fellow, under your eye. I want the others up there."

He nodded at the hut.

Scut sat down on the frame of his old kyak. And the movement was almost collapse. He had heard the orders, and knew just all they meant. But he was indifferent to them, and to the three men who stood over him and Sid Grover.

He was thinking and deploring for Sandy and Wanita whom he guessed to be still sleeping within that hut. Oh, the madness of it. The boat. It was lying there ready. It must have lain there all night. Why, why in the name of all that was crazy had they not made their start overnight instead of—Miles. They could have been miles out on Clare by now. And they could have been across it, and in hiding, before the trailing patrol boats could have made the distance.

And now—now—!

He turned to watch the inspector who was moving up on the hut with that caution that told of the man's intent. He saw him pause and search the hut's surroundings. He saw him turn with instructions to his men. Then his men deployed to the stations he had obviously appointed. It was all methodically ominous, and the sight of it drove the watching man desperately. He passed a hand back over his forehead, and his visored cap was pushed from his head. Danvers was approaching the door.

Then he heard. It started a sort of low moan. It grew. Louder and louder. It became a half strangled roar of anger as well as pain. Then it died out and began again.

Scut stared. Every soul of the police were listening, startled. Then Scut saw the inspector rush and fling open the hut door.

With the door open the cries came infinitely louder and Scut knew the voice. He leapt to his feet, only to be seized and held by the men left to watch him. Then, even while he struggled to get free, Inspector Danvers reappeared.

"Leave him free, boys," he shouted in a tense, harsh voice. "Scut! Quick! Bear a hand! Someone's laid him out inside here. Crucified!"

Chapter XXXI

The Outfit

"God A'mighty!"

It broke from Scut with everything in it from amazed horror to a world of angry pity.

Scut was just inside the doorway. Inspector Danvers was well within the half-lit interior of the hut. The place had been stripped of everything removable in it. And on the floor, stretched out face upwards, Sandy was cruelly staked out in the form of a sort of crucifixion.

Five deeply driven stakes held him. To one was fastened a rawhide, set chokingly about his muscular neck. Two held his securely lashed wrists, with his arms reaching out to their full extent on either side of him. And two more had his ankles held fast, his legs forced apart to the outmost limit of physical possibility.

He was writhing, heaving, and emitting queer snarls with every gasping breath the strangling rope permitted him. His vivid eyes were wide, bulging, rolling. And if they consciously beheld they gave no sign of it. What looked to be going on was an insensate struggle of his physical body, which, in its aimless way, would go on as long as the last flicker of life endured.

Even as his cry broke from him Scut flung himself to the help of the struggling body. His sheath-knife flashed, as he dropped to his knees, and Inspector Danvers did the same. In a moment each rawhide thong was severed and the boy was free.

Then happened that which was wholly unlooked for. Sandy's great arms flailed out right and left. He lifted himself, and tried to stand. His eyes were ablaze, and there was saliva frothed about his lips. He smote at the two men beside him, and a crazy snarl of rage accompanied the blows.

It was Scut's powerful arms and heavy body that grabbed and held. And in an instant a furious struggle began.

It should have been an unequal enough struggle with two such men as Danvers and Scut arrayed against him. But Sandy seemed possessed of a superhuman strength which his madness gave him. He flung them about like some savage mastiff shaking terriers.

It was the policeman's sharp call that saved the situation.

Perhaps it was a glimpse of returning sanity in Sandy. Perhaps he discovered the uniforms of the men who dashed into the hut in response to their chief's summons. Even he might have recognized the harsh tones of Scut as he shouted him to quit fighting and "get sense." At any rate, as the new men jumped in and held, his struggles ceased, and his fury died out like the snuffing of a candle flame. Breathing heavily he sagged back in the arms holding him. And the while his pathetic gaze turned from one white face to another.

Finally they came to rest on the grizzled features of the anxious Scut. And the big creature sighed like some weary child letting a troublesome world fade away before an advancing wave of supreme content.

There was no word. The blue eyes just closed. And Scut held and nursed like some mother pacifying her babe.

The atmosphere of the hut was tense while the men looked on. Inspector Danvers watched Scut lay the youth's body back on the ground, and bend over observing it. Then he was startled as the man's deep-set eyes were turned up to him.

"Say, I'm a bit of a doctor," Scut said. "Got any 'first aid' truck?"

Danvers signed to one of the men who hurried from the hut.

"Yes," he said shortly. "Is—he going to come through?"

Scut stood up. And his broad body, still pumping heavily from his exertions, was something Danvers regarded with silent satisfaction. Scut nodded.

"Sure. I guess it's over, and he'll sleep. It was craze for the thing done to him. Maybe done to her. We'll have to wait around for some hours. I'm going to dope him. We'll need to go careful when he wakes. You'll want his story?"

Danvers nodded.

"Yes," he said. And Scut knew it was the police officer rather than the man who acquiesced.

The constable returned with the police "first aid" outfit, and, at a sign from Danvers, passed it to Scut. Then all of them stood watching the man who had claimed to be something of a doctor.

That which he beheld satisfied Danvers. And when Scut stood up from his work he appealed to him with confidence.

"Well?" he questioned.

Scut glanced down at the still figure lying on the bare soil of the floor. He suddenly removed his heavy reefer coat folded it and set it under Sandy's head. Then he replied.

"We can quit him now for awhile," he said. "We'll get his story when he wakes. Say," he considered, "it looks like we can't do better than get things fixed for a break north. It looks that way."

He moved to the door of the hut and passed out. Danvers followed him. When the last policeman had left the hut Scut closed the door. Then he turned to Danvers while the others went on down to the boats.

"I'm wondering if you get that the way I do, Inspector," he said, his eyes appraising. "You know it 'most all around here." He pointed down at Sandy's big kyak lying at the water's edge ready for that flight which had never matured. "It looks like the Bull Moose and his bunch jumped in on him. I can't think else. The girl. She's gone. Why's he left crucified and not dead? Say, that kid gal never got away by herself. They hadn't a craft but that one down there of Sandy's, and that one Wanita took from me, and they've wrecked. No. They were jumped in on. And they got her, and took her. And we'll get them, and maybe her, away up north. Yes. If we're mighty quick we may get her. You see, it's likely they don't know you're on the river."

Inspector Danvers considered thoughtfully. And finally he nodded agreement.

"It looks the way you see it," he said. "But we'll have to wait for that boy. It just depends on his story."

