

*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada Ebook ***

This ebook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the ebook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the ebook. If either of these conditions applies, please check with an FP administrator before proceeding.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. **If the book is under copyright in your country, do not download or redistribute this file.**

Title: The Shanty Sled

Author: Footner, Hulbert (1879-1944)

Date of first publication: 1925

Edition used as base for this ebook: London: Hodder and Stoughton, undated, but assigned to 1925

Date first posted: 31 July 2010

Date last updated: October 12, 2014

Faded Page ebook#20141052

This ebook was produced by: Al Haines

The Shanty Sled

By

Hulbert Footner

**Hodder and Stoughton Limited
London**

**NOVELS BY
HULBERT FOOTNER**

THE SHANTY SLED
GENTLEMAN ROGER'S GIRL
THE WILD BIRD
COUNTRY LOVE
THE FUR-BRINGERS
THE HUNTRESS
THIEVES' WIT
THE FUGITIVE SLEUTH
THE SEALED VALLEY
ON SWAN RIVER
TWO ON THE TRAIL
JACK CHANTY

HODDER AND STOUGHTON LIMITED
LONDON

Contents

CHAPTER

- I. [AT BEAR COULÈE](#)
- II. [SUPPER AT THE OLD WOMAN'S](#)
- III. [AT THE LANDING](#)
- IV. [IN NEW YORK](#)
- V. [NORTHWARD](#)
- VI. [THE MEETING](#)
- VII. [THE FIGHT](#)
- VIII. [THE START](#)
- IX. [OVER THE ICE](#)
- X. [INTIMATIONS OF DANGER](#)
- XI. [THE ATTACK](#)
- XII. [THE LONG PORTAGE](#)
- XIII. [THE MOTHER](#)
- XIV. [A LONG DEFERRED MEETING](#)
- XV. [THE HAND OF MACCUBBIN](#)
- XVI. [PUTTING ON THE SCREWS](#)
- XVII. [INCREASING PRESSURE](#)
- XVIII. [THE CHINOOK](#)
- XIX. [THE DECISION](#)
- XX. [MARRIAGE BY CONTRACT](#)
- XXI. [AND LAST](#)

I.

At Bear Coulèe

It was September at Bear Coulèe, and the poplar bluffs were painted with splashes of crude yellow ochre on the chocolate-coloured hills. In the little hollows of the hills rose-scrub burned like fire. Every night for weeks past there had been a frost, and the weather showed signs of breaking; it would not be long before the first snow. Old Woman Rambert came to the door of her shack and looked up at the beautifully dying vegetation with an inexpressible pain in her eyes. It was like seeing one's dearest friend pass. She thought of the coming snow with a shudder. Six unbroken months of it to face! It was like the hand of death at her heart.

She shook her head like a terrier and trotted back to her work. She had six loaves of bread in the oven, and that was only the first of several batches that had to be baked that day. Three of the boys were starting next morning on the four-hundred mile journey outside. Throughout the whole country the men of Bear Coulèe bragged of their old woman's home-made bread. A fat lot of good that did the baker, she thought with a wry smile. They were good fellows, all of them, but what did they know, what did they care about the sore heart of the lonely old woman who went to bed every night with a gnawing pain in her side and got up with it? Sometimes in the night panic gripped her. "What will I do? ... What will I do when It comes?" she asked herself, stuffing the sheet into her mouth. "And never a white woman near!"

She was only forty-eight years old, but for many a year now she had been the Old Woman. She ran the "kitchen" at Bear Coulèe; that is to say, she fed the gang, which consisted of Maccubbin, the trader, and the half-dozen or so of

farmers, all bachelors. There was a fiction current that she was putting by enough to retire presently and live with her daughter outside. Only she and Maccubbin knew that that prospect yearly grew more remote. She was an odd-looking little old woman, with her scanty white hair screwed into a hard knot at the back of her head, and a bright red flannel dress. Year by year the style of it never changed. When she needed a new one she simply cut another piece from the bolt of red flannel which Maccubbin kept for her in the store. She had dark eyes full of a gloomy fire, and her mouth was surrounded by hundreds of tiny wrinkles, due to her continual pursing and twisting of it. In all her movements she was as quick as a squirrel.

Bear Coulée was at the end of the waggon-trail in that direction. Their nearest white neighbours were at Spirit River Crossing, one hundred miles south. Maccubbin was a "free" trader. The settlement at Bear Coulée was his idea and his own making, and he enjoyed whatever profit there was in it. These particulars are related in order to explain the isolation of the place. In the most remote of "company" posts there are at least the visits of the doctor, the inspector, and the missionaries to look forward to. Maccubbin made no provision for missionaries. Hence there was no occasion for any white person ever to visit Bear Coulée, and none ever did.

Hearing footsteps outside, the Old Woman drew a mask over her face. None of the men ever saw her without that mask; the mask of a gallant fighter who conceals his wounds. She was never the one to take refuge behind her sex. As she would have said, she always tried to keep her end up. Maccubbin came in, a handsome, strong, dark man in the prime of life, with another sort of mask over his face. He was better dressed than you would expect to find a man at the back of the backwoods; strathcona boots, whipcord breeches, tweed coat, and the inevitable Stetson. This outfit was the insignia of his office; he was the boss.

"You want to see me?" he said, frowning.

"I sure do," she answered brusquely.

"What's the idea?" he asked, running up his eyebrows.

The Old Woman knew exactly why he had assumed this high and mighty air, and she was not in the least intimidated. "In the store the clerk is always about. I wanted to see you by yourself."

"What about?"

"You know perfectly well."

Maccubbin sat down, frowning still. The Old Woman looked at him with that look of long-tried exasperation that women are so often obliged to bend on men. She was looking at his hat. In her twenty years in the country she had not been able to overcome her resentment at the fact that they did not take off their hats when they came into her kitchen. It stuck in her crop at the beginning, and it was still sticking there—but she no longer spoke about it. She drew a long breath for patience, and began:

"The boys are starting out to-morrow, and I shall send my letter to my daughter by them. I want a draft from you to enclose in it."

"Oh, of course," said the trader, as if he had not known it all along. "I don't remember the exact figures, but there's a little over a hundred dollars due you."

"A hundred dollars nothing!" said the Old Woman energetically. "The child can't get through the winter on less than four hundred."

"That's not my fault," said Maccubbin.

"Nor mine either.

"Four hundred dollars!" cried Maccubbin, with a cold hard stare.

"That's what I said!" she returned, squarely meeting his cold eyes with her hot ones.

"That's ridiculous!"

The Old Woman waggled her head and pursed up her lips, and said nothing.

"You can't have it."

"Then I'll go out *with* the boys," she said promptly. "And you can cook for yourself."

"That's ridiculous too," he said coolly. "You know you can't go."

"And why can't I?"

"Because I won't allow it."

This was what she was waiting for. "And are you the Lord God Almighty?" she cried, brandishing her hands above her head. "Have you the power of life and death over us?"

"Don't be silly, Old Woman. You'll bring on a fit of coughing if you screech so. This is merely a matter of business, and you understand it as well as I do.... You owe me over a thousand dollars. Out of consideration for you I have funded it, and I never say anything about it as long as you pay me the trifle of interest yearly...."

"Oh, you can always make the figures come out on your side...."

"... The team that takes the men out to-morrow is my team...."

"Everything hereabouts is yours!"

"... And I'm certainly not going to let my team carry my thousand dollars out of my reach."

"Then I'll walk!"

"A hundred miles?"

"I'd like to see anybody try to stop me!"

"Now come, Old Woman, you're just talking wildly. Suppose you did go out, what could you do at your age? You couldn't make a living for your daughter. You'd only starve together."

"I'm not making a living for her here."

"Quiet down, and talk to me like a reasonable being. You must remember that you're getting on, and your health isn't what it was. I stand to lose the whole amount. But I want to do all I can for you. I'll do what I've always done before, advance still a little more to you. I'll make it two hundred."

"Four hundred!"

And so the battle was joined. They went through this every year.

"If you were a square man," cried the Old Woman desperately, "you would take the responsibility of this boarding-house and pay me a fair wage, but you make me stand the risk, and I always lose! always lose! Because I have to buy everything from you!"

"It was your idea in the beginning."

"Because you persuaded me I could make money this way."

"I'll make it two fifty just to quiet you."

"Four hundred!"

"I'm not made of money. I've had a losing season."

"God forgive you for that lie," cried the Old Woman. "*You lose!* Only He knows what your profits are! Look at these poor wretches of farmers here, all in your debt. You take precious good care that they never get out. They have to buy everything they eat and everything they wear, and their seed, and their implements, from you at your price, and when they're not frozen out and they get a crop, they have to sell their grain to you at your price. And the Indians, they're all in your debt too. You grind the grain into flour and sell it to them at your price; and they have to sell their furs to you at the price you set. Four profits on every transaction, and you dare to tell me you're losing money!"

Maccubbin's dark face turned darker still with rage. "Whisht, Old Woman," he cried. "I'm not obliged to give you anything more than your hundred and eighteen dollars. And not even that, because you owe me a thousand! You'll do yourself no good by angering me."

She marched up to him with arms akimbo. "And who are you that you must not be angered? You'll never shut my mouth while I have breath. You may break me, but you'll never tame me!"

Thus it raged for more than an hour. When Maccubbin strode out of the shack with knotted brows, he left a draft for three hundred dollars lying on the table. The Old Woman, her head still up and her eyes flashing, bowed him out with polite sarcastic remarks, each of which had a sting in its tail. When he was gone she dropped into a chair exhausted, all but fainting, pressing her hand hard to her side. But there was thankfulness in the weary old eyes that she lifted to the yellow and brown hills. She had got more than she expected.

In the intervals of putting the bread in the oven, and looking to see how it was getting on, and taking it out again, the Old Woman sat down at the table to write her letter to her daughter—her letters rather, for she always wrote two. The first and the longest wrote itself, one might say: the pen fairly raced across the paper line after line without a pause, and the Old Woman's tears splashed down and spread the ink. When it was finished, she stood up and read it to herself in a low voice, holding a hand ready to press against her wrinkled lips when they trembled too much.

"MY DARLINGEST, DARLINGEST CHILD,

"I love you! Oh, how I love you! The thought of you is never absent from my heart! Those are my red letter nights when I have a dream of you. The photographs you have sent me are my most precious possessions. I am never too tired to go over them one by one. The little ones are almost worn out. But it is the later ones that I love best. You have become such a beautiful woman that I can scarcely believe you were born of me. That sweet woman's face that I have never seen is engraven on my heart. Oh, I should know you among a thousand!

"Two months have passed since I wrote you. I shall not speak of them. Nothing is changed here. It is a long nightmare. The land is beautiful in the summer, but I hate it, how I hate it! because it has taken from me everything that I hold dear. It took my husband from me, and it forced me to put my child away from me. It has wrecked me, this land; I am not old, but I'm finished and done for, my darling. It has forced me to live among men, and long ago I lost my womanly gentleness. It has turned me into a hideous, coarse old hag. If the miracle should happen, and there ever was a chance of my seeing you, I should put it from me, though my heart broke in two. I could not bear to have you see me. You could not help but turn from such a one. It would be preposterous for me to set up to be your mother, my darling lady daughter. I would not risk losing your dear, dear letters which you write to the mother you have imagined.

"But oh, my darling, how I hunger and thirst for you—for a little love and tenderness and gentleness which have been denied me for twenty years! I continually forget myself and pray God to let me see you once before I die—that won't be long now. When I come to myself I fall on my knees and implore Him not to listen to my prayers, I am so

terrified lest He put an intimation into your heart that I need you, and you should come here. That would be too terrible! You might be trapped here as I was. This country wrecks women, wrecks women, wrecks women! My last and final prayer will be that my child may never know what it is to be trapped in a womanless country.

"The pain grows slowly worse. I don't know what it is. It doesn't matter. It is certainly a mortal pain; but slow. I expect it will give me a goodish run yet before it shuts down on me. I can stand it if only I am able to keep going until I have set you on your feet, my darling. My great fear is of dying among these men. I must not think of that. If I am not taken too suddenly I shall have the courage to steal away before it happens to a place where they will never find me.

* * * * *

"Good-bye, my darling, my pretty one. May God and His angels guard you. Ah! my heart is breaking for you, my courage is gone. I just want you, want you, want you! Come to me, my child!

"MOTHER."

The Old Woman kissed her letter passionately, and going to the stove, lifted one of the lids and dropped the sheets on the flames. As the paper blazed up she whispered:

"That is my heart."

Then she brushed her hand across her eyes; shook her head like a terrier, and stiffening her little back, sat down to write her second letter with serious look and pursed up lips. This was a matter of much greater difficulty. The sentences came slowly. She had often to pause and bite her pen.

"MY DEAREST DAUGHTER,

"Mr. Maccubbin is sending out three lads to Miwasa Landing to bring in the three new teams that will be needed for next season's work, together with our winter's supply of grub, and that gives me an opportunity to write you for the last time this year. You may expect to hear from me again next April. That is, I will write in April, but it will be May before you receive it. But you can write to me again upon receipt of this, for the boys will be obliged to wait over at the Landing until the winter road forms. Horses can only be brought into this country over the ice. Address your letter to me in care of Hugh Bell, Miwasa Landing, Athabasca. Bell is the most dependable of the three. We expect them back here at Christmas or shortly after. For a Christmas present you may send me six pictures of yourself, all different. I like snapshots best, they are so unexpected.

"One of the breeds will drive the lads to the Crossing, where they will get a lift with the freighters over the long portage, and our team will come back. It will bring the August and September mail, and then I shall have two long, long letters from you, I hope, and maybe a picture or two enclosed. It is silly for you to talk about sending me a little camera so I can take a picture of myself. Nobody here would know how to use it. You must just imagine what your mother looks like. You mustn't spend your money on any more books for me either, for my eyes won't permit me to read by lamplight in the winter evenings. I must just defer my reading until I come outside, and can have my eyes seen to. That won't be long now.

"I enclose Mr. Maccubbin's draft for three hundred dollars. I trust this will be enough to see you through, together with what you are now earning. I am delighted to hear how well you are getting on. When your work begins to appear in the magazines, you can send me the magazines, and how proud I shall be! This money I send is only a part of my earnings, of course, and you must not stint yourself any necessaries. Should you run short through sickness or anything, write to me for more in the spring. I am saving every cent against the happy, happy day when I shall be able to leave here and join you. They say that the route which passes through Bear Coulée has been decided on for the new trans-continental railway. That will make us all, well, not rich, but comfortably off. I have a hundred and sixty acres of land right on the location. Of course, it's mortgaged to Mr. Maccubbin for a small sum, but that will be a mere fraction of its

value when the railway comes through.

"You must never speak of coming up here. The expense would be terrific, and there would be nothing to see when you got here. I assure you it's the dullest hole on earth. Why, it's two months since I wrote you, and I cannot think of a bit of news. We had a crop this year, and the farmers are correspondingly elated, but most of it will go to pay the debts they contracted because of the freeze-up last year. When more farmers come in and a larger area is cultivated, we will not suffer so much from summer frosts. You ask me to tell you about the men, but they would not interest you, my dear; well-meaning fellows, but only rough, crude farmers. I am more fortunately placed than the farmers, because they all have to eat just the same, bad years and good.

"My health continues to be excellent, I am happy to say. Everybody remarks on how well I look. I do not have to work as hard as you seem to think, for there is always native help, such as it is. I just direct things. You needn't fear the effect of the long winter on me. We do not have the extreme cold that they have to endure further east, for the Chinook wind modifies our climate. In the middle of the winter I have seen the snow melt right off the prairie. The winter climate is dry and bracing, and seems to suit me very well.

"That is all now, my dear. I have to see to the supper, and early to-morrow the lads will be gone with this. I will start another letter right away, and jot down a line or two from time to time. Sometimes in the winter we have to send men out to the Crossing on snowshoes. Who knows, perhaps you will hear from me before spring after all. As soon as we have twenty people in this place, the Government has promised us a regular mail service summer and winter. Good-bye, my darling child. Take great care of yourself, and write me a long letter on receipt of this. Do not worry about me, for everything is going splendidly here. Much, much love from

"MOTHER."

II.

Supper at the Old Woman's

Hugh Bell and Billy Penrose sat on a bench outside the Old Woman's shack waiting for the summons to supper. The sun had gone down and a chill was falling on the valley, but inside the shack it was a little too warm, for the Old Woman was in one of her "stews." When that happened they all kept close to the ground. What there was of Bear Coulée was spread before their eyes. There was the Old Woman's shack; and a hundred yards away Maccubbin's group of buildings; store, dwelling, mill, and stables; two or three more shacks at intervals of a quarter-mile or so down the little valley. That was all. All the buildings were of logs with sod roofs. Musquasepi or Bear Creek a small stream threaded its way down the valley to meander away to the north-west, where it fell into a great river, they said. Nobody had been out there. The fields of golden stubble stretched along both sides of the creek.

"We'll have a fine day for the start," remarked Hugh.

It had cleared at sundown, and the sky was a lucent sea of aquamarine and topaz above the western hills. The surrounding hills were not hills really, but merely the escarpments of the prairie. On top it was bald, and gently rolling for hundreds of miles in every direction. Bear Coulée was a place where the deep trough, cut by the little stream in the prairie, had widened out to something less than a mile. The extraordinarily rich bottom lands of this hole in the prairie stretched along the stream for six miles or so. "The richest land in the north!" Maccubbin would cry; "twenty-four inches of black loam!" Unfortunately, the bottom lands were even more liable to frost than the bench above. "What matter?" said Maccubbin. "The land is so rich that one crop out of three will pay you." Well, to the involved farmers it didn't quite seem to work out that way.

The door to the shack opened, and the angry voice of the Old Woman came out with a burst.

"What do you s'pose started her off to-day?" asked Billy, with an anxious glance through the window. Billy was the youngest member of the community, a stripling of seventeen, with the rosy, innocent face of a child, and a man's length of limb.

"I suppose she's had a scrap with Maccubbin," said Hugh, scowling. "It's a damn shame!" Hugh was some eight years Billy's senior, a big fellow; blonde, slow, and diffident. The two batched together half a mile down the valley.

"What about?" asked Billy.

"What about? You know. She was trying to get money to send out to her daughter."

"Why does she stay here?" asked Billy.

"For the same reason that we're all chained here. She has a quarter section of land that her husband left her, and it's all she has in the world."

"It's a rotten shame!" said Billy.

"She and her husband were among the first to come in twenty years ago," Hugh went on. "I've heard say that she was above him in station. They had a baby just able to walk. The first spring after they came in, the man was killed by the fall of a spruce-tree he was cutting. Seems they had put every cent they possessed into their outfit, and she didn't know what to do. Maccubbin persuaded her to stay, with his talk of the future of the country—you know his style. What he was after really was a cook. He would have been glad to marry her then, but she wouldn't. She was one of these fierce widows; all other men were horrible to her alongside the memory of her husband. But she sent the child outside to her sister by a missionary's wife from the Crossing, and she stayed to cook. She's never seen her daughter since. She's still here cooking; you see what she's got out of it."

"It's a shame!" said Billy.

"So we don't mind if she gives us the rough side of her tongue occasionally," said Hugh. "I'd do anything to serve the Old Woman. Only she won't let me. Proud as Lucifer!"

The well-dressed Maccubbin presiding with dignity at the head of the table; the Old Woman in her red flannel dress at the foot; four men in more or less nondescript garments down each side: such was the entire white population of Bear Coulée. There was a soft-footed, big-eyed breed boy to fill the cups and bring the pie. All the men were in an excellent humour, for the meal was a special one in honour of the departing travellers; there was a haunch of moose-meat with onions and potatoes, and a wild cranberry-pie. The Old Woman had quieted down. She kept her head up and her mouth tightly pursed. She was Johnny-on-the-spot with her sharp remarks, but her glance was sombre. There was always this emotional strain when anybody departed for the Land of Promise—outside.

"Bring me two whole cartons of cigarettes!" cried one. "I want to kill myself smokin'."

"Bring me a store suit with peg-top trousers.

"Aah! peg-tops went out ten years ago."

"Bring a little phonograph and a dozen records. That would make the winter nights pass."

"Bring the Old Woman a five-pound box of candy for me. None of your cheap stuff out of a wooden pail, but real outside candy in a box with a ribbon round it."

"Much obliged, Wilkie," said the Old Woman dryly, "but I'm thinking after a month on the trail, my old teeth would hardly be equal to it."

"Bring me in a Stilton cheese."

All this was mere comedy, of course. They knew they would get none of these things. Maccubbin might import them, and they could buy them at the store. It was the Old Woman who got in the slyest dig at the trader.

"Bring me in a mail order catalogue."

There was a great laugh.

"Well, I hope there'll be room on the sleds for a little bacon and beans," said Maccubbin, undisturbed by it.

Maccubbin was the first to leave the party. He shook hands genially with Hugh, Billy, and Lester Morrow, the three travellers-to-be. "I shan't see you fellows before you start. You'll have to be off by five, if you want to halt at the water-hole by the big spruce. Well, you know what you have to do. You'll find my outfit stored in my own warehouse at the Landing. Trudeau has the key; and Trudeau has the horses. Check up the inventory when you arrive, and again when you load the sleds.

"Start back as soon as you are able, but do not be foolhardy. Don't be the first party to start over the ice, but the second. Once you are started, push through without delay. You know as well as I do that, most years after January fifteenth, there is too much snow on the prairie for you to get through with horses and sleds. And we'll be in need here of sugar and beans and tea by that time."

When Maccubbin went a certain constraint was lifted from the gathering. The men pushed their chairs back and rocked on the hinder legs. The Old Woman sat down away from the table with her mending. She had a small lamp on a dresser beside her, with a tin reflector to cast down the light on her work. But her eyes were bad to-night. After an ineffectual struggle, she put down her sewing and sat quietly in her corner.

"Old Woman, have you written to your daughter?" asked Lester. He was a tall, handsome lad as dark and spare of frame as an Indian. And like an Indian's were his keen, close-set eyes. Unlike most Indians, he was a great talker, and was generally the life of the party. He was reputed to be a favourite of Maccubbin's, but in the North a man finds his level, and there was a general feeling that Lester, good hunter and tireless on the trail though he was, was less dependable, say, than the diffident Hugh.

"Why, of course," said the Old Woman.

"I'll carry it for you," said Lester.

"Much obliged," said the Old Woman, "but I calculate giving it to Hugh."

Lester's eyes seemed to draw closer together. "Can't you trust me?" he said, with the frank laugh which was one of his recommendations.

"Surely. But it just happened I spoke to Hugh about it first."

"Old Woman, did you give her our regards?" asked Wilkie Beach, a slack-looking, hairy farmer.

"Surely," she said, with more than a trace of dryness.

"Not meaning any disrespect," said Wilkie deprecatingly, "but just because we feel we know her, having talked about her so much, and looked at her pitchers."

"Tell us about her, Old Woman," said Sandy Govans cajolingly. He was a wistful little fellow, on whom Maccubbin's stock sizes of shirts and pants hung a world too big. "What's this about her being an artist?"

The Old Woman could not resist this. She said with a quickening eye: "She draws pictures such as those you see in

the magazines."

"But I thought them was printed," said Sandy.

"You blooming idiot, they've got to be drawn before they can be printed," said Lester.

"Oh! Well, how was I to know? ... Well, anyhow, I never see no pitchers anywhere as purty as herself. Show us her pitchers to-night, Old Woman."

She got up with an air of great condescension, and pulling open the top drawer of the dresser, took from it a little packet carefully wrapped in a handkerchief. The handkerchief spread, a little pile of photographs was revealed, including several of cabinet size, and many snapshots, small and smaller.

"Let me see your hands," she said sternly to Sandy.

He wiped them furiously on a very grimy bandanna before venturing to exhibit. The others, more or less furtively, also wiped their hands. The Old Woman, carrying the precious packet, returned to the foot of the table, and the men drew up again. With a sharp admonition to handle the pictures carefully if they ever wanted to see them again, she began to pass them around the board.

"This is the first picture they sent back to me after she had gone," she said. "Age two years, nine months, and eleven days. At that time her hair curled all over her head as you can see, in ringlets as soft as the finest spun silk, and in colour like pale sunlight.... In this one they have put her hair in a ribbon for the first time, and she is wearing her first stuff dress. It was a red and black plaidie. They sent me a sample of it. She was intensely proud of it, they said, and went about to everybody holding out the skirt and saying: 'See! See! New dress!'..."

And so on. And so on. They all knew the Old Woman's tender, simple game off by heart. Nobody thought of laughing at her. They were not merely humouring her either; for this charming baby, child, girl, woman, had come to fill a big space in their empty lives. They handled the pictures reverently, and something of the mother's own rapt air entered into them as they looked. That is, into all but Lester. He was no less keenly interested than the others, but he kept his slightly conceited air.

"Well, Old Woman, it is something to have had a beautiful child like that, even if it was by proxy sort of," said Wilkie Beach.

"Oh, the pretty little Miss!" said Sandy, with his face all softened. "See, in this one she looks as if she was just goin' to start dancin'. See! See!"

"She's somepin more than just a pretty child, too," said another. "See how she looks out at you so serious and all. She's got good sense."

"Hurry up with the ones where she's grown up," said Billy. "Those are the ones that get me. Oh, boy!"

Hugh said nothing at all, but his too-candid eyes betrayed him. Lester looked sideways at him with a slightly derisive smile. These two being young, and of the same age, were great rivals in everything.

When at last they had all been passed around and had returned to the Old Woman again, and she carried them to the dresser to put them in the handkerchief, something prompted her to count the pictures. Having done so, she whirled around to the table with a terrible face.

"There's one missing!" she cried.

They all looked slightly aghast, and started to look in the most unlikely places: under the dishes that remained on the table, under the table, under the chairs; they even got up to see if by chance they were sitting on the lost picture. It was not to be found. Meanwhile, the Old Woman agitatedly went through the pile. She was at no loss.

"It is the one taken on her nineteenth birthday," she cried accusingly. "A snapshot. She is sitting on the grass with a bush behind her and her feet at one side. She has on a hat with two wings, and she is smiling. *Who had that last?*"

Her tone made them all look guilty.

"I remember that pitcher," said Sandy hastily; "I looked at it and passed it along to Dan here."

"And I passed it on to Wilkie," the next man hastened to aver.

"That's right, and I passed it to Hughey," said Wilkie.

Before Hugh could speak for himself, Lester, who sat on the other side of him, said softly: "It never came to me."

Everybody looked at Hugh.

"Bell, have you got my picture?" the Old Woman demanded in an awful voice.

The hanging head, the crimson face told their own tale. Hugh had never a word to say for himself.

"Hand it over!"

Blonde Hugh arose and with wretched eyes slipped his hand in his inside breast pocket and produced the missing card. He carried it to the Old Woman with a hang-dog air. The feelings of the company were mixed. Lester led off with an enormous laugh, in which one or two others joined, but some, like little Sandy Govans, looked at him with a curious compunction. Billy, his pal, was, of course, quick with his look of sympathy, and he glared at the laughers. The Old Woman felt no compunctions.

"How dare you! How dare you!" she stormed. "You miserable thief! You snake in the grass! When I let you look at the pictures out of kindness, you would rob me, would you? Well, I'll take precious good care you never get your itching palms on them again. Out of my house, you thief, before I forget myself!" In her heat she clean forgot that she had asked Hugh to do her a service.

Hugh took his hat and left the shack without a word. Billy made haste to follow, with defiant backward glances at those who laughed. Outside the man walked along with his head down. The boy slipped his arm through that of his friend, but there was no answering pressure; Hugh's arm hung straight down.

In their own shack Hugh sat on the edge of the bed and looked at the floor. Hugh and Billy shared a big home-made bedstead filled with straw. Lester's bedding roll was lying on the floor; for he was to sleep with them that night, that all might get up together.

"Aw, don't take it so hard," said Billy in distress. "It was only a kind of a joke like. The Old Woman don't mean all she says when she's mad."

"It wasn't a joke," muttered Hugh.

"Well, let on it was, anyhow."

"I was a fool ... a fool! I thought she'd never miss it. There was another one almost the same...."

"But what did you want it for?" asked Billy.

"I'm going to be away for three months," said Hugh very low. "I shall hear nothing, see nothing all that time...."

The boy stared uncomprehendingly.

"Come here," said Hugh peremptorily. He let his hand fall heavily on the boy's shoulder. "You're only a kid," he said, "but you're a good partner. I want to tell you this so you won't always be looking and wondering.... There is no

woman in my life. There never will be. How could there be with me stuck in a God-forsaken hole like this, and up to my neck in debt at that? ... Yet I'm young.... I started to dream about this girl just to cheat myself, see? And it went on and on, and before I knew it had got me. Yes, a girl I have never seen, and never will see. She is more real to me than life itself. Now, there never could be another woman for me, not if I was set in the midst of millions of them!"

"Oh, Hugh.... Oh, Hugh!" the boy murmured, half scared.

"Well, that's that," said Hugh rousing himself. "I made a fool of myself, but I suppose it'll blow over. We won't speak about it again. Let's get to bed."

They left the lamp burning for Lester. When that lad entered the shack, a sharp look at the two on the bed showed him that they were asleep. However, in order to make sure, he went close to the bed. There was no move from Hugh or Billy. With every inhalation they were filling their lungs to the bottom. Hugh's coat was hanging from a hook on the wall at the foot of the bed. Lester stole to it, and keeping his eyes fixed on the sleeping Hugh he felt for the inside pocket. From it he drew a thin packet wrapped in newspaper. Within it was the Old Woman's letter. Lester took it out of its wrapping, studied the address upon it, rewrapped it, and returned it to the pocket. He then wrote down the address in his own notebook, and started to make ready for bed. He was thinking:

"I might write her a little letter myself. No harm in that."

III.

At the Landing

Four hundred miles from Bear Coulée—that is to say, across the prairie, over the long portage to the head of Caribou Lake, down the lake by York boat, and down the "little" river and the "big" river to Miwasa Landing—the three travellers were now batching it in a shack of a more pretentious description, being built of rough-sawn pine boards and roofed with tarred felt.

The Landing was the first outpost of civilization, the place where one emerged from the wilderness. To men fresh from Bear Coulée it might seem quite citified, with its piece of plank sidewalk, its company store with plate-glass windows, and its two-storied hotel that boasted both a piano and a billiard table. Hugh and Billy were satisfied, but Lester, thinking of the honest-to-goodness city and its delights, only one little hundred miles further to the south, chafed continually. They had plenty of grub, and credit to a certain extent with Trudeau, but the canny Maccubbin had not provided them with any money.

The long journey had ended with relations a little strained amongst the trio. Nothing positive had happened, but there was a temperamental difference between Lester and the other two, and the closeness of the relations between Hugh and Billy emphasized it. The selfish, conceited Lester got a little on the nerves of his mates, and presumably they got on Lester's nerves also. At any rate, when they reached the Landing they flew apart. They had to sleep and eat together in Maccubbin's shack, but Hugh and Billy rarely saw Lester at other times. Lester shirked his part of the work of constructing the sleds for the return journey, but they didn't mind that, for they expected to have to wait five or six weeks for the ice, and they had little enough work to fill in the time.

From the Landing the various routes into the north radiated like fingers; consequently there was plenty of company coming and going. Hugh and Billy spent all their spare time at Trudeau's yarning with other travellers. Trudeau's was on the river front, with a glorious prospect from the front platform over the Miwasa, where it made its wide sweep in front of the settlement and turned north again. But it was mostly too cold to sit outside now. They gathered around the big stove in the common room. After the empty months at Bear Coulée how good it was!

"You want to keep your ears open, young Billy," said Hugh. "It's a sort of education for you. They're a rough lot, but

they're real. Up north every tub stands on its own bottom. What a man knows he has doped out for himself. Whereas in the cities men are apt to be like newspapers, all printed alike."

Billy couldn't believe *all* he heard, because there was an incorrigible tendency amongst the men to josh the inexperienced stripling. He didn't mind so much, because they made it clear that he was a prime favourite with them notwithstanding. One of the men was Mel Delsher, a brawny Hercules, with a black beard that overspread half his chest. He was a mail-carrier with a route six hundred miles long. This was Mel's style:

"Waal, they say they ain't nothin' in Nature but what has its proper uses, but I swear sometimes it's hard to see it. Take skeeters and black fly and muskegs. Or take sawr-grass. To the West of Great Deer Lake there's thousands of miles of sawr-grass, I guess. 'Tain't fit to burn; 'tain't fitten for the lowest of God's critters to eat. I never could see no manner of use to sawr-grass except to tear the clo'es offen a man's back, when he was forced by the wind to make a landing on that side. But I learned better, boys. Even sawr-grass has its uses."

"What's that, Mel?" somebody asked.

"Waal, I'll tell you. One time in the spring of the year I was travellin' along the bench to the westward of the lake when I see far ahead a curious procession like wending its way towards the bottoms. Imagine my surprise when I come close to see that it was composed of mountain goats as far as I could see. You may well stare at me disbelievingly, men, but I said it, and I stick to it. A whole procession of 'em; hunderds. And they didn't pay no more attention to me than if I wasn't there, but kep' straight on. The rarest and the shyest of all animiles. Strange ain't no word for that sight. They didn't pay no attention to me, because their minds was concentrated on somepin more important to them. Their glassy eyes was fixed on the distant sawr-grass...."

The mail-carrier paused to shave a plug of tobacco with great care not to spill a shred, and Billy, all worked up, asked eagerly:

"What for, if they couldn't eat it?"

"They cut their whiskers with it, son," said Mel gravely.

A great roar of laughter went up, and Billy perceived that he had bitten again. He blushed and wished that he might sink quietly through a hole in the floor. These fellows had such a dry manner you never could tell when they were preparing to sell you.

Lester never came home until very late, and since these days were not filled with strenuous labour, sleep did not come so promptly as usual to Hugh and Billy. They always spent an hour or so lying on their beds on the floor of the shack "talking" before they dropped off. They both cherished these "talks" more than they would have cared to admit. They had been friends for more than a year now, since Hugh had picked up Billy, a forlorn little derelict, at Spirit River Crossing; but Hugh, conscious of his superior years, had always treated the boy with a certain condescension. Their real intimacy dated from the night when Hugh had confessed his hopeless passion for a dream girl. Hugh had said they would never speak of that again, but, of course, they did. It eased Hugh's breast to speak of it.

He could open his heart to the boy in a way that would have been impossible with a fellow his own age. As for Billy, well, he had always regarded Hugh as something between a god and a hero of romance. Nobody but Billy knew what was concealed beneath Hugh's quiet, slow, inarticulate exterior.

"She'll have her letter by now," Hugh said one night. "But she'll never know that I kept it warm inside my coat for three weeks.... I wonder what the Old Woman has told her about me."

"Not much, likely," said Billy; "because the Old Woman rates her so high, you see. Alongside o' *her* you and me are like dirt to the Old Woman."

"Yes, that's right," said Hugh. "It's natural.... I hope to God in her next letter the Old Woman won't say anything about me trying to pinch the photograph."

"Well, I don't know," said Billy; "if she did, it might start the girl wondering about you. Women are shrewd that way."

"That's just childishness," said Hugh. "We've got to face the facts."

"Well, you're a fine-looking man," said Billy, "and she's a woman...."

"Cut it out!" said Hugh peremptorily. "I don't like it!"

Billy mumbled something to himself obstinately.

Hugh presently went on dreamily: "Measuring by distance it isn't so much, but measuring by time, we've come close to her. Two days by stage from here to Prince George; and four days by train from Prince George to New York. Less than a week would do it...."

"Don't think of that," urged Billy.

"I like to think of it. I'd like to go to New York just because she's there, even if I didn't see her."

"Do you mean to say you'd go to New York without trying to see her?"

"Sure. I don't want to see her ... that is, I know it wouldn't do me any good. That would start something that I ... that I couldn't handle. That would *do* for me, kid.... But as it is, I got things straightened out in my mind. I can think about her...."

