ALTON OF SOMASCO

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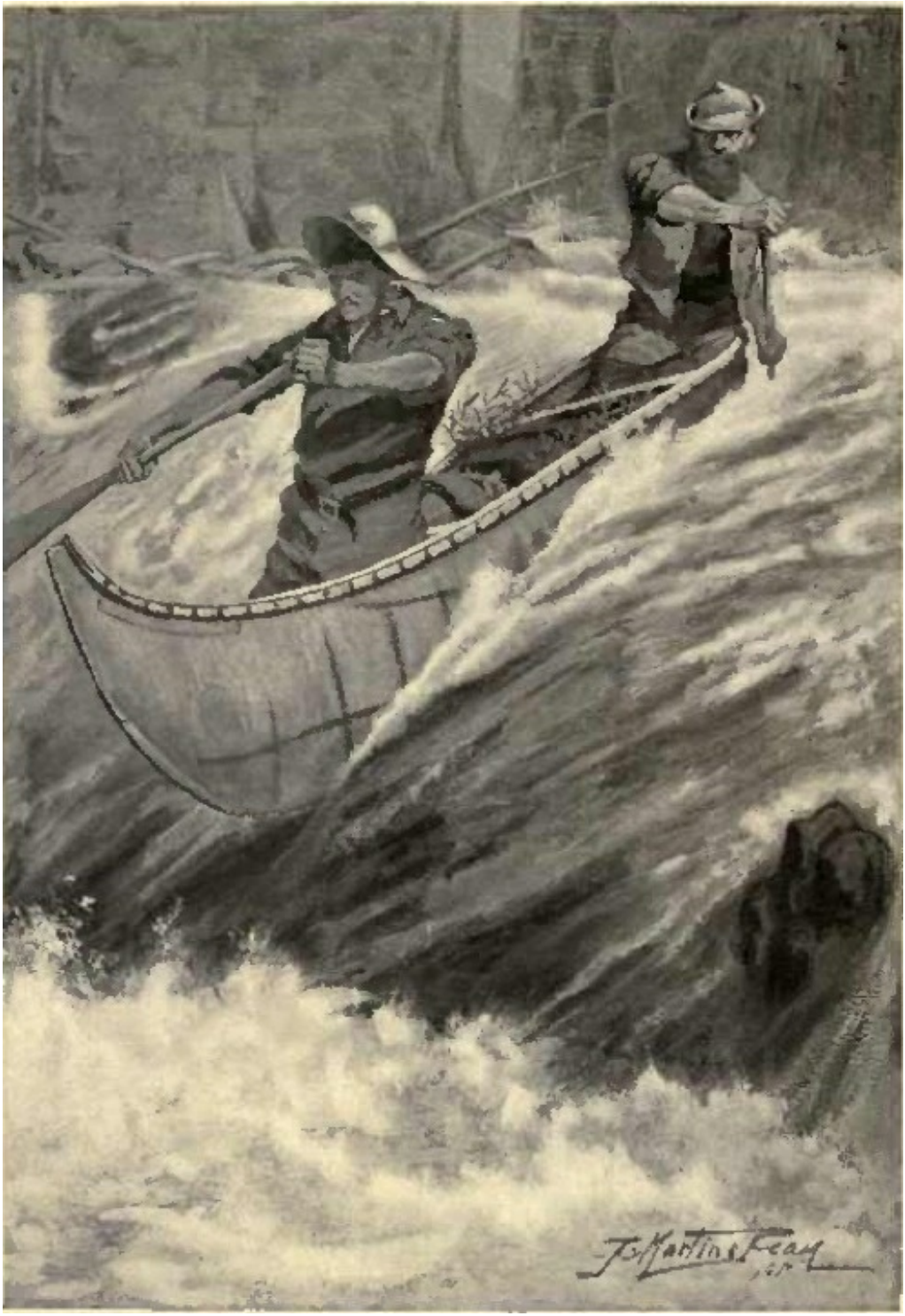
J. Watkins Fear

“A FALL OR A BIG RAPID. WE’VE GOT TO GO THROUGH.”