Sandy's recovery from the thing he had endured was swift and complete. Scut's prompt ministrations worked out precisely as he had calculated. Some four hours later Sandy was awake, sane, but in a fever of suspicion at the presence of the police, and a very volcano of smoldering rage and despair.

They were up at the hut. Sandy was in the doorway, leaning, and nearly filling up the entire space of it. His brooding gaze was on the activity down at the boats, where a meal was being got ready. Inspector Danvers was watching him, standing just beyond the doorway. Scut was squatting on a stone he had taken from the ashes of the camp fire over which Sandy and Wanita had sat the night before.

Sandy had just paused in the story which he had told in his simplest fashion. There had been neither exaggeration nor reservation. He had told how everything had been made ready for a dawn start for Clare. Then they had eaten and sat, and finally gone to their blankets. Then, in the night, and he guessed it was not long before that dawn of their intended start, he had been startled awake. There had been just a moment of doubt till he saw the door flung open. Then he had found himself in the midst of a raging struggle, with the hut full of half-naked Kaska Indians.

All that happened he did not know. Wanita was torn from his arms and he fought with all the fury of which he was capable in the darkness to reach her again. Then, in the midst of it, he had found Wanita again at his side, fighting like a wild cat, too. He knew his only chance was to get out into the open. At least he thought it was. And, with a big effort, he picked Wanita up bodily in his arms and charged for the closed door. That was all he knew.

"I guess I must have gone down," he went on after a moment, "I don't rightly know. I just got an idea Wanita passed from my arms. But maybe that's only fancy. But the thing I do know was waking up like I guess you found me. I was mad, crazy

mad, and I fought all I knew to get free. I guess I was stark raving thinking of that poor kid. They'd got her. I knew they'd got her and—!"

His fists clenched in a furious gesture, but he held himself.

"Then when you came I guess I thought they'd come back on me. I didn't see! I couldn't think. But I can now. And I'm going after her if—if—"

"They won't kill her. They won't hurt her."

Scut had seen the danger signal in Sandy's sudden violence. But his attempt to pacify was a complete failure. Sandy turned on him furiously.

"Kill? Hurt? I tell you she's my—wife."

The implication left all Scut would have said unspoken. And it was Inspector Danvers who jumped in and saved the situation.

"We're going after her, and we're going to get her," he said in his coldest, most official tone.

Sandy turned on the instant. Alarm had replaced every other emotion.

"You're—police," he snarled.

"Surely." Danvers looked straight into the troubled eyes. "But maybe that won't hurt you, or—her."

"But she—killed Faro Neale. She shot him to death."

"That's so, too," Danvers nodded. "There by her bunkside, where she'd been sleeping—alone. He'd broken in on her. And he meant—"

"You mean you don't figure it—murder?"

"We're—police."

"And—white."

It was Scut. And Sandy remained looking from one to the other in the pathetic uncertainty of a mind torn between hope and fear. Finally he turned on Danvers, and there was the hard grin of his father and mother in the set of his young face.

"Yes," he snapped. "You're police. You've nothing on me, and I'll do just the way I figure. I've got my outfit. And I'm going after her right now. You can't stop me. No one can. She's my—wife."

Scut looked up and the twinkle of his eyes was a warming sight.

"That kyak of yours is—double," he said.

The glower of Sandy's eyes passed. He turned.

"You mean that, Scut?"

The gold man grinned back at the hope he saw dawning.

"It wasn't the pleasure of p'lice company," he said. "The Inspector knows I'm here to help you and your kid gal."

Danvers nodded down at the ruffian he liked.

"We best make an outfit of it," he said quietly. "We're police all right, and you can reckon we're tough company. But when it comes to things like this we pull a strong hand." He looked squarely into Sandy's eyes. "That way you'll have a better chance getting back your—wife."

Chapter XXXII

Northward

Inspector Danvers had all a skillful police officer's faculty for availing himself of such local resources as came his way. Scut Barber had already more than proved his value. So, too, in lesser degree, Sid Grover. And he saw in Sandy a veritable volcano of energy, if his knowledge, and experience, and wisdom were on a lesser plane than that of the others.

These were men of the river, and he was concerned with the river. He was going on up into a region that needed more than common police skill. And men, minded as these were, were of infinitely greater service to him than any Indian scouts he had it in his power to enroll.

Danvers' plans were as simple as they had to be, and they were typical of the police when adventuring into far, uncharted regions. There was the unfriendly highway of the Alikine, and it must serve him. Farther north was the great Valley of the Moose, and that must be visited and searched. And so he would go on, as long as humanly possible, till he came up with the homing ground of the Kaskas.

He knew nothing of the region; he knew nothing of the Kaskas, except through ill repute. But he was going to carry the law to them. And in his own phraseology "put the fear of God" into them. He was going to unmask the Bull Moose if there were any such reality existing. And if the half-breed girl, who had killed Faro Neale, had come to any hurt through these people, he was not prepared to turn back until the power of the law had done its work.

The journey began as soon after Sandy's story had been told, and his fears of the police had been allayed, as a midday meal could be prepared and eaten.

It was then these men of the river got a glimpse of police swiftness of movement, and their readiness to face up to whatever their work might show them. Danvers detailed their method of procedure. Scut and Sandy would share his boat and Grover would remain with the second. Sandy's lightened kyak would be taken in tow against the unforeseen possibilities of the river. Then Danvers gave a few sharp orders to his men. The engines were started up and the grim scene of Sandy's tragedy dropped away behind them like an ill dream forgotten.

The race of the journey northward was something that astonished Scut and Grover, and even satisfied the fevered urge of Sandy. Danvers had the machines running all out from the jumping-off. And it seemed as if the Alikine's boasted torrent no longer existed. Scut's claim was reached, and passed, in a sort of unhurried flash. And the scene of it all changed with almost kaleidoscopic abruptness.

Then came the Great Falls. The roar of them boomed down the river far below. Danvers consulted at once. And he learned the usual landing for portage. Then he drove on to the very edge of the rapids below the cataract, chose for himself, and shortened the portage to half that to which these men were accustomed.

Then the portage itself. It was a wonder of simple but clever organization. The patrol boats had been designed to lighten the task. The engines were unshipped and man-packed with their spare fuel. The boats followed. And the engines were reshipped while the outfit was hauled on a third trip.

The portage was completed by sundown, and an hour's rest and food were permitted. Then, as a glory of moonlight rose in a cloudless sky, and with half the dome of the night blazing with aurora, the journey went on at the same reckless speed.