"You're too humble-minded," said Billy. "After all, a man's a man...."

"Oh, that's just story-book stuff!" said Hugh. "Face the facts!"

One night towards the end of October when they returned to the shack Lester's bed-roll was gone.

"Oh, well, he's found a bunkhouse more to his taste," said Hugh. "He'll turn up for grub."

But at breakfast there was no sign of him. Sallying out afterwards they met Mel Delsher, with whom it was a point of pride to know everything that went on.

"Seen Lester?" asked Hugh.

"Why, sure," said Mel, "didn't you know? He started out for town at sun-up with Chocolate Jimmy in his demmycrat. There's style for you!"

Hugh merely shrugged. When they were alone, Billy asked anxiously:

"Hadn't we ought to do something? The two of us can't take in three teams."

"He'll be back," said Hugh.

Lester had not been content to sit gossiping away the lazy hours at Trudeau's. After having been immured for a year at Bear Coulee, he felt as if he were full of coiled springs, and he told himself he had a right to have some fun while he was outside. So he went prowling about the settlement to look for it. There were other less reputable places of entertainment at the Landing; such as Pete Bridge's retired shack, a piece down the river-bank, where they played seven-up for high stakes and rattled the bone cubes. Here Lester made his hang-out—but he had no money! That fact was ever present in his galled breast. He could only look on at the play, and Pete Bridges, he thought, looked at him sourly when he came in. A young man in his pride, and no money to fling away! Lester found it unbearable.

Providence threw Chocolate Jimmy Beeston in his way. Chocolate Jimmy was quite a character in the country. With his meagre frame encased in a much-bepocketed "hunting suit," and his wrinkled face with big, credulous eyes, he

looked like a middle-aged little boy. He was not of the country, but termed himself "explorer." He had gone in several times armed with an elaborate and impracticable outfit, but had never got very far from the company posts. Altogether he was quite a joke amongst the old-timers. It was rumoured that he wrote books about his travels, but nobody had any proof of it. He had gained his sobriquet from the amount of chocolate he packed, and from his gifts of that sweet in and out of season.

Chocolate Jimmy came up the river from Fort McMaster in a canoe with two native paddlers, and he had to wait over at the Landing for a few days for his conveyance to town. He disdained the ordinary stage, and had sent for old Dave Gregg, a Scotch half-breed, to come for him in a democrat. This made a lot of talk. Chocolate Jimmy was hailed with cheers by the crowd at Trudeau's, but he fancied there was a lack of respectful sympathy in their greetings. He was leery of the crowd. He and Lester had come together like the magnet and the steel, for Chocolate Jimmy had money, and Lester had plenty of sympathy for a traveller with money.

They hobnobbed in Chocolate Jimmy's room. The explorer opened bottles of rare old Scotch and recounted his exploits. Respectful sympathy caused the little man to gobble like a turkey when he talked and wag his head like a walking-beam.

"Yes, sir," he said, "the enraged she-grizzly was squarely between me and the setting sun, and I was dazzled, dazzled. There was not a second to be lost. I dropped to one knee, and with a bowing motion threw the tail of my coat right over my head to keep the sun out of my eyes. The bear looked surprised at this manoeuvre. I let her have it between the eyes, and she dropped. Somersaulting two or three times under the force of her impetus, she fell dead at my feet."

"Gosh! that showed presence of mind!" said Lester, with a perfectly straight face.

"Nothing at all! Nothing at all!" said Chocolate Jimmy with a wave of his hand. "One has to learn to think quickly, the sort of life I lead."

Finally Old Dave arrived in the democrat. He brought one of his boys along for company on the way up, but even so, this left a vacant space in the four-seated rig. Lester thought about it longingly, and redoubled his attentions to Chocolate Jimmy. He let fall several little hints about having a bit of business to do in Prince George, and after several drinks of the generous Scotch, Chocolate Jimmy asked him to come along. Lester fetched his bed and lay beside Old Dave that night to be ready for an early start.

And so they went. On the way down Lester confided to his host, with that frank and engaging laugh of his, that he was stony-broke; consequently Chocolate Jimmy had him on his hands. Willingly or unwillingly he paid Lester's score in Prince George, but on the third day he departed for the East in a drawing-room compartment, and as he had not suggested paying Lester's way back to the Landing, the young man was left flat. He went to Maccubbin's agent in Prince George, and, identifying himself, said that he had had an errand to do for his boss in town and had run a little short. He got a small advance, and used it to prolong his stay in town, trusting to his luck to send him another windfall.

One night he went into the bar of the Athabasca Hotel, where he had scraped acquaintance with a bar-tender. His friend seeing him, turned to a party of gentlemen at the bar, and said:

"Here's a lad what knows hosses."

One of the gentlemen turned around and looked at Lester from his head to his feet. Lester knew him at a glance for one of "these real tony sports"; he had a look of command in his eye that inspired Lester with respect, though Lester could have picked him up with one hand and dropped him over the bar.

"What's your job?" he asked.

"I farm at Bear Coulee in the Spirit River country, five hundred miles north-west," said Lester.

"Five hundred miles!" said the gentleman with a laugh. "That's a goodish way to come for a drink."

"I came down to take in new teams and an outfit for the trader up there," said Lester.

"Teams, eh? Then you know horses?"

"I was raised with them."

"How'd you like a trip to New York?"

New York! The heart seemed to puff up in Lester's breast. But he answered cautiously: "I don't know; I got to go back home."

"New York's only a four days' trip. You could be back here in eight."

"Well, I could spare ten days or two weeks to it," said Lester carelessly. "We're waiting for the ice. What's the idea?"

"I've got a string of polo ponies that I'm shipping to a gentleman on Long Island. They're loaded in a car on the siding here. I've got one man with them, but my second groom has gone on a tear and left me flat. Do you want it?"

"What is there in it?"

"All expenses, your transportation back to Prince George, and twenty-five dollars."

"I couldn't see much of New York on twenty-five."

"I can get plenty who would do it for the trip alone."

"Make it fifty, and I'm your man."

"Can you give me a reference?"

"Sure. There's my boss's agent here." Lester named him.

"All right. It's a go!"

Lester left the place treading on air. New York! New York! New York! was singing through his mind. What a chance! *what* a chance! Lucky he put down that girl's address. He'd show her a time in New York.... What would Hugh say when he heard...?

IV.

In New York

In a bare, workmanlike studio on West Eighth Street, two girls clad in smocks, well spotted and streaked with paint, were hard at work at their easels. The one in the faded green smock was a very pretty girl, with a mop of light brown hair, and the deep blue eyes that are generally called violet. She was working at a picture that looked as if it might be intended for a magazine cover. The figure had been completed from the model, and she was painting in the background. Her friend in the rusty black smock was somewhat older, and not at all pretty; a sharp-nosed, dark little thing; but she looked intelligent. She was painting a bunch of chrysanthemums in a Chinese jar in a bold, free style that signified a considerable talent. Both were deeply absorbed in their work and apparently oblivious of each other.

After a while the dark-haired girl put down her brushes for a breather and looked around at her pretty friend. She saw that her friend likewise had stopped work and had averted her head from her picture with rather a discontented expression.

"What's the matter, Selina?" she asked.

"Oh, nothing in particular," was the answer. "I just feel dull."

"What! and only yesterday a magazine offered you a story to illustrate! Your first story. All day you were capering around here like a wild thing."

"I suppose this is the reaction setting in."

"Why should it? It's just as fine a thing to-day to earn your living as it was yesterday."

"Oh yes, I know."

"What's the matter then?"

"I was just wondering if that was all there was in life."

"Mercy! If what was all?"

"Work."

"Suppose you were a salesgirl or a stenographer. We're lucky."

"I'm not kicking against my work. I'm crazy about it.... But I'd like a little fun too."

"Sure! we all would. What do you mean by fun?"

"Well ... fun."

"But everybody has their own kind, my child. Do you mean fellows hanging round, and going out to dinner and dances, and so on?"

"Yes," said the pretty Selina with a defiant look.

"Well, you don't have to glare at me."

"I thought you would think I was foolish."

"Sure, you're foolish. But who isn't? I would enjoy that kind of fun first rate myself. But I made up my mind long ago that it wasn't for me."

"Ah, you have real talent, Clara. I have not—though I can support myself."

"It's a good thing I have something," said Clara dryly. "... If you want that sort of fun, why don't you have it? I know at least three men who would fall all over themselves to take you around if you so much as raised a pretty eyebrow in their direction."

"Artists," said Selina, making a little face.

"Well, what's the matter with artists?"

"Oh, I like artists as artists, but not as men." She struggled to explain herself. "Artists are too knowing ... too sophisticated. They treat us like men, and talk shop all the time. How could romance ever creep in? Besides, they generally despise us, because they consider themselves better artists than we are—even the worst artists do. Oh no! Decidedly I must keep the two things separate. I must look outside my business for a man."

"There's sense in what you say, kid."

"Anyhow, city men don't appeal to me," Selina went on. "I wish I knew a man, simple, strong, and direct in his nature...."

"Like Bill Hart?" said Clara teasingly.

"Oh, you may laugh," said Selina. "But that's my ideal. I can't help it."

"That's the ideal of all of us," said Clara, "however we may laugh." She turned around from her easel. "Let's talk about men. The fascinating creatures!"

Selina smiled quickly at her friend's droll manner. When she smiled one saw that she was more than pretty; she was beautiful. "I don't know anything about them," she said. "I was brought up by an unmarried aunt, a grandmother and a great-aunt, and there was no man around our house. As you know, my father died when I was a baby. My mother, who had gone up into Northern Athabasca with him to make a home, sent me out to her relatives to be taken care of. Living with three women, two of whom had never married, I got the notion that men were worthless creatures, who were much better left to their own devices.

"I never knew any young men until I came down to New York to study art. At the Art Students' League I had plenty of opportunities to meet them. But I had no time. I felt that my people had all made great sacrifices to enable me to obtain an art education and I must not lose a day in learning to earn my own living. So it was grind, grind, grind. Now that I have turned the corner, I feel that I have missed something. I'm nearly twenty-three."

"And youth has fled!" said Clara sepulchrally.

"Oh, go on! ... Seriously, Clara, there is a horrible weakness, a vice in my nature that you do not suspect. I long to be a butterfly. I want to be run after and courted. I crave to be admired."

"Well, if that is sinful," said Clara, "there won't be many women in heaven."

"But the trouble is, that the men I know don't seem to be worth attracting. Such featherweights! I dream of a *man*....!"

On another day when Selina and Clara had knocked off for lunch, there came a knock at the studio door. The two girls paused in the act of biting into sardine sandwiches and looked at each other inquiringly; nobody was expected.

"Come in!" Clara sang out.

But no one came in. They heard someone cough in an embarrassed manner behind the door, and the knock was repeated. Clara, with her quick, birdlike walk, hastened to open the door, and Selina looked with strong curiosity to see who was behind it. But it was dark in that end of the room, and she could see only a tall dim figure. She heard a resonant voice say:

"Oh! ... I was looking for Miss Selina Rambert."

"Well, she lives here," said Clara. "Come in."

A young man strode into the room. Selina caught her breath in astonishment, for he was like a figure of romance—like a character that she might have drawn for a magazine story. To be sure he was wearing an ordinary store suit which clung rather awkwardly to his tall figure, yet could not obscure its fineness; but his shirt was of blue flannel and the hat he carried in his hand was a broad-brimmed, high-crowned affair such as is seldom seen in the streets of New York. It was the hat which provided the touch of romance. Then, too, Selina saw that he was wearing riding boots, though his trousers came down over the tops. He walked somewhat stiffly in them.

He was uncommonly good looking, with the sleek black hair of an Indian and an Indian's piercing gaze... He was very tall, with broad shoulders and a waist like a girl's. He bore himself like one accustomed to the saddle. There was a

sort of pantherlike grace in his movements, of which he was well aware. What a figure to stray into West Eighth Street! At present he had rather an embarrassed air, due to the strangeness of his surroundings. His eye darted dubious, sidelong glances at the studio appurtenances.

Selina was standing in the full rays of the skylight, and as soon as he saw her he broke into a wide, engaging smile that revealed dazzling teeth. "There you are!" he said. "I'd have known you anywhere!"

Selina opened her eyes wide. "But I don't know you!"

"Of course you don't!" he said, with a delightful laugh. His embarrassment was only superficial. Selina perceived a man's boldness and assurance in the bright black eyes. Well, she did not like him any the worse for that. "I'm Lester Morrow," he said.

The name suggested nothing to Selina. "I'm sure I never saw you before," she said. "How is it that you know me?"

"From your photographs that you sent the Old Woman."

Selina still looked blank.

"That's the name we fellows have for Mrs. Rambert, your mother."

"Oh!" said Selina. She was a little affronted. "She isn't so very old."

"Sure she isn't!" said Lester. "It's just in the way of affection, see? Oh, we think a heap of the Old Woman! She's the only white woman anywhere about."

"Well ... sit down," said Selina.

Of the two Selina was the more embarrassed now. Clara had seated herself quietly in the chair before her easel and was watching them both. "What a beautiful pair!" she was thinking. As they paid no attention to her she began to sketch Lester on a piece of Bristol board.

"Did my mother send you to me?" asked Selina.

"No," said Lester. "She didn't know I was coming to New York.... I didn't know it myself," he added with his laugh. "I didn't expect to come any further than the Landing to get horses for Maccubbin."

"Yes, my mother said in her letter that three of you were coming out, but she only mentioned one name—Hugh Bell."

"Oh, Hugh, yes," said Lester carelessly. "He's up there.... I went down to Prince George while we were waiting for the ice," he went on with a casual air, "and I happened to meet a friend who asked me to oblige him by bringing a string of polo ponies to New York. So here I am."

So far so good. But at this point the conversation suddenly broke down. Neither could think of anything further to say. Clara watched them with the hint of a smile clinging around the corners of her lips.

Lester was not to be downed for long. "This is a strange life to me," he said, glancing around the studio.

"Well ... and you are strange to us," said Selina.

They looked at each other, and Lester suddenly broke into his frank, boyish laugh. Selina had to join in it. That broke the ice.

Clara spoke up. "We were just finishing our lunch. It isn't much—just what two women would pick at. But if you'll join us..."

"Thanks ever so much," said Lester, "but I was going to ask Miss Rambert...." He betrayed a boyish confusion that

was very attractive. "Of course, I don't know the rules and regulations here in the East. But I thought maybe since I'd come so far ... and knowing her mother and all ... I thought maybe she'd come out to lunch with me."

Selina glanced at Clara, who kept her head down and made believe not to get it. There was an obstinate dimple in Clara's cheek. "Why, surely!" said Selina, with a touch of defiance. "I'd be delighted to. Half a moment while I tidy up."

The back part of the studio had a curtain hanging across it. Behind the curtain was the girls' dressing-room. Selina disappeared.

Lester glanced at Clara cautiously. He was a little afraid of *her*.

"I don't bite," said Clara in her sharp way.

Lester laughed, but it had rather a forced sound. This girl was *too* sharp. "Can I look at your work?" he asked politely. "It seems wonderful to me to be able to paint pictures."

Clara held up the little sketch she had been making.

"Why, that's *me!*" said Lester amazed. "Gosh! ... Can she do that too?" he asked, with a jerk of his head towards the curtain.

"Surely," said Clara.

"But not as well as she can," said Selina from behind the curtain.

"Oh, but she's been at it much longer," said Lester quickly.

Clara bent over her work again with a dry smile.

When Selina reappeared in her pretty dress and smart little hat, Lester was sharply taken aback. "Gosh!" he exclaimed. "... Gosh!"

"What's the matter?" asked Clara wickedly.

"In her working clothes I thought she was out o' sight!" said Lester. "But I wasn't prepared for this. A photograph doesn't tell you anything. She's wonderful ... wonderful! It's enough to strike a man dumb."

Selina blushed and made believe to be having difficulty with her glove.

"You seem to have all your powers of speech," said Clara dryly.

"Come on," said Selina.

When the door closed behind them Clara sighed and tossing the sketch aside got down to serious work.

Pagliariello's, a famous old Italian restaurant, was only a few doors from the studio, and within a few minutes Selina and Lester were seated one on each side of a tiny table overlooking the animated panorama of Eighth Street.

"Can you eat another meal?" asked Lester anxiously.

"Oh yes," said Selina frankly. "We only eat enough at lunch to keep ourselves going, so we can work afterwards."

They were well pleased with each other. Lester showed his pleasure, and Selina hid hers. Each saw in the other the incarnation of a secret dream. Lester looked around the place. There wasn't a girl there that could hold a candle to his girl. Amidst great laughter Lester struggled with the national dish of Italy.

"You mustn't cut it," said Selina. "It's never done."

"Then I ought to have a funnel to lead it in," said Lester.

Between courses he leaned his elbows on the table and gazed at her ardently. "You don't know what this means to me," he said. "Try to imagine it. There isn't a white girl within four hundred miles of Bear Coulée. When I come out most any white girl looks good to me. Just as girls, you understand. But you ... you are *the* girl to me. From looking at your photographs so much I have put the image of you away inside me. I never expected to see you face to face. It's like a miracle. It's almost too much. It makes me light-headed."

"Well, if you feel like that," she said, laughing a little uncertainly, "I wish you'd keep it to yourself. It puts me out of countenance."

But it was music in the girl's ears, and he knew it. He didn't stop. "It comes right out of me," he said pleadingly. "I can't help it. You must excuse me."

"Those photographs of you," he went on, "I know them all by heart from the ones with the ringlets and the plaid dress on."

"Fancy that!" murmured Selina.

"And the Old Woman has told me so much about you. That's why I feel as if I knew you so well."

"Does she show them to the others too?"

"Oh, well, maybe once in awhile," said Lester carelessly. "But the Old Woman and I are special pals. She wouldn't tell the others everything."

"Fancy having your photographs make friends for you like that with people you will never see!"

"Look, I'll only be here a couple of days or so," said Lester, leaning closer, "before I have to go back and bury myself... Come out with me often, will you? Spend all the time with me. You don't have to work."

"I'll come as often as I can," said Selina demurely. "And you must come to the studio."

"Your friend don't like me," said Lester.

"You can't tell. She's like that to everybody."

After they had finished their meal Selina said: "We must stop talking about ourselves now. I want you to tell me about my mother."

"What can I tell you that you don't know from her letters?" said Lester.

"I know next to nothing," said Selina, "because she will not write about herself. Her letters are all about me. She says that there's nothing at Bear Coulée to write about."

"She's right enough there," said Lester. "It's a dull hole. And she has such a rotten time, it's natural she wouldn't want to talk about it."

Selina looked up quickly. "A rotten time? What do you mean by that?"

"Don't you know?"

"I told you I knew nothing."

Lester would have been glad then if he had not spoken, but there was no help for it now. He could not foresee the result of his speaking: "It's Maccubbin," he said. "He's a sort of Czar of Bear Coulée.... He hasn't got anything on me," he lied, "because I don't owe him anything; I stand on my own feet. But he's got all the others sewed up with debts."

"My mother too?"

"Sure. She's the worst off of any. Because Maccubbin needs her so bad, see? He likes to eat nice. So he's fixed it so she's got deeper and deeper in his debt every year, and now she can't ever get away."

"The man must be a monster!" cried Selina.

"Oh no," said Lester simply. "He's a hard man, but square."

"I thought the business paid," said Selina. "My mother has sent me money every year."

"I know that," said Lester. "Every year she has a stand-up fight to get it out of the old man. It's quite a joke with the boys."

"Oh, Heavens!" murmured Selina. "... Is there no way she can get out?"

"No way but by Maccubbin's teams. He isn't going to carry her."

"How much does she owe him?"

"Oh, nobody but the Old Woman and Maccubbin knows that."

Selina plied him with one searching question after another. Lester, bored, but wishing to be agreeable, answered as best he could, and truthfully—except where he came into the story.

"It's told a lot on the Old Woman the past year," he said thoughtlessly. "She has fallen away to almost nothing."

Selina quickly lowered her eyes at that, and for a while said nothing. When her voice came it was a mere whisper. "Anything special the matter?"

"Who knows?" said Lester. "There isn't any doctor."

Something new came suddenly into Selina's face. Lester, enamoured of its beauty, failed to mark it. "When are you going back?" she asked.

Lester silently calculated his money. "In three days," he said.

"And you will be pushing right through to Bear Coulée?"

"I expect so. The ice is generally bearing before December first."

Selina caught her breath. Her eyes seemed to have grown almost black in their remoteness. "I am going with you," she said quietly.

Lester looked at her clownishly. All his assurance was gone at a stroke. At first his vanity suggested that the girl was throwing herself at his head, but a glance in her face dissipated that idea. She was not thinking of him at all. Then a swift panorama of the winter journey passed through his mind and he was staggered.

"But ... but you couldn't!" he stammered. "It's four hundred miles from the Landing. A month's journey maybe. Driving on a sled without shelter through the snowstorms and the zero weather. It would kill you!"

"If a man can do it, I can," said Selina. "... I've *got* to do it!"

One by one she calmly overruled every objection that he brought up. "It doesn't matter. I'm going. Thank Heaven I didn't have to spend the money my mother sent me. That will be more than enough for expenses."

The thought of the sweetness of the long, long journey with her stole into Lester's mind and his blood began to race.

"Oh, well," he thought with an inward shrug, "if she's determined to go it isn't my funeral." He leaned towards her across the table.

"Oh, it will be great, *great* to have you," he murmured ardently.

But Selina's glance was far away.

V.

Northward

The stage for Miwasa Landing was drawn up in front of the post-office in Prince George waiting for the mail-bags. Grey with the mud and dust of innumerable journeys, it had not much the look of a vehicle of romance. The top had been blown off in a storm years before, and never been replaced. When it rained the passengers had to make shift as best they could. Amidships there was a sort of well for the reception of the mailbags and luggage, and aft of that a compartment for the passengers with two seats facing each other of the exact height and narrowness best calculated to torture the human anatomy. The rig was drawn by four bony horses, whose harness was mended in more than one place with shaganappi—*i. e.*, rope.

The passengers were in their places. Selina Rambert, who had only to show herself north of Fifty-three to have the best of everything handed to her, sat beside old Paul Smiley, the driver, with Lester Morrow on the other side of her. The driver's seat was just a little less uncomfortable than the places behind. Selina's eyes were sparkling with interest and excitement and her cheeks as red as snow apples. She was wearing a little Robin Hood hat of Lincoln green with a quill stuck in it and a great coon-skin coat—Clara's parting gift. How they stared at her! Within the memory of man no such lovely apparition had ever started north before. Lester plumed himself and bent over her with a proprietary air. He was responsible for this marvel. In the seats behind there were eight assorted men, who already looked uncomfortable.

Lester and Selina had met but an hour or two before. In order to save money enough to get from Prince George to the Landing without walking, Lester had been obliged to cut short his stay in New York. He had been ashamed to confess to Selina that he had to travel across the continent in a day coach, so he had made believe that he had business in Chicago and had taken a different train. On the last part of the journey he had been in the same train up ahead, but she did not know that. In Prince George he was waiting at the step of the sleeping-car when she got off.

The mail-bags were thrown in, old Paul clucked to his horses, and they moved off—but hardly with the dash that Selina had pictured to herself. It took the old horses a little while to get limbered up.

"Look your last at the pavements of the city, miss," said Paul. "Hereafter you'll see nothing but dirt trails—and ice." Paul was a little old light breed, with a deeply seamed face and merry blue eyes. He had an elegant pearl grey Fedora cocked rakishly on one side.

In five minutes they were out on the prairie. It was a mild day for the season, and the air was like wine. Overhead the sky showed the delicious pale blue of high latitudes. Selina looked around her with a little catch in her breath; everything she knew lay behind her now. As far as one could see the prairie stretched away with nothing to break the expanse but clumps of poplar scrub and willow. A settler's house sticking up starkly here and there only emphasized the distances. The road was no more than a tangled skein of waggon-ruts showing black amidst the dry buffalo grass. When a rut became too deep the next comer made a new one. There was plenty of room.

"When it's all covered up with snow, how do you find your way?" asked Selina.

"Well, miss, I got a kind of second sight, I guess," said Paul. "I been drivin' this route since it was started thirty-five year ago."

"The same stage?" asked Selina.

"The very same, miss. On'y when the winter sets in for good I drives a sledge."

Lester did not intend that old Paul should have all of Selina's attention. "This isn't our country yet," he whispered in her ear. "Wait till you see the Spirit River country."

"It's all wonderful!" said Selina.

But as the hours passed one after another, each a little more slowly than the last, her enthusiasm waned. As they got further from town the road became worse, yet they had to keep going at a smart pace in order to make their fifty miles, and the old vehicle bumped and swayed madly over the ruts. Selina's seat was without a back to support her, and she began to ache in every bone. Her sense of fitness was outraged by the crazy flinging about. She was obliged to cling to Lester in a manner that suggested more than she intended it to convey. The country ceased to please her; after all this part was without any noble prospects, just the interminable prairie with its insignificant scrub. Old Paul prattled entertainingly the whole way, and Lester whispered in her other ear, but her whole attention was focussed on maintaining her unstable equilibrium.

They halted for lunch at a rough log-shack beside the trail, which was roofed with sods sprouting a luxuriant crop of weeds now brown and dry. A coarse meal was awaiting them. There was no sign of a woman about the place, and for the first time a chill of strangeness and indefinable fear settled on Selina's breast. They all stared at her so! It might be insolently, wistfully, furtively, or ardently, but all stared. She began to feel like a captive animal on exhibition. Was there no place where she could escape those eyes?

Then she had to climb painfully back into her seat again. As the afternoon wore on, it appeared from the talk of the men that they were to spend the night at a place called "Minter's." How she watched for it! But the twenty-five miles seemed to draw out like the successive lengths of a telescope. And by the time they rounded a little rise and old Paul pointed with his whip to some buildings lying below, she had given up hope of ever arriving anywhere. A groan of relief escaped her.

This was a more extensive establishment with a house of several rooms, also stables, outbuildings, and a corral, all built of logs. There was a woman, too, to receive Selina; but she stared no less than the men, and in an unfriendly fashion. A young woman herself, and the only one about, she resented the sudden transference of all the male attention to the traveller. However, she gave Selina a room to herself, which was like a blessed refuge. Selina would have loved to have her supper there, but lacked the courage to prefer so unusual a request. She ate her beans and fried pork at the common table, covered with a red cotton cloth, and she was still the target for all eyes. So many staring eyes they beat hers down, and the spirited Selina was not accustomed to that.

When they rose from the table Lester suggested a turn outside to take the cramp out of their limbs. Selina gladly consented; by comparison with these strangers in a strange land, Lester seemed quite near and dear to her. They put on their coats and went out, followed by all the eyes.

Outside it was clear, breathless, and cold, a Northern night; the mud of the yard was stiffening under foot, and the least star in Heaven had hung out its wee spark. They turned out through the farm gate into the waggon trail and continued in the grass alongside. Lester slipped his arm through Selina's. It seemed natural between fellow-travellers, and she made no objection. This shallow valley where Minter had taken up a homestead marked the limit of the prairie. To the northward the land rose in a long gradual slope covered with sparse timber. On the other side of that height, Lester said, all the water flowed to the Arctic.

At first they had little to say to each other. For once Lester's ready tongue was stilled. He was thinking—or it would be more correct to say that his thoughts and his feelings were leading each other a wild dance through his brain, from which nothing issued but confusion. Even the happy-go-lucky Lester could no longer conceal from himself the appalling difficulties and dangers of the coming journey. Four hundred miles over the ice without shelter! Moreover, the stares that day had warned him of other dangers. Taking the adorable Selina into a womanless country!—why, would he not have every man in the country for his deadly rival? Lester bit his lip. He was no coward, but his nature was one which

naturally seeks a way out by overreaching the other man instead of fighting him.

In short, Lester had conceived the wild plan of persuading Selina to marry him at the Landing before they started into the wilderness, and he was now trying to think of some suitable way of leading up to it; meanwhile the touch of her arm within his own and the occasional kiss of her hair against his cheek were making him dizzy with delight. When ardour and calculation combine to advise a young man it results in his cutting very odd capers.

"What do you think of it all?" he asked at last.

"Ah, to-night," said Selina, "I feel as small and strange and lonely as a lost child!"

"You have me," he said, aggrieved.

"Oh, I know. But think how little I know you. Just two days in New York, and then to-day."

"What has time got to do with it? Or the number of meetings? The very first moment I laid eyes on you..."

"I expect my nature must be slower," said Selina quickly.

"But you like me, don't you?" said Lester.

Selina avoided an answer. "The men stare so!" she murmured.

"It'll be worse later," said Lester craftily. "These fellows down here often see white girls. But after we leave the Landing..." He shook his head.

"Oh, dear!" said Selina.

"You have nothing to fear," said Lester, with a manful air. "I'll protect you. With my life. Of course, if the odds are too great ... if they do me in..."

"What!" cried Selina aghast.

"Well, you see I'll have every man in the country down on me."

"Why?"

"Because they'll all think I'm first in the running with you."

"What business is that of theirs?"

"Well, it's like this: if you were just an ordinary traveller going through the country they'd just look at you in respectful admiration, and that would be the end of it. You would be like a creature from another world to them. They would never think of looking so high for themselves. But you see they all know the Old Woman—at least, by reputation. And they will all know that you are her daughter—for nothing can be hidden up here. So they will look on you in a way as belonging to the country, and every man will say to himself, why shouldn't you stay there as well as your mother, and why shouldn't you marry him...?"

"But, good heavens!" cried Selina, breathless with indignation, "there is first the slight formality of obtaining my consent!"

"They won't think of that," said Lester. "The sight of you will arouse the old savage instinct in their breasts to carry you off and marry you regardless."

"But what can I do? ... what can I do?" cried Selina in distress. "It's not my fault if men are savages.... Oh, I know it's a foolhardy thing to undertake, but I cannot help myself. There's my poor mother up there dying by inches!"

"You'd be safe enough if some man had the right to protect you," murmured Lester. "Then the matter would be settled, see? No room for argument."

Selina made no answer. They came to a stand in their walk.

"Selina, give me that right," said Lester huskily. He was groping for her hand. "Oh, I know it's too soon to ask you, but my hand is forced. I'd protect you, anyway, as long as there was breath in my body, but if you'd marry me no other man would have the right to look at you. And it would please your mother, Selina, I'm like a son to her.... Oh, I'm mad about you! With me it was like a lightning stroke. I'd be the proudest man alive. Will you, Selina, will you?"

"No!" she said in a queer, sharp voice that seemed to be surprised out of her.

"But you like me, don't you?"

"Yes, I like you. I want to be friends. You're all I've got up here.... But *this*! It only frightened me. I'm not ready to take such a plunge.... I'm thinking about my poor little mother, and about this trip that's before us. I can't think about you."

"Oh!" said Lester in an affronted tone. But he quickly reflected that no woman was ever won by sullenness and turned on the tap of ardour once more. "You mean everything in the world to me, Selina. It didn't seem sudden to me because I felt I'd known you for years from the Old Woman's talk. I crossed the continent just to see you. And found you prettier than my wildest dreams.... Kiss me, Selina, then it will be all right.... Ah, don't pull away! ... Kiss me, and then you'll know!"

But she did pull away—violently. Lester was surprised by her strength. "Oh, don't!" she said. "You're simply making yourself ridiculous! I can't possibly think about you in that way!"

His instinct told him that he was risking everything then and he shut up. They returned to the stopping-house in silence.

Later, as she made ready for the night before a piece of broken mirror tacked to the wall of her room, she ruminated: "... He is not truthful. I am quite sure my mother would not discuss me in private with a young man.... But I suppose you can't expect a man to be quite truthful when he wants something very much ... Just the same, there was a lot of truth in what he said. There will be trouble all the way.... But I can't allow myself to think of that. It's too late to turn back.... It is awkward that I have to go with him. Fortunately there are three of them. Perhaps the other two..."

Not even to the bit of mirror did Selina confess the true state of her feelings towards Lester. Perhaps she did not know.

At six o'clock on the second day the stage came clattering down the main and only street of Miwasa Landing to draw up with a loud and quite unnecessary whoa! at the door of Trudeau's Hotel. Most of the males of the place were already there waiting for it; others hastened up, drawn by the magical glimpse of a green hat. Selina had to run a very battery of stares. She was escorted to a room. Trudeau's, of course, is quite an outside hotel, being of two stories, and built of sawn lumber. It is even reported that some of the best rooms can show a complete unbroken set of bedroom china. Selina's room faced the river. The brown flood was choked with heavy ice and the burnt-over hills on the other side showed patches of snow in the hollows. She shivered. It was a bleak prospect.

Hugh and Billy were not among the crowd at Trudeau's, and Lester went to announce his return to his partners. Maccubbin's shack, which served them for both lodging and warehouse, was on the river-bank a short distance behind Trudeau's. Lester whistled loudly as he went, but his breast was far from being easy. The difficulties of the projected enterprise grew enormously as it came closer. What would Hugh say? It was in vain that Lester sneered and said to himself: "What the hell do I care?" He had a secret dread of Hugh's quietness at moments of crisis. You never could tell of what the fellow was thinking.

Hugh and Billy were sitting at their supper when Lester entered. His welcome was not exactly uproarious.

"Well, I'm back," said Lester, with a false heartiness.

"So I see," said Hugh, cocking an eyebrow. Billy looked at Lester and said nothing.

"Aah! what's the matter with you?" demanded Lester truculently. To pick a quarrel would help him over the coming difficult moments as well as anything.

But Hugh declined to be drawn. "Cook up what you want for your supper," he said coolly. "I only fixed for two."

"I'll eat at Trudeau's to-night," said Lester. "Suit yourself," said Hugh; and he and Billy went on eating.

Lester walked around the shack noisily; moving a chair, throwing down the lid of a box, an obvious bluster to hide his uneasiness.

"What are you after?" asked Hugh, looking up from his plate.

"I been to New York," said Lester.

"Aah, you're lying," said Hugh, returning to his food.

Lester laughed, and Hugh, glancing at him quickly, saw that he was speaking the truth. The big blonde fellow's face hardened. "What is it to me where you been?" he said.

"I saw the Old Woman's daughter," said Lester.

Hugh did not look up, but he stopped eating. He had a curious still pose like an animal's.

"She's prettier than the pictures," added Lester.

One of Hugh's big hands rested on the edge of the table. The knuckles turned white as he pressed it down. Young Billy looked across at him in a kind of panic.

"She wanted to know all about her mother," Lester went on, gaining courage. He took out a cigarette. "She wants to see her. So she decided to come back with me. She's at Trudeau's. She's going in with us."

Hugh stood up so suddenly that his chair crashed over backwards. His red face turned white, and his blue eyes fairly blazed on Lester. He made a terrible picture of human wrath, but not a sound escaped his lips. Lester instinctively fell back and, throwing away the cigarette, put up his guard.

"Aah! what's the matter with you?" Lester snarled. "It wasn't my fault. I told her how it was. I told her a woman couldn't do it; that it would be her death. She wouldn't listen. Go talk to her yourself if you don't believe me..."

"You skunk!" said Hugh.

That was all. It was sufficient. Lester's windbag of excuses went suddenly flat. Hugh turned and strode out of the shack.

"What the hell is biting him, anyhow?" said Lester to Billy.

The boy's pink face turned pinker still; his honest eyes were full of pain and scorn. "Don't talk to me, you skunk!" he said, and followed his partner out.

Lester, ducking his head to look through the little window, saw that they turned down river, and not towards the hotel. "Aah! they're both batty!" he muttered, swaggering to restore his own confidence. He searched about the floor, and finding the cigarette put it back in his mouth and returned to the hotel.

VI.

The Meeting

Notwithstanding his bravado, Lester did not care to sleep in the shack that night. He bunked with a chance friend he had made. But it was absolutely necessary for him to know what Hugh was going to do, and in the morning he went back. Hugh and Billy received him with grim faces and shut mouths. They did not refer to the matter in any way. Lester would not open it. He told himself he had put it up to Hugh now, and it was for Hugh to say what he was going to do. Lester hung about for a while, making believe to busy himself with his own things, and then went off to the hotel no wiser than he came.