ALTON OF SOMASCO

A Romance of the Great Northwest

By

HAROLD BINDLOSS

Author of
“Winston of the Prairie,” “The Dust of Conflict,”
“The Cattle Baron’s Daughter,” “The Young Traders,”
etc.

With Illustrations
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CHAPTER I
THE FIRST ENCOUNTER

It was snowing slowly and persistently, as it had done all day, when Henry Alton of Somasco ranch stood struggling with a half-tamed Cayuse pony in a British Columbian settlement. The Cayuse had laid its ears back, and was describing a circle round him, scattering mud and snow, while the man who gripped the bridle in a lean, brown hand watched it without impatience, admiringly.

"Game!" he said. "I like them that way. Still, it isn't every man could seize a pack on him, and you'll have to let up three dollars on the price you asked me."

Now three dollars is a considerable proportion of the value of an Indian pony fresh from the northern grass lands, with the devil that lurks in most of his race still unsubdued within him, but the rancher who owned him did not immediately reject the offer. Possibly he was not especially anxious to keep the beast.

"Oh, yes," said a bystander. "He's game enough, and I'd ask the boys to my funeral if I meant to drive him at night over the lake trail. After being most kicked into wood-pulp Carter hasn't any more use for him, and I'll lay you a dollar, Alton, you and your partner can't put the pack on him."

Perhaps the Cayuse was tired, or desirous of watching for an opportunity, for it came to a standstill, snorting, with its wicked eyes upon the man, who laughed a little and shoved back the broad hat from his forehead as he straightened himself. The laugh rang pleasantly, and the faint twinkle in Alton's eyes was in keeping with it. They were grey, and steady when the light sank out of them, and the rest of the bronzed face was shrewd and quietly masterful. He wore a deerskin jacket fancifully embroidered, blue canvas overalls, and gum boots to the knee, while, though all of them needed repair, the attire was picturesque, and showed its wearer's lean symmetry. The man's age was apparently twenty-five, and eight years' use of the axe had set a stamp of springy suppleness upon him. He had also wrested rather more than a livelihood from the Canadian forest during them.