The rush of it was stupendous. It was almost overwhelming to men accustomed to the paddle. But to the keen mind of Scut it conveyed a vivid expression of police power. The Police! Red-coats! Authority! He, like all the rest of the north, had always hated and spurned. And now he wondered, and not a little marveled. Here were six men and an officer hurtling into the blue of unknown dangers at a mechanical speed such as the Alikine had never before witnessed, and without a thought for the possible cost to themselves. They were going to drive the law home to a murdering horde of Indians. And he felt they would surely do it.

Night camp was finally made when the twin hills gating the Valley of the Moose were reached, and possession had been taken of the dead Faro Neale's claim.

Danvers sat over their camp fire with Scut and Sandy. Grover was asleep in his blankets a wreck of physical weariness. Danvers' men had their own camp down at the boats, which were hauled well clear of the river on the low shore.

Bodily weariness had made for silence as the three men smoked and digested after a final meal. But Danvers was alert, calculating, thinking hard and keenly.

Danvers' thought was for the journey lying yet ahead of them and he was estimating the chances of success or failure as he saw them. Scut and Sandy were each thinking and calculating. But it was from an angle entirely different to the police officer's.

Danvers stooped for a fire coal to re-light his pipe.

"From here on you boys know nothing?" he asked casually. "There's no story of what lies in there?" he added, pointing at the wide mouth of the valley with his fire stick.

Sandy looked up into the man's questioning eyes and dropped his own again to the fire without replying. He hated the delay of a night camp. Scut shook his grizzled head and spat.

"Oh, there's yarns," he said contemptuously. "Neche yarns. But you can't take notice of the neches. You see, the Kaskas have got that Bull Moose a-top of them. And you can't ever tell. Likely they set neche yarns going to suit themselves. Sort of a bogey to scare with."

"What sort of yarns?"

Danvers was missing nothing.

"I was guessing where we're likely to come up with 'em," Scut mused. "You see, they're a nomadic bunch, the Kaskas. They're scattered over a hell of an area. It's said they got a crackerjack location on a plateau overlooking this darn river away up in there. It's said they've always got a bunch sitting around watching for anything coming up river. To pick 'em off with their store guns," he added.

Danvers kicked the fire together.

"That sounds better than neche yarns to me," he said. "Anything more?"

Scut shot a quick glance at Sandy and shook his head. Danvers saw the look and comprehended.

"Oh, there's other stuff that's no sort of account," Scut admitted, with a great show of indifference.

Danvers nodded.

"Yes. I expect so," he agreed. "But this plateau. Are there any details to make it recognizable?"

Scut considered, smoking heavily. Then he removed his pipe.

"Might be—if neche yarns *are* anything," he said, with a short laugh. "They guess it's a plateau 'bout seven or eight hundred feet up. It's surrounded most sides by hills and mean grown woods. Then one side's over the river, where it's wide like a lake. That's where it drops sheer to an easy shore. Sounds like we ought to locate it—if it's there. It's way up back of another falls a mile or so." He gulped a mirthless laugh. "Anyway I guess they'll tell us when we make it."

"You mean they'll be watching the river."

"An' shootin' up anything on it they don't fancy seeing there."

Danvers went on smoking. He seemed to be satisfied. But when Scut, in his doctor's capacity, had sent Sandy to his blankets, the officer came again.

"Let me have it now," he said, as Scut watched Sandy's big figure moving down towards the boats.

Scut spat, and put his pipe away.

"Sure," he said, subduing his harsh tones. "They call it the 'Hill of Sacrifice.' That's what it means in their darn lingo. I

guess it's a place where they collect any stray enemy they fancy, Dogrib, Yellow Knife, Caribou-Eater—or white—and bump 'em off. Then they dump 'em below on that swell shore where the timber wolves an' coyotes and things clean up the mess."

For more than twenty miles the Valley of the Moose was a glory of hill and forest, and wide open water. The river widened almost to the proportions of a lake behind the gateway hills. And once within these portals half the power of the Alikine's torrent was lost.

The following dawn Danvers availed himself of the easy water to the utmost limit of his engine's power. He was not concerned for anything which nature might show him by the way. Great belts of virgin forests lining the shores, and mounting the hill slopes, meant nothing to him. Towering, distant hills, with shining, crystal peaks gleaming in the morning sunlight interested him not at all. He wanted first a big cataract. And after that a high plateau with eyes searching the river, and where he might hear the echoing crack of an Indian store gun, and perhaps even the whistle of an ill-aimed bullet.

The whole patrol was watching, searching, listening.

As they neared the northern end of it the lake narrowed in, and the stream increased its power. Speed lessened proportionately, but that was all. Then the wide waters were left behind for a great, gray gorge that was comparable with Ten Mile Gorge further south.

These were high, dark, and speeding narrows, but were of no great length. Perhaps four miles of them. And in due course they, too, were left behind without any untoward happening.

Then, once again, came wide water, and a splendid stretch of nature's monstrous artistry. And as a glorious vista widened out the stream again eased, and speed was restored. With no heed for anything but his objective, Danvers leaned over where he sat at his tiller and claimed his mechanic.

"Keep her running all you know," he said sharply. "I want to hear falling water before we eat."

Scut, who, with Sandy, was keeping "look-out" at the craft's bluff bow, turned at once.

"You don't have to wait that long, Inspector," he said. "You can hear it now. It's coming over the water same as someone was moaning. Hark!"

Then he pointed ahead. "Get that patch of steam?"

Danvers set his tiller, and clambered forward. And he stood peering in the direction Scut was pointing.

"Yes," he agreed, after awhile. Then he added: "Those neche yarns look like working out."

"Ye—es."

Scut remained watching the far mist lying low upon the water. And the distant moaning grew in volume as the boat sped on. Danvers had given him an unpleasant reminder. He was thinking somewhere far beyond that hazy mist, and that droning, distant thunder.

"The plateau's a mile or so above that?" Danvers further reminded him.

But Scut made no reply. With Sandy glowering out ahead beside him he had no intention of being drawn further on the subject of the Kaskas' homing ground.

But Danvers was unconcerned for any scruple. Whatever tragedy might be waiting on Sandy it was only to be thought on, deplored, when his police work had been efficiently completed. He pointed at the growing patch of mist telling of the falls.

"How far d'you make it?" he asked, his keen eyes measuring.

Scut considered.

"Four miles. Maybe five," he estimated. "You can't rightly say. We're high up. And the air's mighty clear."