At Trudeau's there was a little second story veranda which was thought to add a great touch of elegance to the building. Selina was waiting here for Lester, walking up and down in the coon-skin coat, for the morning was cold.

"Well," she said immediately, "did you tell Mr. Bell about me?"

"Yes," said Lester.

"What did he say?"

"Nothing."

Selina's rounded eyebrows went up. "Nothing?"

"He's just a clod of earth," said Lester; "a blockhead. He hasn't got sense enough to say what he thinks."

Selina lowered her eyes. She was thinking: "I wonder what happened really." She said: "Then he doesn't want me to go with you."

Said Lester: "It don't matter what he wants."

"But he's in charge, isn't he?"

"He's not my boss."

"Why doesn't he come to see me?" asked Selina.

"He's too ignorant," said Lester. "He don't know enough."

Selina thought Lester must be right, for no other possible explanation occurred to her. "Well," she said, "the matter's got to be settled. If he won't come to me I've got to go to him."

"Don't you do it," said Lester quickly. "The ice-bridge isn't formed yet. There's plenty of time. You just sit tight. Everybody knows you've come here to go in to your mother. That'll force his hand. 'Tain't fitting that you should go courting him to take you."

Selina felt the same way about it herself.

Meanwhile they were talking about it in the shack. During the past hours young Billy had been roughly silenced more than once when he had brought up the subject, but after Lester left that morning he felt that he could no longer keep silent.

"Hugh, what are you going to do?" he asked.

Hugh swore at him savagely, but the boy faced him out. "We got to talk about it," he said simply.

"I'll kill that damned skunk!" said Hugh.

"Sure, I know how you feel," said Billy. "But the girl; she's here. What are we going to do about her?"

At the thought of the girl the blazing anger fled out of Hugh's face and he looked stricken. A panic seized him. "Aah! she can't go," he muttered.

"Of course she can't. You'll have to tell her that."

"*Me* go and tell her!" said Hugh aghast. "Oh, my God!"

"You can't leave it to Lester. You know how smooth he is; telling her all the time she can't go, and making her want to go more."

"I simply won't take her," said Hugh. "I don't have to see her. I didn't bring her up here." In his agitation fine beads of perspiration sprung out on his face.

Billy looked at him in surprise. "But she's our Old Woman's daughter," he said. "She belongs to our outfit in a way of speaking. We can't let her go on stopping there at Trudeau's and spending her money for nothing. You know what he charges."

"Then you'll have to go and see her," shouted Hugh in desperation. "Tell her she can't go.... Oh, tell her anything you like!"

"But ... but..." stammered Billy, panicky in his turn, "it don't seem just proper for me to go.... A kid like me..."

"I can't help that!" cried Hugh. "If she was in danger now I'd know what to do. I'd fight a dozen for her. I'd march out there in the river and hold my head under the ice if it would do her any good. But I can't go over to the hotel and face her. No, that I cannot do."

Selina and Lester were still pacing the upper veranda discussing the situation when Billy Penrose appeared in the doorway, nervously turning his hat in his hands. The tall, slender frame surmounted by the pink-cheeked boy's face with eyes at once gallant and timid made an appealing figure, and Selina instinctively smiled at him, dazzling the boy.

"What do you want?" demanded Lester roughly.

The boy hardened at the sound, and his eyes met the man's squarely. "Not you," he said. "... I want to speak to ... her."

"Who are you?" asked Selina.

"Billy Penrose." Rapid twisting of the hat.

"Oh," said Selina, "I didn't know you were...."

"Just out of short pants," put in Lester, guffawing.

But Selina bent a look on him that dried his laughter up.

"What did you want of me?" Selina asked Billy,

The boy drew a long breath to nerve himself. "Hugh Bell sent me to tell you," he said, "that he couldn't take you North with us. He wanted you to know it right away so you wouldn't be wasting your money staying on here."

Selina was deeply affronted. "Why doesn't Mr. Hugh Bell come and tell me himself?" she asked.

Billy was horribly embarrassed. "Well ... well, he's busy," he stammered.

Lester roared with laughter. "Busy!" he cried. "What doing?"

Billy ignored him. He said to Selina: "If you must know, he wanted to save himself the pain of refusing you to your face."

It was not such a bad answer. Selina was more impressed than she cared to show.

Lester redoubled his laughter. "He's afraid to come!" he cried.

"You lie!" said Billy hotly.

Lester's face darkened. "You shut your head, kid, or..."

"You're not man enough to make me shut it," cried Billy, his voice cracking in his excitement. "Last night I called you a skunk to your face, and I call it you again, you skunk!"

Lester made a violent move toward the boy, but Selina was not the Old Woman's daughter for nothing. She put herself squarely between the two; twin red flags were run up in her cheeks. "Cut it out!" she said sharply. "Both of you! I'm not going to have you fighting here. Fighting won't settle anything. I shall find out the truth for myself."

"Then let him keep a civil tongue in his head," muttered Lester.

"He called Hugh a coward," said Billy, undaunted. "Why, miss, if you only knew! Hugh is worth a hundred such as him..."

Selina was still sore against Hugh. "Be quiet!" she said curtly. "Mr. Hugh Bell may not be a coward, but he is acting in a very odd manner. I shall see him for myself and make up my mind about him. I'll go at once. You may both come along if you wish."

Hugh Bell was sitting on an up-ended box in the shack, elbows on knees and head between his hands. The remains of breakfast were not yet cleared away. In all his twenty-five years of life Hugh had never before known this feeling of despair. In the first place he was filled with a helpless rage against Lester. His instinct told him that Lester had been, and was still, acting treacherously, but Lester was so slippery he could not pin him down. Added to this was the consciousness that he, Hugh, was cutting a very poor figure in delegating the boy to send Selina away. To send Selina away! that was the bitterest thought of all. It was his duty to do so, of course, but sending her away was like destroying his one chance of fulfilment—his Heaven on earth.

He heard the sounds of several voices approaching and jumped up in a panic. One was a woman's voice. Like a trapped thing, his eyes darted around the shack looking for a place of concealment. There was none. They were too near to the door of the shack for him to hope to escape that way. In another moment they were entering. Hugh raised his eyes from the ground and beheld the lady of his dreams. In the glance of her beautiful, angry eyes he felt as if he had received a death stroke. At any rate, something like life passed out of him, and he knew he would never be his own man again.

She was very angry. "So this is Mr. Hugh Bell," she said, looking him up and down; "who sends a boy to deliver peremptory messages to the daughter of his friend!"

Hugh looked at her again in a kind of stricken amazement. So contemptuous! so unjust! If she had been a man! But he could not fight *her*. He *was* hers. His head fell again. He had not a word to say, though Lester was sneering triumphantly in the background. In such a situation the best of men appear at a horrible disadvantage. With his big hands hanging

limply and the stiffness gone out of his neck, Hugh looked very much what Lester had described him—viz., a spiritless clod.

"Have you nothing to say?" demanded Selina.

Billy's face was a study in pain and chagrin. He burned to hear his hero justify himself nobly, but Hugh kept his head down.

"What is there to say?" he muttered. "I can't take you."

"Why not?"

"Well, apart from the hardship and exposure, what would you do nights when we put up at the stopping-houses beside the trail? They're all kept by men. There's nothing but an open bunkhouse...."

"I will buy a tent and a small stove to heat it."

Hugh heard Lester's voice in this suggestion. "Supposing we got you there all right!" he said doggedly, "you couldn't get away again until spring. And you couldn't get away at all except at Maccubbin's good pleasure. Instead of helping your mother you'd only be running your own head into a noose."

"Are you Maccubbin's man?" asked Selina with a sneer.

The injustice of it stung Hugh into a retort. "Do I sound like it?" he asked.

"Well, I'll take my chance of getting out again..." Selina began.

"There's no chance about it," said Hugh, scowling. "I'm telling you the hard facts."

"All right," said Selina, "I face them. The only thing that influences me is that my mother is sick and in trouble. So you see, I've got to go."

Hugh remained doggedly silent, and Selina realized that she had come up against that imaginary quantity, the immovable object. Womanlike, she instantly altered her plan of attack. To Lester and Billy she said coolly:

"Please step outside. I want to talk to Mr. Bell alone."

They had no choice but to obey. Lester's look at Hugh as he went was poisonous.

Selina dropped in a chair. "Sit down," she said to Hugh.

He dropped awkwardly on his box again, not looking at her.

"We must not quarrel," said Selina in a milder tone than she had yet used. "I'm afraid it's mostly my fault. I was very angry when I came, because it looked as if you were treating me with deliberate contempt. Well, I see that I was mistaken. Let us be friends."

Hugh gave her an extraordinary deep-stricken look out of his blue eyes. It disconcerted Selina. She bit her lip and was unable to go on for a moment.

"I'm afraid you have a very bad opinion of me," she said wistfully.

Hugh shook his head without speaking.

"Surely if we act together as friends we can overcome all the difficulties in the way of this journey," she said. "They tell me that the men up here are prepared to meet any situation. Women *have* gone into that country, haven't they?"

"Yes," he said, "in the summer. As far as Spirit River Crossing."

"And in the winter too?"

"Ye-es. There was one case. A missionary's wife. She was with her husband."

"Well, you'll take care of me," said Selina quickly.

The blue eyes burned on her.

"You see," said Selina, "here I am this far. Knowing that my mother is sick, knowing that she may not live through the winter, how can I turn back now? How could I go back to New York and wait through the long months without a word? You see I have just learned all this; how she has endured every hardship and humiliation that she might send out money to me. Suppose she died without my ever having a chance to tell her that I know what she has done for me! Why, the thought nearly drives me out of my mind!"

In her agitation Selina jumped up and came close to Hugh, who rose to meet her.

"You do understand, don't you?" she said imploringly.

The sweetness that emanated from her made him dizzy. The room seemed to swim around. He did not know what he was saying. "I understand," he murmured.

"And you will take me?"

"Yes, I will," he said suddenly. "I ought not to, but I will. I'll take care of you!"

"Ah, thank you!" she said, and her hand shot out.

At the touch of hand to hand the big young fellow's face went pale to the lips and his eyes burned and brooded over her in that strange fashion. Selina, a little frightened, dropped his hand and privately resolved never to touch him again.

"What must I do to get ready?" she asked, just to be saying something.

"Nothing," said Hugh. "When the ice road forms I'll be ready for you."

Selina and Lester went back to the hotel. When Billy entered the shack he found his big partner striding up and down the floor, red and flustered with excitement.

"I said I'd take her, and I will!" Hugh almost shouted at Billy, as if daring him to bring up any considerations of prudence now.

But the boy beamed. "That'll be fine!" he said. "Think of seeing her every day!"

"Every day!" said Hugh, and suddenly stopped in his stride, staring ahead of him. "God knows what will come of it all—for me," he murmured hoarsely. "Already ... I'm a goner!"

"But she likes you," said the boy loyally. "You ought to have seen the look she gave Lester just now when he started to abuse you. It shut him right up."

"Oh, likes, I dare say," said Hugh, with a shake of his head, "as she might like a faithful dog." He resumed his pacing. "I'll keep out of her way as much as possible," he went on gloomily. "That will be best. You can ride with her."

"And Lester?" suggested Billy.

Hugh shrugged. "She'll soon get his number—if she hasn't got it already," he said coolly. "She's got good sense."

"You bet she's got good sense!" said Billy enthusiastically. "And plucky! You ought to have seen her when Lester got fresh with me over at the hotel. She was all ready to fight him herself, I swear. Oh, she's a wonderful girl! I mean, she's the prettiest girl I ever saw, and she's got good sense, too. You don't expect that. She looks you square in the eye, and you don't have to talk girl-talk to her."

Hugh, with his face all softened and lighted up (if Selina could but have seen him then!) went to Billy and gripped his young partner's shoulder as in a vice—then resumed his jerky pacing.

"I'm waiting till she takes her hat off," said Billy. "Her hair is the colour of the hills along the river when the buffalo grass begins to cure."

"Or like ripe wheat in the sun and the shadow," said Hugh in his deep voice.

"And such a lady in all her ways," said Billy. "I never spoke to such a one before."

"Me, neither," said Hugh.

"Think of her travelling with us! I can't get over it!"

"Here, we got to plan everything out now," said Hugh. "Let me see, we got about forty-five hundred pounds of freight. The idea was to divide it into loads of three-quarters of a ton each and travel fast. Well, we have to divide it into two loads now. Twenty-two-fifty each. It can be done, though it'll take longer."

"But why two loads?" asked Billy.

"The third sled is for her, of course," said Hugh.

"The whole of it?"

Hugh did not answer directly. "I must figure up the lumber we'll need. Trudeau 'll have to give me credit for it—well, I'll make him. The sled body's about nine feet by four and a half. Well, we can get in a foot or two more in the overhang. Say three hundred feet of lumber. And three windows, one on each side and one in front so she can talk to the driver, and a door at the back.

"What the hell...?" said Billy, opening his eyes wide.

"Why, I'm going to build her a little cabin on one of the sleds," said Hugh; "with a stove and a bed inside, and all the comforts I can get for her. All snug like the cabin of a ship. You didn't think I was going to expose her to the weather, did you?"

"Oh Gee!" said Billy.

VII.

The Fight

The temperature went down and stayed down; the floating ice in the river jammed and froze solid from shore to shore. Winter had set in. A few days later there was a heavy fall of snow which completed the matter, and the various parties waiting at the Landing for the winter roads began to talk of moving on. Nothing is undertaken in the North without a deal of preliminary talk. Finally, the first party bound due north—that is, down river—actually set out.

Beside Hugh and his partners there were several outfits waiting to start up-stream for the north-westerly posts. Bishop Goussard was starting on the rounds of his vast diocese. There were large parties for Raspberry Lake and Red Willow Prairie, two new settlements to the west and to the north of Caribou Lake respectively. There was no reason now why all of these should not have started, particularly after a sled came in from Mirror Landing, having broken a track the whole way, but only the Bishop and his two round-faced young acolytes set forth. The others hung around waiting for Selina. Baldy Red Hines, who was going down river light with a single sled and three breed companions, waited around too. The fame of Selina and the van which was to convey her was in everybody's mouth. During her stay at the hotel she had been rather stand-offish, but it was hoped that in the forced association of the trail they would all have an opportunity to become acquainted with her.

All sorts of gifts were offered to Selina. It soon became known that she would politely refuse anything that was brought to her direct, so thereafter the offerings were generally carried to Hugh in private. Hugh had no scruples about accepting them. Money was scanty, and he was determined to obtain every possible alleviation of the hard journey for Selina. Thus he collected thick, fleecy white blankets, expensive edibles, such as jars of pickles, sweet biscuits, and tins of soup, besides other articles too numerous to mention.

Hugh and Billy worked on the shanty sled from daylight to dark. They had plenty of volunteer assistance, but Hugh soon found that it was a hindrance, and he would let no one work on the structure who was not a proved carpenter. Lester patched up a sort of a peace with them, and he helped them during a part of each day. The partners shrewdly suspected that this was merely so that he could go to Selina and enlarge upon his labours on her behalf. They knew Lester pretty well. Lester spent all the rest of the time with Selina, which made Billy anxious, but Hugh only shrugged.

"She's bound to find him out," was his invariable comment.

This was all very well, but Hugh was crediting Selina with an unnatural acumen. After all, Selina was a very human girl. It is true that her intuition warned her that Lester was not reliable, but one does not always hearken to one's intuitions—particularly where the feelings are concerned. Hugh never went near Selina, but would send Billy when it was necessary. Every time this happened Selina was freshly angered. On the other hand, never a day passed but Lester spent several hours of it with her, and he was so agreeable, so gentle with her, so anxious to accommodate himself to her every mood that—well, young Billy had grounds for his anxiety. Selina began to look for Lester's coming and to depend on what he said.

It was from Lester that she got her first news of the shanty sled. He said: "I've been talking to Hugh."

"Then you are on better terms?" said Selina.

"Oh, I don't like the fellow," said Lester, "but I can't let a thing like that interfere now. Because I need him, you see, to help me take care of you. So I forced myself to shake hands with him. I've been trying to persuade him to help me build a little shack on one of the sleds for you. Lord! what a job it is to get a new idea into his thick skull. He has finally agreed, so now I'll be able to take care of you the way I want."

"A little house on runners!" cried Selina, with sparkling eyes. "What a wonderful idea! ... How good you are to me!"

"I'd do anything in the world for you," murmured Lester.

"Can I go to see it to-morrow?" she asked.

"Please," said Lester, "that would spoil all my pleasure. Promise me you won't go near it until it's all ready for you to step into."

She promised.

It was part of Lester's scheme to keep her separated from all the other men of the place so that she would be obliged to receive her accounts of everything that happened from him. That was why they considered her stand-offish. Left to herself, Selina would have made friends with everybody.

By Herculean efforts on the part of Hugh and Billy, the shanty sled was completed a week after the ice-trail had formed. Every day was precious, because after a certain amount of snow had fallen the last lap of their journey—viz., the trail between Spirit River Crossing and Bear Coulee—became impassable. It was on a Friday afternoon that they finished. They had built their shanty on the far side of their shack so that it was invisible from the hotel. They stood off and surveyed their work with no little pride.

"We can load up to-morrow morning and get away at noon," said Hugh. "Then we won't be blamed for starting Sunday.... If it don't snow," he added, with an anxious glance at the sky.

"She's a beaut!" cried Billy.

Hugh had not been satisfied with knocking the thing together anyhow. From the first he had determined that the shanty sled must have style. To be sure they had neither the time nor the money to paint it, but it had a neat and well-built look. Upon the low-hung sled one saw a trim little cabin with a pointed roof, the front end of which projected to afford a certain shelter to the driver's seat. This was so Selina could ride outside sometimes and get the air. It was built of rough-dressed pine lumber, the cracks stopped with laths, and the roof covered with felting. With its white cambric curtains hanging inside the windows, and real honest-to-goodness smoke puffing out of the stove-pipe in the roof (they had lighted a fire to see how it drew), the illusion of snug comfort was complete. Hugh and Billy clapped each other violently on the back and relieved their breasts with whoops of satisfaction.

It was entered by a step at the rear. Within the walls had been first lined with tar paper to keep out the draughts, but as this made a decidedly gloomy effect, Hugh had covered them again with manila paper affixed with tacks driven through tin shields like silver dollars all over the place. Selina's cot was at one side, and on the other side was a table hinged to the wall so that it might be fastened up when not wanted. The tiny cook-stove was up in front with a box for wood on either side, and over the wood boxes many little shelves for dishes and kitchen utensils. There was a good coal-oil lamp securely bracketed to the wall; there was a strip of carpet alongside the bed and two folding camp-chairs.

"In case she ever asks us in," said Hugh, blushing.

"Aah!" said Billy, with a kind of affectionate despair, "you wouldn't have nerve enough to come if she did ask you."

Lester had been working with them earlier in the afternoon, and when Hugh and Billy had come out of the cabin and were tidying things up outside, Lester and Selina suddenly appeared around the warehouse shack. Instantly the other two partners became paralysed with self-consciousness. Hugh abruptly turned his back, and picking up an end of plank at random, started to saw it. Billy stood there all hands and feet and sheepish grin.

At sight of the shanty sled a cry broke from Selina, and her eyes lighted up exactly like a little girl's when she finds a doll's house under the Christmas-tree. Accompanied by Lester she walked slowly all around it, pointing everything out with fresh exclamations of delight. Billy followed behind them. But of Hugh blindly wielding his saw, all Selina could see was the edges of his crimson ears. Then, still accompanied by Lester, she went inside. Billy hardly liked to follow. They stayed inside a long time. Her cries of pleasure could be heard through the open door.

When she finally came down the step at the rear Hugh and Billy heard her say to Lester: "It is simply wonderful! How can I ever, ever thank you!" She stopped behind Hugh. "And you, Mr. Bell." At whatever cost to himself, Hugh managed to turn around and face her. "And you, Billy. I can never thank you enough for helping Lester."

Neither Hugh nor Billy could get anything out in return, and presently she was gone. Hugh looked at Billy with a kind of grim incredulity; the boy's face was twisted with angry pain.

"*For helping Lester!*" muttered Hugh. "... Can you beat it?"

"It's exactly what Lester would tell her," the boy burst out excitedly. "I told you how it would be."

"But she seemed to believe it!" said Hugh, still incredulous.

"Why shouldn't she believe it?" said Billy. "You gave Lester a free field. How is she to know any different?"

Hugh looked down, and his brows drew together in a heavy scowl. "This is a bit too thick," he muttered; "a bit too thick! ... When Lester comes to his supper to-night we'll have this matter out."

That was all he said, but the scowl remained like a thundercloud on the horizon. He went about getting the supper just the same as usual, but the atmosphere of the shack was electrified. Billy was divided between terror and anticipation. "If you kill him," he said, with a shake in his voice, "we'll never be able to get started."

"Oh, I'm not going to kill him," said Hugh coolly. "I'm over that."

Lester's money had given out, and he had been eating with the partners for some days past. To-night, warned perhaps of what was awaiting him, he did not come. Hugh and Billy ate in silence. When they had finished Hugh sent Billy after Lester.

"Tell him I want to talk to him," he said. "If he doesn't come, tell him I'll come fetch him wherever he may be."

Billy found Lester supping with Selina in the dining-room at Trudeau's. There were other diners within hearing, and he delivered his message in a whisper. Lester answered, likewise in a whisper:

"You can tell Hugh Bell with my compliments he can go to hell!"

Selina quickly laid her hand on Lester's arm. "*Please!*" she said. "We're going to start out together to-morrow, and we've got to maintain some kind of relations. We know what this man is; why bother about the style of his messages? I ask you to go—and to keep the peace."

"Oh, well, if you put it that way," said Lester. To Billy he added: "I'll come over as soon as I've finished eating."

Later, when Lester entered the shack, it was curious to see how Hugh's face cleared. Lester saw Hugh sitting on his up-ended box as usual smoking his pipe as if he had not a care in the world. Lester swaggered a little, sure sign that he was ill at ease. Billy was over in the corner by the stove, all eyes.

"Sit down," said Hugh, pointing with the stem of his pipe to a chair beside the table.

Instead, Lester planted himself carelessly on the edge of the table with one foot on the chair.

"We heard her thank you for building the shanty sled," said Hugh, with an ominous mildness.

"Well, I helped," said Lester truculently.

"Sure, you helped," said Hugh, his blue eyes beginning to blaze, though his words were quiet. "But she seemed to think it was all your doing."

"I thought of it first," said Lester. "I had talked it over with her before you ever started to work."

"That's a lie!" said Billy from his corner.

"Whisht!" said Hugh, with a wag of his broad hand in that direction. "... It may be so," he went on to Lester. "But that don't concern me. What I want to have understood is, that this particular shanty was my idea and my making."

"Well, why don't you tell her?" said Lester, sneering.

"I'm telling you," said Hugh. "I reckon you've made up your mind you're going to drive this shanty sled."

Lester got down from the table. "So that's it," he said.

"Yes, that's it," said Hugh.

"Are you going to drive it?" asked Lester.

"No. You and I will drive the loaded sleds. The kid will drive her."

Lester stood there, his black eyes narrowed and sharp. His mind was darting this way and that in search of a loophole. "Why not put it up to her?" he asked. "That's the decent thing to do."

Hugh stood up, the blue flames leaping in his eyes. "By God! is it *you* that's undertaking to teach me decency! You skunk! you liar! you slippery snake! Your idea of decency is to lie to a helpless girl with the object of worming yourself into her good graces."

"Ask her! Ask her!" Lester began excitedly. "I swear..."

"Shut up!" roared Hugh. "I didn't bring you here to argue with you. I couldn't argue you into being decent. Maybe I can knock a little decency into you. Take off your coat!"

Lester paled and his eyes sought the door. Billy had already slipped there like a shadow and put up the bar. "Two of you!" cried Lester, his voice scaling up. "This is a put-up job, a trap! How can I take on the two of you?"

"Billy," said Hugh, "you know what fair play is if this skunk don't. You're to keep out of this, see? If you should forget yourself, I'll leave off with him to smash you, understand?"

The boy's lips were tightly pressed together. He nodded.

Lester retreated slowly before Hugh. He kept moistening his lips; his eyes darted hither and thither. "This won't do you any good with her," he snarled.

"Maybe not," said Hugh, "but it will make me feel better."

Billy pushed table, boxes, and chairs back against the wall.

"For God's sake be reasonable!" cried Lester. "Fighting ain't going to settle anything. Let's sit down and talk things over quiet."

"Talking ain't my line," said Hugh. "Put your fists up!" He flipped the back of his hand in Lester's face.

Lester's face went livid, and he showed all his teeth in a snarl. With a single movement he was out of his coat and the coat flung aside. Lester would wriggle and lie and evade the issue as long as he could, but in the last resort he had his courage too: an infernal, catlike courage that never counted the cost. They walked warily around each other looking for an opening. They were well matched; equal in age, in height, and in reach; Hugh the heavier, but Lester lither and quicker in his movements. Lester now, like a cat, was electrified with animal rage. He would not fight fair, and Hugh knew it.

Lester struck first, a catlike hook that caught Hugh under the ear with force sufficient to jolt the blonde fellow's head, but not to disturb his equilibrium. Lester was away before Hugh could return the blow. He came back with his right to Hugh's cheek. Inspired with rage and hatred, Lester danced as on steel springs; Hugh looked logey by comparison. Apparently Lester could hit him when he pleased, and Hugh's great fists only stabbed the air. A devilish grin was fixed on Lester's face; Hugh stood four-square and solid, only his eyes blazing. In the background Billy's face was convulsed with anxiety.

"Smash him, Hugh! Oh, *smash* him!" he groaned.

So the first few minutes went, all Lester's. Then Hugh began to evolve a strategy to meet Lester's catlike rushes and jabs. When Lester rushed, Hugh rushed too, and they collided with frightful force. Lester flung his arms around Hugh's neck to save himself. They wrestled, panting for breath.

"Break away!" cried Billy. "Watch yourself, Hugh!"

Lester wound one of his feet around Hugh's ankle and with a sudden twist threw him heavily on his back, Lester falling on top. Lester punched him savagely about the head and face, while Hugh struck up at him ineffectually.

"Foul!" yelled Billy in a shrill falsetto. "Let him up, you skunk, or I'll brain you!"

"Keep out of this!" bellowed Hugh from beneath.

With a tremendous heave Hugh threw Lester off his body, and rolling over, fell on him in turn.

"Now you have him!" yelled Billy. "Smash him! Smash him! Give him his own medicine!"

But Hugh got up and allowed Lester to rise. They instinctively retired into opposite corners of the room to recover wind. Billy rushed to drag up a chair for Hugh and snatched up a dish-cloth to fan him as he had seen the seconds do in a boxing match. But Hugh pushed him aside with the flat of his hand.

"Let it be fair and equal," he growled. "He has no second."

Lester came out of his corner with his hands outspread. "What's the use of this?" he said in a reasonable-sounding voice. "Can't we parley? What is it you want me to agree to?"

Hugh looked at him speculatively like an angry mastiff. Suddenly Lester, with the infernal quickness that was characteristic of him, struck Hugh in the face with right and left while Hugh's hands were still down. A grunt of rage was forced from Hugh, and hauling off, he put forth a blow with his right arm that would have killed Lester had it reached its mark. But Lester ducked it. Lester caught hold of the back of the chair and slung it round between them to keep Hugh off. Hugh with a flying kick sent the chair crashing to the far end of the shack. Lester sidestepped.

Such were Lester's tactics all through: to provoke Hugh with taunts and foul blows until he became so wild with rage he would not know what he was doing; and furthermore, to lead the bigger man in a footless chase around the room and let him exhaust himself in punching the air. Hugh did not always punch the air though.

Lester's lip was cut and his nose bleeding; his black hair hung down over his forehead, giving him an inhuman look. Moreover, Hugh had his strategy too. Lester finally found himself penned in a corner of the room beyond the door whence he could not escape.

"Now *fight*, you rat!" cried Hugh.

And Lester, true to his nature, sunk his head between his shoulders and rushed Hugh insanely, pressing him so hard with his short, vicious blows that Hugh was obliged to give ground, and could not get room enough for one of his whole arm blows. The fighting was all Lester's. Hugh was beaten to his knees. In the background Billy groaned and brandished his fists in despair. But Hugh was still biding his time. No human organization could maintain such an insane expenditure of energy for long. Lester faltered for a second; that was all Hugh needed. His right fist shot out and there was a crack like an explosion as it met Lester's jaw. Lester, lifted clear off his feet by the impact, went down like a ninepin. A wild cheer escaped from Billy.

Like a cat Lester was up again as soon as he was down. He scarcely seemed to touch the ground. First on all fours, then on his feet crouching, then a mad rush at Hugh. But Hugh was ready for him. Again the crack of fist on jaw, and Lester went down in a heap.

"That for your dirty work behind my back!" said Hugh, with a savage satisfaction.

A third time Lester, blind and beside himself with rage, sprang up only to be knocked down again.

"That for lying to the girl!" cried Hugh.

This time Lester lay there. He was not knocked out, but he had had enough. He twisted on the floor and groaned in pain. Hugh's brow suddenly cleared. He said to Billy, perfectly good-humoured:

"Fetch me some water and I'll wash his face. Then bring his bed here from Nick Grylls's and we'll put him in it so he won't have to show himself to the fellows looking like that."

VIII.

The Start

All day Saturday it snowed, and the setting-out had to be postponed. Lester stuck close to the shack, bathing his face in cold water at frequent intervals, and anxiously studying it in a bit of mirror. A much better feeling prevailed amongst the partners, for Lester was chastened, and Hugh magnanimous. There was no reference to what had happened. Outside the shack Hugh and Billy loyally kept their mouths shut, but it was impossible to keep such a thing hidden. Hugh himself bore marks of the encounter. Before the day was out everybody knew what had happened—except Selina. She wondered at being left to herself all day.

On Sunday afternoon, tired of her seclusion in Trudeau's, she started out for a walk. She would not appear to be seeking any of the partners, and therefore turned in the opposite direction from their shack—that is to say, up river. A mile or so up-stream there was a Cree encampment, and already a well-beaten path skirted the top of the bank. The world was beautiful and rather terrible under its fleckless white blanket. No river now, but only a snow meadow, and on the other side the burnt-over hills with blackened trunks of trees sticking up through the snow.

Selina walked about three-quarters of a mile and turned back again, not caring to venture into the Indian camp alone. She had not met anybody. She had no sooner turned back though than she came upon a white man moseying along with a highly self-conscious air that instantly suggested he had been following her. Selina felt a little qualm of fear—she was so far from aid—but kept her head high. He was a repulsive creature, obese and dissipated-looking, with a leering brutish face. And when he snatched his hat off upon meeting Selina it was worse, for he was perfectly bald upon his crown; only a fringe of red hair at the sides of his head. Selina had seen him passing in and out of Trudeau's.

"Afternoon, miss," he said, showing his blackened teeth, in what he intended to be an ingratiating smile.

"Good-afternoon," said Selina politely. "Heavens!" she thought, divided between amusement and horror, "the creature is trying to fascinate me!"

"We ain't zactly met," he said, with a gallant air, "but I know you. I'm John Hines of Caribou Lake."

Selina had heard Lester mention this name; only Lester had called him Baldy Red Hines. From the nature of the references to him, Selina had gathered that he was a man of importance in the country. He stepped into the loose snow to allow her to pass and fell in behind her. They could not walk abreast in the freshly trodden path, and Hines was compelled to address the back of her neck.

"Ev'body knows me up here, you bet. If there's any thin' doin' you'll gen'ally find me behind it. I had a whole string of posts at Caribou Lake, up and down the Spirit River, and other places, and I jus' sold out to the French outfit for six figures, yes'm, six figures." He slapped his breast as if he actually carried the money on his person. "Now I'm lookin' about," he went on, "and plannin' what to do with the money. I got 'em all guessin' and whisperin', but I keep my own counsel, you bet. I put one over on the French outfit, I did. I never contracted not to start tradin' again if I wanted to, and I can go in and take their trade in the very posts they bought from me. Oh, I'm shrewd!"

Selina wondered what sort of comment was called for on this. "I see," she said uncertainly.

"You may think I'm a pretty rough customer," he went on, "but that's only up here. Outside I dress and live with the best. I can afford it. You come and look at my horses, girly. That's how you judge a man up here. I'm the richest feller north of fifty-three, and I'll be richer yet before I cash in. A single man up to now, age forty-nine, and sound as an oak."

"Good heavens!" thought Selina. "What is he getting at?" She quickened her pace.

"Don't be in such a rush," protested the man. "Me and you ought to have a little talk. I know this country inside and out, and I'm the best one to advise you. It's more 'n thirty year since I first come in with nothin' but a tomato-can and a blanket. And I made my way over the hills to Caribou Lake livin' off the country. They still talk about it.... You've got a hard row ahead of you, sis. Ev'body knows your old woman's so deep in debt to Maccubbin, she'll never crawl out this side of the grave. And you got no money. What you goin' to do about it?"

Selina resisted the angry impulse to tell him it was none of his business. Perhaps he meant well, she told herself. Anyway, the ways of the country were strange to her yet, and she must take the people as she found them. Biting her lip, she said:

"I'm not prepared to say yet. I must look into things."

"There's nothin' to look into," said Hines. "The facts are known and you can't get away from them. You can't do anything up at Bear Coulèe unless some feller helps you out. Maccubbin's a shrewd feller, but he ain't as shrewd as me. I could buy him out half a dozen times over without crampin' meself.... I'll lend you what money you need to get your Old Woman out o' hock."

Selina, with a gasp of amazement, looked around in his face. Was this kindness or what? But his expression was merely swinish. She shuddered at what she read there. "Oh no! no!" she whispered.

Her look was so suggestive of instant flight that Hines put out his hand and grasped her wrist. "Wait a minute! Let's talk it over. Do you mean you won't take it?"

Selina crushed down the impulse to snatch her arm free and take to her heels. She had read somewhere that the way to subdue a man was by not resisting him. Above all, one must not run away. "I am much obliged for the offer," she said in a quiet voice; "but I could not possibly accept it."

"Why not?"

"Because I do not see my way clear to repay you."

"I'm willin' to take my chance of that."

Selina remained silent.

"Look ahere!" said Hines, still clinging to her wrist. Selina held herself at extreme arm's length from him, but did not pull at her arm. "I know girls are funny, but you seem like a sensible sort; you got a good eye. I been watchin' you a lot when you didn't know it.... Well, I could do a bit of courtin' such as girls like as well as any young fellow, but there ain't no time for it. You got to go one way and me another. And it'll be some time before we can meet up again. Well, I want to put my proposition before you, because every man in the country will be makin' his offers to you, but you won't get any like mine, because there ain't no feller up here as shrewd and as well fixed as me, nor nowheres near it. I'm offerin' to marry you, my girl. What do you think about that?"

Again Selina looked incredulously in his face. Convulsed with what he no doubt thought was tenderness, he was more unspeakably hideous than ever. Anger welled up in her. How dare he! she thought. But she restrained it. He was a powerful man, and for her mother's sake she must try to avoid angering him. The situation was funny as well as horrible. If only she could master her nerves!

"Do you wish me to give you an answer now?" she murmured.

"No! No!" said Hines. "A girl must have time to think things over. I just wanted to put my offer to you before you let yourself in for anything else. That long-legged Lester Morrow, for instance; a poor tool! He's already in debt up to his neck to Maccubbin. He'll never have anything. The others are no better. I ain't afear'd of the result if you think it over. Look what I can do for your Old Woman. She's had a hard life. She's entitled to ease and comfort for the rest of her days. And with me behind you, both of you can tell Maccubbin to go plumb to hell. You just say the word, sis, and I'll come up there in the spring and take you both out. And you, you can have anything you set your mind on. I'm a liberal feller, I am, when I'm treated right. The day we're married I'll settle a good fat sum on you in your own right."