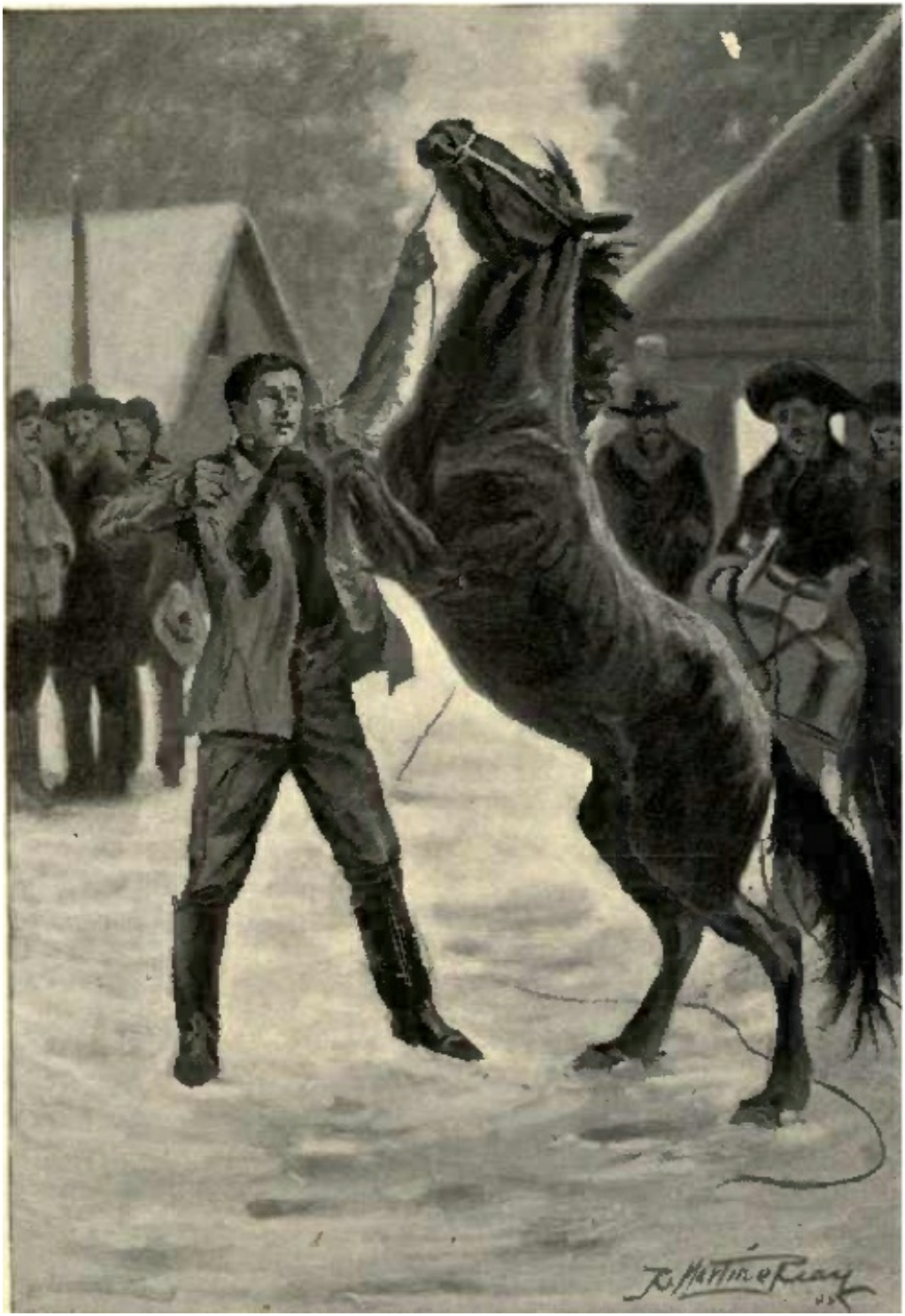
All round him the loghouses rose in all their unadorned dinginess beneath the sombre pines, and the largest of them bore a straggling legend announcing that it was Horton's store and hotel. A mixed company of bush ranchers, free prospectors, axemen, and miners lounged outside it in picturesque disarray, and high above rose a dim white line of never-melting snow.

"Well," said Alton, "it's time this circus was over, anyway, and if Carter will take my bid I'll clinch that deal with you. Have the pack and seizings handy, Charley."

The rancher nodded, and Alton got a tighter grip on the bridle. Then the Cayuse rose upright with fore-hoofs lifted, and the man's arm was drawn back to strike. The hoofs came down harmlessly, but the fist got home, and for a moment or two there was a swaying and plunging of man and beast amidst the hurled-up snow. Then the Cayuse was borne backwards until the vicinity of the hotel verandah left no room for kicking, and another man hastily flung a rope round the bundles he piled upon its back. He was also tolerably capable, and in another minute the struggle was over. The Cayuse's attitude expressed indignant astonishment, while Alton stood up breathless, with his knuckles bleeding.

"I'll trouble you for that dollar, and I'll keep him now," he said. "Can you wait until I come down next week, Carter?"

"Oh, yes," said the rancher. "Your promise is good enough for a year or two."



THE CAYUSE ROSE UPRIGHT WITH FORE-HOOFS LIFTED, AND THE MAN'S ARM WAS DRAWN BACK TO STRIKE.