Danvers went back to his tiller, and the craft lurched to a change of course. Scut looked back. And Sandy's gloomy eyes shot a quick glance at the policeman.

"That's all right," Danvers said coolly. "We're going to make in as close under those falls as we can. Then we'll quit these machines and portage the kyak."

"How?" Scut's eyes were anxious.

The policeman was searching the wall of primordial forest which lined the western bank, and came down to the water's edge.

"We don't need to raise a scare to that bunch," he said. "Give 'em a sight of these machines and they'll run like the gophers they are. I want to come up with them. If they see just you, and Sandy, and me, in a crazy kyak they'll likely guess we're no better than poor mean whites and act—accordingly."

He shrugged.

Scut spat and his eyes shone.

"You figger a lone hand with a thousand murderin' Kaskas fitted with Marthe's store guns?" he said. "Well, that suits me."

Chapter XXXIII

The Golden Shore

The portage had been accomplished with a minimum of delay and in circumstances of ease wholly unanticipated. Inspector Danvers had driven in towards the wood-lined western shore, right up just below the swift waters of the great falls. Then, to his amazement, he had discovered a well and stoutly fashioned landing which had been obviously used for years by those making their criminal traffic up and down the river.

But this was not all. The landing connected with a cleared trail, which went right up over the welter of rocky forest, which was the land continuation of the mass of obstruction which had created the great cataract.

Danvers, and Sandy, and Scut set off at once. Three of his men portaged the lightened kyak, while the patrol boats were left with their mechanics and Sid Grover snugged at the landing. There they were well hidden from any prying eyes searching above the falls. And, in case of need, Danvers felt the guard he had left with them to be sufficient. Danvers fully appreciated the value of uniform when dealing even with so lawless a race as the Kaskas. He had no doubts.

But further astonishment awaited at the completion of the portage. And Danvers felt that they were on a red-hot scent. The cleared trail was good all the way up above the falls. And a mile beyond them it brought them to another landing, while still continuing on, clearly marked, through the shadowed aisles of the forest.

It was Scut who discovered the trail's continuation. The man's keen eyes were searching, and he was casting like a well-trained hound the while the others were getting the kyak down to the landing. He hailed the policeman.

"Do you get this, Inspector?" he cried, pointing the twilit lane amongst the boughless tree trunks. "That trail's going to make their camp. Or someone's. It looks like we're right atop of that plateau. Looks like we can quit the stream, and beat up this darn trail. How?"

Danvers left the landing. He came at once to the forest edge where Scut was still pointing. He searched the shadows and he realized the beaten track. He looked for indications and found them.

Danvers knew the northern forests with the intimacy of years of experience; he knew nature's many queer ways in creating blind alleys with which to lure; he knew, too, the very definite tracks made by the wild life, whose homing ground the forests might be. But on the instant he realized the rightness of Scut's prognosis. Here was a roadway. And he could see it winding in and out amongst the trees till the shadows of the forest swallowed it up.

Without a moment's hesitation he changed his original plans.

"It's their trail all right," he agreed at once. "And it looks they've used it years."

He turned and called to one of the three men, Jarvis, who had set the kyak in the water, and was holding it against the stream ready for his chief. The man came on the run. Danvers pointed to the forest trail.

"The moment we pass up river you boys 'll make that to its limit," he said. "Just see what it leads to. You'll need to keep a smart eye. You can't tell when you get into that sort of stuff. Don't hand 'em a chance. Not a dog's chance. Make that trail to its end. And if there's nothing to it get right back here and wait for us."

Then he turned to Scut.

"I guess you're right. But we'll hold to the river," he said. "It's on the river they'll sight us, if I'm any judge. And that way those boys look like outflanking their camp."

"You're taking a hell of a chance for them," Scut protested. And he saw the quick smile of understanding pass between the two policemen.

Danvers nodded.

"Sure," he said. "All the time."

They went back to the landing. There was no further delay. If Scut was casting like a hound, Danvers was certainly in "full cry." He knew now that the "neche yarns" were truly founded and he wanted the rest.

In a few minutes the kyak had left the landing with the urgent Sandy at the forward paddle, Scut at the stern, and Inspector Danvers somehow cramped in the well of the craft between them.

The landing was on the inner side of a big bend of the river, and Danvers appreciated the cunning of it. They were a mile up from the falls which droned out their thunder distantly. But on the inner side of the bend they escaped the main flood of the water race induced by them.

The craft moved easily, and at speed, under the drive of the paddles. And every yard it made changed the scene opening out before them.

It was the same wild scene these men knew almost by heart, and to which they were now wholly indifferent. Forest, and hill, and shadowed inlet. And always a sense of greater and greater altitude. It was broken, silent, and majestically gloomy. It was a mighty work set out by a mighty hand. And it was painted with soft or vivid colors by the blaze of a noon sun.

The men cared for none of it. They were greedily seeking a lofty hill rising sheer from the water's edge, and with a level top cut sharply against the sky. A plateau. And they wanted it quickly. A mile or two up above the falls. And so, as their kyak skirted the great bend, they searched and missed nothing.

It was Sandy's keen blue eyes that got its first sight. And he raised his dripping paddle pointing.

"There!" he barked over his shoulder. "See it? That hummock. It's dead flat, and—"

There was the crack of a rifle. It was ridiculously insignificant in the world about them. And it found no echo in the wide openness beyond the bend. There was the hiss of a speeding bullet. And then, some distance away, the dull "plomp" as it found the water. Another came. And then another. And then there were no more.

Sandy glanced shorewards as he drove his paddle again. Scut's deepset eyes were searching, too. But Danvers was concerned only with the plateau rising sheer from the water's edge a few hundred yards ahead. It stood there gray, treeless but dominant, even amongst wooded hills of greater height.

They were paddling easily, watchfully. A long golden line of shore marked the water's edge at the foot of the gray plateau. There looked to be quite half a mile of it. A lifeless stretch, without a shrub, or tree, or rock. It was just golden sand that caught and reflected the sunlight.

They searched for ambush; there was none. There had just been those three isolated shots as they passed the last of the great bend, but that was all. Here there was neither movement nor sound in a profoundly still world, except for the dull, heavy droning of the falls away behind them.

It was that bald, flat summit that held Sandy's whole attention. Nor did he realize the magnetism it exercised. Wanita. He was thinking wholly of the wonderful creature he had claimed his wife. Somewhere here, in deadly peril, he told himself; somewhere here, and needing him, longing for him. Yes. He was sure now. She was here. He felt her presence. He knew.