"I will give you your answer at another time," said Selina, endeavouring quietly to withdraw her arm.

"Don't go! Don't go!" he pleaded. The bloated face broke up in an alarming fashion. He seemed about to cry. "God! but you look good to me, girly! Your eyes are so bright and your lips so red! You have a proud air! You shall be the mistress of the finest house money can build, and all the servants to wait on you that you want. Don't go yet! Don't pull away from me like that. I won't hurt you. All the time I'm talking to you so quiet and reasonable I'm burnin' up inside. Before you go ... give me ... give me a kiss to seal the bargain...."

Horror overcame Selina then. She snatched her arm free and started to run. Baldy Red plunged after her. He flung his arms around her. They struggled.

"Let me go, you beast!" muttered Selina, unconscious of what she was saying. "You beast! I'd sooner die! I'd sooner die than marry you!"

With a strength and quickness that he was unprepared for, she tore herself free of his arms. As he came after her again she gave him a push with all her strength, and he toppled over backwards. The path at this point skirted the extreme edge of the river-bank, and Baldy Red rolled to the bottom enveloped in a cloud of light snow; a grotesque figure. He got to his feet, with snow sticking all over his face, and shook his fist in the direction of Selina's flying figure and cursed horribly; but she could not hear him. She did not stop running until she came within sight of Trudeau's.

At one o'clock on Tuesday the three sleds were drawn up outside the river door of Trudeau's ready to take to the ice. First a laden sled covered with canvas, and Hugh sitting on top; then the trim shanty sled, so snug and cosy looking with smoke coming out of the chimney and curtains in the windows; then another laden sled with Lester standing beside the horses. The whole male population of Miwasa Landing was standing about swinging arms and stamping feet to keep warm, while they waited for Selina to appear. The Raspberry Lake outfit had already gone, and behind the hotel the Red Willow Prairie fellows were feverishly loading their sleds to follow. Baldy Red Hine's sled, with his fine horses carefully blanketed, stood near.

There was the usual amount of persiflage back and forth. "Well, so long, Hughey. Watch out that there mansion don't stick her runner in a crack and lay over. 'Tain't no cinch to set a whole house on its feet again."

"Fellows, I lived forty year in the country, and blest if I ever expected to see a house with a smokin' chimney take to the ice. 'Tain't natural, I say."

"With a little red and gold paint now it 'ud do for a circus waggon."

"Looks like a dining-car on the railroad."

And so on. And so on.

Billy, grinning, came out of the hotel with Selina's little trunk on his shoulder. Selina followed, all muffled up in the coon-skin coat, but with the green hat showing bravely above the standing collar. A cheer went up from the assembled men, and she bowed to the right and left like royalty. She had to wait at the bottom of the step while Billy shoved her trunk under the bed inside, and several parting gifts were thrust on her: a pair of fur gauntlets, a red worsted sash yards long, and a pair of delicately fashioned snow-shoes. Selina laughingly protested, but the donors instantly lost themselves among their fellows, and she could not give the things back.

Finally Billy came out, and she went in to appear instantly at the window smiling and nodding her farewells. The

cheering was redoubled. Billy climbed on in front, Hugh cracked his whip, and the three sleds set off, accompanied by most of the men, running and cheering down the long slope to the edge of the ice.

Baldy Red Hines came out of the hotel sucking his teeth. He sent a venomous glance in the direction of the little procession wending upstream. Three breeds lounging about his team sprang into activity at his appearance, whipping the blankets off the horses and climbing aboard. Another breed, a sinister, weazened, ferret-eyed little creature, came around the corner of the building and cringed up to Baldy Red. The fat man spoke to him in an undertone.

"You are to take snow-shoes and go to Tom Beavertail's camp north of the river. Tom Beavertail has got good dogs. Do not tell anybody here where you are going. Get a good team of dogs and a driver and plenty of grub from Tom Beavertail and go by the red man's trail north-west to the camp of Joe Providence under Jack-knife Mountain. That is five days' fast going. You tell Joe Providence to take six strong young men and his two best teams of dogs and meet me twelve sleeps from now at the north side of the crossing of Heart River where it comes into Caribou Lake. Let him camp behind the willows there and watch for my coming. Let him show no tracks near the freighting trail.

"The outfit for Red Willow Prairie will have left them then, and the boys for Raspberry Lake strike off at that place. Then the girl will have but three with her, and one a young boy. When Joe Providence has started you are to wait in his camp. Here is my ring to show Tom Beavertail and Joe Providence that you are sent by me."

IX.

Over the Ice

The outfit which had preceded them up the river by an hour left a hard-packed double track through the snow, so Hugh twisted his reins around one of the poles that confined his load and walked ahead of his team. The tall, strongly built figure was dressed in an old suit of canvas lined with sheep-skin, with shoe-pack moccasins to his knees. Out of the tender blue sky the sun flashed well-nigh intolerably on the wide fields of snow. The air was still and very cold, and one seemed to inhale infinitesimal frost crystals with every breath. But Hugh was not impressed with the fine day. He had too much to think about. The trail was well packed, but it was not smooth, for underneath the snow was the broken ice which had jammed and frozen solid to make the winter road. At intervals Hugh glanced back at his load with a measuring eye. The going was easy here, but anybody could see the sled was overloaded. True, he could keep changing the teams about so that each team could be put to the light shanty sled every third day, but when the way was bad that would not be exactly the same thing. He foresaw plenty of trouble ahead.

Whenever the track twisted to avoid a hummock of upended ice, Hugh looked back over the balance of his convoy. Fifty yards behind the shanty sled came lurching over the bumps, spitting the smoke out of its stove-pipe in puffs. It had most absurdly the look of a house which had taken a drop too much. At an equal distance behind it came the other loaded sled driven by Lester. Both Billy and Lester were walking ahead of their horses as Hugh was. By-and-by Hugh saw that Selina had come out of her little house and was seated in the driver's place wrapped in a blanket. He could see her red cheeks like berries against the snow, and the green hat like a holly-leaf. A surprising sharp pain transfixed his breast. How would he be able to go through with this?

Still later he saw that Selina, becoming chilled in spite of the blanket, was now walking sturdily alongside Billy in the parallel track. They were talking away and showing their white teeth to each other like the young things they were. The sight caused Hugh both pleasure and pain. She got along with the boy. That was all to the good; *he* was all right. And what a pretty sight they made smiling at each other! So much for the pleasure; it was impossible for Hugh to be jealous of Billy. But the pain—Ah! why couldn't he, Hugh, talk to her too? Why must he be paralysed and flattened to the earth like a cringing dog whenever she looked at him?

Meanwhile, he had all his anxieties. How would he manage this first night out? Darkness fell so early, they could

only make a few miles. It was customary to spend the first night at Ange Grobois' stopping-house. But he had some feed for his horses with him; could they not spend the first night in the open, and so avoid the crowd at the stopping-house? Though cold the night would be still and shelters could be made. But there was that outfit behind them; they had feed too, and if they came up and found them camped they would camp also. Then the outfit in front, after waiting for them in vain, would be sore next day. On the whole, Hugh decided it would be better to go to the stopping-house. The thing must be gone through with.

The outfit in front comprised nine men, and there were seven following them. Hugh was well aware that the eyes of all sixteen men were bright with anticipation, and that the same thought was in the mind of each one—namely, the marvellous girl who had come amongst them like a miracle. How was trouble going to be avoided during this long journey together? Not that he feared for Selina's safety. She had laid a spell upon the roughest of them, but they were almost sure to fall fighting among themselves. Each man had the potentialities of a dynamite cartridge. Hugh did not care particularly if they blew up and destroyed themselves or each other, but Selina must not be shocked or terrified. He was prepared to give his life to prevent that. Unfortunately, giving his life wouldn't do any good either; he had to keep his life and set his wits to work, a much harder thing.

Shortly before they turned in at Ange Grobois', Hugh saw Baldy Red Hines' sleek team and his well-known light sled come trotting up behind Lester. Yet Baldy had given out at the Landing that he was bound down river for Fort McMaster. Hugh scowled and ground his teeth. This entirely altered the situation. His anxieties were directed from the general to the particular. Baldy, with his wealth and power and assurance, was a dangerous man. Hugh knew all about him, and the thought that this fellow might dare aspire to the glorious Selina filled the breast of the honest young man with a wild rage. Hugh had no suspicion of what had taken place between Selina and Baldy at the Landing.

Ange Grobois' establishment consisted of one low, attenuated log-shack nearly a hundred feet long, built on a low bench above the river out of reach of the spring floods. Grobois was a bachelor, and his household arrangements were simple in the extreme. He lived in a room at one end where his lodgers were free to spread their beds on the floor if they wished; the rest of the building was the stable. Accommodations were taxed to the utmost by the crowd which arrived this night.

The shanty sled was left standing about a hundred feet from the living end of the shack. It grew dark, and a warm yellow light glowed behind the curtains. The chimney smoked hospitably; Selina was cooking her supper within. A score of men hung about, nearly all with a highly self-conscious air, watching the lighted windows furtively and wistfully. It was impossible to cook for so many on Grobois' little stove, so a fire had been built outside under lee of a grove of pines behind the shack. Here the cooks were at work. The usual uproar of a populous camp was strangely absent. Everybody talked in undertones, but was mostly silent. To the anxious Hugh it seemed as if there was something threatening in this silence. His eyes were everywhere at once on the alert to nip any trouble in the bud.

Baldy Red Hines, who sat comfortably by the fire letting his breeds do the necessary work of camp, was the only one who seemed not to keep the tail of his eye on the shanty sled. He had an affable air—too affable, Hugh thought. Baldy was never affable for nothing. He sought to ingratiate himself with one man and another by inviting them to have a drink of contraband whisky with him. North of the Landing whisky is forbidden. Neither Hugh, Billy, nor Lester were included in his invitations. Hugh suspected a conspiracy, particularly when he saw Baldy attach a man called Svenska Lew to his side, a crude, ignorant Hercules from the Raspberry Lake outfit, whom Baldy would not ordinarily have noticed. Svenska Lew had more than one drink.

Hugh had to fight against the feeling of being terribly alone. He could not even count on Lester, his partner. True, since the fight at the Landing Lester had been somewhat subdued, and he had not once attempted to speak to Selina on the trail that afternoon, but his secret look at Hugh was full of hatred. Hugh had Billy, and Billy was true blue; but Billy was only seventeen years old, and lanky as an aspen sapling.

Selina came to the door of the shanty sled and called Lester. In the strange stillness of evening the bell-like sound of her voice made the hearts of all those lonely men squeeze up a little breathlessly. There was magic in it. Lester went with alacrity. She wanted her little bucket filled with water. He fetched it, and they stood for a moment at the door talking in low tones. Then Selina went in and Lester came back to the big fire swaggering a little, as a young man will. He was received in silence with sidelong scowls that Hugh was quick to mark.

Hugh waited a moment or two, then sent Billy to Selina with a message. She was please to ask Billy for anything she wanted. Billy was much embarrassed by this errand, and one cannot expect much diplomacy from seventeen years old. The upshot was that Billy blurted out:

"Hugh says you mustn't let Lester come around you. I'm to get you anything you want."

The spirited Selina's eyes flashed lightnings and her lips went tight together. She said not a word to Billy, but after he had gone back to the fire, she came to her door and called Lester in a voice warmer than she would ordinarily have used. Lester went like a shot. They spoke together, and presently Lester was seen to be building a fire near the shanty sled. Though the temperature was still falling, the air was so still it felt almost warm out of doors. With a coat hung over one's shoulders one could sit before the fire in great comfort.

Well, there the two of them sat eating Selina's supper in the full view of all the others. The twenty or more outsiders behaved according to their natures. Some made believe not to notice anything, but their talk was strained and sharp; the simpler natures scowled blackly and openly at Lester. Svenska Lew was still planted beside Baldy Red, who occasionally whispered something to him out of the corner of his mouth, and the Swede's eyes burned stupidly. Hugh was filled with a helpless rage. He did not blame Selina. A girl like that couldn't know what was going on—but Lester knew. The man must be insane with his self-conceit, Hugh thought. For Hugh the worst of it was that while he was more jealous of Lester than any man there, he clearly foresaw that he would have to take Lester's part against the crowd. It was a bitter necessity.

There they sat partly facing each other, with the fire between them and their observers. Only the profile of Lester could be seen, but Selina's full face was revealed. Not having accustomed herself to Mother Earth as yet, she sat on a box, and the fire at her feet cast up curious shadows in her charming face like old-fashioned footlights on the stage. Her face was turned toward Lester with encouraging smiles. Like any woman under the circumstances, she was putting on a little more than she felt. She honestly had no idea of the damage she was working amongst the quiet men by the other fire; she merely wished to show Hugh that he might not issue his commands to her with impunity. All men have a strain of childishness in them, and as much as by anything else, the observers were enraged to see Selina sharing her delicacies with Lester, while *their* meal consisted only of tea, bacon, and beans.

By the time Selina and Lester had finished eating she had repented of her hasty impulse or perhaps she had grown tired of Lester; who can say what passed through her mind? At any rate, she carried her things inside and coolly sent Lester back to join his mates by the other fire. He came to them with a slight air of bravado. One look around the circle of faces was enough to warn him of his danger; the odds were more than twenty to one. He changed colour and his eyes bolted this way and that; nevertheless, as has already been pointed out, Lester had his own kind of courage. Finding a place in the circle of warmth he sat down and pulled out his pipe, looking stubborn and dangerous.

The fire was a long narrow one to give them all a chance at it. Along the one side under the boughs of the pine-trees a rough, leaning shelter of branches had been set up. The gross figure of Baldy Red sat under it in the place of honour in the middle. Lester had to be content with a place on the other side of the fire, the more exposed side. Hugh was inconspicuous down at the end.

"Think you're quite a feller, don't yeh?" said a voice out of the line to Lester. The words were harmless enough, but they conveyed an ugly sneer.

"Feller enough to keep up my own end, I guess," retorted Lester.

"We'll see about that."

"Act as if you was the on'y man present," growled another. "What do you think you are, anyhow!"

"Do you think we're goin' to stand for this every night?" from still another.

There was a whole chorus of growling epithets up and down the line. "Damned conceited puppy! ... Think he's one of these here matinée idols on the stage.... Thinks the rest of the men ain't one two three when he's around...."

It was curious that Selina's name and presence were never mentioned, never even suggested.

Lester's panicky eyes searched in vain from face to face for a sign of support. Every hard face was set in the desire to destroy him. Only Hugh down at the end was not looking at him; Hugh was smoking with an air of wooden indifference. But Lester held his ground.

"Stand for what every night?" he demanded.

"This showin'-off before our eyes."

"What is it to you?"

Once more individual speeches were lost in the swell of growling rage up and down. All kept their voices low so that no sounds might penetrate inside the shanty sled, which was about a hundred yards off.

Then suddenly the half-drunken Swede got to his feet, a mountain of a man, as tall as Lester, and two stone heavier; Lester looked like a stripling alongside of him. Sticking his block-like head truculently forward, he poured a guttural stream of opprobrium over Lester, which had nothing to do with the case, but was just abuse. The eyes of all the other men brightened, and they bared their teeth in cruel anticipation.

"Go to it, Svenska! ... Jump at him! ... Smash him! ... Spoil that smooth face! ..."

And not a cry on Lester's side! He jumped up and looked about him, white and desperate. No help! No help! Twenty to one against him! Of course, the Swede had no science, but he had a fist that could kill an ox. You couldn't knock such a man out. And, anyhow, the others wouldn't *let* him, Lester, win.

The Swede came leaping over the fire. Lester gave ground warily. And then suddenly help arrived from a quarter unexpected by him. Hugh pressed Lester out of the way and faced the Swede. The latter, confused for the moment by this abrupt change of antagonist, stood with open mouth and hanging hands. But angry cries rose from the others.

"Hey, you keep out of this, Bell! It's none of your put! ... Let them settle it between them! ... Sit down, or you'll get the same as your partner. There's plenty here to do it!"

Hugh, with a quiet voice that instantly won a hearing, asked: "What do you want? A murder? ... You all know the Swede won't fight fair when he's got drink in him. He carries a knife."

With a snarl of rage the Swede thrust his hand in his back pocket and flung the heavy clasp knife on the ground. "I don't need no knife," he said.

The sight of the ugly weapon checked the passion of the men; enough, anyhow, for Hugh to go on. He went on quickly before the tide could turn again:

"If there's a fight to-night there'll be another fight to-morrow night, and there'll be blood spilled. You all know how it is when fighting once begins in a camp. Well, how about her? That's all I want to ask you. How about her?"

This was the first time Selina had been named, and it had a powerful effect. Hugh paused a moment to let it sink in. There was only one voice raised against him.

"Aah! you think you're goin' to get her for yourself, eh?"

"That's a fool crack!" said Hugh, flashing on the speaker. "Everybody knows I ain't so much as spoke to her. Everybody knows she don't like me. I ain't got no interest in this matter, except to take her safe to her mother. That's my job."

More than his words, a certain ring of bitterness in his voice convinced them of his disinterestedness, and the tide began to set in his favour.

"This is the first time we ever had a young lady like her come to visit our country," said Hugh. "What kind of an account of us do you want her to carry out with her when she goes?"

Most of the men began to look sheepish. Svenska Lew stepped back over the fire and sat down by Baldy Red, who received him coldly. The Swede asked for a drink, but did not get it. Lester sat down in his former place, and the colour came back to his face.

"That's all right," a voice cried out, "but you needn't think we're gonna stand for that fresh guy showin' off before her. You keep your partner in his place and you won't have no trouble."

"She asked him to come eat with her," Hugh pointed out.

But they were deaf to reason on this score. A general growl answered him. One said:

"That's all right. But it's got to be all free and no favour, or there'll be trouble."

Now Hugh had thought this all out beforehand. Like any young man he hated the idea of having the exquisite girl of his dreams fraternizing with a miscellaneous lot of men, but he had clearly seen that it was the only way to avoid trouble, and had made up his mind to it.

"Sure," he said boldly. "Lester is the only one she knows. Instead of quarrelling and fighting like a lot of dogs among yourselves, why don't you spruce up and make friends with her?"

This advice came oddly from the diffident Hugh. It was received with enthusiasm. But a voice grumbled:

"Don't get a chance."

"Why don't you ask her to join us by our fire?" suggested Hugh. "Can't be much fun for her alone there in the shanty. Let's have some music. Tom Stillson's got his concertina, and there's plenty of harmonicas in the crowd. Most everybody can sing. Let Pap Fraser tell her some yarns of the country. He's been here longest. Show her that we know how to entertain a lady."

This proposal was received with unbounded enthusiasm. "Let the kid go ask her now," they cried.

"Wait a minute," said Hugh. "I got another thing to propose first. With only one lady in the party and every man aiming to put his best foot forward to please her, there's bound to be plenty opportunities for trouble. We got to put on the brakes against trouble. I propose that we elect a committee of three to keep order in camp. I won't serve on it because I don't want you to get the idea I'm tryin' to run the show. I propose Pap Fraser, of the Willow Prairie outfit, and Jack Shemwell, of Raspberry Lake, and Baldy Red Hines as the most responsible men amongst us."

The proposal was carried *nem. con.* with cheers. Thus Hugh drew the sting of his most dangerous adversary. Baldy Red accepted somewhat sourly. He knew, and Hugh knew, that having been elected by the men, if he tried to queer the game they would turn and rend him.

Ten minutes later Selina sat in state on her box, with the long fire before her, and behind her the screen of branches reaching overhead, and reflecting the heat down on her back. It was as cosy under there as in the ingle-nook of an old house. Grouped around her feet on both sides of the fire sat or lay the twenty-odd men, every face turned up to hers like plants to the sun. They hung breathlessly on her lightest word. The feeblest of her jokes was received with shouts of approval. It gave her an intoxicating sense of power. She glanced back somewhat wonderingly at the discontented girl of West Eighth Street. What a change from that to this. This is the life! she thought. On the extreme outside of the circle sat Hugh, keeping himself behind the others as much as possible, and trying not to look at Selina. But Selina marked him in his obscurity, and her breast stirred with resentment. "Making a parade of indifference!" she said to herself; "I'd like to teach him a lesson!"

"What kinda story you like, miss?" asked Pap Fraser.

"A story about Indians," said Selina.

"Waal, the Injins ain't much nowadays, not much!" said the old man. "They're purty tame as you'll soon see. Even the missionaries with the best of intentions seems to demoralize them. The boys turn out to be thieves and the gals ... hum! The on'y livin' Injin you could so much as tell a story about is this here Tom Beavertail, who hangs out under Jack-knife Mountain way north of Caribou Lake. And he ain't a pure Injin. They say he's got white blood and red blood and black blood and yellow blood too. I dunno.

"This Tom Beavertail lets on that he's the appointed leader of his people, and when the time comes he's goin' to drive the whites into the sea. That's the word they pass among themselves, you understand. Meanwhile, he's gathered a bunch of bad actors around him, and they live by plunder. He keeps out of trouble with the authorities because he never troubles a white man unless it's safe. He mostly robs his own people. Those poor fish-eaters around the lake, he's liable to descend on them any time and carry off their catch when its all nicely smoked. And they don't dast complain to the police for fear of catching worse next time.

"Of course, if he catches a white man alone—I need only say he hates the whites like poison. Five years ago there was a white man come up the little river in a small boat all alone. He was gonna write the country up. He undertook to paddle around the lake in his little boat. He was never seen again after he left the head of the river. Some said he was drowned, but the little boat was never found. Tom Beavertail got him. Then summer before last there was two men came in with a fine outfit; two big waggons and about a dozen horses. They started to make their way around the shore of the lake...."

"Do you mean to say such things still happen?" asked Selina, with wide eyes.

"Sure thing, miss. Tom Beavertail is alive and kicking to this day."

"Oh, give us something more cheerful!" cried Baldy Red Hines. "These are old women's tales to scare brats with!"

"Oh, very well," said Pap Fraser in his mild voice. "I will tell you the story of Swift, the Cree, who lived on Pine Tree Hill south of the Landing...."

Later, when all the men stretched out between their blankets in Ange Grobois' one living room, it was suffocating in there. Hugh and Billy elected to sleep outside. They built up the long fire and stretched out alongside it head to head under the screen of branches.

"It's been a wonderful evening!" murmured Billy enthusiastically.

Hugh grunted morosely. Wonderful for whom? that sound meant.

"That was the neatest trick you worked!" Billy went on. "I saw through you. Never thought you were so clever."

"Had to be," said Hugh.

"Sleepy?" asked Billy.

"Nope."

"Mind if I talk awhile?"

"Fire away."

"Isn't she the most wonderful girl!"

"Yep."

"Gee! you're a clammy one!"

Hugh smiled in a twisted way at the fire. His face was drawn and haggard with pain. Billy could not see it, of course.

Billy's enthusiasm wore itself out against Hugh's bitter and monosyllabic replies, and the boy finally fell silent, staring at the fire with a dreamy smile on his lips. Stretched away from him in the other direction the man likewise stared at the fire, but with unsmiling eyes and compressed lips. From the shack near-by came a suggestion of snoring and the occasional stamp of a horse on the earthen floor of the stable. But the great out-of-doors was held in an uncanny spell of silence; one stretched one's ears to hear the breathing of the creature, and wondered if the earth had died.

After a long time Hugh murmured: "Asleep?"

"No," whispered Billy comfortably.

"I saw her talking to you to-day," said Hugh, "when you were walking along in the trail. A long time."

"Why, yes, she did," said Billy. Hugh could hear the delighted smile in his voice.

"What did she talk about?"

"Oh, I can't remember now...."

"Just tell me one thing."

"It was nothing in particular. Just talking. It's gone clean out of my head."

"You must remember something!" said Hugh. "If she's so wonderful, what she says means something, don't it? Have you got a head like a sieve?"

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," said the scared Billy. "Maybe it will come back to me.... You know how girls are. Jolly the life out of you to get you all mixed up so you won't see what they're really getting at. She treats me like I was seven years old instead of seventeen, but I don't mind it from her because she likes me a little. She lets me see that. And then sometimes she treats me like a real old man about thirty-five just to jolly me."

"What *was* she getting at?" asked Hugh.

"You can search me," said Billy in his simplicity. "She's too deep for me. I can on'y grin at her, she's so damn pretty."

"Did she—did she ever say anything—about me?"

"Well, she said in a sort of off-handed way: 'You seem to think a lot of Mr. Bell, don't you?' But when I opened up on that subject she made out she wasn't interested any more..."

"Naturally," said Hugh sorely.

"Well, you can't always tell about girls," said Billy sagely. "... Wait a minute, here's something she said that's just come back to me. You had stopped ahead of us to wrap a chain that you thought was going to chafe your horse, and she said: 'Mr. Bell is fond of horses, isn't he?'"

Hugh raised himself on his elbow. "Did she really say that?" he whispered eagerly. "Did she ... did she...?"

"Yes," said Billy sleepily, "and she said ... she said..."

"Well?" said Hugh impatiently.

His only answer was silence. Billy, boylike, had gone to sleep in the middle of things.

X.

Intimations of Danger

During the next two weeks Selina travelled like an empress in her palanquin—i.e., the shanty sled. The days were so short and the way so rough they could only average about twenty miles a day. When they came to the hundred-mile stretch of Caribou Lake, the wind shrieked like devils around the plodding sledges, and the sharp snow cut like whips on any exposed patch of skin, but Selina rode in comfort in her cabin while her twenty and more slaves contended against frozen noses and fingers. They waited on her hand and foot; they hung about her wistfully and mutely on the chance of a word or a smile; they seemed to offer her their necks to tread on.

It was a wonderful and rather intoxicating experience for the girl art student, who in New York had scarcely known any men. True, these were rough fellows, and not "gentlemen" in the ordinary sense, but Selina had wit enough not to be deceived by the guinea's stamp. They were men, and on the whole of superior quality to the sleek creatures who pass as "gentlemen" in the cities. In the North a man is thrown much on his own resources, and that tends to develop his individuality. The weak ones are quickly thrown back "outside," and Selina found few blanks in her train.

It was not quite like the progress of an empress, for the bolder spirits among her servants each aspired to win her. Difficult as it was to separate her from the crowd during these days, seven determined men managed to accomplish it, and Selina received seven offers of marriage. In each case she tenderly declined and offered herself as a friend instead. Very little trouble resulted from her refusals, because as soon as Selina was allowed to mix with the men, she saw how it was with them, and comported herself accordingly. She treated all with the same friendliness and the most absolute impartiality. Hugh was secretly proud of her. The committee functioned well on the whole, and there were no serious disturbances in camp.

There is no doubt that Selina enjoyed it tremendously—what girl wouldn't?—but what her secret thoughts about it were can only be guessed at. For, like royalty, she could never permit herself to be frank and open—except, perhaps, with Billy. She had to keep the whole twenty in play. She must have had a lot to wonder about in her mind; the sullenness of Lester Morrow, for instance, so different from his attitude before they had set out from the Landing; and the extraordinary stand-offishness of Hugh Bell. Hugh was the handsomest young man in the whole company, and the only one who avoided her. What was the matter with him, anyhow? Every time she thought about it she became angry. Was he a boor or a senseless clod? The worst of it was that everything seemed to suggest that Hugh was the steady one, the dependable one, the one who kept things together. At any rate, as she assured herself twenty times a day, she disliked him intensely.

Then there was Baldy Red Hines to wonder about. What a name for a man! He appeared to have forgotten the humiliating manner in which she had rolled him in the snow, was always attentive and polite, never thrust himself forward unduly, never referred by word or by look to his preposterous offer of marriage. But he had a bad, bad eye, and Selina continually found herself wondering what he was up to. He had told her he was going down river, yet here he was tagging along with the rest watching all the other men like a cat to make sure that none was making headway with Selina. Selina would have liked to tell somebody what had happened at the Landing, but she did not feel like telling Lester now; Hugh was the one who ought to be told, and Hugh gave her no chance. Hugh went out of his way to make it clear that he detested her. Oh, well, let him! This always ended with a toss of the head from Selina.

Young Billy was Selina's refuge and her joy, and she took care each day when they were on the march to have an hour or so alone with Billy, when she could laugh and talk and cut loose generally without fear of making trouble. The boy was her principal source of information too, and she pumped him assiduously in her off-hand way. Billy knew he was being pumped, but he was not astute enough to perceive what she succeeded in getting out of him. Not being a thinking animal, Billy had great difficulty in reporting the substance of these conversations to Hugh, no matter how much he wished to. Hugh would become angry at last.

"Well, why don't you talk to her yourself?" Billy would ask. And that would silence Hugh.

At last they came to the Narrows of Caribou Lake and went into camp there. This was the point where the Red Willow Prairie outfit was to turn north. Next morning an affecting scene took place. Seven woebegone men (four of whom she had refused to marry) took their leave of Selina. The three she had not refused still had hopes, and severally announced their intention of coming to see her at Bear Coulée. They were absurd, yet they were so deeply moved, too, as to be beyond caring whether the other men saw it or not. Selina herself was touched, and a little struck with awe at the strange power of a woman over lonely men.

Two days later the reduced party came to the Heart River where it empties into Caribou Lake, and camped on the south side. In the morning a similar scene took place, and the Raspberry Lake outfit turned off to ascend the river. This left only Maccubbin's three teams and Baldy Red Hines with his team and his three breeds to continue to the head of the lake.

Hugh did not see their friends depart without a considerable twinge of anxiety. Baldy Red's behaviour had been irreproachable the whole way; nevertheless, Hugh still profoundly distrusted him. Hugh had considered asking Jack Shemwell to lend him a man or two as far as the head of the lake, but had finally decided against it. They had only one more sleep between them and the Caribou Lake Settlement, where all danger would be past; and surely, thought Hugh, the three of them ought to be able to protect Selina against Baldy and his three breeds for one night. The fat Baldy himself was no fighter, though he was no doubt armed. But Hugh did not think Baldy would proceed as far as murder; a dirty trick of some kind was more in Baldy's line.

As soon as the Raspberry Lake fellows had gone, Hugh regretted his decision; for a subtle change came over Baldy's face. An evil complacency appeared there; evidently he considered that things were going well for him. He was too smooth, too plausible, too friendly. "Well, anyhow," Hugh thought grimly, "you're not pulling the wool over my eyes as you seem to think. I'm on to you, you blackguard." Hugh resolved not to sleep that night.

From this point on no teams had preceded them since the last snow, and they had to break trail. It was natural for Baldy, travelling light, to offer to go first, and he set off with his three young breeds, whose faces were as expressionless as brown paper masks. Notwithstanding that theirs was the task of making a track, they travelled faster than the loaded sledges could follow, and in the course of the morning passed out of sight.

The two loaded sledges, with the shanty sled between, lumbered after. They had first to cross the wide estuary of the river. On the other side the winter trail took to the land in order to cut off a big peninsula running out into the lake. This overland piece was about twelve miles long. The stopping-house where they counted on spending the night was on the shore of the lake where the trail took to the ice again. This stopping-house was not inhabited, but there was a shack for travellers, and a stable for horses, with a supply of hay. The settlement was less than a day's journey beyond. It has no other name but settlement, since it is the only settlement in all the country round.

By the time they reached the other side of the estuary Baldy Red had been long out of sight. They had first to cross a swampy meadow with thickly springing willows, amongst which the sled track twisted. Billy saw Hugh stop his team and peer all around him into the snow. Hugh beckoned to Billy and Lester to come up.

"They stopped here for half an hour or more," he said, pointing out various tell-tale marks in the snow.

"Well, why shouldn't they have?" asked Billy.

"I don't know," said Hugh. "Why should they stop in a place like this? Baldy Red is up to dirty work of some kind, and I mean to find out what it is if I can. He dropped a man off at the edge of the lake back there to watch that we did not come up and surprise them. I saw his tracks where he squatted behind a willow. Baldy stopped here for some special purpose. Maybe he had an appointment with somebody."

"There was nobody else here," said Billy, looking at the tracks. "And they never left the trail though they walked up and down."

"Well, it's worth looking into," said Hugh.

He strapped on his snow-shoes and started in a wide circle around the standing teams. In a few minutes Billy and Lester received a hail from behind the willows fifty yards or so to the right. Joining Hugh they found him grimly regarding the evidences of a lately abandoned Indian camp hidden snugly behind the bushes. There were the remains of a fire, and scattered about, the poles on which a tepee had been hung. The circle where the tepee had stood was still clearly defined in the snow. The snow was tramped down all around, and there were many dog tracks also.

Billy whistled. "A whole crowd of them!" he exclaimed.

"Seven men slept in that tepee," said Hugh, pointing. "And they had two teams of dogs. They've been camped here for several days—waiting for Baldy very like; and they've just gone." He pointed to the tracks leading away, unmistakably clean and sharp. They led in a north-westerly direction—that is to say, parallel with the route they were themselves taking. "We shall hear of these fellows again," said Hugh.

"Who do you suppose they are?" asked Billy anxiously.

Hugh shrugged. "Baldy's dark-skinned friends are scattered all over. They come from a distance, that's certain, for they don't use dog-teams in these parts. From the country north of the lake very likely. Tom Beavertail maybe."

Billy shivered. "Do you believe those stories?" he asked.

"Not all of them," said Hugh, "but there's no doubt that Tom Beavertail is a bad actor. It'll be up to us to keep our eyes skinned to-night."

"But how could Baldy get word to Tom Beavertail so quick?"

"Did you never hear of moccasin telegraph, my lad?"

"Baldy and these fellows never came together just now," said Lester.

"What was to prevent their hailing each other back and forth without leaving any tell-tale tracks?" said Hugh.

They decided that there was no good in frightening Selina, so they told her when they returned to the sleds that it was game tracks which had drawn them away. The same explanation also accounted to Selina for the fact that thereafter Hugh walked ahead of the outfit with his express rifle over his arm, and Lester brought up the rear with his rifle. There were only the two heavy rifles in the outfit. Billy had to be content with a twenty-two. Hugh would have given something pretty for a six-shooter, but those too-handy weapons are not toted north of the line.

From the willows they climbed to higher ground and travelled through a thickly springing forest of jack-pine. They halted to feed themselves and their horses, and started on again without having seen or heard anything of Baldy's outfit—or any other. Shortly afterwards they were greatly astonished upon rounding into a little opening among the trees to come upon Baldy's team standing there hitched, and Baldy himself wrapped in his fur coat sitting on the tail of the sled nursing his knees. Nobody else in sight.

"I'm in a fix!" Baldy instantly called out. "My breeds have vamoosed." He seemed very cheerful about it.

"Hey?" said Hugh grimly. Billy and Selina and Lester came up.

"What you carrying your guns for?" asked Baldy suspiciously.

"We saw moose tracks awhile back," Hugh answered readily. "A bit of fresh meat would go good."

"You'll never get a moose travellin' through the bush with horses," said Baldy scornfully.

"What about your breeds?" said Hugh.

"Well, we halted here," said Baldy in his glib style, "and after we'd finished eating they walked away this way and that way among the trees. I didn't pay no attention. Thought they was lookin' for fool hens or rabbits. When I was ready to

go on I hollered for them, but got no answer. I looked about and discovered that each one of the red devils had sneaked his bed out of the outfit, so then I knew they'd gone for good. I found their tracks making westward. I suppose they're bound for the Cree village by Goose Slough. They can go to hell for all I care. I'm all but at the settlement now, where I can get plenty more."

"Hum!" said Hugh.

"I been havin' a bit of trouble with the boys the last two, three days," Baldy went on. "Modess left a good copper pot at Tooley Jim's stoppin'-house and wouldn't let on about it because he didn't want to be sent back on foot. And yes'day I give Hooliam a couple good licks with a trace end when I caught him givin' the hosses ice water and them sweatin'. One thing and another. You know how 'tis with them breeds. When they got a grievance they don' say nothin' 'tall. Jes watch their chance and walk off on yeh."