The speaker was a sinewy bushman in curiously patched overalls with a bronzed and honest face, and he turned aside with a little gesture of dislike, when a man of a very different stamp pushed by him. The latter wore a black felt hat and a great fur-lined coat, while his face was pale and fleshy and his eyes were cunning. His appearance suggested prosperity and a life of indulgence in the cities, and when he stopped in front of Alton the latter would have lost little by any comparison between the pair. The pose of his sinewy figure and the clear brownness of his skin spoke of arduous labour, sound sleep, and the vigour that comes from a healthful occupation. The steady directness of his gaze and quiet immobility of his face also conveyed an indefinite suggestion of power and endurance, and there was a curious grace in his movements when he turned courteously towards the stranger.

"You soon fixed him, packer," said the city man.

Alton laughed. "The boys mostly call me rancher," said he. "Still, it don't count for much, and I do some packing occasionally."

"That's all right," said the stranger sharply, for there was something in Alton's answer which made him inclined to assert his dignity. "Everybody seems to be a rancher hereaway, and you mayn't be too proud to put through a job for me."

Alton nodded, and glanced at the speaker questioningly.

"No. If it would fit in," he said.

"I'm Hallam," said the other man. "Hallam and Vose, of the Tyee mineral claim. They've been fooling things up yonder, big pump's given out, and I've a few hundred pounds of engine fixings back at the railroad I want brought in by to-morrow."

Alton glanced at the pack-beasts waiting unloaded outside the store, and shook his head. "I'm sorry I can't trade with you," he said. "You see, I've promised another man to pack up some stores for him."

Hallam made a gesture of impatience. "Then you can let him wait," he said. "This deal will pay you better. You can put your own price on it."

Alton's eyelids came down a little, and the stranger seemed to find his glance disconcerting. "You don't seem to understand. I promised the other man to bring up his things," he said.

"Well," said Hallam, "come along into the shanty yonder, and have a drink with me. We may fix up some way of getting over the difficulty."

"Sorry!" said Alton with a suspicious quietness. "I don't drink much, anyway, and then only with the boys who know me."

"Hey!" said Hallam. "You are talking like a condemned Englishman."

"I can't help that," said Alton. "I am a Canadian, but if you want another

reason, it wouldn't suit me to drink with you, anyway. You see, you didn't do the square thing with one or two friends of mine who worked on the Tyee."

He turned on his heel, and Hallam, who was a man of some importance in the cities, gasped with astonishment and indignation.

"What is that fellow?" he said.

The man laughed, and answered him in the bushman's slowest drawl. "You don't know much, or you wouldn't ask," said he. "He's Alton of Somasco, but if he lives long enough he will be one of the biggest men in this country."

Hallam said nothing, but there was a curious look in his face which puzzled the rancher. It suggested that he had heard of Alton, and something more.

Meanwhile Alton entered the store, where the man who kept it pointed to a litter of packages strewn about the floor and sundry bags upon the counter.

"That's Townshead's lot, and those are Thomson's things," he said, and turned aside to listen to a rancher who came in smiling.

Alton took up a big cotton bag marked Townshead, tossed it aloft and caught it, and then shook his head dubiously. "That's rather too light for ten pounds. You want to try her on the scales again," he said.

The storekeeper, who was also a magistrate, grinned good-humouredly. "It's good enough for the money, anyway," said he. "But what's the matter with the Tyee dollars, Harry, that you wouldn't do Hallam's packing?"

Alton glanced at him gravely. "I think not," said he. "Put another pound or two into her, and I'll pay you on your invoice for the last lot you sent me. Otherwise I'm going to whittle down that bill considerably. You see Townshead is too shaky to come down, and he can't live on nothing."

"And the Lord knows when he'll pay you," said the storekeeper. "It's a good twelve months since he sent a dollar to me."

Alton laughed a little. "I can wait," he said. "Fill that bag up again. Get hold of the truck, Charley."