And so, as his paddle mechanically dipped, he eyed the sharp-cut line of that summit rather than the golden line of its shore.

Scut, too, was watching the sheer gray thing they were approaching. But his search was not concerned for the skyline above. He remembered the "neche yarns," and the pale gold of that low shore held him to the exclusion of all the rest.

Danvers, alone among them, found nothing in the grim rock to absorb the keen activity of his police mind. He was considering the whole of its setting for those things, anything, that might serve him. And he found it and pointed.

"I was wondering," he said sharply. "There it is! See? There! The south side of it. There's a track. And it comes out of

those woods. And it goes up around back of the hill. If they find nothing amiss those boys 'll make it before us."

Scut grunted, and swung the kyak so it headed straight in for the shore. And with a great stirring hope Sandy drove his paddle with all his strength. It was a swift and silent approach.

"Can you see a landing?" Danvers asked suddenly. "I'd gamble there's one down around that track. Swing her down that way. It—"

Sandy's harsh tones startled the quiet.

"Keep dead ahead! There!" He flung an arm pointing directly in front. "There's something on that shore. Maybe it's—"

That which he would have said remained unspoken. The kyak swung away sharply in precisely the opposite direction under the swift, fierce strokes of Scut's agitated paddles. He headed straight for the point the policeman had indicated instead of the direction for which Sandy had called. And he drove at a power and speed that might well have warned.

He, too, had seen that at which Sandy had pointed. But where Sandy had only guessed he had recognized. It was a human body sprawled on the golden alluvial. And it was naked and—white.

There was a landing as Danvers had guessed. And it was clearly of Indian construction. It was of light logs secured by rawhide and driven poles. It was cranky, but sufficient. And the kyak ran to it in the free, almost slipshod fashion that had little enough of Scut's usual river skill.

Sandy was concerned for no landing. Only for what he had seen afar. And he leapt from the kyak and his great body moved off at a rush. Danvers stepped on to the landing with intent to follow. But Scut detained him almost roughly.

"Don't!" he snapped harshly.

Danvers looked down into the man's upturned face as he remained in his place in the boat, holding fast to one of the driven poles.

"What's amiss?"

Scut stood up. He steadied himself and stepped on to the frail landing, which almost submerged under his weight. Then he stooped and lifted the kyak from the water, and carried it to the soft sand of the shore. He laid it down and turned to the policeman who had followed him.

The grizzled face was curiously working. And the heavy brows were drawn in a scowl of queer ferocity.

"That pore, darn kid!" he cried, and his voice was harshly choking. "Did you see it? No. Course you didn't. You're police. You wouldn't. It's her. She's lying where they dumped her from that hill top. It's only p'lice eyes that wouldn't see that white soft body lying around, and that head of black hair. Man, it's hell!"

Then it came back to them. It was a cry, a strangled inarticulate cry that was full of a man's broken soul. A rough, human heart's despair. And they turned and looked out across the smooth golden shore.

It was Sandy. They saw him standing; then they saw him drop to his knees; then they heard sounds that smote each, policeman and hardened rough northerner, alike.

They stood there helplessly for silent moments. Then Scut straightened his great shoulders like a man summoning all his courage.

"We can't leave him like that," he said harshly.

"No."

Again came that movement of Scut's body.

"Come on!" he snarled fiercely.

Out there where the yellow sand was slightly mounded Sandy was crouching. He was gazing down at the fair, white, dead thing that had been his wife only for hours. He had lifted the shoulders so that her head, with its mass of raven

black hair, was at rest on his massive thigh. He was holding one of the dead hands in the palms of both of his.

There was no sign on the bare white flesh of any hurt. There was no blood, no ugly wounding. Wanita was just dead; that was all; dead. And the manner of it was surely in that mighty hill behind her. And in the soft sand to which she had been ruthlessly hurled.

As Danvers and Scut came Sandy looked up at them. And his look was almost calm. Veins stood out on his forehead. There was a queer pallor showing under the youth's tanning. But his eyes, though straining, were steady, with a sort of fixed, calm cold.

Scut remembered that struggle at the claim; he had feared an awful return of that dementia; he had completely forgotten that Sandy was the son of Jim and Marthe. The man looking up at him was surely that son. Dour, unflinching, invincible, under the blow that had befallen. He was crouching there nursing his dead. And, in a moment, his vivid eyes dropped again, and the men were forgotten. Scut's relief was immense.

Neither Danvers nor Scut voiced a word; there was none to speak; there could be no word from them. Dead! That poor child who had been Sandy's wife. Every hope in the boy's heart crashed to atoms, and broadcast to the winds. Scut sickened. Danvers stirred. They were more helpless than were those hands caressing that which was dead.

Sandy's head lifted. It was a jolt. The blue of his straining eyes flashed from one man to the other, and came to rest on Scut. The big throat seemed to swallow. Then the voice came huskily and hushed, as though fearful of waking a sleeper.

"You go right on—up," he said. "Just leave me around—awhile. I'll—I'll come along—later."

Inspector Danvers drew a deep breath. Without a word he turned to go. But Scut stood unmoving.

Suddenly the blue of Sandy's eyes blazed as he looked up at his waiting friend. Scut saw and understood. And he followed the policeman hurriedly towards the landing and trail.

The glare of Sandy's eyes followed them.

Chapter XXXIV

The Plateau

The two men were standing where the heavily trafficked trail came over the edge of the plateau. It was the end of a steep climb. And they gazed out over a wide flat fringed about by a low growth of leaning, twisted woods. They formed a sort of hedge, and perhaps wind screen, about a bare camping ground. And they encircled the whole of it except where the river lay below.

But interest for the policeman and for Scut was not in nature's formations and provisions. It was in that which had been the work of human hands. There were a number of log-built huts, with grass thatch held down by sapling logs. There was one large building of frame and weather-board. Then there were the earth markings where had stood the teepees of the nomads, and the white dead ashes of camp fires.

There was not a single living, moving thing to be seen anywhere. Not a bird. Not a wild creature from the surroundings of woods. It was just a bare flat that was utterly dead in a world alive with a sun's glory.

A queer sense of disappointment and desolation affected Scut. The heart of him was savage. He had left the golden shore below hoping to find life up here. Something he could help to kill. At that moment there was nothing so much he wanted to do as to kill.