This was a plausible story, because that is the way the breed boys do act under the circumstances. But Hugh did not believe a word of it. Hugh was deeply bothered because he could not see *why* Baldy had divested himself of the breeds. He suspected that more than one pair of beady black eyes was watching them at that moment.

"I hitched up and got all ready," said Baldy. "But I didn't want to drive on too far alone. There's more 'n one man in the country would be glad to take a shot at me if he could do so without witnesses." He laughed uproariously.

"Lester will go with you," said Hugh. "His team can follow ours all right."

Hugh's private instructions to Lester were to let Baldy do the driving, and for him, Lester, to keep his gun in his hands and watch Baldy's every move. Billy was told off to bring up the rear of the procession to guard against a possible surprise.

During the rest of the afternoon Hugh kept his three teams as close together as possible. Baldy, breaking the trail ahead, was generally within view or within hearing. Baldy was a noisy driver. Nothing suspicious happened. Shortly before dark they arrived at the empty shack on the lake-shore where they were to spend the night. No signs of anybody having been there.

Hugh had resolved that Selina must spend the night inside the shack, and his next job was to put it up to her. He dreaded that more than facing bad Indians. But there was no help for it; it was too important to be delegated to Billy. Therefore Selina, as she busied herself about household tasks at the door of the shanty sled, was astonished to see Hugh come marching up very stiff and wooden and red in the face.

"I ... I think you ought to sleep in the shack to-night," he stammered. "... If you don't mind."

"But why?" asked Selina, opening her eyes.

"Well, I don't want to scare you unduly," said Hugh, "but there's Indians hanging around. It was their tracks we saw this morning when we told you it was game."

"Unfriendly Indians?"

"There's no unfriendly Indians, strictly speaking," said Hugh. "It's just suspicious that they should be hanging around without letting us see them.... We'll carry your own cot in the shack, and I'll string up a couple of spare blankets to make a little privacy for you.... If you don't mind."

"Why, certainly," said Selina, quite meekly for her; "if you think I ought to." She felt a sudden need to confide in Hugh. "Er ... I think maybe that Hines man is up to mischief."

Hugh smiled suddenly at her, a cool, hard, pleasant smile without a trace of confusion. "I know damned well he is," he said. Then suddenly aware of having used profanity, he blushed crimson again and walked hurriedly away.

Selina's eyes followed him. She felt as if he had taken a little piece of her heart with him. "Strange, strange man!"

she thought. "I wonder why he dislikes me so?"

Hugh had said "spare" blankets, but there were no spare blankets in the outfit. It was his own blankets that he set about stringing across the end of the shack. As he intended to remain up all night, he told himself he wouldn't need any.

"What's that for?" demanded Baldy Red suspiciously.

"Miss Rambert is going to sleep in here," said Hugh.

From the way the man's face fell Hugh was satisfied he had done the right thing. "What the hell for?" asked Baldy.

"Because I advised her to," said Hugh.

"Aw," protested Baldy. "It's dirty in here. And us men's got no place else to go. 'Tain't fittin' for the likes of her. And her own little shanty so neat and cosy and all."

Intimations of Danger

"You can sleep in that if you want," Hugh mockingly.

"All right," said Baldy eagerly.

Hugh saw that he had made a mistake. "No, I'm damned if you can," he said coolly. "You'll sleep in here with the rest."

Seeing the uselessness of argument, and not wishing to let the discussion go too far, Baldy strode out of the shack scowling.

They ate their supper and began to make ready for the night. Hugh kept out of Selina's way. He had another heavy responsibility, second only to that of Selina—i.e., the horses. Knowing something about Indians he guessed that any trouble from them might come by way of the horses. Driving off horses is an ancient and still a favourite trick of the redskins. These horses of Maccubbin's were new to the wilds, and if they were stampeded through the bush there would be broken legs to pay. Hugh decided that he must leave Billy and Lester in charge of the sleeping shack while he stood guard in the stable. At this camp the stable was in another building a hundred feet away.

Selina retired behind her blanket curtain. In the room outside there was a big home-made bed filled with hay. This was contemptuously allotted to Baldy's use, while Billy and Lester prepared to sleep on the floor. Before leaving them Hugh issued his final instructions in a whisper.

"You two are to stand watch and watch throughout the night. Keep an eye on Baldy. Don't let him leave the shack. If he gets ugly jump on him, the two of you, and tie him to the bed. There's a tracking line under Billy's blankets for the purpose. You two stick to the shack under all circumstances. If Baldy or anybody else threatens the girl, shoot!"

Baldy lay on his luxurious bed with his hands under his head watching them with a sneer, and offering no comment. A certain anxiety showed in his face. He was wondering, no doubt, what had made them suspicious, and how much they knew. But he appeared to be buoyed up with a secret confidence, and Hugh went out with a heavy heart. Suppose Baldy's three breeds had joined the prowling Indians, that would make ten against them. Heavy odds! Modern redskins could hardly stand against white men in the day-time, but the darkness would give them confidence.

When the door closed behind Hugh, Billy dropped the heavy bar in place. He was to stand the first watch. He built up the fire and Lester rolled up in his blankets. Lester affected to make light of Hugh's fears, simply because he was jealous of Hugh. However, he was prepared to obey instructions. He presently fell asleep. Baldy appeared to be sleeping too, but you couldn't be sure. The lanky boy sat down on the floor with his back against the door and listened ... listened....

XI.

The Attack

At intervals Billy got up and walked to and fro to ease his stretched nerves. When he stuck his head inside the fireplace he could hear better what was going on outside. To-night there was a light breeze, which was playing strange tricks with the pine-tops. One could imagine creeping things, breathing things, whispering things all around outside. The boy clenched his teeth to keep them from chattering. If only Hugh had been there! He looked with wonder from Lester to Baldy. It appeared that they could sleep! Then he would go back to his seat by the door again and listen ... listen...

And as it proved, it was not in the least necessary to strain one's ears. When it came it was like a thunderclap; a fearful burst of yelling, shrieking, shooting all around the shack that turned the blood to ice. The old, old redskin way! One would have said that their assailants were ninety instead of nine. Lester and Baldy leaped from their beds, and Selina, fully dressed, appeared through the curtains, a tragic figure of terror.

"Where is Hugh?.... Where is Hugh?" she whispered, looking from one to another.

"In the stable," said Lester.

"Oh, we need him here!" she moaned.

Their attackers were running around and around the shack shrieking senselessly and firing off their guns at random. No bullets were heard to plug themselves into the log walls.

"They're only trying to break our nerve," said Billy stoutly. Now that the thing had happened he no longer felt so much afraid.

"I'll go out to them," said Baldy, making a move towards the door.

"No you don't!" said Billy, raising his gun.

"Put that down, you little fool!" cried Baldy, turning pale. "I know the natives, and they know me! I have more influence over them than any white man in the country. I will talk to them and bring them to their senses. I'm not afraid."

Billy kept his gun up. Lester was attacked by indecision. He had no particular cause to suspect Baldy, and it appeared to him as if there might be some reason in the man's words.

"Why not let him out?" he said. "Can't do us any harm."

"Hugh told me to keep him in here, and I'm going to do it!" cried Billy. "Get back on the bed, you pig, or I'll bore a hole through you!"

Baldy flung himself on the bed cursing.

From the sounds outside it now appeared that the gang had surrounded the shanty sled. Presently they heard the door smashed in. Fresh cries were raised when they found the place empty. After that there was a great crash which included the sounds of breaking glass and crockery. They had evidently in pure wantonness turned the whole thing over.

"Oh, our shanty sled!" muttered Billy, almost crying with rage. "Oh, damn them! ... damn them!"

A sort of a lull followed. They heard the men approach the shack again jabbering, disputing among themselves perhaps. Suddenly Baldy sat up on the bed, and raising his voice spoke loud in an Indian tongue. There was absolute silence outside while he was speaking. Both Billy and Lester knew a good deal of Cree, but this was not Cree. However,

Billy distinguished one word. That was Tete-Jaune (Yellow Head), the name all the Indians applied to Hugh.

Baldy fell back on the bed and flung an arm over his eyes. "I can do nothing with them!" he groaned. "It's me they're after! They think I have my money on me!"

"You lie!" said Billy. "Your mouth is grinning!"

With fresh yells the whole party of Indians ran around the shack in the direction of the stable.

"By God!" cried Billy, with blazing eyes. "He told them Hugh was in the stable!"

Lester could no longer doubt. His eyes, too, fired up. The two lads of a common accord dropped their guns and leaped on Baldy. Lester had snatched up the thin, strong tracking line. In a trice they had the fat man tied up hand and foot on the hay, finishing with a couple of turns around the head of the heavy bedstead.

Meanwhile Selina, with her head stuck in the fireplace, was listening with strained ears for sounds from the stable. She did not hear what she dreaded to hear. Apparently the yelling men ran right through the stable (it had a door at each end) and then back again. There was no sound that suggested Hugh, no shot. There was no alteration in the sound of their cries to indicate that they had found anything. But where, then, was he?

The Indians came back to the shack with more uncertain cries. One could hear them very close to the door and to the window (which was shuttered inside) like dogs smelling there. One smashed the glass of the window, only to bump his hand against the shutter inside. This was a strong affair made of short lengths of pole nailed to cross pieces.

Baldy on the bed shouted out a single brief phrase to them; shouted it three times before Billy was able to clap a hand over his mouth. They gagged him then.

A silence succeeded which was much harder to bear than all the noise. They all had a sense of creatures softly busying themselves outside. Selina stood leaning against the wall in the corner below the fireplace pressing her hands hard to her breast to hold back the tide of hysteria.

Lester and Billy listening walked from door to fireplace, and from fireplace to window and back again, like caged men. Baldy, bound and gagged on the bed, listened with strained eyes.

Suddenly there was a horrifying crash against the door. A wild shriek was forced from Selina. "The fire!" gasped Lester.

The remains of a pail of water stood on the hearth. Snatching it up, Lester threw the water, and the embers hissed into blackness.

"Flat on the floor!" said Lester. "When the door goes in, fire!"

"Get behind us, Selina," whispered Billy.

At the third blow of the battering-ram the cleats that held the bar yielded and the door smashed back against the wall. Lester and Billy fired simultaneously. The explosion within doors was shattering. There was nothing outside. The Indians had dropped their log and fallen back. Those inside saw the pale gleam of snow—empty, and a breath of icy air puffed into their faces. Billy's miserable pop-gun had to be loaded after every shot. Lester's shells were in threes.

"Move around out of line with the door," whispered Lester. "Save your shot until something creeps in."

"Keep behind us, Selina," whispered Billy.

Again that racking silence. They could hear the dogs yelping and snarling a little way off; they could hear the wind in the pine-tops; but one might have supposed the men had flown. It was pitchy dark inside the cabin. Selina touched Billy to assure herself that he was close.

Then a rude crash behind them, and the shutter banged in. Whirling about the two men instinctively fired again—uselessly, of course. Something moved outside the window; a hat elevated on a gun barrel perhaps; and Lester fired again. They must have counted his shots, for upon that very moment the whole party swarmed into the cabin through the open door, and before Lester or Billy could reload they were borne back and overwhelmed. The last man who entered held aloft a blazing pine knot to give his comrades light.

Selina screamed again—once only; the sound was like death in Billy's breast. There was no attempt to maltreat him and Lester, but with innumerable hands and bodies pressing them down, their wrists and ankles were quick bound with thongs of hide. They could scarcely have identified any of their assailants, because the flickering light was behind them. All they could see was that their faces were dark. When the two lads were secured, a blanket was thrown over their heads to keep them from seeing. The last thing that Billy heard was Baldy screeching: "They're taking me away! They're taking me away!" There was cynical laughter in the voice. Then Nature mercifully lowered a curtain and Billy knew no more for the time being.

Meanwhile Selina, when the assailants fell upon her two defenders, crept behind the curtain and crouched there, with her arms wrapped about her head, frozen with terror. Her voice was dried up, her limbs useless. The curtain was violently jerked down, and as in a hideous dream she beheld the crowd of dark-skinned men grinning at her evilly—yet partly abashed too. One lifted her to her feet, one brought her fur coat, into which she was somehow assisted, one caught her hands behind her and bound her wrists together—but not so tightly as to hurt her. Her feet were likewise bound. Then on top of the coat she was wrapped within fold after fold of the two blankets that had formed her curtains and carried out of the house.

As in a dream she was aware that Baldy Red approached her, and she heard his sly voice: "They've captured me too. Maybe I can save you. Don't lose heart." But it didn't seem to mean anything in particular. She felt herself being carried down to the lake edge, and saw the pale field of snow fading illimitably into the night. She saw two narrow sleds standing there, each with a long train of dogs hitched to it in single file. The dogs squatted in the snow, or rolled in their harness, or snapped at each other. There was a seated man guarding them. She was laid on one of the sleds, a whip cracked, and she was jerked into swift motion. A wild renewed yelling broke out among the Indians. Something gave way inside Selina, and she knew no more.

The coming back to consciousness was cruel. Still the rapid smooth motion with little jerks as the capricious dogs tightened the traces, the pad-padding of their paws, an occasional low whine, and the squeak of the snow under the runners. A moment of blankness, and then as in the lurid flash of an explosion the whole scene came back, and Selina experienced an unspeakably agony. Ah, if she could only die! If she could only die!

When she moved her body she discovered to her surprise that her wrists and ankles were no longer bound. The sled had merely a low rail along each side. Moved by a blind impulse, Selina flung herself over it.

The bed of the sled was but a few inches above the ground, and she was not hurt, of course, merely rolled in the snow. Pandemonium arose ahead. The dogs were pulled up snarling and yelping. A man's deep voice cursed them roundly—but an English voice! an English voice! *Hugh's voice!*

He came running back and picked her up in his arms. "Oh, Miss Rambert, are you hurt? are you hurt?" he cried, in distress.

"Hurt?" she cried hysterically, while she clung to his rough coat; "hurt? Oh, you blessed fool!" and dissolved in helpless laughter, while the tears ran fast down her cheeks.

XII.

The Long Portage

They continued their journey.

"Where are we going?" asked Selina.

"To the settlement," said Hugh. "We'll be there in half an hour. There are white women there. Sisters at the Catholic mission. I will leave you with them and go back to help Billy and Lester."

"Ah, poor Billy!" she said, with a sharp catch in her breath.

"He'll be all right," said Hugh reassuringly. "Murder was not the object of those devils. You were their object. Baldy Red got the whole thing up, of course. He made out he was being carried off too. He would have appeared later as your saviour. Very clever of him."

"Where were you all the time?" asked Selina.

"You think I played a pretty poor part, eh?" said Hugh very low.

"No!" cried Selina. "How could I ... now? But we wondered..."

"I went to the stable," said Hugh. "But as soon as they broke out I realized they weren't going to bother the horses. They were after you." He hesitated here. "It would have been easy to jump into the thick of it," he went on in a lower tone. "That was what I wanted to do. I had a struggle with myself. I couldn't afford to get done in or knocked out. I couldn't take any chances at all. I had to put my wits to work. I heard the dogs waiting down at the edge of the lake, and I understood they meant to carry you off by dog-sled. That drove me wild. Because you see we couldn't follow over the snow with horses. On foot we'd never have caught up with you. I went down to where the dogs were. There was just one man watching them. I crept up behind him and gave him the butt of my gun. He dropped without a sound. I dragged him out of sight and waited there in his place. In the dark I looked enough like him to deceive his friends for a moment. The instant they laid you down on the sled I cracked my whip and the dogs sprang away. It was a near thing for a minute; I had to knock a couple over, but none of them had their snow-shoes on, and they broke through the crust."

"So that was why they set up such a yelling," said Selina. "It was the last thing I remember hearing."

"Yes, that's why they yelled," said Hugh, in his simple way.

"But there was a second dog-team there," said Selina. "Didn't they come after us?"

"No. I cut the traces almost through, and they parted at the first pull."

"Is that all there is to the story?" asked Selina, with a sort of tender mockery.

"That's all," said Hugh quite simply.

It was about three o'clock in the morning when Hugh hammered on the door of the mission at the settlement and delivered Selina into the astonished hands of the gentle Sisters. Leaving her to tell them her own story, he hastened to the police barracks. The buildings of the settlement are straggled for several miles around the shore of the land-locked bay that forms the head of the lake. The detachment of police at this time comprised a sergeant and three troopers. Unfortunately they had no dog-teams since this is a horse country. At the first word of Hugh's story Sergeant Peterson reached for his fur coat.

"Tell me the rest as we go," he said. He ordered his men to follow with team and sled.

Daylight was breaking when Hugh and the Sergeant hove in sight of the stopping-house on the lake-shore. Lester and Billy had long since succeeded in freeing themselves from their bonds. Between them they had managed to right the shanty sled, and they were now putting the horses to. It was a sick-looking pair of lads: all the light had gone out of their eyes, and they went about their work like feeble automatons. The change in the once blooming Billy was especially shocking; he looked aged. Nor did his eye brighten when he perceived Hugh and the policeman.

"You're too late," he said listlessly. "They got her."

"The hell they did!" cried the Sergeant, clapping him on the back. "Hugh got her! She's safe at the settlement this minute."

"Wh ... wh ... what?" stammered Billy, falling back.

"I say she's safe with the Sisters at the mission!"

Billy's legs suddenly caved in, and he went down in the snow in a heap. Hugh picked him up. He was all right again immediately, but intensely ashamed of the tears he could not keep back.

Hugh dared not stop to help Sergeant Peterson in his chase of the miscreants. They had lost far too much time as it was. More snow than usual had fallen at the onset of winter, and the anxious question was always before Hugh, Would he be able to make the last hundred miles of their journey at all? that terrible hundred miles across the baldheaded prairie with not a house, with scarcely so much as a patch of woods to afford shelter the whole way.

As soon as the horses were put to, therefore, the three partners started on for the settlement with the shanty sled and their two loads, leaving Peterson to make his dispositions for the pursuit. The fugitives had left a wide open trail eastward down the lake, but unfortunately it soon began to snow again, and that would soon be wiped out. It would not be difficult, of course, for the police to establish the ownership of the captured dogs, but the one they wanted to get their hands on was Baldy Red Hines.

The shanty sled was not damaged except for broken windows and broken crockery, though everything inside was in a terrible disorder. Billy was told off to set it right as far as possible while they travelled. There was a joyful reunion at the settlement that night. All three of the partners dined with Selina at the mission, with white collars to grace the occasion. Only for Lester was there a mixture of bitterness in his joy, for he saw clearly now, even if Hugh did not, that his chance of winning Selina's favour was gone for ever.

Next morning they were *en route* again at the usual hour. After circling the big bay, the trail heads straight overland for the nearest point of the Spirit River, roughly a hundred miles away. This part is called the long portage. It was a decided change for the worse from the ice-road. In summer this road is full of bottomless holes, and even under eighteen inches of snow one could feel them still. Moreover, there were hills to climb of various degrees, and Hugh, thinking of them, looked at his overladen sledges with anxious eyes. Nobody had preceded them over the long portage for some days, and they had to break trail the whole way. The shanty sled headed the procession.

As has been said, they had a pleasant time at the mission the night before. Hugh was not exactly garrulous, but he had not been wooden either; his happiness was evident in his quiet smiling eyes, and Selina felt that the ice was broken for good. But later Hugh had had some bad hours, of which Selina knew nothing. His happiness then had looked to him like weakness. "This can't go on," he had said to himself; "the like of her is not for me!" And during the hours of the night, when he ought to have been asleep, for he had had no sleep whatever the night before that, he struggled to erect his defences again.

Consequently, when she came running out of the mission next morning (the boys had slept at the French outfit's boarding-house and stopped by for her) with a gay greeting to all, Hugh's face was as wooden as a sledge runner. And when her face changed at the sight of it, he abruptly turned his back in the bad old way, and made believe to be fixing one of the ropes. That his face went red to the ears only made it seem worse. Selina quickly hid her feelings and hopped inside the completely repaired shanty sled.

Later, after the first spell, she rode alongside Billy on the driver's seat. "Billy," she said, "what's the matter with Hugh?"

"Why ... why ... nothing!" stammered Billy, blinking under the directness of her attack.

"Look at the way he acts whenever I come near him."

"But he always acts that way."

"Why does he?"

"He's bashful."

"Nonsense! A full-grown man like that."

"Lots of men are bashful around women. Some of the finest ones. With Hugh it's like a disease. Well, it's the feather-weights that have the ready tongues."

"You're loyal," said Selina dryly. "But bashfulness only accounts for part of it. It's partly deliberate. Why does he dislike me so, Billy?"

"Oh, you're wrong! you're wrong!" cried Billy, in distress.

"How do you know I'm wrong?"

"Why, anybody would know ... anybody could tell..."

"I can't."

"Oh, you're wrong!" Billy continued to repeat helplessly.

"Does he ever talk to you about me, Billy?"

"Oh no!" said Billy so quickly that she knew he was lying.

"Maybe he's the kind of man who dislikes all women," suggested Selina.

"No, I wouldn't say that," said Billy. He was sweating gently, notwithstanding the cold.

"Well, maybe he's the kind of man for whom there is only one woman in the world."

"Yes, that's the kind of man he is," agreed Billy unwarily.

"Oh, I see. He's in love with some other lady, and the rest of us just bore him."

"I didn't say that," said Billy. "He ain't in love with anybody else."

"You said there was only one woman in the..."

Billy had his back against the wall now. "Look ahere," he said reproachfully, "Hugh is my pal, and you hadn't ought to worm out of me what his private feelings is ... are I mean. You're cleverer than me. 'Tain't fair.... You answer me one question now. You needn't be afraid neither that I'll tell Hugh. What do you think of Hugh?"

"I'm in love with him, Billy," she said softly. "Head over heels!"

"Oooh! Jiminy!" cried Billy, with eyes like blue saucers. "Oooh! then everything's all right. Cos he's in love with you; crazy! looney! Hey! Giddap there!" And in his excitement he gave his horses a cut with the whip that almost resulted in the overturning of the shanty sled.

Selina, veiling her shining eyes from Billy, affected disbelief. "You only imagine that."

"Not on your life!" said Billy. "Since long before he ever saw you. Just from looking at your pictures!"

Selina was not over pleased with this. "I don't want him to fall in love with my pictures, but with me."

"Well, since he's seen you it's a hundred times worse," said Billy. "He's near out of his mind about you. That's why he acts so funny."

"But why should he avoid me?"

"Because he's a high-minded fellow. He thinks he's got no right to ask a girl like you to share his hard lot."

"Oh!" said Selina, and fell silent.

They spent the night at a breed stopping-house on the long portage. There was a small, separate bunk-house for travellers, a cheerless place and none too clean. It was a bunk-house by courtesy only, for it had no bunks. It contained no furniture whatsoever, and the three young men had to spread their supper on the floor and eat it sitting on the floor. In one corner there was a mud fireplace so small that the sticks had to be set upright in it.

After eating, the three of them sat in front of the fire nursing their knees, smoking, saying nothing at all. Lester's dark, sharp face was bitter; the boy Billy was full of suppressed excitement, darting a glance from time to time in Hugh's face; Hugh, unaware of being observed, was sunk in a painful reverie. There came a pleasant hail from Selina outside.

"Oh, Mr. Bell!"

When Hugh went to the door she was silhouetted in the doorway of the shanty sled close by. "Bring a screw-driver, will you? I want you to fix something for me."

"You better go, Billy," whispered Hugh agitatedly.

"Not on your life!" said the boy. "She asked you."

So Hugh went. After the bunk-house the warm, bright interior of the shanty sled was like a bit of paradise in that rude land. Selina had contrived a shade for the lamp out of a bit of yellow silk; there was a cosy green travelling rug spread over the cot, and a bright scarf on the table, with books lying on it. Everything was beautifully in order, and Selina herself, in a light dress such as Hugh had never seen her wear before, looked like ... like ... (He was at a loss for a simile) ... like a princess! It made Hugh feel gone inside.

"This bracket," said Selina, "the screws are loose. I'm afraid it will come down."

Hugh, of course, was never one to suspect that she might have loosened the screws herself. He tightened them and turned to go. Selina was now between him and the door.

"Sit down for a few minutes," she said, smiling like an angel.

A fearful agitation took possession of the young man, but he looked wooden. "I ... I better go," he mumbled. "The fellows..."

"Well, what about the fellows?" asked Selina.

"Well, you know ... I ... they ... I ... I better go..."

"Doesn't it ever occur to you that I might like to talk to somebody in the evenings?" suggested Selina.

"Billy comes."

"Billy's all right. But he's a boy. I'd like to talk to a grown-up person sometimes."

Speech failed Hugh altogether. He felt like a great booby standing there holding the screwdriver.

"You are unfriendly," murmured Selina.

"Oh no! no! It's not that!" he protested, deeply moved. And for a moment he raised his blue eyes to hers, dark with pain.

"Then sit down."

He dropped on the cot. Selina sat in the tiny folding-chair by the table, her hands demurely in her lap. She talked. She sought to put him at his ease by paying no particular attention to him. She told him, with laughter, stories of her childhood. And as Hugh listened, the sweetness of her stole around him and through him, undermining the last of his defences. He was like a man held spellbound by heavenly music. His eyes were fixed on her face now, and there was no cover over them. In their depths Selina could read his soul. She could not quite meet those eyes, and in the end their rapt gaze caused her voice to falter and stop.

She whispered, apropos of nothing: "You don't need to be afraid of me."

And Hugh answered simply: "I am not so much afraid of you as of myself."

"Why?"

"If I once lost hold...!" He finished with a speaking gesture.

"Must you always keep hold of yourself?"

He nodded, not looking at her now. "I must keep saying to myself: 'Not for me! Not for me!' It is my lot to live alone, and I must face it!"

"You suffer?" she said softly.

A groan was forced from him. "Nobody knows!" he muttered. He stood up abruptly. "I'd better go."

"Hugh...!" she whispered.

Still refusing to look at her, he said, like a man speaking by rote: "I have nothing but my quarter section of land and my team and implements. I owe Maccubbin six hundred dollars, and I see no way of paying it off..."

Selina interrupted him. She had risen too. "What is all that to me?" she said softly. "I love you."

Hugh went back a step. His eyes widened in amazement, almost in horror. Then his face suddenly became irradiated. The natural man leaped out of his eyes, fierce in joy. "Selina!" he cried. "Oh, God! *You!*" He seized her in his arms.

It took them seven days to cover that hundred miles. More snow fell and they were in continual difficulties. Two of the horses got sick from eating bad hay at one of the stopping-houses, and on a little side hill one of the loaded sledges turned clean over. On another day a runner collapsed, and they lost half a day making a new one. But Hugh was living in a dream where difficulties and hindrances meant nothing. With his face shining with happiness he worked with the strength of seven men.

The man was completely transformed. His blue eyes blazed like a Viking's, and his speech was rude and merry. Selina adored him. The blooming Billy went about with a reflected happiness and an air of bless-you-my-children, as if he had brought it all about unaided. Only Lester's face daily became more yellow and sour. No one paid any attention to him.

On the seventh day darkness forced them to go into camp about two miles short of Spirit River Crossing, where they had hoped to spend the night. They were only a mile from the edge of the bench where Hugh had promised Selina the most glorious view in the North-West. They had to camp in the open, but they always carried enough horse feed for at least one stop, and they made themselves comfortable enough with fires and shelters of pine-boughs in a little wood.

Next morning as soon as it was light enough to see, Hugh was at work. He went about a hundred feet along the trail to chop down a dead tree that he had marked for firewood. Their camp was invisible from this spot. Between the strokes of his axe he became aware of the approach of a horse along the trail, and turning around he beheld Maccubbin, his employer, whom he had supposed to be a hundred miles away at that moment.

"Well!" cried Hugh heartily. "Hello there!"

But at the sight of Hugh, Maccubbin's face, hard and imperious at the best of times, darkened with rage. "Where the hell you been?" he burst out. "You're three weeks late! There's two feet of snow lying on the prairie now. How are you going to get through that?"

"It's not my fault it's snowed most every day," said Hugh good-temperedly.

"It's your fault you're three weeks late!" snarled Maccubbin. "Ten days ago we ran out of sugar and tea and other things at Bear Coulee. I pushed through light to the Crossing to break a trail for you. But it's filled up and snowed over long ago. Where you been?"

"Keep your shirt on!" said Hugh. "It's a long story."

They were returning along the trail while they talked. Rounding a clump of bushes they came on the camp. At sight of the shanty sled Maccubbin pulled up his horse. His jaw dropped.

"In Heaven's name what is that?" he demanded.

"That's the cause of the delay," said Hugh grinning. "I'm bringing in the Old Woman's daughter to see her mother."

For an instant Maccubbin stared at Hugh speechlessly—then the storm broke. "You confounded young blockhead!" he cried. "Have you the face to stand there and tell me you used a whole team and sled to bring in one unnecessary and unwelcome female! And played out my other horses by making them drag overloads? And dawdled along the trail while we were half starving for the lack of what you were bringing!"

This was too much for Hugh's equanimity. His face darkened. Before he could reply, Selina came out of the shanty sled. She had thrown on the fur coat, but wore no hat, and her shining, tawny head stuck up above the turned-up fur collar like a little sun there in the dawn before the sun was up. Maccubbin's face when he saw her was a study.

"This is Mr. Maccubbin, Selina," said Hugh. "He came to see what was keeping us."

"How is my mother?" Selina sang out.

"As well as usual, miss," said Maccubbin.

"It is my fault that we were late," said Selina. "I had a terrible time to persuade Hugh to bring me at all."

Maccubbin strove hard to soften his iron face and to make his smile ingratiating. "This is an unexpected pleasure," he said, pulling off his cap. "I hope you will like our country, miss. I will do everything in my power to make you comfortable."

Hugh, a little in the rear of Maccubbin, grinned at this rapid change of front. Selina did not feel like smiling. She scented danger in the smile of this man with the arrogant predatory eyes: eyes which would brook no opposition.

They presently breakfasted in a row alongside the fire, a screen of pine-branches at their backs. It did not require

much perspicacity on Maccubbin's part to see how the land lay between Selina and Hugh. Hugh's outrageous happiness stuck out all over him. Maccubbin's face became as expressionless as a Chinaman's, always a sign that boded trouble at Bear Coulée.

"Hugh," said he, "you're to take sugar, tea, and dried fruit, and push in ahead of us with the team and sled I brought out. You'll be slow breaking trail, so we'll give you a good start. Don't wait for us at any camping-place, but jam right through."

Hugh flushed darkly, and said nothing. Selina's eyes flashed with resentment. She said quickly: "I thought men never travelled alone in this country."

"Oh, he can take back the breed I brought out with me," said Maccubbin carelessly.

XIII.

The Mother

Four months had made a perceptible change for the worse in Old Woman Rambert. Never more than a meagre little body, she was now a mere wisp of humanity, and the latest of the red flannel dresses which had been cut off the same pattern for years and years hung in wrinkles on her wasted frame. As ever, the sparse white hair was screwed into a tight little knot at the back of her head; she looked aged, though she had but just passed her forty-ninth birthday. Her dark eyes looked bigger and brighter than ever; and she still bustled and scolded from morning to night like a sparrow. That was just the habit of years; she was often obliged now to sit down suddenly, pressing a hand to her side.

She was left much more alone than formerly, for the sight of the tragic, gallant figure somehow made the men of Bear Coulée uncomfortable, though they scarcely realized it. Men may be trusted to avoid discomfort whether they realize it or not; so they had fallen into the habit of leaving her shack as soon as they were done eating, and sitting in the store to smoke and talk. The three lads who had gone out to bring in the new teams were now nearly a month overdue. Fifty times a day the Old Woman had peered through the window towards that point where they would appear over the edge of the bench. Two weeks ago Maccubbin had gone out to look for them, and he had not come back either. She made up her mind that some serious accident must have occurred. Or maybe the lads, sick of their life at Bear Coulée, had deserted, all three. Well, she couldn't blame them much for that.

Her heart was sick with deferred hope. For weeks now she had been deprived even of the comfort of her cup of tea, and if they didn't come soon the little settlement would be reduced to living on flour and potatoes alone. But that was no part of her trouble. Neither was she worrying about the fate of Hugh and Lester and Billy. Good lads, but they meant nothing in particular to her. It was her letters, her letters, the precious letters from her darling child, who had been torn from her as an infant, that she sickened for. Those were the crumbs of life on which she eked out her miserable existence.

She had fallen much into the habit of talking to herself. Or rather, it was an imaginary Selina that she addressed, as she bustled about preparing the interminable succession of meals. Sometimes Selina was a child, sometimes a woman. So real did these figments of her imagination become to the Old Woman that she was almost happy until something awaked her from her dream.

"My darling child, you must listen to me. Oh, I know they say old folks never can tell young folks anything, but with you and I it will be different. I have suffered so much and thought so much in my solitary life, it would be too bad, wouldn't it, if you couldn't take some advantage from what I have been through. You and I will be like sisters together instead of mother and daughter, and you will tell me everything. And especially you must let me advise you about getting married. Ah, my dear, young things make such tragic, tragic mistakes when they fall in love!

"Love ought to be abolished, anyway. It only blinds young people. It's the warm-hearted ones that make the worst

mistakes. Marriage ought to be entered into from common-sense motives. Marriage lasts longer than love. So whenever a man asks you to marry him you will tell me all about it, won't you? Of course you will! I expect there will be a lot of them. You mustn't be in a hurry to make up your mind. A girl like you can be choosy. I'll help you pick the right one. No man can deceive your old mother, however handsome his exterior. Most women know next to nothing about men because they see them only under the most artificial conditions. But I have lived among men exclusively for twenty years under the hardest conditions. I know them...!"

This was interrupted by the entrance of Wilkie Beach bringing the Old Woman some things from the store that she had sent for. She received him somewhat thanklessly and hustled him out again. As soon as he had gone, she tried to recall the charming phantom, but the spell was broken, and it would not be evoked. She suddenly sat down at the table, and dropping her head in her arms broke into a soft weeping.

"Oh, you fool!" she whispered, addressing herself this time. "You are alone! alone! alone! To make believe that you are not, only makes the reality harder!"

From force of habit she still went to the window, though she had but little hope. It was with a shock of surprise, therefore, that she did see a team come over the top late that afternoon. But after the first wild leap of her heart, her lip curled bitterly. She saw that it was but one team, and that the sledge was not loaded. This would be Maccubbin coming back empty-handed. Her luck had not changed.

In a few minutes she heard the sledge drive past her door, but so bitter was her heart she would not even go to look. Quarter of an hour later there was a knock on her door and Hugh Bell strode in. The heart almost leaped out of her breast then.

"Hugh!" she screamed. "You're back! Oh, thank God! My letters!"

His face was grey and drawn with fatigue. He staggered to a chair and dropped into it. He had a little canister of tea which slid out of his extended hand across the table.

"What has happened?" she demanded.

"Nothing," he muttered. "Just tired...." And fell asleep with the words on his lips, his head fallen over on his extended arm on the table.

She possessed her soul in patience awhile. Drawing the kettle forward on the stove, she opened the little canister.

A few minutes later she brought a steaming cup to the table, and shook Hugh's arm. Seeing the tea, he mechanically swallowed some of it.

"Has anything gone wrong?" asked the Old Woman.

He shook his head. "The others will be along to-night or to-morrow. I wore myself out digging a way through the snow. The breed gave out on the first day. Drifted bad."

"My letters!" said the Old Woman, as he threatened to relapse into unconsciousness again.

"They're coming with the outfit," he said. "Didn't seem worth while to bring them."

"Worth while....!" she gasped, well-nigh speechless with indignation.

With a mighty effort Hugh cleared his befogged brain. "Pull yourself together, Old Woman," said he, "and get ready for a shock."

"Hugh, for God's sake what has happened?" she gasped. "Quick, man!"

"A shock of joy," he said quickly. "Selina is coming."

She didn't take it in at all. Her eyes were perfectly blank. "Selina coming?" she said. "Coming where?"