Charles Seaforth, who was apparently younger, and certainly a trifle more fastidious about his attire than his comrade, shouldered a flour bag, and twenty minutes later he and Alton tramped out of the settlement with three loaded beasts splashing and floundering in front of them. It was almost dark now, though a line of snow still glimmered white and cold high up beyond the trees until the trail plunged into the blackness of the forest. Then the lights of the settlement were blotted out behind them, the hum of voices ceased, and they were alone in the primeval silence of the bush. The thud and splash of tired hoofs only served to emphasize it, the thin jingle of steel or creak of pack-rope was swallowed up and lost, for the great dim forest seemed to mock at anything man could do to disturb its pristine serenity. It had shrouded all that valley, where no biting gale ever blew, from the beginning, majestic in its solitary grandeur and eternally green. Pine and hemlock, balsam and cedar, had followed in due succession others that had grown

to the fulness of their stature only in centuries, and their healing essence, which brings sound sleep to man's jaded body and tranquillity to his mind, had doubtless risen like incense when all was made very good.

Now Alton loved the wilderness, partly because he had been born in it, and because he had a large share of the spirit of his race. He had also seen the cities, and they did not greatly please him, though he had watched their inhabitants curiously and been taught a good deal about them by what he read in books, which to the wonder of his associates he would spend hardly-earned dollars upon. It was more curious that he understood all he read, and sometimes more than the writer apparently did, for Alton was not only the son of a clever man, but had seen Nature in her primitive nakedness and the human passions that usually lie beneath the surface, for man reverts a little and the veneer of his civilization wears through in the silent bush.

Thus he plodded on contentedly on his twelve-mile march, with the snow and the mire beneath it reaching now and then to his knee, until his companion stopped beside a little bark shanty and lighted a lantern.

"Thomson's dumping-place already," he said, pulling a burst cotton bag out of the sack of sundries upon the Cayuse pony's back. "Some of it has got out, and Jimmy was always particular about the weight of his sugar. Well, the rest of it must be in the bottom somewhere, and if you'll hold the sack up I'll shake it into my hat."

Alton's hat was capacious, and he had worn it during the two years which had elapsed since his last visit to Vancouver, but it did not seem to occur to him that it was in any way an unusual receptacle for sugar. His companion, however, laughed a little as he stirred the sticky mass round with his wet fingers.

"There is no use giving him our tobacco and matches in," said he. "Here are the letters Mrs. Neilson gave me at the post-office, too."

Alton took the letters, and his face grew a trifle grim under the flickering light of the lantern as he thrust them crumpled into his pocket. "From England, and they will keep," he said. "There's nobody I'm anxious to hear from in that country. Now we'll go on again, Charley."

The Cayuse, however, objected, and there was a struggle before Alton convinced it that resistance would be useless, while presently the trail grew steeper and the roar of water came out of the darkness before them.

"This," said Alton gravely, "is a great country, but it's mighty unfinished yet, and it kind of hurts me to see all that power wasted."

"Wasted?" said Seaforth, smiling. "Don't the salmon swim in it, and the bear and deer come down to drink?"

"Oh, yes," said Alton. "And sometimes the Siwash wash themselves in it too, but that's not the question. This earth wasn't made for the bear and deer, and they've thousands of poor folks they can't find a use for back there in the old

country. Isn't that so, Charley?"

Seaforth, who was a young Englishman of good upbringing, laughed. "I have no reason for doubting it," said he. "In any case, none of my worthy relations had any use for me. Still, I don't see the connection exactly."

"No?" said Alton. "Well, it's simple. We have the gold and silver, and the coal and iron, too, while it don't strike one that these forests were put here just to look pretty."

"The metals you allude to take some trouble in getting out," said Seaforth dryly.

Alton nodded. "Of course," he said. "That's what man got his brains for, and the one difference between a white man and a Siwash is that he's always striking for something better."

Seaforth laughed. "You are trying to get at something, as usual," said he.