If disappointment was in the policeman he gave no sign of it. He just pointed at the litter of Indian huts dotted close about the frame building.

"On the run," he said. "They're wiser than we guessed. They must have got word passed up of our patrol. We'll go see what they left behind them."

Scut pointed.

"That frame shack. It's white man. No Kaska set that up. Where? There? At that—white man—shack?"

The policeman's absorbing eyes searched the plateau as though further to reassure himself of its deadness. Then he nodded.

"Yes," he said. "We'll go see."

They set off in the direction of the central building that looked large and almost dignified in its surrounding of mean log shacks, set so close about it. And their choice was surely the obvious. Here was the citadel of the Kaskas. The Kaskas were led by the Bull Moose. The Bull Moose was reputed "white." That hut was white-man built. What might it not tell them? What clew might have been left behind? Yes. That frame and weatherboard building first.

The camp was in the very center of the plateau. And the ground on which it was built had a surface of almost dead brown earth streaked with stony outcrop. Its area was less than a half mile. Just a small flat which could be defended by a small garrison of well armed fighters. For surely its height and steepness would have rendered it difficult of assault against a defense of that nature. Danvers, at least, appreciated its strategic advantages.

They came to the first of the log huts and Danvers considered them closely. They were Indian; they were without windows; and every door was open. There were no totems; there was nothing of Indian value lying amongst the litter strewn everywhere; there were just dead ashes of Indian fires; there was hewn cord-wood stacked or lying; there were empty cans. And a litter of useless truck. And there was the reek of a waste "dump." Clearly the leavings of a hasty departure.

Danvers peered into one of the doorways.

"Dead as mutton," he declared, withdrawing. "A get-out!"

Scut nodded and moved on. These huts failed to interest him. He was eager for that center building.

It was just a rectangular house with cotton-covered windows. There was an iron smoke stack protruding from a pitched

roof. And the roof was properly "shingled" by skilled hands. There was no paint. But the woodwork was heavily tarred. It looked like a two- or three-roomed building, and as if the rooms were of fair size.

The two men came up to it and moved round it till they reached the only door. It was painted and paneled. It was shut, too. Tight shut.

Danvers stood sniffing. Scut spat and turned to him.

"There's dead meat in there," he said, at once. "It's dead, and—rotten. Gee!" And he spat again.

Danvers tried the door. It resisted his efforts. It even failed to open when he raised a foot and crashed it where a lock should have been. So Scut moved to a wood pile and came back with a log, and they used it as a ram on one of the panels.

The panel splintered and crashed in, and Danvers peered in through the opening. He reached inside, and a moment later, something fell, and the door swung open.

"We're foolish, Scut," he said. "They barricaded it and got out through a window. We could have got in that way."

He passed into the building.

They were standing in a room with a boarded floor that was scrubbed white. It was lit by two closed, cotton-covered windows of ordinary size. The place was arranged with plain furnishings; a chair; a white-wood table; there was a cupboard reaching from floor to ceiling; there were other simple oddments, and a square of carpet centered the floor.

But neither Scut nor the policeman was concerned for the furnishings of that obviously white man's dwelling. One swift comprehensive glance was sufficient. And it had brought them to a single bed cot on trestle supports standing against a wall. Both were staring only at the head of it; they were gazing amazedly; almost incredulously.

The whole length of the bed was covered with a soiled white blanket which plainly revealed the outline of the figure lying beneath it. But at its head, reaching up and leaning forward, were the splendid webbed tines of the antlers of—a Bull Moose.

Danvers had a colored handkerchief pressed tightly to his nostrils. Scut was less sensitive to the awful reek of the room. He just stared at those drooping antlers and forgot everything else.

Then of a sudden he exploded.

"Hell!" he cried. "Let's see!"

It was the hard, savage northerner in the presence of all that was hated most in his life. There was death. These men had reason enough to know it; but in neither was there any feeling other than revulsion at something foul. In Scut, as he moved up to the head of the bed, and reached out and gripped those horns, the savage was a-riot. He lifted the antlers from that which lay beneath them, and hurled them violently to the floor. And, even as they crashed on the woodwork there came his inevitable profanity.

"God A'mighty!"

Danvers moved up beside the peering man. He, too, peered down at what the removal of the long moosehide mask had revealed. It was an ashen but bluely discolored white man's dead face. The flesh was hideously sunken. And staring eyes gazed deadly out of deep, gaping sockets. Then the lower jaw hung loose, and a great mouth was agape.

"Who?"

Danvers' question snapped muffled from behind his handkerchief.

"Faro Neale!"

They were out of the room; out of the building. And the entrance door was shut tight and barricaded behind them. They moved away hurriedly to get beyond the nauseating reek that had so sickened. And once clear of the outlying, deserted huts Danvers turned on the man beside him.

"But Faro was shot up by that girl," he protested. "He was one of you boys on the river. He—"

Scut scowled up into the other's face, and his great hands gestured violently.

"What the hell!" he cried savagely. "That's Faro. What's left of him. And he's the Bull Moose!" He snatched a quick breath. "It's stark crazy, only it ain't," he went on. "Faro! The Bull Moose! I can't believe. But I know it's so. Faro! The light-pull gunman reckoning to face up to the Bull Moose lone-handed. Faro! Out here sluicing on a claim at the foot of this valley. Faro! With bunches of dust that made his claim look the richest on the river. Mackinaw! That kid Wanita! He wanted her."

Scut gestured.

"It gets clearer as you think," he went on. "Clear as daylight. That's it. He wanted that kid for all he'd his woman 'Frisco' Belle. You mind the way the Bull Moose killed up Shamus and Roskana, and let Wanita go free? Faro was out on his claim then and no one was to know different. Then later when Faro sent warning down river. No one ever saw the Moose then but—Wanita. And he *left her alone*. Then when Faro came and found Sandy with her and tried to stampede them. It was that night his neches shot up Sandy and *left Wanita safe*. Then when she got Sandy down home. It was then Faro got after her while Sandy was sick. Maybe Faro was drunk or he wouldn't have risked it in Reliance. Anyway he got it. He got it from that kid."

Scut thrust his cloth cap back and raked his hair with gnarled fingers.

"And they stole his carcase," he went on. "They would, they're thieving neches. They got him to—home. And they laid him out and tricked him in that moose truck. Sure. Then they went after her. Why wouldn't they? She'd shot up the feller who'd handed them a good time years. They'd get no more good times coming—with him dead. They're just mean neches, anyhow, who've lost the trick. So they went after her and took her from that boy's arms. They brought her here and—"

He broke off gazing out at the edge of the plateau where it dropped to the river below. Then he turned and looked back at the black shape of the Moose's home.