"She's with the outfit," said Hugh. "They can't be far behind me. They'll be here to-night maybe, if it don't snow."

The Old Woman slowly put a hand to her cheek. Her eyes were staring. "You've over-exerted yourself," she whispered. "You're touched."

"Not a bit of it!" said Hugh. "I've been travelling with her for weeks past. Nothing touched about that."

"Selina ... coming ... here...?" whispered the Old Woman huskily, all in a maze.

"Pull yourself together, Old Woman," said Hugh. "Listen. While we were waiting at the Landing for the ice-road to make, Lester went to town and got a job there to take some horses East on the railway. In New York he went to see Selina..."

"He had a cheek!" said the Old Woman, perking up, "the likes o' him!"

"They talked," Hugh went on, "and when she heard there was a party of us going in, she made up her mind she'd come too. And she came."

"This is no place for her," said the Old Woman crossly. "And when she gets here how will she get away again?"

"Shan't you be glad to see her?" said Hugh.

The Old Woman suddenly covered her face with her hands. "I'm afraid," she whispered piteously, like a child. "I've dreamed about her so much I'm afraid to see her."

"You needn't be afraid of *her*," sang Hugh. "She's the finest girl in the world, and the kindest and the truest!"

"Well, you don't have to tell *me* that, you fool!" said the Old Woman, pursing up her lips and wagging her head.

Hugh grinned.

Then the Old Woman began to shake. "I cannot bear it!" she whispered. She ran to her chest of drawers. Taking out a hand mirror she looked in eagerly, then averted her face with a groan. "A hag! ... Oh, if only I'd time to make me a new dress even! I had a black silk dress when I came to this country, but it's rotted away to ribbons long ago. And my hair! Hugh, how are women outside doing their hair now? Did you notice?"

"I didn't go all the way outside. It was Lester."

"Oh, it don't matter! I haven't got enough left to do nice!" She closed the drawer on the mirror. "I have let myself go all to pieces," she said despairingly. "All my ways are common and coarse!"

"You're foolish!" said Hugh. "What does she care about your dress or your hair! She's true blue!"

"You talk like a fool!" snapped the Old Woman. "Every girl wants her mother to look ladylike!"

"You're lady enough for me!"

"You wouldn't know a lady if you saw one."

"Well, she asked me a million questions about you," said Hugh, "and she wasn't disappointed with the answers neither."

"She wouldn't let on to a man that she was disappointed. But *I* will know!"

"Her eyes shone whenever we talked about you," said Hugh. "And you should have heard her when we met

Maccubbin in the trail, how she sang out: 'How is my mother?'"

The Old Woman dropped in a chair and began to cry weakly: "How can I bear it? Look at this room! Is this a fit place to receive a lady?"

"If they should come to-night what have you got to give them to eat?" asked Hugh cunningly.

The Old Woman called in her tears while she considered, head turned aside a little, and knuckles pressed to her cheek. "There's plenty of fresh meat," she said; "Sandy went trapping to Old Squaw slough and brought home a caribou." She jumped up and ran to one of her cupboards. "I have a little rice and desiccated egg and milk powder, and a cup of sugar I was saving, I will make her a pudding." She immediately started to work, but only to come to a full stop presently with hanging hands. "This is a dream!" she whispered. "In a minute I'll wake up."

"Two people can't dream together, Old Woman," said Hugh. His head was going down again.

"Stretch out on my bed," she said. "You need the warmth as well as sleep."

About two hours later Hugh was awakened by the delicious aroma of baking meat in his nostrils. He was ravenous. Meagre as were her supplies, the Old Woman presently put such a meal before him as he had not tasted since the last time he had eaten in her cabin. She sat down watching every mouthful he took with tight lips and burning eyes, but never saying a word. When he finally pushed his plate away, she jumped up like a jack-in-the-box with a cry:

"Thank God! I couldn't have stood it another minute! Never saw a man eat so much in my life! Now, tell me! tell me! tell me! There's a thousand things I want to know! Don't you dare to say you want to sleep again! How could you bring a woman over the trail in such weather as we've been having? How did she manage at night?"

Hugh told her all about the shanty sled, describing it proudly in detail, while she listened with her hands in her lap, rapt like a little girl at story-telling time. He gave her a somewhat softened version of the Baldy Red affair.

"I bet Maccubbin was mad when he saw the shanty sled!" she said, with grim amusement.

"Mad!" said Hugh, "he was ready to kill me. But he soon changed his tune when he saw *her*."

"Oh, did he," she said dryly.

"You know we had a whole gang coming in with us," said Hugh. "And every man Jack of them fell in love with Selina, of course. She told me she had a proposal of marriage every day."

"Hum!" said the Old Woman still more dryly. "How did she come to tell you about the other men?"

"Oh, that was later," said Hugh. "I never guessed it at the time."

"Well, sooner or later," said the Old Woman impatiently; "how comes it you and she got so confidential?"

Hugh got red and bashful. "I'm in love with her too," he muttered. "How could I help myself. Wait till you see her—and hear her voice. The photographs tell you nothing. I ... I can't put it into words. She owns me, Old Woman; body and soul!"

"Oh, of course," said the Old Woman indifferently. "But how about her?"

"She loves me back again," said Hugh dreamily. "Strange as it may seem! I can't get over it!"

The Old Woman stood up very suddenly, pressing her knuckles on the table. "Are you in *earnest*?" she demanded to know.

"Dead earnest!"

The old face was twisted in bitterness. "I suppose this happened after you saved her, as you say, from that man."

"Why, yes," said Hugh. "It was the next day."

"Of course! You took advantage of her natural impulse of gratitude to get her to pledge herself!"

"Took advantage of her!" said Hugh, opening his eyes very wide. "How could that be? I locked it up inside me. I never would have said a word, though it killed me, until she told me she loved me."

"You lie!" said the Old Woman. "She wouldn't do such a thing!"

"What does it matter?" said Hugh. "If it's all understood."

"Do you think you're a fit husband for the likes of her?"

"No, of course not."

The Old Woman walked up and down wringing her hands. "Oh, God!" she murmured. Then faced him accusingly again. "You are talking of getting married?"

"Yes."

"Where you going to live?"

"On my land."

"You would not think of pulling up stakes here?"

"No. There is my land, my house, my tools, my stock. I have worked hard for six years to get that together. It is true I am in debt to Maccubbin, but my property is worth many times over the amount of my debt. There is no purchaser for my property, so I must remain here. Where else could I go? I am not cut to the pattern of a city man."

"Anybody could see that," sneered the Old Woman. Pain made her quite reckless. "Oh, God! Oh, God!" she cried. "Must I live to see my darling child condemned to my fate? It is too much! I thought I had drained the cup of bitterness to the dregs without that!"

Hugh scrambled to his feet. "Why, Old Woman ... why, Old Woman..." he said, full of concern. They were all so accustomed to her little tempests, he had not realized at first that she was in deadly earnest.

A storm of words beat around his ears. "You say you love her. You tell me she is beautiful and gentle and nice in all her ways. Well, look at me, look at me! So was I once! Do you want to make her like me?"

"Ah, you've had bad luck," muttered Hugh.

"Will she have any better luck living in a rough shack like yours? Surrounded by rough men like these here? And with nary a woman of her own colour within two hundred miles? She won't even have me long. It's done for me. I'm dying by inches. Oh, God! but death will be bitter if I leave her here! How long will she be able to keep her beauty, her elegance, her nice ways living like this?"

Her words beat him down. He dropped in the chair and buried his face between his hands. "Don't! Don't!" he groaned. "I can't bear it!"

"You mean you won't face it! You've got to face it!"

"For God's sake not to-night, Old Woman! I'm all in!"

"You and I have got to have this out before she comes.... You say you love her. Will your love make up to her for a

life of misery like mine? You're going to marry her. You look forward to having children. Well, what then, my man, eh? Where will you get a doctor and a nurse for her?..."

"Oh, God! stop it!" cried Hugh.

She was relentless. "You said you kept your love to yourself at first. You said you would have died sooner than told her. Why was that? It was because you knew in your heart that it would be like a living death for a woman like that to share your life. Isn't that so? Isn't that so?"

"Yes, God help me!" muttered Hugh.

"Aha!" cried the Old Woman in triumph.

"She said she loved me," muttered Hugh. "Was I to deny her, loving her as I did? What am I to do?"

"Give her up," came the instant reply.

"Never!" muttered Hugh. "So long as she wants me. That's nonsensical."

The Old Woman changed her tone. "You're a good lad, Hugh. Different from the others. You're the only one, of course, that she could have taken a fancy to. You have strength and character and good sense. You are strong, and you must save her from herself. She has just been carried away by admiration of your courage. No doubt all this seems romantic to her—Oh, my God! romantic! You must not take advantage of a passing whim, Hugh. Don't let her ruin her life. She's going to be a great artist!"

"Stop talking or you'll drive me mad!" cried Hugh. "I'm not going to take advantage of her. I love her better than my life. This is my last word. You can take it or leave it. I will give her every chance. I will keep away from her. I promise you I will speak no words of love to her. If she wants to leave me, I will not put out a hand to hold her back. But if she wants me, such as I am, I am hers until death!"

He banged open the door and went stumbling away through the dark towards his own shack.

XIV.

A Long Deferred Meeting

It was about six o'clock when Hugh left the Old Woman, though it had long been dark. Shortly after he had gone, a mysterious sense warned her that it was snowing outside. She ran to the door and peeped out. Yes! it was a windless night, not very cold, and the snow was falling with a heavy persistency that suggested immense reserves. She closed the door, and a little groan of disappointment escaped her. "Ah! they won't come now!" The tears began to roll down her cheeks again. The poor little Old Woman was like a bit of thistle-down this night, blown hither and thither on the storms of emotion. She felt so tired. Oh! so tired! But sleep was quite out of the question.

By-and-by there was a knock on the door, and in response to her irritable "Come in!" (why couldn't they leave her alone to-night?) Hugh strode in again. He had a sort of hang-dog air.

"Old Woman, I'm sorry I was rough," he said bluntly.

She made no reply to it, but her expressive eyes accepted his apology. "You ought to be in bed," she said.

"Can't sleep," said Hugh. "This snow ... I knew you'd be worrying."

"Oh, well, they won't get here, that's all."

"I'm not so sure. If they were within ten miles of home when it started, they'd drive right through. The horses could follow my track. By morning, of course, it'll be filled up."

"Then what would they do?"

"Put the shanty sled ahead and break a fresh track. No danger to an outfit that size. With a couple of tons of food aboard. As soon as it's light, if they're not here, I'll drive out to meet them."

"You'll kill yourself," muttered the Old Woman.

"Oh, I'm tough."

"Well, sit down and light your pipe," said the Old Woman gracelessly.

Hugh knew her intuitively, and was not put off by the irritable wag of her head and pursed-up lips. In reality she was thankful to have him there, he was so big and so quiet. And as for Hugh, he accepted her invitation with a sigh of content. His own cabin was ghastly. They might quarrel all night, but they respected each other, these two. They understood each other's pain. That which divided them, brought them together too.

They instinctively avoided any further reference to Selina. Indeed, they scarcely spoke at all. Hugh sat near the fire smoking and staring unwinkingly at the well-blackened stove, while the Old Woman, sitting near the chest of drawers which had the lamp upon it, knitted a stocking like lightning, ceaselessly twisting and pursing up her lips in that piteous way which may mean so much—or so little.

After a couple of hours of their vigil, Hugh, who had the developed hearing of a wild creature, was aware of a sound from outside, a mere sound disorganized by the falling snow. Not wishing to excite the Old Woman's hopes in vain, he kept a grip on himself, and sat like a carven man listening for more. He heard it again, and he was sure, but he kept still, wishing the Old Woman to have the joy of discovering it for herself.

From quite close to came a shrill, glad hail—Hugh recognized Billy's voice. The Old Woman leaped up like a mad thing, her knitting flying half-way across the room. "Thank God!" she cried; and immediately afterwards, glancing around her insanely: "I wish I could hide!"

A minute later they were driving up outside. Hugh, struggling into his coat, ran out. The Old Woman was not behind him. The shanty sled was there, its yellow window gleaming. Maccubbin was at the door, and Selina jumped out. Billy and Lester came up out of the dark.

There was only time for a swift pressure of hands. "Dearest!" whispered Selina; then louder: "How is my mother?"

"Right as rain!" said Hugh cheerfully.

Selina ran into the shack. Maccubbin seemed disposed to follow, but Hugh's bulk was planted in front of the door. "Let them have quarter of an hour," he said.

Maccubbin grunted. "Drive on," he said.

The three teams moved away towards the stables. As they followed, Billy slipped his arm through Hugh's and pressed it. "Old fellow!" he said affectionately.

"How goes it?" asked Hugh, determinedly cheerful.

"All right. But Golly! I'm tired—and hungry!"

"You're to come back here for your supper as soon as the horses are put up."

Meanwhile Selina, shutting the door behind her, was aware of but one thing in that interior, the tiny, wasted figure in the red flannel dress, all crouched over in a chair beside the stove, her face hidden in her hands. A low cry of compassion was forced from the girl; she flew across the room, and dropping on her knees beside the chair, wreathed the little figure in her arms.

"You darling! ... you darling!" she murmured.

"Aha! ... don't look at me!" whispered the Old Woman, straining away.

"I think you're just sweet! You're just what I wanted you to be!"

With a cry the Old Woman flung her arms fiercely around her child. "Oh, my baby! ... my little baby...!"

Selina arose from her knees, and slipping out of the fur coat threw it over a chair. The Old Woman was looking up at her with eyes full of shy delight.

"What a pretty dress!" she whispered. "I never thought to see anything like that up here."

Selina's eyes travelled curiously around her. A bare, well-scrubbed interior; on one side a long, home-made table mounted on trestles, with cheap "outside" chairs standing about; a chest of drawers between door and window, an iron cook-stove on the third side of the room; and over in the far corner beyond the stove the Old Woman's narrow cot with a bearskin thrown over it. What struck Selina was the beautiful order and cleanliness of the room; a sort of miracle when you considered that six or eight men had to be fed there three times a day.

"Well," said the Old Woman, anxiously following Selina's glance; "you see it all!"

"I'm satisfied," said Selina, with a decisive little nod.

"You only say that to please me."

"I'm not going to argue with you," said Selina affectionately. "You love to be argued with, and it doesn't do any good. You'll just have to find out about me by degrees."

"Yes, and you've already made up your mind to manage me," said the Old Woman. "I can see that."

"Well, why shouldn't I? I'm twice as big as you."

"Oh, what a wonderful, wonderful creature you are!" said the Old Woman. "I can't stop looking at you! How strange that such a one should belong to me!"

It seemed to Selina that her heart would break with compassion at the sight of the big-eyed wasted little woman, so like a little girl. She was near tears herself, and rattled on to save both their faces: "It'll be too bad to see such beautiful illusions fade! Wait till you see me as I am, my dear! You'll want to disown me then!"

The Old Woman paid not the slightest attention. "The last time I saw a white woman was six years ago," she said artlessly, "and she was only a little girl. It was Caviller's daughter; he's the trader at Fort Enterprise down the river. I went out to the Crossing for a trip, and she happened to pass through on her way outside to school. My heart yearned over her, but she never noticed me, of course. A handsome child, but she would never make a woman like you. Ten years before that I had seen her mother. There are several white women down at Fort Enterprise, but that's nearly five hundred miles from here."

"But has no white woman ever been here?" asked Selina, a little aghast. Those few simple sentences of her mother's seemed to sum up her whole life.

"What would there be to bring them?" asked the Old Woman in surprise.

Selina was thoughtful.

"How did you come to embark on such a tremendous journey?" asked the Old Woman.

"Well," said Selina, "I'm self-supporting now, and I didn't need the money you sent me. Then Lester Morrow came to see me...."

"Yes, I know it, damn him!" said the Old Woman, off her guard. She was instantly overcome with horror. "Oh, my darling child, excuse me! I completely forgot..."

Selina laughed aloud. "I often say damn, and I don't apologize for it either!"

"Well, you ought to know better!" said the Old Woman sharply. "Brought up the way you have been!"

Selina flew to embrace her again. "You're a perfect lamb!" she murmured.

"I won't be treated like a child!" objected the Old Woman, struggling in her arms.

There was a clearing of throats and a scraping of feet outside, and the travellers filed in for their supper; Maccubbin, Lester, Billy, and a breed boy whom the trader had brought in from the Crossing to lighten the work of camp. He sat meekly on the floor by the door to await his turn.

"Where is Hugh?" asked Selina quickly,

"He went home," said Billy.

"Oh, go fetch him."

"He wouldn't come," said Billy, in some embarrassment. "Said he'd had his supper."

"He was clean worn out," put in the Old Woman. "Only got in a few hours ago. It was I who sent him home to bed."

"Oh, of course," said Selina quickly. She wasn't going to let anybody see that she was hurt.

They took their places. The Old Woman sat at the head of the table with Selina at her left, her back against the wall. Selina covertly called Billy's attention to the seat next her, and he slid swiftly into it, leaving Maccubbin to sit down across the table. Selina, because she was nervous and unhappy, talked a good deal. The first doubts of this country as a desirable residence had entered into her mind. The poor little mother was an object lesson not to be escaped. The Old Woman was terribly absent-minded now. How they laughed when she poured tea into the sugar-bowl. Everybody hung eagerly on Selina's slightest word. She caught herself wondering what she was talking about, anyway.

In a lull, Maccubbin said to the Old Woman genially: "How are you going to manage to-night? I wish you and Miss Selina would take my house. I can bunk with one of the men."

"I'll be all right here," said Selina, "if Billy will carry in my cot from the shanty sled."

"Well, it must be the last night here," said Maccubbin. "This house isn't big enough for the two of you. You must move into my house bag and baggage. The Old Woman will be able to manage the meals much better in my big room, and the small room will serve as your bedroom. I'll have the storeroom back of the store cleared out for my room."

Selina slyly sought for her mother's foot under the table, and gently stepped on it. But the Old Woman chose not to understand. "That will be fine!" she said at once. "Thanks ever so much."

Selina bit her lip. "It's awfully kind of you," she said, "but really I'd rather stay here—I mean in the house where my mother has always lived."

"Can't be done," said the Old Woman. "Look around you. You must have a room to yourself."

"It is an easier house to keep warm," said Maccubbin smoothly; "being built in a block, so to speak."

Selina's eyes flashed at him. "Why did you not think of keeping my mother warm all these years?" that look meant. But she said nothing. She felt as if the net had been drawn around her a little closer. She had been aware of that net ever since Maccubbin had appeared on the scene.

XV.

The Hand of Maccubbin

There was no doubt about it, that inner room in Maccubbin's house was a great boon to Selina and her mother. It was like their castle where they could talk together secure from observation and interruption. And talk! after the hysterical emotion of the first few moments, the Old Woman's talk ran on all day like a brook. Oh, the joy of having a being of her own sex and blood to talk to! She had twenty years' arrears to make up.

There was a good fireplace in the inner room, and great piles of wood were forthcoming. The breed boy Maccubbin had brought from the Crossing was told off to draw wood and water for the ladies; to scrub and clean up, and help them in all ways. It was wonderful how easy Maccubbin could make things for them. He took the Old Woman aside and said:

"Miss Selina is my guest, you know. While she is here I am going to allow you twenty-five per cent. discount off everything you get out of the store. So you can set the best we have before her. And plenty of it!"

These evidences of consideration only made Selina secretly angry. It all ought to have been done years ago for her mother.

They breakfasted in the Old Woman's shack, then moved over to Maccubbin's. It snowed all night and all day; an unvarying, heavy, dogged, windless fall. At dinner-time Maccubbin said, with the new heartiness of manner which sat a little awkwardly on him:

"Just got here in time! We're bottled-up now for weeks to come. What do we care? Here we are safe at home with plenty of grub and good company. Let it snow!"

Selina smiled a little stiffly. His use of the phrase "bottled-up" was unfortunate. Hugh came to dinner with the others, but avoided Selina's eye, and gave her no opportunity to speak to him. Selina's world was out of joint. Maccubbin occupied this first day after his return in making a sort of tour of his little community. In addition to the persons so often mentioned in this tale, there were six farmers at Bear Coulée, all bachelors, and all partakers of the Old Woman's fare. Four of these men, who eked out their incomes by trapping in the winter, were now away at the fur camps; but Maccubbin found Wilkie Beach making a pair of snow-shoes in front of his fire.

"H'are yeh, Wilkie?" said Maccubbin. "Thought I'd drop in. Don't often have a chance to get a private talk with you."

Wilkie was somewhat astonished but greatly pleased by this unusual condescension. "Sit down! Sit down!" he said heartily.

It would take too much space to give Maccubbin's conversation in full, for he approached the point somewhat circuitously; but this was the gist of it:

"I can scarcely ever let myself go up here, being the boss of everything, so to speak. But with a man like you, a man

my own age, and a sensible feller, it's different. You and I ought to see more of each other, Wilkie. I'm a lonely man."

"Well, you won't find me backward, Maccubbin," said the flattered Wilkie.

"Oh, call me Joe when we're together, Wilkie."

"Sure thing, Joe."

"I've had a pretty good year at the post, Wilkie—well, anyhow, the books show a profit this year instead of a loss as usual. And I sort o' feel that a feller like you ought to participate, see? We're all in this together. I couldn't get along without you to back me up. So I propose to write off a hundred dollars of your debt to me—on one condition."

"What's that, Joe?" asked Wilkie, with a strained eagerness.

"That you keep your mouth shut about it. If it got known, of course, they'd all come whining to me."

"You can depend upon me, Joe!" said Wilkie fervently. "It certainly is decent of you, Joe."

A similar scene took place later, in private, between Maccubbin and Dan Ellum.

Lester Morrow had always been supposed to be a favourite of Maccubbin's. Lester shared a cabin with Sandy Govans, who was away, and when Maccubbin entered, the dark youth was sitting alone in front of the fire doing nothing at all. He, who had always been considered the life of the camp, had turned sulky and silent. His hearty laugh had not been heard since his return.

Maccubbin clapped him heartily on the back. "Lester, I been bothered about you these last few days. You sit and glower like a poplar log that refuses to burn. What's bitin' you, old boy?"

"A-ah!" said Lester, scowling more blackly still.

"I don't want to pry into your private affairs," Maccubbin went on; "I only say this: If any man has wronged you, by God! if it was me I'd make him feel it! You hadn't ought to go sit by yourself and scowl at the fire. That's womanish."

Lester jumped up and began to pace the floor. "It's that damned Hugh Bell! Oh, God! how I hate him!"

Maccubbin's face was as expressionless as a mask. "Well, of course, being the boss of this camp, I can't take sides in any private quarrel. But I can say this: I'm your friend the same as I've always been. You can count on me. If you've got a quarrel with Hugh Bell or any other man, have it out with him; don't let him override you!"

Lester did not care to tell Maccubbin that he had already tried conclusions with Hugh, and had come off second best. So he remained scowling. Maccubbin studied the young man through narrowed eyes. After a good deal of miscellaneous talk, the trader said: "Look ahere, Lester, in order to buck you up, I'm going to make you a proposition that's been in my mind a good while back. I'm a regular slave to my store and my mill. I want somebody to share the responsibility. Well, you're the likeliest prospect. You're young and sharp, and you and me understand each other. What do you say to being partners with me?"

Lester was effectually startled out of the sulks. "Partners!" he cried. "My God! do you mean it?"

"I offer you ten per cent. of the profits of my business to start with," said Maccubbin. "We will start afresh, and your present indebtedness to me will be wiped off. You are to come live in my house, and you get your board free, so you won't be the loser in a bad year. You'll have plenty of time to work your own land, as before. You ought to make quite a good thing out of it.... It will improve your position here," Maccubbin went on slyly. "You'll be second only to me. You can make yourself felt, see? Do you accept?"

"Accept?" cried Lester. "Watch me!"

"You must understand," said Maccubbin, "that I am offering to share income with you, not capital. Should I sell out,

you would not participate. But if you want to put your earnings back into the business I'll let you buy a share."

"I accept gladly," cried Lester.

Maccubbin stood up. "Wait a minute," he said. They faced each other, and Maccubbin's expressionless eyes bored the young man through and through. "It must be further understood that I am to receive complete co-operation from you, understand? You are to back me up in all things.... Maybe you'd better take time to think that over."

Lester's eyes flickered for a moment. The thought flashed through his head: "I have no chance of getting her myself; the best thing I can do is to spike Hugh's chances." Then he and Maccubbin exchanged a glance of complete understanding. "I accept," said Lester.

They shook hands on it

At dinner-time Hugh slipped away as soon as he had done eating. Billy hung about upon the chance of getting a word with Selina. Maccubbin called him into the store.

"Billy, my lad," said he, with that hearty manner in which his cold eyes did not share, "I want to have a talk with you. I've got an interest in you; in fact, we all have, because you're the youngest one amongst us. I've been bothered about you, because I can see with my experience that you can't possibly get ahead the way you're going. You can't earn enough to pay your board, consequently, you're slipping back a little all the time. You'll never get title to your homestead that way. I've been thinking how I could make things a little easier for you. What say to being partners with me, Billy, instead of Hugh? Hugh's a good lad, but he can do nothing for you."

"I—I don't get you," stammered the scared Billy.

"I propose that you come live in my house and get your board free. All I ask is that you help around the store a little. In the spring I agree to let you have the use of a team to work your land and get in your crop. That's fair, isn't it?"

"I ... I'll let you know," stammered Billy, and ran out of the store as if something was after him.

A minute or two later he burst into the cabin that he shared with Hugh. "Hugh! Hugh!" he cried. "What the deuce do you make of this? The Czar"—(so they called Maccubbin among themselves)—"has offered to take me in with him!"

Hugh smiled rather mirthlessly. "So!" he said in the jocular style that they usually affected. "Well, I'm not surprised. In fact, it's quite decent of him. He wants to save you from the horrible fate that he's preparing for me!"

"What do you mean?"

"I reckon he's aiming to break me, or at least to drive me away from here."

"Can he do that?"

"He can't break me," said Hugh quietly. "Nor any man living.... But you've got to admit that he holds pretty much all the cards in the pack. I don't doubt that he can give me a nasty time."

"It's all on account of Selina!" Billy burst out.

"Whisht, kid!" said Hugh quickly. "Men don't drag in a woman's name like that. I've taught you better."

"I'm sorry," muttered Billy.

"Tell me the whole story," said Hugh.

Billy did so.

"Well, are you going to accept?"

"No!" said Billy.

"Now wait a minute. This thing has got to be considered. It's perfectly true that you'll never get ahead the way we are, as long as the board's so high. And the Old Woman can't put down the board because Maccubbin soaks her for everything she gives us. If there's any free board going, I say take it."

"I'm damned if I will!" cried Billy, the tears of indignation threatening. "You're the best friend I've got. You've done everything for me! Do you think I'm going to shake you now when there's a bad time ahead? You hadn't ought to say such a thing! What do you think I am, anyhow? Whatever comes I stick with you, see?"

Hugh flung an arm around the boy's shoulders. "Well, that's all right, old fire-cracker!" he said, more moved than he cared to show. "If you were older I wouldn't let you. But you're young. Even if Maccubbin spoils your chances here, you've got plenty of time to make your way."

While this was going on Maccubbin was walking up and down in front of the counter of his little cluttered store thinking hard. Six paces back and forth, stepping out of the way of the bags of beans in the middle. What with the smallness of the window, the snow outside, and the amount of stuff hanging from the cross-beams, the place was almost dark. Maccubbin kept his head down as if to hide his face from what little light there was. His brain was hatching plots like a manure-pile brings forth maggots.

By-and-by the Old Woman came through the door from the house to get some things that she wanted for supper.

"Ha!" said Maccubbin. "I was just thinking about you. I want to have a talk with you." He went to the door leading out-of-doors and dropped the bar in place.

"Don't want to be interrupted," he said. "It's hard enough to get you by yourself. Sit down." He placed her on a box where the light from the little window fell on her face. He kept his back to it.

"The fact is, I need advice," he went on. "You've got a good head."

"Thanks," said the Old Woman dryly.

"I've never spoken of it to anybody," Maccubbin went on, "but every year for the last five years I've received an offer from the French outfit for my post here. Each year they've raised their figure. I received their latest letter when I went out to the Crossing a few days ago. Forty thousand dollars they offer for land, buildings, and good-will."

"Why are you telling me this?" asked the Old Woman, with wide eyes.

He did not immediately answer her question. "What they are after, of course, is the mill and the wheat," he went on. "The company has corralled all the rest of the wheat grown up here, and the French outfit wants to ensure a supply of cheap flour for *their* posts. Long-headed fellows. As a sort of addenda they offer to pay any settler who may want to sell out fifteen dollars an acre for his land. A fair price. But that offer, of course, is contingent upon my selling the post to them."

The Old Woman began to breathe fast. She saw the prospect of liberty breaking like dawn in the sky. To sell out, to get away from there, to live in a peopled land! She could scarcely speak in her agitation.

"Well ... what are you going to do about it?"

"That's what I want to talk to you about. For four years I've turned down their offers flat. This is my life; I was satisfied with it; I desired nothing more. Then, besides that, my business nets me much more than the ordinary percentage on forty thousand dollars. But now a change has come, and I hesitate. There is something more that I want."

"What is that?"

"Selina."

"Oh, my God!" whispered the Old Woman, and saw all her rosy hopes fading grey again. "More trouble! More trouble! ... What do you want to torment me for? You know what it would mean to me to get away from this place. It is sheer cruelty to dangle it before me.... What have I got to do with it? I can't hand my daughter over to you like a chattel. You've got to win her for yourself."

"Not so loud!" warned Maccubbin. "... Surely, surely!" he went on soothingly. "But without your doing or saying a thing, the mere fact that you are for or against me will make all the difference."

"You're trying to buy me!" said the Old Woman.

"How can you say such a thing?" said Maccubbin, with assumed indignation. "I know better than to try such a thing with you.... Now listen; don't get excited. The matter must be discussed from every angle.... I couldn't ask a girl like Selina to live up here."

The Old Woman was with him there. "Of course not," she said.

"Therefore, if she will have me I'll sell," said Maccubbin. "I've got twice forty thousand invested outside," he went on. "We could live anywhere that she and you wanted, and have every comfort and luxury that money could buy. It would be nice, eh! after these hard years?"

"Stop! Stop!" cried the Old Woman. "You are like the devil on the Mount, and I haven't got the strength of Him who resisted."

"But listen," said Maccubbin. "I know this isn't just the match that you would desire for Selina. I'm over twenty years older than she...."

"Twenty-eight years older," said the Old Woman. "I know your age."

"Well, twenty-eight years," said Maccubbin sourly. "So I'm prepared to make concessions. I don't expect to get an adoring little slave. Selina shall have full liberty. If she wants to continue her career, all right! I'll help her...."

The Old Woman finally broke away from him. "I won't listen to you!" She ran out through the door that communicated with the house, forgetting about the groceries she had come for.

Maccubbin was not at all put about by her seeming repulse. He had not expected to do more than drop a seed in the Old Woman's mind. Her very agitation showed him that it was doing its work. "I bet she doesn't tell Selina what I have said," he told himself. And as a matter of fact she did not.

Maccubbin then sat down to write a letter to the head man of a tribe of Indians in a nearby fur camp. There was an excellent working arrangement between trader and chief, under which, it is to be feared, the ordinary members of the tribe came out rather badly. Maccubbin now besought his friend to lend him four "bad" young men for a week or two. They should have a warm house, Maccubbin said, and all the grub they could eat, and would each be credited with the equivalent of seven beaver skins every week. This letter was despatched by a messenger on snow-shoes when the snow ceased to fall.

Maccubbin was well pleased with his day's work. Things were in good train, he told himself. The devil was working on his side. He was not at all put about when Billy presently came in to tell him with a stammering tongue, but a defiant eye, that he was much obliged to Maccubbin for his offer, but he'd stick by Hugh, thank you.

Maccubbin shrugged. "That's up to you," he said.

Putting on the Screws

It stopped snowing sometime during the second night, and the following morning broke bright and cold. The sun shone with an unbearable brightness on the wide white fields. They said it was now thirty inches deep on the flat.

Between breakfast and dinner the Old Woman and Selina retired into their own room and closed the door. There was a generous fire burning on the hearth, and they gave themselves up to sewing and talking.

"Do you mean to say there is no way of getting away from here until spring?" said Selina. "That's an uncomfortable thought."

"It's a thought I've lived with for twenty winters," said the Old Woman grimly.

"Surely there must be some way."

"Not unless the Chinook wind blows."

"What is that?"

"It's a warm wind that comes over the mountains from the Pacific. Melts the snow, and makes it like spring for a day or two. Then if it comes a sharp freeze, one can make it over the prairie with a team. But we're on the extreme edge of the Chinook belt. We don't get it but once or twice in a season, and sometimes not at all."

"There's something I've been wanting to ask you," said Selina. "Lester suggested to me that your health wasn't good."

"All da—all nonsense!" said the Old Woman sharply. "There's nothing the matter with me but old age, hard work, and boredom."

"Boredom?"

"Well, you must have seen by now that I'm not exactly in love with this place."

"Yet you hid it from me all these years!"

"Wasn't any use whining when I couldn't help myself."

By-and-by the Old Woman succeeded in bringing the talk around to a subject that was more to her mind. "Have you ever thought of getting married, my child?"

"In a general way," said Selina guardedly. Her intuition warned her that the moment was not propitious for any confidences about Hugh. "It needs a lot of thinking about," said the Old Woman. "How foolish a girl is for throwing herself away blindly on a poor man, trusting to the ravens to feed her like Elijah—or was it Elisha? I never can remember which was which."

Selina's heart sunk. "But there is love," she murmured.

"Pooh! Love will butter no parsnips!" said the Old Woman. "That's such a foolish argument! Is a man any the worse lover because he can take care of you and keep you in comfort?"

"No," said Selina softly. "But sometimes your heart inclines you towards a poor man... Yours did."

The Old Woman chose to ignore the last two words. "Then you need a good talking to!" she said. "Love indeed! Love's all very well in books! A girl must look at the practical things of life. There is nothing so terrible as poverty. Look at the life I've led for twenty years. Poverty ties you hand and foot, and ages you before your time, and embitters you; poverty poisons the very springs of life!"

There were many things that Selina could have said, but she remained silent.

"Now a girl who marries a man older than herself does a wise thing," said the Old Woman, without the least shame. Yes, the seed dropped by Maccubbin had taken root, and had produced a rank plant which filled the Old Woman's mind to the exclusion of everything else. "A settled man, a steady man, there is security for a girl," she went on. "Do you mean to tell me that a comfortable house with every convenience has no weight with you; nor a good balance at your bankers? That means a proper provision for your children if you have any, and a fair start for them."

All Selina answered, very low, was: "My father was young."

"That's quite another matter!" said the Old Woman loftily. "Your father was a very exceptional man."

Selina smiled sadly, and said nothing. It was hopeless to try to argue with the Old Woman. She was perfectly unscrupulous in argument; would twist anything about to make her point. She was as wrong-headed as she was warm-hearted. Ah, but what she had suffered, Selina thought, excused everything.

The discussion soon petered out because Selina would not try to keep her end up. The Old Woman made believe that she had prevailed over her daughter, but she was a little uneasy at Selina's determined silence. Neither Maccubbin nor Hugh had been mentioned.

When it came time for the Old Woman to busy herself about the dinner, Selina put on fur coat, cap, and snow-shoes and sallied out of doors; "for exercise," she told her mother. With an anxious eye the Old Woman observed that she turned to the right at the door; that is, in the direction of Hugh's cabin.

And, of course, that was where she was bound. Imprudent, perhaps, knowing that more than one eye was following her; but she could not help herself. Her heart had gone down into her boots. She must have support, she felt, or she would sink altogether. And where was she to look for support but from Hugh?

Billy saw her coming and ran out.

"Where is Hugh?" she asked.

"Cutting logs in the spruce grove," he said, pointing to a black mass against the snow that peeped out from a fold in the hills, quarter of a mile down-stream. "As soon as we can haul them up here, we're going to build a little stable. All the horses have always been kept in Maccubbin's big stable you know, and Hugh thinks we ought to take care of our own now. We've got a rick of hay to feed them."

"Come along down there with me," said Selina.

Billy shook his head, grinning. "Well, I'll come a little way," he said.

Hugh saw her enter the edge of the woods alone, and had time to brace himself for the encounter. He was not one to picture to himself what he was going to do. He had made up his mind, and the matter was settled. Meanwhile she made an adorable picture. She had had a bit of practice along the trail, and handled the snow-shoes featly, bringing each shoe over the other in the correct fashion.

"Hello!" she said, smiling.

"Hello!" he returned, smiling back, but with a smile that hurt her. It had the shape of a smile, that was all. There was a world of feeling in his eyes, but his features were perfectly expressionless.

Selina waited for him to come close to her, but he remained leaning on his axe. With a sore heart and a very off-hand air, she perched herself on the stump of a tree that he had already cut down.

She waited for some sort of explanation. None was forthcoming, and she finally said directly:

"What has happened since you left me that morning at the Crossing?"

"I've been thinking things over," said Hugh.

"Oh," she said, chilled. But she was determined to drag things out into the open now. "And have you decided to give me up?" she asked, with a scornful smile.

"No," said Hugh, quite unsmiling; "but I think you ought to give me up."

"Indeed!" she said sarcastically. "Why?"

"Need you ask?" he said. "I am tied to this place hand and foot. Well, you could not live here."

"I said I was willing to chance it."

"You did not know what it was then. You have seen, now."

"And if I were still willing to chance it?"

Hugh hesitated before replying. He spoke in a curiously measured way. God knows what the words cost him. "I think ... I ought not to allow you to do it ... even if you were willing."

"Who put that idea into your head?" cried Selina bitterly. The worst of it was that common-sense told her he was right. But who wants to listen to common-sense at such a moment?

"It was there all the time," said Hugh.

"Then who *reminded* you of it?" she acutely demanded.

Hugh was silent.

She cast over the possibilities in her mind. Not Maccubbin; Hugh would never have discussed her with him; not Billy; not Lester—it could be but one person. "My mother!" cried Selina.

Continued silence from Hugh.

"You told her ... about us?"

"She had to be told some time."

"But don't you see, her hatred of this country is a sort of monomania with her."

"Yes," said Hugh, "but it's justified ... in a white woman."

"What did she say to you? I have a right to know."

"Just what she says to everyone. You have heard it all by now."

"Did you make her any sort of a promise?" Selina demanded.

"The Old Woman doesn't come into this," said Hugh. "I made up my mind what I had to do."

"What an extraordinary way for a man to talk to a girl!" said Selina, with curling lips. "I suppose you feel very proud of your self-sacrifice and all that."

"No," said Hugh.

Selina was near tears now. "I could understand it if you showed the least human feeling in the matter. But to stand there like a graven image and coldly tell me ... and coldly tell me..."

Hugh looked at her with an unfathomable reproach in his eyes, but his face was perfectly composed. "I am not cold," he said in low tones.

Selina turned away from him in order to regain her self-control. She was dabbing at her eyes with a foolish little handkerchief. When her back was turned the man's face showed the inexpressible longing that filled him. When Selina turned around he lowered his eyes.

"I suppose you know there's likely to be another match proposed for me," she said, more composedly.

He nodded.

"Do you think I ought to take him?"

"Why do you torment me?" he muttered.

"Oh, you appear to be well able to stand it," she flashed back. "I asked you a question."

"It's not for me to say."

"If I married him I'd have to live on here just the same."

"Does the Old Woman urge it on you?"

"Yes. But no names were mentioned."

"Then Maccubbin has promised her that if he gets you he will sell out here and go outside. Nothing else would win the Old Woman to his side."

There was a sharp bitterness in Hugh's voice saying this that somewhat reassured Selina. She said more tenderly: "Answer me one plain question, Hugh. Do you love me? Or was that all lies on the trail?"

"It was not a lie," said Hugh quietly.

That was not the way she wanted him to say it. "'It was not a lie,'" she mimicked, with curling lips. "You're not a man, but a stick of wood!" She turned and ran as fast as the snowshoes would permit.

Hugh's eyes blazed up. He followed two steps, then pulled himself in. The light died out of his face. He perceived the foolish little handkerchief lying on the snow. Snatching it up, with a curiously guilty look around him, he thrust it inside his shirt.

Selina ran away with the hot tears falling fast. They were tears of anger rather than grief; anger because she could not break down the man's resistance. In the bottom of her heart she knew that he loved her as well as ever.

The four young bucks came in from the fur camp, and were quartered by Maccubbin in the Old Woman's shack, now untenanted. As far as anybody could see, nothing was required of them but to stuff themselves with food and lie around a nice warm house all day. This suited them very well, but the whites wondered what they had been brought in for. However, Maccubbin's face discouraged any questioning on the subject.

Sandy Govans and the other three white men belonging to Bear Coulée, hearing of the arrivals, had paid a visit home to get a fresh supply of grub and a look at Selina. Maccubbin had seized the occasion to take each one apart and make the little proposal that was designed to weld each man to his interest. Hugh's name was never mentioned in these interviews; nevertheless, every man perfectly understood the situation. Consequently, when Hugh ventured out nowadays it was to be met everywhere with hard looks, a thing subtly calculated to break a man's morale. However, Hugh, suspecting the cause of it, hardened his own face and kept on about his business.

Maccubbin felt his hands much strengthened by having the Indians at hand. These simple fellows looked upon the trader as the Lord of life and death. Was not the entire visible supply of grub and ammunition in his hands? They could conceive of no higher authority; consequently, they could be depended on to carry out any orders he might issue.

But Maccubbin was far from easy in his mind. With Selina and the Old Woman he was all courtesy and affability; outside of their presence he went about with a cloud on his brow and his gaze turned inward. Everything was in his hands, yet he was terrified of making a wrong move. The dark, self-controlled, middle-aged man had been swept off his feet by a belated passion. He was like a raging furnace inside, a thing which does not help a man's judgment. Maccubbin distrusted his own judgment, and vacillated from day to day. Selina was the unknown quantity. Should he speak to her at once, or should he get Hugh out of the way first? Yet he was afraid of proceeding openly against Hugh, for fear of arousing the girl to some reckless gesture.

At the end of the fourth day he happened to come upon Selina alone in the principal room, and he let the opportunity decide for him. He begged her to sit down in front of the fire for a moment, and straightway, not without a certain manly directness, laid himself and all he possessed at her feet.

Selina was no less direct in answering him. "I am sorry," she said; "I cannot marry you."

"Why?"

"Because I do not love you."

"I will take my chance of that coming later," said Maccubbin. "I will do my best to earn it. I offer you very solid advantages and full freedom to live your own life. Then there's your mother to be considered. What a boon it would be to her to pass her remaining years in comfort, yes, in luxury."

"You may be willing to take me without love," said Selina, "but I am not willing to marry without love."

"Then there is no hope for me?"

"None."

"Is it because of some previous attachment...?"

"I do not admit your right to ask me any such question," said Selina, with her chin up.

"I beg your pardon," said Maccubbin. He left her with a very creditable bow, and went into the store, but the man was blind and raging inside. An absolute reign of twenty years had not prepared him for being refused like this. Incapable of considering what he was about, he instantly prepared to put his measures into effect against Hugh.

Wrapping himself up he trudged away through the snow towards Hugh's shack. It was five o'clock, and completely dark, of course. As he went he bitterly reflected that he had made a tactical error in respect to Hugh's horses. The stable had been finished that day—merely the roughest of shelters, banked and covered with snow for warmth, and Hugh had taken his horses. He should not have been allowed to take them.

Hugh and Billy were tidying themselves for supper at the Old Woman's when Maccubbin strode into their shack. With half a glance Hugh saw that there was serious trouble afoot.

"Sit down," he said.

Maccubbin made a great effort to appear businesslike. "I want to talk business with you," he said to Hugh. "The boy had better go up to the house."

"Aw, let me stay, Hugh!" said Billy involuntarily.

Hugh reflected that it would be just as well to have a witness on his side to that interview. "Billy knows all about

my affairs," he said. "He can remain here."

"I've been going over my books," said Maccubbin. "I find you owe me over six hundred dollars."

"Well, we both knew that before," said Hugh quietly.

"It's too much," said Maccubbin. "It's more than any other man in the post owes me."

"That's because I haven't finished paying off for my team," said Hugh. "I'll pay you a good bit out of next year's crop. And if we're frozen out, I'll freight for wages and pay you that way."

"I can't wait till next year," said Maccubbin. "I must ask you to pay me at once, or at least to reduce the amount materially."

"Right now this minute?" asked Hugh, with a hard smile.

"You heard what I said," said Maccubbin, raising his voice.

"Yes, I heard you," said Hugh, "and it's plumb foolishness. Why don't you say right out what's in your mind. You know perfectly well that I have no way here of paying you?"

"Then you can turn the team over to me."

"I'm damned if I will," said Hugh coolly. "The team is worth a thousand dollars as it stands. Besides, it's my livelihood."

"Then I'll take one horse in part payment of your debt."

"Foolishness! Foolishness!" said Hugh, wagging his hand as one might to a troublesome shrew. "You know that one horse is worse than nothing in this country."

"Then you refuse to pay me what you owe me?"

"I'm a patient man, Maccubbin," said Hugh scornfully, "but this ceases to be funny. For God's sake come to the point!"

"You can't expect me to give you any further credit," said Maccubbin.

"So that's it," said Hugh quietly. "You mean...?"

"I don't see my way clear to crediting the Old Woman any longer for your board."

"So! What do you expect me to do then? Sit here and starve? You know I can't take horses out through thirty inches of snow."

"Walk out on snow-shoes," said Maccubbin, with a hateful smile. "It's been done. I'll present you with enough grub for that as a gift."

"And leave my horses with you?" said Hugh. "You be damned!"

"Oh, well, it's nothing to me what you do," said Maccubbin, turning as if to go.

"Wait a minute, Maccubbin," said Hugh in that dangerous quiet voice. "Give me leave to call you a damned scoundrel! All this talk about your debt is just lawyer's jargon. You know the unwritten agreement that holds between white men in this country. You can't starve men at your pleasure just because you've got a store! You're a scoundrel, and I'm going to knock you down!"

Maccubbin began to edge towards the door. "That's no kind of talk," he blustered.

"Turn around!" cried Hugh, "and defend yourself!"

Maccubbin made a spring for the door. As he got it open Hugh reached him, and with a tremendous kick upon his hindermost part sent him flying through. Maccubbin grunted and fell upon hands and knees in the snow. He scrambled away into the darkness. Hugh shut the door.

"Oh, Hugh, that was lovely!" cried Billy, wild with excitement. "Oh, Hugh, I wouldn't have missed that for a farm! Golly! you lifted him clear off the floor on your toe! Wow!"

But Hugh's anger had evaporated like mist. "I was a fool!" he muttered gloomily. "But he made me see red.... He'll have a charge of assault to lay against me now. What chance has a man against these lawyer sharks?"

"What are you going to do?" asked Billy.

"I'm going to stick it out!" said Hugh, raising his head. "I've got my seed wheat here in the house. That'll feed me. And my gun and my snares to bring me meat. I'll get along."

"That's the right idea!" cried Billy.

"You run up to the house and get your supper," said Hugh.

"Aw, Hugh!" said Billy, with falling face. He flung an arm around his partner's shoulder in his eagerness. "Let me stick it out with you, old feller! Let me feel that I'm doing something too. Two fellows can make out together a heap better than one!"

"A growing boy needs proper food," muttered Hugh.

"Aw, Maccubbin's grub would choke me now!"

"Boiled wheat porridge is pretty poor chow, old man."

"What do I care? I'll fix up some kind of rig to grind the wheat."

"We've got no yeast-powder."

"I'll get some from the Old Woman."

"No charity!" said Hugh, scowling.

"I'll trade her a lynx-skin."

Hugh relented. "Well, come on, let's put on the porridge-pot," he said. That was all.

XVII.

Increasing Pressure

When Maccubbin returned to his own house his face showed its usual cold, hard mask. When he entered the general room for supper he bestirred himself as ever to be courteous and affable to the Old Woman and Selina. There was nothing to suggest the scene that had just taken place in Hugh's cabin. The trader had wonderful self-control, and only a

very close observer might have noticed that the usually steady hand trembled a little with rage.

The meal began. From time to time the Old Woman glanced angrily towards the empty places of Hugh and Billy. Like all good cooks she took it as a personal affront when her boarders were late for meals. Finally she burst out:

"What's the matter with Hugh and Billy? There's no reason why they shouldn't be on time. At this season they've got nothing to do but eat!"

Maccubbin affected to start suddenly. "I'm sorry, Old Woman," he said. "I should have told you before but it slipped my mind. Hugh sent me word that he and Billy weren't coming here any more for their meals. They're going to cater for themselves. Your board is too high, they said."

"Cater for themselves?" said the Old Woman, surprised.

"Oh, I suppose they'll get what they want from the store."

The Old Woman shrugged them away, not at all ill-pleased to get rid of Hugh. Selina lowered her eyes to her plate, but her face could be seen to harden.

Now Maccubbin knew, of course, that his lie would eventually be found out, but seeing Selina's face, he hoped to gain more by uttering the lie than he would lose when the truth was revealed. It is a favourite trick of the reckless gamester. Maccubbin hoped to gain his ends before the lies were brought home to him. After that he didn't care.

Next day in their own room the endless discussion went on between Selina and her mother. The Old Woman might look as if a breath would blow her away, but it was the strong and young Selina who felt as if she was being worn down to exhaustion. They had come to the point now when names were openly mentioned.

"Has Maccubbin spoken?" asked the Old Woman mysteriously.

"If you mean has he asked me to marry him, yes," said Selina.

"And what did you say?" asked the Old Woman, breathlessly eager.

"I said 'No.'"

"Finally?"

"I made it just as definite and final as I could."

"Oh, you did wrong! you did wrong!" said the Old Woman, wringing her hands. "Nobody wants to rush you into anything. But it's your duty, at least, to take thought of what you are doing. Is all that I have been through lost on you? Does my advice mean nothing to you?"

"In this matter I must be allowed to decide for myself," said Selina doggedly.

"Certainly. But you don't have to be pig-headed about it. You don't have to go off at half-cock. Do you consider that you are capable at present of forming a reasonable decision?"

"I don't know," said Selina wearily. "But I know what I can do, and what I can't do."

"You're out of your senses and you don't know it!" cried the Old Woman in her violent way. "Your head is turned by this broad-shouldered young wood-chopper. A ploughman, that's what he is! What good will his handsome face and his strong arms do you? This is an age of brains!"

"Oh, you needn't worry about that any longer," said Selina. "Everything is over between Hugh and me. He is not

what I thought he was."

"Eh?" said the Old Woman, glancing at her sharply to see if she could believe this. "Eh, girl....?"

"I don't want to marry any man. I just want to be let alone to do my work."

"H'm!" said the Old Woman, and fell silent for a bit.

She soon returned to the charge. "That's all very fine, but how are you going to get back to your work? Here we are, the two of us, prisoners of the snow...."

"And of Maccubbin," added Selina quietly.

"Yes! Prisoners of Maccubbin! What are you going to do about it?"

"Surely you wouldn't want me to marry him for any such reason as that?"

"Oh, you make me mad!" cried the Old Woman. "I lay hard facts before you, and you answer me with fine sentiments!"

Selina was no tame woman. "Well, that seems to me like a pretty hard fact," she retorted, with spirit. "Marrying a man I dislike for the sake of my bread and butter."

"I know of no better reason!" cried the Old Woman, all the more violently, because her heart secretly misgave her. "In my mind a lifetime of security outweighs a year of happiness and the rest misery. Mutual respect wears better than love's young dream."

"I agree," said Selina. "Unfortunately, I couldn't respect Maccubbin."

"Why not?"

"Can you ask?" said Selina, with a look of surprise. "Look at the way he has treated you all these years."

"That's nothing against him," said the Old Woman, determinedly wrong-headed. "He had the advantage over me, and he used it. Any man would do the same."

"Then I'll live single," said Selina.

"Don't exasperate me with such cheap, smart answers! That doesn't settle anything."

"Well, quite apart from the way he treated you," Selina went on, "the instant I laid eyes on him my intuition warned me that he was a bad man, a bad-hearted man."

"Intuition fiddlesticks! A rivalry sprang up between him and Hugh, and you took Hugh's part. That's all that means."

"No! I will not deafen myself to my intuition. It's my best guide. You can talk all around me, and talk me down, I don't know what is going on, but my intuition tells me that at this very moment Maccubbin is busy with some devilish plot."

"I don't doubt it," said the Old Woman coolly. "He is mad about you, and will stop at nothing in order to get you. Most women would be flattered. That shows the man's strength."

"Yes," said Selina, "but how does the wife of such a strong man generally come out?"

"You talk like a fool!" said the Old Woman. "He's in love with you. He's the sort of man that shows one face to the world and one to the woman he loves. He would do anything for you. You could twist him round your little finger."

"Thanks," said Selina. "The prospect does not appeal to me."

The quarrels between those who love are very bitter. "Don't talk to me like that!" cried the Old Woman passionately. "I told you not to give me those cheap, sarcastic answers! I am only working with you to save you! Have I so much as mentioned myself. You're an ungrateful girl...."

"Oh, mother, please, *please!*" murmured Selina.

It angered the Old Woman still more because it put her in the wrong. "You are an ungrateful girl!" she repeated louder. "You ... you ..." The overtaxed body rebelled at last. Her speech trailed off; she sank down in a little heap on the floor—such a piteously little heap!

Selina ran to her with a cry of remorse and compassion, and gathered her up in her arms, and laid her on one of the cots. The girl was terrified half out of her wits by the strange greyish, yellowish tinge that had crept into the Old Woman's face. She ran to the door with the idea of fetching help, only to remember before she got there with a dreadful sinking of the heart that there was no help to be had. Of what use would one of the rough men be?

She returned to her mother and unfastened her clothes and chafed her hands, did whatever suggested itself to her distracted wits. She remembered having read somewhere that a pungent odour of any sort was useful in bringing a person out of a swoon. She had no smelling salts. Partly supporting the Old Woman on one arm, she held a smouldering rag near her nostrils. She was finally rewarded by seeing her mother's lips part and her eyelids flutter. A slightly better colour returned to her face..

Before she had well recovered her senses she began to talk: "What happened? Everything went black... I smell something burning ... Oh, Selina! you're there, thank God!"

"Oh, my dearest! my dearest! my dearest!" whispered Selina, the tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Now I remember!" the Old Woman chattered on. "You were so unreasonable..."

"Oh, hush!" said Selina in a panic. "There must be no more of that!" Selina was ready at that moment to promise to marry Maccubbin a dozen times over.

Selina perceived that her mother was pressing one hand hard against her side, and a new fear attacked her. "What is the matter?" she asked.

The Old Woman was too much unnerved to make any further pretences. "Pain," she whispered. "It's bad.... It's always there."

Selina asked her a few questions. The answers confirmed her fears. "This is serious!" she said, with a constricted breast.

"I suppose so," said the Old Woman wearily. "Something growing there."

"Oh, Heaven! what will I do?" murmured Selina. "You must have medical advice at once ... at once."

"Oh, after all this time a week or two isn't going to make any difference," said the Old Woman, with a twisted smile. "I doubt if any amount of doctors could do anything for me."

As soon as she had made her mother comfortable, Selina went into the store in search of Maccubbin. She found him behind the counter pulling at his cheek and staring with fixed eyes through the little window. Hearing her his eyes leaped upon her face and fastened there as they always did. Selina told him what had happened.

"I'm afraid there's something seriously wrong," she faltered.

"It wouldn't surprise me," said Maccubbin, with a heavy air of condolence, and his eyes boring through her. "The

Old Woman has been failing fast lately."

"Why didn't you send her out to me when the young men went?" said Selina.

"I hadn't noticed anything then," he answered glibly.

"I must get medical advice for her somehow ... somehow," said Selina desperately.

"But, my dear young lady," he protested; "we can't move out of here, nor get anybody in while there's thirty inches of snow lying on the prairie."

"Something *must* be done!" said Selina, half hysterically.

"It's an impossibility—unless the Chinook wind blows."

"If the Chinook wind comes, will you let me take her out immediately?" said Selina imploringly.

What he said was: "I'll do everything in my power!" But Selina was aware of the evasive note in his voice—and he intended that she should be aware of it. She hastened back to her mother. "What shall I do? What shall I do?" she asked herself in terror.

The Old Woman, sitting up on the cot, immediately opened up on her. "I hope you're going to be more reasonable now...."

"Oh, my dearest, you must not, you must not!" begged Selina. "That matter must rest for a little while. First we must get you quite well again. Maccubbin has as good as promised that he'll let me start out with you as soon as the Chinook wind blows."

"Huh! 'As good as,'" she said sceptically. "And do you think Maccubbin is not going to exact his price for that?"

Despair entered Selina's heart.

XVIII.

The Chinook

Days of harrowing anxiety followed for Selina. Every morning she leaped out of bed in the bitter cold and ran to look out of the window. There was no change. It did not snow again; the weather remained bright and exceedingly cold. Every night the great silence enfolded them. Before she went to bed when Selina went to the door for a last look at the sky, there in the unfathomable depths hung the millions of stars in their inhuman beauty. They were shining just the same over the happy peopled lands, Selina thought with a catch at her breast; they didn't care.

Every day and all day she had her sick mother to contend with. The Old Woman had no mercy on her; nor was she above using her condition as a further club over Selina. Selina was obliged to seem to agree with her; to let it appear that she was gradually coming around to the Old Woman's views in regard to Maccubbin. Selina knew that in doing so she was only drawing the net more tightly around herself; only making it harder to break out in the end; but it was the only way in which she could keep the Old Woman even reasonably quiet. "How can I act any differently?" she asked herself despairingly.

She was very bitter now when she thought of Hugh. Here she was in as desperate a situation, surely, as ever a girl had got into; yet the man who said he loved her still held aloof, content, it seemed, to let her sink or swim without raising

a finger.

And then at last one afternoon, while the sky was still blue low down on the western horizon, a lovely arch of cloud formed across the zenith, like a fillet binding the brow of Heaven. Every soul in Bear Coulée except Selina knew what that portended, but as it happened nobody told her. Later, after it had become dark and they were expecting the men for supper, she gradually became aware of a sound around the house. It came into being so slowly that it was quite loud before she realized it was there at all. A strange sound in that frost-bound land; the sound of dripping.

"What is that?" she asked, wide-eyed.

"The snow is melting," said the Old Woman impassively. "It is the Chinook."

Selina flew to the door wild with excitement. When she threw it open a mild air puffed in her face like a breath of spring. It was miraculous. "Oh, thank God!" she cried.

The Old Woman overhearing twisted her lips painfully. "We are just where we were before," she murmured.

The men began to come in excitedly discussing the change in the weather. Selina, quite carried out of herself, openly signalled to Maccubbin that she wished to speak with him alone, and led the way into the store. It was dark in there, and he followed her in, breathing audibly, reaching for her. Selina evaded him, and striking a match lit the lamp. His narrowed eyes fastened greedily on her face; otherwise his face showed the usual mask.

"The Chinook!" she said breathlessly. "Can we start to-morrow?" Her excitement lent her an unearthly beauty. Maccubbin's eyes were burning.

"Not to-morrow," he said, carefully schooling his voice. "You must give the snow a chance to melt."

"Well, then, the day after, or the day after that?"

"How can I tell? Sometimes the Chinook blows itself out in a few hours without doing any good. Even if it lasts a couple of days it's customary to wait for the freeze-up which comes after and then make a dash for it."

"All right," said Selina. "Will you let us? Will you let us?"

"How can I answer right off the bat?"

"Oh, you've had plenty of time to make up your mind!" she groaned.

"There's a whole lot to be considered. How could you take your mother out in the state she's in?"

"In the shanty sled, of course."

"But if I gave you a team to take you all the way out, I couldn't get it in again. I'd lose it."

"Oh, give me a plain answer!" implored Selina. "You've thought all this out."

"I can't do it until I see how the weather's going to turn out," he said, in a reasonable-sounding voice.

In his burning eyes, of course, she read the terms on which she might obtain the shanty sled and the team and everything else she required. She seemed to feel an emanation of the man's powerful will that turned her half faint. Something dragged at the easy words that would mean release from all her pain—but she would not speak them yet. She returned to the general room half distracted inside, and wearing the fixed smile that women put on to conceal their agony.

She passed a frightful twenty-four hours. Next day even the Old Woman was scared by her expression into leaving her alone. All day without a moment's respite the contest went on in the girl's breast: "Shall I? Shall I? Shall I? It would all be over in a minute. I can't stand this. I must do it. There's no other way out.... Oh! but how can I? How *can* I?..."

The Chinook held all day. The little stream that meandered through the bottom of the coulee began to run black between its snowy banks.

Just before supper, as upon the day before, she again faced Maccubbin in the store. All she could get out of him was:

"Wait until to-morrow night."

The man's eyes showed more confidence to-night. They seemed to say to her: "You know you've got to give in to me." And Selina shivered in her soul.

On this day something happened of which Selina did not hear until later. Hugh and Billy, returning to their cabin after having made a round of their traps and snares, found that the horses had been taken out of their rude stable. Their tracks led the two partners direct to Maccubbin's big stable. The big door of the stable stood open, and just within lolled Maccubbin and four Indians, each man with a Winchester over his arm.

"Where are my horses?" asked Hugh.

Maccubbin jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "I seized them in satisfaction of my debt," he said. "If you make any trouble you'll get the top of your head blown off."

"All right, Maccubbin," said Hugh quietly. "You'll pay for this some day."

The boy, wild with rage, began to shout offensive epithets at Maccubbin. Hugh took him by the arm and walked him away.

"Shut up!" said Hugh. "It's womanish to take it out in yelling."

"I can't help it!" said the boy. "The damned skunk!"

The muscles on the sides of Hugh's jaw stuck out. "He's got the bulge on us," he said curtly. "When that happens a man's got to keep his mouth shut until *his* turn comes."

They returned to their shack. For a long time Hugh paced up and down the floor, while Billy brooded over the fire.

Billy could not always refrain from speech. "What gets me," he said, "is why should he do it now? It will only cost him that much more horse feed."

"The Chinook," said Hugh. "He thought maybe we'd make a break for it with the team."

"But he wants to get rid of us!"

"He thought we might try to take a couple of passengers."

"Oh, now I see," said Billy.

After a while Billy said thoughtfully: "We might set fire to the stable."

"Sure," said Hugh sarcastically. "And roast the horses."

"Well, we could prow1 around the stable at night and pick off those damned redskins."

"Nothing would please Maccubbin better," said Hugh. "He could then ship us out to the police roped up."

"Well, what are you going to do?" cried Billy.

"Nothing. I couldn't take out ... any passengers against such odds—Maccubbin's got a whole tribe of redskins to

draw on. Therefore the horses are of no use to me at the moment. Let him feed them. We've got to play a waiting game."

"You've got more patience than I have," said Billy bitterly. "It don't seem human!"

Hugh whirled on him. "Well, what do you propose?" he said. "I'm open to suggestions."

Billy could only shake his head helplessly.

"Exactly!" said Hugh, showing his clenched teeth as if in pain. He struck his fist violently into his palm. "Oh, God! he's got us *boxed!*" he groaned.

At the end of seventy-two hours the wind changed and the temperature fell rapidly. By this time brown spots had actually begun to appear on the most exposed knobs of the hills. For the third time Selina faced Maccubbin in the store. They had just risen from the supper-table.

"Well, are we going to start to-morrow?" asked Selina recklessly.

His eyes brooded on her full of a sombre fire. "That rests with you," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, I reckon you know what I mean."

"But you must put it into words so I will know exactly where I stand."

"Well, you and the Old Woman may start out to-morrow—if I go too. And if I stay with you."

A soft groan broke from Selina. She spoke almost as if it was an evil that threatened somebody else. "Oh! What good could ever come of such a marriage!"

"I'll chance that," said Maccubbin. "Anyhow, you can't tell from the beginning how a marriage is going to end. I guess our marriage will stand as good a chance as most."

Selina shook her head. "No," she said softly, "not if you force me into it." She still spoke in a detached way as if it was somebody else's affair. "I wish I could find the right words. If I could only talk to you like a man. You can't do such a wicked thing and get away without paying."

Maccubbin's mask began to break up and the long-concealed fires in the man showed out. "All right! Wicked. I'm not afraid of the word." He made a violent gesture with his hand. "None of those words mean anything to me now. You are the only thing that matters to me. I have sworn to have you. Nothing shall come between me and my aim. Do you want a tame man? What more can a man do for you than burn for you as I burn? I guess that's as good a feeling to start a marriage with as any."

Selina looked at him as from a distance. "I'm sorry for you if you expect to get any happiness out of it," she said. "This fire will burn us both up."

"All right," he said roughly. "I shan't holler when I'm singeing."

There was a silence between them.

"Well, what do you say?" he demanded, madly eager.

"I'd sooner die," whispered Selina.

"Oh, if that's the way you feel, my lady..." he said with a snarl.

Selina raised her head. "I didn't say I wouldn't do it," she said apathetically. "I said I'd rather die than do it... I've got to get my mother out somehow."

"All right," said Maccubbin. "You'll marry me to-night...."

"To-night!" gasped Selina. "There's nobody..."

"Nobody to marry us, eh? ... We'll make a contract of marriage to-night. When we get outside the first parson we meet can mumble over us if you want. I don't care anything about that. But I mean to make sure of you before we start."

"Always businesslike," murmured Selina, with a sneer.

"You bet!" he said roughly. "This is the most important piece of business I ever undertook, and I don't mean to have any slip-up. You come to me to-night. Once I'm sure of you, you'll have no cause to complain of me as a husband."

Selina's head went down. She was silent again.

"Well, how about it?" he demanded.

"I can't get the words out," whispered Selina. "It is harder than dying."

"You've got to do it, yet you won't!" he cried angrily. "Isn't that like a woman! Don't try me too far!"

Selina raised her head. Her eyes were big with tears. "Can nothing that I say move you?" she said. "You say you love me. Don't you see that you are torturing me worse than if I was on the rack? If you do love me you will go mad when you realize what you have done to me."

"All talk!" he said, angrily waving his hands. "That's the way a woman always goes on when she doesn't want to do a thing. It's no such great matter as all that. After all one man's much the same as another. If you can't say it put out your hand."

Selina put her hands behind her back. "I must have an hour," she said, meeting his eyes.

"What for?" he angrily demanded. "It'll be just the same an hour hence."

She turned and hastened into the general room. The men there and the Old Woman sitting around after supper were greatly astonished to see Selina run in, snatch down the fur coat from a peg on the wall, and run out of doors, closely followed by Maccubbin. A strained anxiety appeared in the Old Woman's eyes. Now that her darling dream seemed in the way of realization, she began to have doubts of it.

Outside Maccubbin did not follow Selina far. He let the darkness swallow him. He went only as far as the big stable, the door of which was now closed and barred within. He knocked on it and spoke and it was presently opened. Two of his Indians were keeping guard inside.

One of these men could speak English.

"Watusk," said Maccubbin, "the white girl has gone to Tete Jaune's house. You follow without letting her see you, and listen at the crack of the door. Watch out for the boy. I will wait here."

He added something in an undertone. The Indian grinned, and taking his gun, went out.

The Decision

Selina's act in running down the trail to Hugh's cabin was purely instinctive; she was no longer capable of thinking what she was doing. All her anger and bitterness against Hugh were forgotten; she ran to him as to a forlorn hope, because she could not help herself.

Hugh and Billy were tidying up the shack when they heard her rapid, nervous tapping on the door. Billy reached it first and drew her in.

"Oh, Selina!" he cried, overjoyed. "How bully of you to come to see us. I expect you'll catch rats for this. Oh, Selina, it's fierce not to be able to see you any more!"

When Hugh saw who it was his face turned as pale as paper. He turned his back to them, and the struggle to control himself made his face appear perfectly wooden.

"Well, that's your own fault, isn't it?" said Selina, smiling a little shakily.

"Our own fault!" said the boy, opening his eyes very wide. "How do you make that out? We were kicked out, weren't we?"

"What do you mean?" said Selina sharply.

"Never mind that now," said Hugh, coming forward. His voice was harsh. "I reckon there's something else in the wind or you wouldn't be here."

Selina nodded.

They waited to hear what it was.

"Dear Billy," said Selina, "you know I like you ever so much. I don't want to hurt your feelings, but ... but..."

"That's all right," said the boy quickly. "I understand. I'll go out." He took his cap and coat.

As he went out of the door, a shadow drew back around the corner of the cabin.

He left a miserable sort of silence behind him. Selina waited for Hugh to speak, and Hugh could not trust himself to speak. Hugh was like a man standing in the breakers. Great billows of feeling were breaking over his head one after another. He was engaged in the struggle to get a breath between each one; to keep his footing against the terrible pull. If he were swept away all was lost. Meanwhile, Selina's heart was sinking lower and lower. Here she had come running blindly to a man, and he received her in silence. Did he not know that her pride was in the dust? Still he did not speak.

The silence at last became too dreadful to be endured, and Selina said nervously: "I suppose you're wondering why I'm here."

"Yes," said Hugh simply.

"Well ... they say it will be fit to travel to-morrow."

"Yes," said Hugh.

"Maccubbin says he's willing to take me and my mother out if I will marry him to-night."

"To-night!" cried Hugh, startled out of his woodenness.

"Yes. By contract. It can be confirmed in a church outside."

Silence from Hugh.

Selina sat bent over on a stool in front of the fire while Hugh remained lurking in the shadows at the back of the room. There was no light but that given by the fire. The cabin, like all of those at Bear Coulee except Maccubbin's, had but the one room. The feature of it was the big fireplace which had been carefully built by Hugh out of stones from the creek-bed below. It is not every amateur builder who can construct an arch. The shack had but the one window; and that, for reasons of economy in building, was in the front wall alongside the door. There was a home-made bedstead in one corner, which, with a rough dresser, a table, and chairs, completed the furnishings.

"Have you nothing to say?" said Selina sharply.

"I am not the one to advise you," said Hugh, in a carefully schooled voice.

"I didn't come for advice ... but just to hear what you had to say."

"I am not the one to advise you," he reiterated.

"Why?"

"Because I'm an interested party."

"Oh!"

"How do you ... feel towards Maccubbin?" Hugh presently asked.

That careful, cold voice chilled Selina's breast. It was impossible for her to open it to the speaker. "Oh, he's just a man like any other," she said flippantly. "... What do you think of him?"

"I think he's a scoundrel."

Selina flashed a warm glance over her shoulder. But Hugh immediately spoiled the effect of his speech by adding: "He's acted in a scoundrelly way towards me, but up to this time you've got to admit that he's borne a pretty good reputation throughout the country. A hard man, but pretty square on the whole. And he's smart, of course. He's made a pot of money. They say he's got near a hundred thousand salted down outside. His wife would want for nothing."

Selina turned square around on the stool and stared at him in astonishment. "A few days ago," she said—"excuse me for reminding you of it, but it's so curious—you said you wanted me yourself."

Silence from Hugh.

"Have you changed?"

"No."

"Yet now you're urging me to marry Maccubbin!"

"I'm not urging you to marry him!" Hugh almost shouted at her. "I'm just trying to be fair. I don't want to influence you."

Selina suddenly fell to laughing weakly and shakily, bent over in front of the fire.

"Don't do that!" said Hugh sharply. "Don't do that!"

"I don't believe there was ever a man in the world," said Selina shakily, "who said he wanted a girl ... and talked to her like this!"