"Say, Danvers," he cried savagely. "I want to break something. I want to wreck that." He flung out an arm. "I want to burn it all. And pass that rotten carcase a taste of the hell that belongs it."

Danvers nodded. He was gazing over at three uniformed figures which had just appeared over the edge of the plateau from below.

"I know," he agreed shortly. "I feel that way, too. But we aren't going to. There's those boys of mine. They just got up. I wonder if they located that sniper."

Scut watched him go and he understood. The thing they had just witnessed in all its foul horror, the truth which they had discovered, these things were all in this man's day's work. The thing it meant to him, Scut; to Sandy; to anyone living on that river; could never find place in this efficient officer's sensibilities. No. He was just doing his day's work.

Danvers stood with his men talking just beyond the ring of log hovels surrounding the Moose's mausoleum.

Scut watched them and wondered; and watching he saw the man Jarvis gesticulate unusually. He felt that they had brought news, possibly important news. But what could be of importance now. Sandy and his dead Wanita!

He abandoned his waiting and moved out across the open to where the hill dropped to the river. It was the thought of those two down there on the golden sand of the shore that impelled him. It was irresistible. What would happen to him, Sandy, now? Well, Marthe had got her way. Sandy would never marry Wanita. But had she got her way? Would Sandy ever go back to a mother who had hated Wanita and driven—yes driven—her to this?

He shook his head and paused on his way to look back at the policemen. But they were gone. There was no sign of them anywhere. He shrugged his squat shoulders and went on to the cliff face.

He came to the extreme edge of it where nothing grew and all was smooth weatherworn granite. Scut was entirely without scruple. The dizzy height left his hard head entirely unaffected. He stepped to the very extremity of the ages-worn rock and peered into a depth of nearly eight hundred feet.

But even at the extremity of the cliff the golden sands to which Wanita had so cruelly been flung, remained hidden from him. It was almost as if they were recessed somewhere beneath him, though he knew well enough they were not. He could see the wide spread of the river, that was almost like a lake. Then, away across, he could view the far bank, which was a broad hillside covered with a virgin sweep of mountain forest. And, while the faintest rumble of thunder of the distant falls came back to him, he could see a mistiness in the brilliant sunshine which marked their far-off presence.

Scut stood there unmoving. He was gazing at the gleaming depths which caught and reflected the sun's glory. And, standing there, he tried to get a grip of the thing that had happened.

He thought again of Faro, that unspeakable "killer" and "hold-up." And now he saw the whole thing the man had done with transparent clearness. It even seemed to him a marvel that suspicion had not fastened on Faro before. His claim at the foot of the Valley. That surely was the key to it all. Once on his claim, miles beyond all others on the river, no one could check up his movements; no one could say where he was. The whole thing was child-like in its simplicity. Faro could move where and when he chose under his Moose get-up, and none would be the wiser. Then the Kaskas. It was—

Scut's thought broke off abruptly. Something had moved out from directly below him, shooting out over the surface of the glistening waters. He peered. And in a moment a sharp, inarticulate ejaculation broke from him.

It was the kyak. Their kyak. And the sun lit the white flesh of the body of the man paddling at the stern of it.

Scut discovered more. Something was lying there in front of the man, in the well of the craft. It looked like something wrapped about with a dark blanket or—coat. Coat! That was it. It was the man's coat. He was stark bare to his waist. Sandy!

Scut stepped back from the cliff edge. He stepped back in his startled agitation. And he remained watching.

What did it mean? Sandy! The kyak! The kyak that had brought him and the inspector. Where was the boy going? And that! that in the boat? Wanita? It must be. Why? What was he going to do? Taking her down to—?

Scut speculated no further. He just stood there watching that infinitesimal object moving in the immensity below. A great unease had seized upon him. He wanted to be down there. He wanted to shout and stop the foolish boy. He wanted to blaspheme furiously.

But he only remained stock still watching. And what he beheld came near to breaking a heart that might well have been thought to be cast iron.

The whole thing came and passed in a few brief minutes. Sandy's bare body was driving mightily. The kyak seemed to leap on the roughening waters of the cross stream as it nosed its way out. The boy went straight out across the stream, fighting the leeway with all his power. On and on he drove till the Alikine's main flood caught the craft in its monstrous rush. Then, with a few swift strokes, he turned the kyak's nose *down stream*! After that he sat up with his paddle shipped athwart the boat, and his white arms folded across his chest.

The swirl of the stream carried the light craft at a lightning speed. A mere speck, it faded smaller and smaller as it neared the mighty abutment marking the bend of the river to the falls below. In a moment it seemed to reach that monstrous shoulder. And in another it had vanished beyond it.

Scut's eyes remained on the vanishing point where the boat had been. And he made no move for many moments. Then at last he drew a deep breath and turned away.

Sandy and Wanita had crept into his life, two primitive young things who had stirred in him such feelings as he had never thought to know. And with such poor might and will as he possessed he had striven for them and for their well-being. Now he knew, only too surely, that they had passed out of his disreputable life for ever.

The gray of winter's approach was everywhere. It was in each dawn which broke at an hour when morning was far advanced. It was in the low sun whose weariness was expressed in the narrowness of its arc as it moved across the southern sky. It was in the heavy cloud that rarely enough permitted the blue beyond it to break through. And it was in the

persistence of the northern winds which searched the whole of the Alikine's wide valley.

Then it was in the hardening earth; in the falling leaves; and in the fringe of ice which gathered where the river's weaker moments permitted. Almost any day in any week might see that final closing down under a pall of snow which would remain till the spring sunshine blazed again.

Reliance was bleak and windswept. But perhaps the bleakest spot along the whole of the Alikine's valley was in the heart of Marthe McBarr.

She was standing alone on her porch. The store was emptied behind her; her bar was shut down tight; and her helpers were away, goodness alone knew where. So far as she was concerned at that moment she did not much care if she never saw them again, never, even, saw Reliance again.

Her angular body was standing squarely. Her heavy-booted feet were set slightly apart, giving her something of a truculent, aggressive pose. She was clad in her ordinary work-a-day garments, with the addition of a long, heavily knitted woolen coat that reached below her sturdy knees. And as she gazed out over the mean township, over which she had ruled for so long, her fingers were clutching and crumpling a white sheet of official paper.