"I can't help about any of the others," said Hugh sullenly. "I've got to hew to my own line."

"I'd better take him then," said Selina, rising wearily.

"Oh, wait!" said Hugh, with a terrible catch in his breath. "Not to-night! ... Why to-night? ... The Old Woman will not die to-morrow...."

"No, but it will soon snow again," murmured Selina.

"But wait!" implored Hugh. Still he would not come close to her. Between each of his broken phrases he laboured for breath. "God knows I pity the Old Woman.... She's had a hard time.... But she is old.... Whatever you do for her, her day is nearly done.... And you're young.... It's not fair.... Marriage is for all your life.... Very likely when you got her out the doctors could do nothing for her...."

The visible agony he was suffering softened Selina. She edged a little closer to him—but he would not meet her half-way. "I dare say you're right," she murmured. "But it's no good. A person knows what they can do. I could not stay on here watching her waste away day by day, dying by inches before my eyes. Not after the way she's been slaving here all these years to send out money to keep me. I couldn't do it."

"Well ... I can understand that too," said Hugh.

"And so ... if there's no other way of getting her out...."

"I see none," said Hugh, very low. "A man must face the facts. Every white man here is back of him. And the Indians. Even if I could seize the team and the sled there is grub to be had. If I took that he could shoot me down for a thief."

"Well then," said Selina, forcing a smile, "there's no help for it.... Anyhow.... I shan't forget ... things." She extended her hand. "Good-bye, Hugh."

Hugh crushed it in his hand. "Oh, wait!" he said in an agony. "You haven't said much about your feelings in the matter.... If you still ... have any sort of feeling for me, this man must be horrible to you! ... Or maybe you just despise him anyhow like I do.... You must not do a thing like that.... I must know how it is.... If it is true that you hate the man I can save you from him...."

"Oh, how?" breathed Selina, with all her heart in that whisper.

"I will shoot Maccubbin," said Hugh coolly. "Once he is down no man here would raise a finger for him. Then I'll take the team and the sled and carry you out. We'll sell the team outside. That will bring plenty to take you and the Old Woman to New York. It's a good team...."

"But you ... but you?" stammered Selina, clasping her hands.

"Oh, they'd have to take the extenuating circumstances into account," said Hugh simply. "They couldn't charge me with anything more than manslaughter...."

Selina's teeth were chattering. The civilized woman in her simply could not face it. A killing; flight, arrest, and prison for Hugh; she was ready to swoon at the thought. "No! No! No!" she cried wildly. "There's nothing in it. I was just trying you out. I don't hate Maccubbin. I've already made up my mind to take him. I just thought I ought to tell you.... Good-bye..." And she was gone out of the cabin like a wild thing.

Hugh remained standing in his shadowy corner perfectly motionless. When Billy came in some ten minutes later, he had not moved.

"I went up to the big house," said Billy, in his jolly style. "I looked in the window and the Czar wasn't there, so I went in. Nobody seemed to think it was out of the way. When Selina came back I beat it. The Old Woman gave me cake. I slipped a slice in my pocket for you. Here.... What, don't want it? ... I say, what's the matter, old feller?"

"Don't speak to me!" said Hugh thickly. "For God's sake go to bed!"

As Billy started to undress himself, looking at his partner sideways, wonderingly, there came a sudden rush outside, the door banged open, and Maccubbin and his four Indians filled the room. Before Hugh or Billy could reach hand towards weapon, they were seized and thrown down. Four men to Hugh while one held Billy. Within a few minutes they were tied up hand and foot and thrown on the bed.

"So you thought you'd put a bullet through me, eh?" said Maccubbin to Hugh, with a harsh laugh. "Selina warned me."

"You lie!" said Hugh. "It was not her."

Maccubbin laughed louder. "Well, I'm not taking any chances," he said. "You can lie here until you cool off. You're welcome to work yourself free of the ropes if you can; but if you attempt to leave your shack you'll be shot down. I'm going on my honeymoon. Three days after I've started they'll let you out. In the meantime they'll keep your guns for you, so you won't be tempted to blow out the brains of the men who bring you food. So long, my buckos!"

After his one speech, Hugh, glaring at his enemy, kept his mouth shut. When Maccubbin turned to go Billy could no longer contain himself.

"You damned coward!" he shouted. "You're not man enough to face Hugh without your gang at your heels!"

Maccubbin paid no attention; but the Indian Watusk came back to the bed grinning fiendishly and raised his clenched fist high over the bound boy's defiant face.

"If you strike him, by God! I'll kill you for it!" said Hugh.

Bound though the man was, his blazing blue eyes intimidated the redskin. Watusk made believe that he had not really intended to strike the boy, and went on out of the cabin laughing loudly.

Meanwhile, another man had gathered up their guns; and a third had, with his axe, wrenched off the cleats that held the bar in front of the door. These cleats were subsequently nailed to the outside of the door itself, and the bar dropped in them, thus preventing the door from being opened from within. Afterwards Hugh and Billy heard them nailing heavy ends of plank over the window.

When they were left in silence Billy whispered: "What does it all mean?"

"They're going to be married to-night," muttered Hugh. "Maccubbin was afraid I'd interfere."

A sort of heart-broken cry escaped from the boy. "Oh-h! Selina married to *him*!"

After a while Billy said: "She told you that herself?"

"Yes."

"And you did nothing to stop it."

"Shut up! It won't bear talking about."

"I won't shut up. I don't care what you do to me. Selina, so pretty and kind and sweet! Married to that black scoundrel! I can't bear it!"

"For Christ's sake!" muttered Hugh, twisting in agony in his bonds; "shut up or you'll drive me mad!"

"You did nothing to stop it!"

"I offered to save her. She said 'No thank you,' and beat it."

"How did you say you'd save her?"

"I said I'd shoot Maccubbin, and carry her and her mother out myself."

"But she's a girl," said Billy. "A city girl at that. At the thought of anybody getting shot, she'd be ready to faint. She couldn't face it. Would you expect a gentle girl like that to say: 'Yes, go shoot him!' And then wait around while you were doing it? You shouldn't have said a word to her, but just gone and done it."

"How could I do that, not knowing how she felt about it?"

"How she felt about it! Oh, my God! She loves you!"

"If I was sure of that!" muttered Hugh.

"Every look of hers shows it! If a girl ever looked at me like that...! Why should she come running to you in her need if she didn't love you?"

"I'll ask her," said Hugh, with that terrible simplicity of his.

"It's too late!" groaned Billy. "We're nailed up in here like pigs in a crate!"

Hugh had rolled over on his stomach. "Hunch your body down until you can get your teeth to the knots at my wrists."

"What's the good? You can't get out."

"You do what I tell you."

Billy obeyed; and in a few minutes Hugh stood freed of his bonds.

"Now untie me," said Billy, rolling over.

"No," said Hugh.

"But Hugh ... *Hugh!*" cried Billy in dismay. "You wouldn't leave me out of this! You *couldn't* do that! You need me, Hugh. There'll be a dozen to one against you. You need me for her sake...."

Hugh silenced him with a rough gesture. "You're only a kid. If there's any shooting I won't have you mixed up in it."

"But Hugh ... but Hugh...."

"Whisht! Or the men outside will hear you."

Billy buried his head in the pillow, fairly blubbing in his bitter chagrin. But he immediately raised himself to a sitting position to see what Hugh was going to do. Hugh was at the fireplace. The fire had burned low. He raked the embers to one side of the hearth, and Billy understood his plan. Hugh planted a chair within the fireplace, and a stool upon the chair. Then he sat down and took off his moccasins and hung them around his neck by their strings.

"Where will you get a gun?" whispered Billy.

"The men will all be at the big house for the affair," said Hugh. "I'll go to Wilkie's house and borrow his gun.... So long."

Hugh climbed to the chair, and from the chair to the stool. This raised him into the narrow part of the chimney, where he could get a grip with spread elbows and knees against the stones. He drew himself up out of sight.

Billy, who had flung himself down blubbing again, raised his head to listen. At first he thought something had gone wrong, for he could hear nothing. Then he did hear some little sounds, but so slight nobody could possibly have heard who was not listening for them. It was a miracle how Hugh did it. Some time later Billy heard little rubbing sounds over his head as Hugh let himself slowly down the slope of the roof on the side opposite to the watchers.

XX.

Marriage by Contract

When Selina returned to the big house after her interview with Hugh, Maccubbin was not there, of course. Selina was all wrought up to the point of self-immolation. Her eyes had a sort of ecstatic look. She could not keep still, but kept moving around the room, continually glancing towards the door. Why did he not come? When one has resolved to make a fatal plunge, it is torment to have to wait.

The Old Woman glanced at her uneasily and timidly. "Shall we go into our own room?" she whispered when Selina came near.

Above all Selina dreaded anything in the nature of a scene with her mother. Even a scene of gratitude. Anything in the nature of an emotional display would wreck her carefully built-up self-control.

"Oh, let's stay out here," she said. "I want to speak to Mr. Maccubbin."

"We thought he was with you," said Wilkie Beach.

"No," said Selina, fixing him with a strange look of composed wildness; "no, he wasn't with me."

It was not long before Maccubbin came in; a complacent grin wreathed the corners of his lips. Selina did not trouble this time to lead him into the store to make her communication. There, before them all, she marched up to him, held out her hand and said:

"I accept."

The Old Woman gasped.

Maccubbin, with a very creditable air, bowed low and kissed her hand. Then straightening himself, he turned around towards the gaping men with his dark face gleaming.

"Fellows!" he said in a strong voice, "I invite you all to my wedding!"

"For *Gawd's* sake!" exclaimed the hairy Wilkie Beach, quite forgetting the presence of ladies. "When?"

Maccubbin looked questioningly at Selina.

"As soon as you like," she whispered.

The trader glanced at his watch. "Well, say in fifteen minutes," he said coolly. "Just to give me time to change my suit."

"A weddin! A weddin!" gasped little Sandy Govans, looking at his hands absurdly to see if they were clean enough for such a function. (They were not!) "Hell, Maccubbin! You had ought to have give us more time to prepare our minds for it!"

Wilkie grabbed him. "Cheese it, man, 'tain't *your* weddin! Fergit yer mind, and come tidy up yer body!"

They hastened to their respective shacks; and that was why, when Hugh came stealing up to Wilkie's some minutes later, there was a light in the window. Peeping in, Hugh saw Wilkie arraying himself, and was forced to wait.

Meanwhile, Selina had gone into the bedroom to change her dress. Here she could no longer keep the Old Woman at bay.

"Oh, Selina! What are you doing?" the Old Woman stammered with a fearful air.

"Why, it is what you wanted me to do, isn't it?" answered Selina, trying to keep up a light tone.

"I am not so sure!" faltered the Old Woman. "Not in such a hurry. Not against your own heart, my darling."

"But that is nonsense, dearest," said Selina, forcing a smile. "I have thought it all out. I have come to the conclusion that this is best for all of us."

"You do not love this man!"

Selina looked at her mother with a controlled exasperation. This was a little *too* much. The girl could not trust herself to speak then.

"It is too sudden!" wailed the Old Woman. "You should not pay too much attention to what *I* say. I am but a daft old wife, my darling. If you were unhappy it would break my heart!"

"I am not going to be unhappy," said Selina patiently. ("At least, if I am, none shall ever know it," she added to herself.) "And you must not feel that you have the slightest responsibility in bringing this about. I did not pay too much attention to what you said. I thought it all out for myself."

"But why this sudden decision?"

"We are going to start home to-morrow morning."

"I am afraid ... it is too great a price to pay ... too great a price!" mourned the Old Woman. And while she helped Selina with her changing, the tears rolled down her withered cheeks.

Selina, while she busied herself with her clothes and arranged her features in the shape of composure, could have shrieked aloud at the ghastly irony of the situation. Somehow there seemed to be a desperate need of haste.

"Be quick! Be quick!" she adjured the Old Woman.

Lester Morrow was left sitting at the table in the general room with a sickly smile. Lester, having betrayed his friend, had received nothing for his pains. A Judas whose thirty pieces turned out to be counterfeit. As he was a decent fellow at heart, his reflections could scarcely have been happy ones.

Maccubbin's establishment, with its various additions, formed a not unpicturesque huddle of log buildings crouching close to the ground. First the store had been built, presenting its gable end to the waggon trail with a small crooked door and window; then the general room had been added as a sort of lean-to down one side. Subsequently, an addition had been built to the back of the store which was now the room shared by the trader and Lester; and still later an addition of quite a different size and shape to the back of the general room. This was the women's apartment.

The general room, therefore, was a long, narrow chamber. Being a lean-to it could be no more than seven feet high on one side and not much more than five on the other. As you came in the front door, the door into the store was at your right, two windows in the low side at your left, and the fireplace at the other end, with a small door alongside leading into the Old Woman's room. When the Old Woman moved in, her cook-stove had been planted in front of the fireplace, and its pipe run up the big chimney. All that end of the room was devoted to her culinary uses, and the long table was nearer the door. The walls were of spruce logs with the bark on, the interstices chinked with clay.

The little company began to gather. Maccubbin appeared in a well-fitting store suit; he was a handsome, young-looking man for his years. His hard face was all lighted up now. One could have felt sorry for him; the bridegroom a little sunk in the vale of years, who anticipated happiness. His hair was well-brushed, he wore a white collar, and as a

crowning touch he sported a boutonniere. He must have plucked the flower in passing from the unsold Indian millinery in the store. He carried a bottle of good Scotch whisky under his arm, which he plunged on the table with an air. Lester moistened his lips at the sight of it.

When Wilkie Beach and Sandy Govans and Dan Ellum came back, there was very little visible change in their appearance; nevertheless, they felt very dressed-up and uncomfortable. When their eyes fell upon the bottle of whisky they widened in astonishment. They looked at each other as much as to say: "Do you see the same thing that I do?" Why, a bottle of whisky with a recognizable label and a cap on the cork had never before been seen at that remote spot. Its market value must have been at least fifty dollars. Little Sandy, with a very casual air, tapped it with his finger-nails to make sure it was no optical delusion. At the true ring that it gave off all three giggled.

Wilkie made a rapid calculation. "There's five of us men here. I don't suppose the women will want any. That'll be about three good pegs apiece. Oh, Gawd, I wish you fellers would drop dead!"

"Are you goin' to open her before or after the ceremony, Mac?" asked Sandy, eyeing the bottle askance.

"Afterwards, of course," said Maccubbin. "That's to drink the bride's health with."

Wilkie swallowed two or three times in anticipation. "This is goin' to be a real weddin' for sure!" he said hoarsely.

Selina came in wearing a dark blue dress with round neck and short sleeves. Simple as the dress was, in that cabin it gave her the look of a being from a more gracious world. She was very pale, and there was a smile fixed on her face, inexpressibly painful to see. That smile cast a damper on the whole proceedings, though nobody understood why it should be so. Her strained air was taken as being due to the natural embarrassment of a bride. The Old Woman followed her in, wearing the red flannel dress; indeed, she had no other. She had forgotten to fix herself up, and her scanty white hair was somewhat dishevelled. She had a distracted air, and moved about picking things up and putting them down again without being in the least aware of what she was doing.

Selina's eyes glanced anxiously from one man to another, and travelled around the walls of the room. She was looking to see if there were any guns. There were not; for, of course, no guest would think of coming armed to a wedding; and Maccubbin believed that he had taken ample precautions against trouble. As inconspicuously as possible, Selina went to the door and dropped the bar in place. Nothing was said, but her act had an immense dramatic significance. Everybody present knew who was being barred out. Maccubbin rubbed his upper lip to hide a smile. He considered that this act augured well for him. "Poor girl!" he thought; "she doesn't know that there's no danger of an interruption."

An embarrassing pause succeeded. No one thought of asking the guests to be seated, and they stood about in acute discomfort—except Lester, who remained seated at the big table, drawing marks upon it with his forefinger and refusing to look around. Everybody was wondering how this wedding was going to be contrived without a parson present, or even a justice of the peace. Wilkie Beach had a secret dread lest, as the oldest man present, he might be called upon to officiate. Embarrassment caused little Sandy Govans, whose clothes, as always, were much too big for him, to adopt an absurd swaggering air.

Finally, Selina said to Maccubbin in a voice that was scarcely more than a whisper: "You spoke of a contract?"

"Sure!" cried the trader, endeavouring to infuse some life into the proceedings by his loud and hearty voice. "Have you got pen and ink and paper, Old Woman?"

Without saying anything she brought him pen and ink from a corner of the dresser in hands that trembled. Her lips were working like those of a child about to cry, but all the spectators were accustomed to that in the Old Woman.

A writing-pad was produced from a drawer. These articles were placed on the small table by the window near the door into the inner room. Maccubbin shoved them towards Selina.

"You write it out," he said.

"No! No!" she said nervously. "I don't know the proper form."

"Well, I ain't had any experience myself," said Maccubbin, with a laugh, and a glance over his shoulder for the men's approval. They laughed with embarrassed servility and twisted. "Oh, well, I don't suppose it matters much about the form," Maccubbin went on, "since it's only got to hold for a couple of days till we can meet up with a parson."

He drew writing materials towards him, and leaning over the table started somewhat laboriously to compose. The pen scratched loudly. Maccubbin scowled at the nib, and carefully removed a hair. The Old Woman was standing with her back towards him staring attentively at her stove. Selina was on the other side of Maccubbin, still smiling with the expression of one who looked on death. The silence in the room could be heard.

Finally Maccubbin finished. Picking up the paper and clearing his throat, he said:

"Listen, all." Then read: "I, Joseph Maccubbin, being of sound mind, do hereby agree to take Selina Rambert for my lawful wife. And I, Selina Rambert, being of sound mind..."

Selina started to laugh—though the sound was as much like weeping. A hurrying, toneless sound that she could not stop, though she pressed her handkerchief hard against her lips. She was shaking all over.

"Why, what's the matter?" demanded Maccubbin in astonishment.

"Of sound mind!" she gasped. "Of sound mind...!" She could get no further.

From the back of the room, unexpectedly, came the sound of Lester's harsh voice: "Those words are from a man's last will and testament, Maccubbin."

"Oh, my mistake," said Maccubbin, laughing too. Evidently he perceived nothing peculiar in Selina's laugh. He made haste to scratch out the incongruous words.

Selina regained partial control of herself. She was still shaking, but no sound escaped her.

Maccubbin offered her the pen with a bow. "Ladies first," he said.

"Oh no!" whispered Selina. "Your name comes first on the paper."

Maccubbin bent over the table again to write his name.

Nobody present could have given a clear account of what happened next. There was a great scrambling, scraping noise in the chimney and a heavy thud. The stove-pipe was catapulted out into the room. Then from behind the stove stalked the sooty figure of Hugh Bell like a Jinn in a pantomime. He carried a gun negligently across his arm.

The Old Woman screeched. Nobody else made a sound. Selina was leaning against the wall with widely distended eyes, still pressing the handkerchief to her lips. For a moment all the men remained frozen in attitudes of astonishment. Hugh took advantage of that moment to edge around the wall until he commanded both doors of egress. There was no way out through the Old Woman's room. The four men down at the far end fell back a little from the proximity of the gun.

Maccubbin was the first to recover himself. His eyes glanced desirously towards the door into the store, and Hugh knew by that that his gun was in there. "What the hell does this mean?" demanded the trader.

"I've got nothing to say to you," said Hugh coolly. "I've got a question to ask of *her*."

"Well, ask it," said Maccubbin.

"Selina," said the blackened Hugh, perfectly indifferent to all the other persons present, "do you love me?"

There was a breathless hush in the room. Selina's fascinated eyes were fixed on the gun in Hugh's hands. "No," she whispered.

Maccubbin grinned triumphantly.

"Look at me when you say it," commanded Hugh.

She refused to lift her eyes. "You have your answer," she murmured.

"I hope you're satisfied," cried Maccubbin.

The Old Woman suddenly intervened. "It's a lie!" she cried shrilly. "She does love you, God help her! I forced her into this. I kept at her from morning till night until I wore her down! I ... I ..." She staggered, and sank on a chair beside the little table. Her head fell forward on her outstretched arm.

Hugh involuntarily took a step towards her. Maccubbin, seeing his attention engaged, made a dash towards the door into the store. Hugh whirled around, flung up his gun and fired. Maccubbin spun around and crashed to the floor in the doorway. Instantly the other four men flung themselves on Hugh. There was a confused panting struggle. They did not succeed in bearing him down.

Lester detached himself from the swaying knot of men. "Fellows! stand back!" he cried. "I have his gun!" Grasping the gun by the barrel, Lester swung the butt over his shoulder and stood ready.

But as the other men fell away from Hugh there was a soft rush down the room. Selina precipitated herself on the staggering Hugh, and flinging her arms protectingly over his head, turned a blazing white face on Lester. Not a sound had escaped her lips.

Lester's arms dropped, and the butt of the gun thudded on the floor. With a black, hangdog look, Lester turned away his head. He presently slung the gun to one side. It banged on the floor, and lay there unheeded. Everybody in the room instinctively realized that the matter was settled, and there was no further occasion for shooting.

Hugh's arm went around Selina, and a human softness came into his steely face. "It was the only way," he murmured.

"I don't care," she whispered, looking into his eyes.

The other three men had gone to Maccubbin's side. With a glance at the fallen man, Hugh said: "He isn't dead. I aimed at his shoulder." To Selina he whispered: "Help the Old Woman."

"Oh, my mother!" cried Selina, coming down to earth with a shock.

"She's a dandy nurse," said Hugh. "She'll know just what to do for Maccubbin. We'll take him along with us when we start to-morrow."

XXI.

And Last

Towards the end of the fifth day thereafter, an outfit of two sleds came across the ice at Spirit River Crossing. In the van travelled an ordinary sled partly loaded with hay and camp duffle; the shanty sled followed with its smoking chimney. Hugh Bell was driving the first team; Wilkie Beach the second. Selina rode behind Hugh, half buried in the hay for warmth. They climbed the southerly bank, and turned into the corral of Angus Eby's stopping-house between the house and the stable. The proprietor presently came hobbling towards them, a tall, old, white man, pretty well smoked, as they say of one who takes a red wife and falls into the ways of her people. His very skin seemed to have darkened.

"Mind," whispered Hugh to Wilkie, "keep a close mouth until we can tell our story to the Sergeant. He has a right to hear it first."

"Well! Well! Well!" said Angus, politely shaking hands with each member of the party. "Goin' back already, miss? And you, Wilkie, what you goin' out for this time o' year?"

"Just to lend a hand," said Wilkie.

"You'll have your work cut out to get home before the ice breaks up. Too much snow east of here; too much snow!" Angus suddenly took alarm from their grave faces. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"We've got a sick man in there," said Hugh, with a nod towards the shanty sled. "It's Maccubbin."

"What, Maccubbin?" said Angus, surprised. "That's the last man you'd expect to hear was took sick. If you were to tell me somebody had put a bullet through him... A hard man, Maccubbin. What's the matter with him?"

"That's for the doctor to say," said Hugh. "The Old Woman's nursing him. He's asleep now, so let him be."

"If there's already two in the shanty sled, how about the young lady to-night?" asked Angus anxiously. "My house ... well, you know..." He spread out his hands.

"That's all right," said Hugh. "We pack a tepee for her so she can have a fire inside."

When the horses were put up, the two men and the girl started out of the corral.

"Where you goin'," asked Angus.

"Oh, just for a bit of a walk to stretch our legs," said Hugh.

The old man's eyes followed them out of sight, sharp with curiosity.

About three hundred yards along the bank stood the trimly built log cabin which housed the R.N.W.M.P. at the Crossing. The entire force consisted of Sergeant Meiklejohn, a man famous throughout the country. He was of Hugh's age, and somewhat of the same type; and a strong bond united the two, though they could not meet but once a year or so, and were chary of speech with each other then. The young sergeant was cooking his solitary supper, and an appetising odour of frying ham filled the room.

"Come in! Come in!" he cried. "This is a grand surprise. You'll eat with me, of course—if the young lady will excuse the roughness of everything." And he ran to get the ham out to cut off additional slices.

"Wait a bit," said Hugh grimly. "You won't be so glad to see us when you've heard my story. At least, not me. I've come to give myself up."

"What!"

"I shot Maccubbin."

The young fellow's smiling face hardened. "That's bad!" he said. "Is he dead?"

"Wounded in the shoulder. We brought him along with us."

"The supper can wait awhile," said Meiklejohn, taking the skillet from the fire. "But I don't know of any reason why you shouldn't eat with me. Please sit down, everybody." For himself he pulled a little table out from the wall and sat down behind it. Behind the table he immediately became the symbol of authority. But his manner remained as simple as ever. "Fire away, Bell."

Hugh stood up.

"Oh, sit down, man! sit down! You're not in the dock."

"Let me tell the story," said Selina nervously.

"No, it's my place," said Hugh firmly.

"But he's so conscientious!" said Selina. "He'll make out the worst possible case against himself!"

Meiklejohn smiled at her broadly. "I know him," he said. "You needn't worry."

In simple, bald sentences Hugh told the whole story with the painful rectitude that was so characteristic of him. Just as Selina had feared, in order to be fair to Maccubbin he insisted on fishing up every possible circumstance in his favour. He concluded by saying:

"I brought Wilkie Beach along because he was Maccubbin's friend. It was only fair that Maccubbin should have a witness on his side too."

"I can't add nothin' to what Hugh has told," growled Wilkie.

The sergeant of police betrayed considerable feeling. He jumped up when Hugh had done, and paced up and down the floor, snorting and making suppressed noises in his throat. Finally he came to Hugh. "Hang it all!" he said, "a man is only human if he does wear a red coat. I'm not the trooper now, see? I'm just Dave Meiklejohn." And he held out his hand.

Hugh gripped it, and the Sergeant, apparently much relieved, resumed his seat and his official air. "You've put me in a devil of a hole, you know. What am I going to do with you? I can't incarcerate you here. And I can't leave my post without being relieved."

"That's easy," said Hugh, in his simple fashion. "Give me a letter to your officer outside, and I'll deliver it."

Meiklejohn looked at Selina, and they both laughed. "I believe you would," said the trooper. "Oh, you're a choice specimen!"

Hugh didn't know why they laughed. He said to Meiklejohn: "You had better go talk to Maccubbin and get his affidavit, or whatever it is you do get."

"Wait a minute," said Selina. "I want Mr. Meiklejohn to do something for me first."

"Anything on earth!" murmured the trooper.

"No, Selina, no!" said Hugh, in distress.

"Be quiet!" she said to him. To Meiklejohn she went on: "I want you to marry me to him."

"What!"

"You do marry people, don't you?"

"Oh yes. In our service we have to be prepared for anything."

"Selina, wait until I have gone through this business," said Hugh earnestly. "Wait until after my trial. I don't want you..."

"Now don't let's go over all that again," said Selina. "It was because you were too ready to give me up before that all this trouble happened. I insist on being married to you at once. I have a particular reason for wanting it before Mr. Meiklejohn talks to Maccubbin."

"Why?"

"Because when he tells Maccubbin you and I are fast married, there will be no reason for Maccubbin to make any further trouble. He's not the sort of man that makes trouble for nothing."

"Good!" cried Meiklejohn. "She's got a head on her. Come on!"

"Wilkie," said Selina, "go fetch my mother like a good man."

"Sure thing!" cried Wilkie, greatly excited. "I'll carry her here!"

A few minutes later Hugh and Selina stood up before Sergeant Meiklejohn with the Old Woman and Wilkie flanking them as witnesses. Hugh had borrowed the Old Woman's wedding ring. The young trooper read the simple marriage service as ordained by the regulations. Selina clung to Hugh's arm as if she were afraid of losing her big man. They had eyes for none but each other. The Old Woman was pale but collected. The demands made on her as a nurse during the past few days had steadied her nerves.

When Meiklejohn pronounced them man and wife, Hugh lifted his wife's chin and kissed her unashamed. "Are you really mine?" he whispered.

"All yours!"

"I never shall be able to believe it!"

Meiklejohn, who was always rosy, blushed redder still as he said: "I don't want to insist, but it's generally the parson's privilege to—er..."

Selina offered him a pink cheek.

"Now you, Wilkie," she then said.

"What, me?" cried Wilkie, terrified, and violently scrubbed his mouth with the back of his hand. The old fellow merely brushed her cheek with his moustache, and drew back with the rapt look of one who has seen beyond this world.

"Old Woman, won't you?" said Hugh, holding out his arms.

"No! I hate you!" she cried, and with the words scarcely off her lips, she reached up on her toes and kissed his cheek. "You're *too* good looking," she said petulantly. "Confound you!"

Meiklejohn then went off to talk to Maccubbin. When he entered the shanty sled the trader was lying on his back on the cot staring at the roof.

"Oh, it's you," he said gracelessly.

"This is a bad business, Maccubbin," said Meiklejohn, drawing up a camp-stool. "Bell has told me his story, and I've come to get your version of the affair."

"What was I left alone for?" demanded Maccubbin suspiciously. "Where's the Old Woman?"

"They wanted her for a witness," said Meiklejohn. "I have just married them."

"So they're married!" said Maccubbin. And then after a moment: "Well, to hell with it!" He rolled over on his good shoulder face towards the wall.

Meiklejohn waited a while, then asked: "Well, what have you got to say?"

"Not a damned word!" said Maccubbin.

"Do I understand, then, that you refuse to lay a charge against Bell?"

"You can understand anything you damn please. It was a fight betwixt me and Bell to get the girl. He beat me to it. He knew her first, damn him! And he had youth on his side. Well, I guess I can take my medicine without squealing."

A look of great relief appeared in the young trooper's face. "That's square of you, Mac!" he said heartily. "You're doing the right thing. Will you sign a little affidavit to that effect, so I won't have to prosecute."

"Sure," said Maccubbin indifferently. "Send the Old Woman back, will you?" he went on peevishly. "My wound hurts me. I want a drink. Oh, God! the pain I have suffered jolting over the prairie. And I suppose it will be worse on the long portage. And send word to Smitty at the French outfit that I want to talk to him to-night."

They set off next morning pursued by the cheers of the whole population of Spirit River Crossing, numbering some twenty souls, white and reddish. The fact of the marriage had leaked out. These cheers could not have been very pleasant in Maccubbin's ears, but with his extraordinary stoicism, he gave no signs of being disturbed. As they set off, Ally Smith, the French outfit's trader, handed Hugh a letter to the general manager of his company in Prince George, and asked Hugh to bring back an answer when he came in.

It would be tedious to recount the return journey. At his own request Maccubbin was left at the settlement under care of the Sisters at the mission. Wilkie Beach was then sent back with the extra team, while Hugh went on over the ice with his wife and his mother-in-law in the shanty sled. They carried the tepee and its poles strapped on the roof for additional accommodation. At the settlement they learned that the infamous Baldy Red had escaped clear of the country, leaving his hapless redskin tools to stand their punishment.

Fifteen days later (for the going improved as they proceeded) the shanty sled drove into the city of Prince George, where it attracted almost as much notice in the streets as a circus, and they were all thankful when they got it safely stowed in a stable. A knifelike anxiety struck at Hugh's breast, for here he was in town with a wife and a mother-in-law on his hands and not a dollar to his name. However, he led the way to an hotel with a bold front.

Going through the streets the Old Woman clung to him like a terrified child. "This is not what I expected," she whimpered. "It's too crowded and noisy. I didn't know there were so many automobiles. Why, in my day T'ronto was a quieter city than this!"

On the next day, while Selina took her mother to a doctor, Hugh went to deliver his letter to the general manager of the French outfit, as he knew it, though Boutellier Frères was the name over the door. A very grand office with a keen-eyed dark young man who sized him up with a glance. Hugh was astonished at his youthfulness.

"Sit down, Mr. Bell," said he.

"I don't know yet if I can carry an answer back..." began Hugh.

"Well, sit down, anyway, until I read it."

The dark young man presently said: "This letter concerns you, Mr. Bell. I will read it to you:

"Joseph Maccubbin, the free trader at Bear Coulée, has just notified me that he is prepared to accept your offer for his business. He is ready to sign the papers as soon as you can have them drawn up, and will yield possession of the property immediately.

"Maccubbin has just come out from his post with a bullet-hole through his shoulder. He refuses to say how he got it. I will hear full details in the course of time, I suppose, but at present I cannot give you any information. Maccubbin is going to the settlement at Caribou Lake to stay until his wound is healed.

"He says he is not going back to Bear Coulée again, so it's up to us to get a man on the ground at the earliest

possible moment, if we wish to save the year's business in fur. In this connection I want to recommend to you the bearer of this letter, Hugh Bell. I couldn't put my hand on a better man for the job.

"Bell is universally liked and respected. His reputation is that of an absolutely trustworthy man, a little slow maybe, but shrewd and sure. You know we get down to brass tacks up here, and you can depend on the general verdict as to a man's character. Bell has lived at Bear Coulée for six years, so he knows the place inside out...."

"There's more to it," said the keen young man, "but I've read far enough. Well, Mr. Bell, I like your looks, and I couldn't have a better recommendation, could I? I offer you the job of our trader and general overseer at Bear Coulée. What do you say?"

"My God!" said Hugh. "You must excuse me. I ... I wasn't prepared for this."

The young man came around his desk and clapped Hugh on the shoulder. "I like to surprise a man like this," he said.

"There is one thing I must tell you," said Hugh. "It was me shot Maccubbin."

"Well, we don't have to go into that, do we? since Maccubbin isn't anxious to."

"I have lately married," said Hugh. "It is not much of a place for a white woman."

"Well, change it! change it! We'll back you up. You talk it over with her, and come see me again to-morrow. A living wage and one-third of the profits was what I had in mind. I should have to ask you to go right back, of course. If it's not feasible to take your wife we will make ample provision for her in town here. You can start drawing against your salary as soon as you like."

Hugh went out like a man in a dream.

When he met Selina he asked: "How's mother?"

The tears started to her eyes. "She must have an operation," she said. "It will not cure her, but will ease her pain. He ... he gives her a year."

Hugh comforted her. "We'll make it a happy year for her," he said.

He then told her of his astonishing offer. Selina had but one word to say to that. He must take it, of course. She had always intended to return to Bear Coulée, she said, even when she thought he had nothing but his land there. "Think what you could do if you had a free hand, Hugh!"

Hugh nodded. "I've often thought it out," he said dreamily. "Proper credit for the settlers, and general good feeling instead of slavery. It would pay better in the end. New settlers sent in by the company. The greater area we can cultivate the less danger of summer frosts. An agricultural experiment station. Dog-teams so we can keep up a mail service in the winter. A little saw-mill. A church, with a missionary in charge—a married one. Maybe we could get a medical missionary."

"You build the church, and I'll undertake to find a man and woman for it."

"But ... but..." said Hugh, with his heart sinking like a stone. "I'd have to leave you!"

Selina went to him. "We belong to each other now," she said softly. "Nothing can separate us really. We can afford to wait a little. This year belongs to my mother, and all the other years of my life ... to you!"

Next day Hugh found enthusiastic support for his projected improvements at Bear Coulée; and upon the day after that he again set his face towards the long trail behind his team. Meanwhile, the shanty had been knocked down and his sled loaded with many things until then unheard of at Bear Coulée.

Upon a day in April when the sun had been shining generously for a week, the Old Woman, who had been daily growing more restless, went to the window of the hotel room. "This will send out the ice in the rivers," she said pensively. "In a week the first York boats will be leaving the Landing for Caribou Lake. One can travel comfortably enough on a York boat. Mrs. Gaviller, of Fort Enterprise, has done it. When the boats arrive at the settlement, there is always some freight to be sent across the long portage. We could get a lift. And Smitty would put us across the prairie...."

"I'm fed up with such an idle life, I guess. I want to see all the fellows again. I want to see my hills when they come in green.... Let's go, Selina."

Selina sprang up with a radiant face. "Let's!" she said.

**MADE AND PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY
BILLING AND SONS, LTD., GUILDFORD AND ESHER.**

[End of *The Shanty Sled* by Hulbert Footner]