Her hard blue eyes were searching a scene which bitterly dejected her.

Where had been familiar shanties and huts containing those she had long known, and been glad of in her cold way, now the whole place was transformed. In any and every direction in which she looked there were new tents, or new huts, either built or in the process of building. The place was alive with a flood of humanity that was entirely new to her. And, for all the promise of her proportion of its trade, she hated it.

It had all happened as she had foreseen. Inspector Danvers with his patrol had been but the spearhead of the invasion to come. The wash of the flood had started right after his arrival; and it had continued in increasing tide ever since.

Now Reliance was full of alert-eyed, specious-tongued speculators. Noah Bartlet's sternwheeler had made a record trip, and dumped a cargo of humanity upon the old landing. Then there had been a fleet of oil-engined craft which had dared the Alikine's avalanche and made good. There were officials in government tents waiting while their winter quarters were set up; there were real estate men; there were gold men, and would-be gold men, with brand new outfits; there was every sort of trader looking for opportunity. And the women.

Marthe knew that in under a month since the first coming of the police a population of little over a hundred had already more than doubled itself.

It was weeks since Marthe had learned the full story of the tragedy which had befallen Sandy and Wanita, and the hideous truth of the Bull Moose. How she had been affected by it no one had been permitted to know. Like every other disaster that had befallen her she had stood up to it squarely, accepted it, and continued about her business.

It had reached her one night when her store was full, and the night life of the place was in full swing. And it had been told across her bar! She had chosen it that way. She had insisted. Inspector Danvers and Scut with the rest of her custom were at one side of it. While Marthe leant with folded arms on the other. And her helpers were there serving. Danvers had asked for privacy. It had been refused. And the manner of it had been characteristic.

"I'll listen here, man," she had snapped at him. "Maybe I know it. So make it short. I'm busy."

Danvers promptly took her at her word and wasted no sympathy. He set out the bare facts which Scut embellished with details of that which he had witnessed from the plateau. While they talked the hard blue eyes had watched unblinkingly. And the while a faint movement of grim lips suggested the voiceless repeating of the words spoken. There was no interruption; no comment; no question; no thanks. Just nothing. And when the story was told Marthe turned away to make change for a customer. And those looking on saw that she counted it with meticulous care.

It had been Marthe as her own little world knew her. If there were any other she only existed when there were no prying, curious eyes to see.

Marthe's feelings, as she gazed at the unlovely thing that she had lived to see grow up about her old fort, were furiously bitter. It was not that she felt she was being swept away on the tide of it all; it was not that she believed her prosperity

would be jeopardized. In her cool, calculating, business mind she knew she was a match for any conditions which might prevail. She was there and would remain there. And in the end she would out-match any vaunting competitor, even Jan Pienart.

No. It was not fear of the future that stirred her to furious rebellion against it all. It was the authority which henceforth she knew she must obey. The police had ordained that her store must close, her tables remain empty of their gamblers, and not a dram of liquor must pass across her bar—on a Sunday. Inspector Danvers! His was the signature on the official document in her hand. And she had no choice but to obey. It was Sunday now.

Well, she had obeyed. The place was dead behind her, and would remain dead. And it should remain dead till she chose to re-open it.

Stirred to real anger Marthe's resources were particularly active. And their activity now were pronounced. She would close down for the whole winter, while she went down to the coast and prepared for the building of a great hotel and store, which she knew would be needed. It was a fine opportunity. It would put her ahead of all others. And, meanwhile, the police could feed and amuse the human wolves they had brought in their wake.

Marthe's spirit eased. Battle! She saw it looming. And Marthe, like her dead man, lived for the battle of things. At the sight of Scut Barber making his way towards her from amidst the litter of tents and huts, something like a grin flashed in her angry eyes. She shook her head at him as he came up.

"Not a dram, you!" she snapped. "If you've a thirst go quench it at the water bar'ls. We're shut down by your darn p'lice. And we remain shut down. They won't stand for liquor on a Sunday. Then they can do without it on Monday, or any other day. You go tell that to your rotten p'lice inspector. I'm through."

Scut stared, his eyes full of twinkling astonishment.

"Shut down!" he said slowly. "But I don't need liquor. No."

Scut looked at the dark walls of the old fort, at its windows, at the porch that had so many memories for him. Then his eyes came back to the great squared figure of the woman, and he considered her. This woman had bred Sandy, and he had loved the youth. She had hated Wanita, and driven her. And he had loved that primitive child, too.

Suddenly he held up a folded paper.

"I want that—cash," he said coolly. "I want it right away. I'm going down with Noah's sternwheeler. I got a dope of dust I've just brought down river. I want cash for that. I'm through, too."

Marthe took the paper and glanced at it. She read the signature. It was Sandy's. It was Sandy's order on her for two thousand dollars. She read the wording of it carefully. She read the date. Then she looked down at the man's squat sturdiness as he gazed up at her.

"That's the two thousand you cashed on me before—before—"

"Sure. I passed him that for his getaway with—her."

Scut saw the paper shake in Marthe's hand. But she seemed unaware of it. She was gazing out at the litter of the new town, and seeing none of it.

Scut sat himself on the porch and leant against his favorite roof post. He waited.

Presently Marthe very deliberately folded Sandy's order and set it in the bosom of her waist.

"That's all right, Scut," she said quietly. "I'll cash that—and your dust—right away. Why are you through—too?"

Scut shook his grizzled head.

"I don't know, Marthe," he said gloomily. "Maybe it's those two darn kids, though. I was kind of glad for those kids, and I get sick thinking."

Marthe snorted. Her eyes glinted.

"You're crazy. Your claim's good pay. Get sense. They'll register you. And you can sluice without any worry for the Bull Moose. Don't have those kids blight you. There's nothing to this life like a swell bank roll. Get after it. Get right after it. The other 'll pass out, same as it don't belong."

Scut shook his head.

"You're wrong, Marthe. That bank-roll can only buy."

Marthe's hard eyes blinked and turned away to the new scene she hated. It was as though they were trying to clear away a sudden mistiness.

"That's what—he said," she muttered.

THE END

Ridgwell Cullum

The Treasure of Big Waters

The Tiger of Cloud River

The Mystery of the Barren Lands

The Wolf Pack

Transcriber's Note: Hyphen variations left as printed.

page 273 weariness And Sandy ==> weariness. And Sandy

[The end of *The Bull Moose* by Sidney Groves Burghard "Ridgewell Cullum"]