"Yes," said Alton gravely. "I generally am. Well, I can see what we don't want of these forests sailing sawn up to China, and this river sprinkled with sawmills and wood-pulp factories. Then I can hear the big dynamoes humming, and the thump of the mine stamps run with the current the men who put them down will get for nothing. What we're wasting round Somasco is going to feed ten thousand people by and by."

"It's a big idea," said Seaforth reflectively. "Still, I don't know that if it were ever put through the place would look any prettier—and the question is, who's going to set the whole thing running?"

"God knows," said Alton gravely. "But somebody will, and if I live long enough I'll make a shot at it. Oh, yes, it's very pretty as it is, but the greatest thing in this world is man, and it was made as it is for him to master."

"You have curious notions for a Canadian bush rancher," said Seaforth. "You are, however, really an Englishman, aren't you?"

"No," said Alton grimly. "My father used to be, but he was too much of my way of thinking and they fired him out of the country. It's a thing I don't like to talk of, Charley, and just now I'm a low-down packer hauling in a pile of truck I'll never get paid for. Steady, come up. There's nothing going to hurt you, Julius Caesar."

The snarling and spitting of a panther came out of the darkness, and it was only by main force Alton dragged the Cayuse past. Then he laughed a little. "It's a pity we didn't bring a rifle along," he said. "Panthers must have been made for something, or they wouldn't be here, but it's a beast a white man has no kind of use for."

It was an hour later, and snowing fast, when they climbed out of the valley and floundered over shale and slippery rock amidst scattered pines to the forking of the trail. One arm of it dipped again, and wound through a deep sheltered hollow to the Somasco ranch, the other ran straight along the hillside to Townshead's

dwelling. The hillside was also steep, the beasts were tired, and the trail was very bad. Seaforth glanced at his comrade when they stopped a moment, and saw him dimly, tugging at the Cayuse's bridle, through the snow.

"It's a long way to Townshead's. Still, I think we can make it out," he said.

Alton laughed. "We have got to. There's not generally too much to eat at that house, and they'll want the things," he said.

There was another struggle with the Cayuse, which appeared reluctant to face a treacherous ascent whose slope was somewhat steeper than the pitch of an average roof, but once more Alton conquered, and they dragged the beasts up, and then floundered on doggedly beside them, seeing nothing but a dim pine or two through the snow. Now and then there was a rattle and a rush beneath them, followed by a faint splash, and Seaforth shivered a little, knowing that the shingle they dislodged had plunged into a lonely lake lying far below. Still Alton said nothing, but floundered on, apparently as cheerfully as though he would be well paid for the risk he ran, until he crawled down into the sliding whiteness, when a hide strip burst and some of Townshead's packages were scattered about the face of a precipitous declivity.

Seaforth held his breath a moment as, gripping the bridle of a trembling beast, he watched him until the dim moving figure sank into the snow. He could hear the wash of the unfrozen lake, and knew there was no foothold on the slippery rock which sloped almost sheer to it through the darkness close beneath. Then a voice came up, "Wasn't there a dry goods package of some kind, Charley?"

"There was," shouted Seaforth. "But come up with what you've got, and leave it."

A faint laugh answered him, and through the moaning of the pines he caught the words, "If it's not over the edge here, I'm going to get the thing."

Seaforth said nothing further. He knew his comrade too well, and could picture him clinging by hand and heel as he crawled along the brink of the declivity with the lake below, and gasped from relief when once more a dim whitened object lurched up out of the snow.

"Got them all," said Alton cheerfully. "That last one was just on the edge, and it took some thinking before I could get at it. Still, I guessed it was some kind of dress stuff for the girl, and if we lost it it might be a long while before she got another."

They relashed the packages and went on again, floundering through steadily deepening snow, until once more the roar of water met them as they dipped into a hollow. It grew louder rapidly, and presently Alton pulled the Cayuse up on the brink of a river. It came down frothing out of a haze of sliding snow, tumbling with a hoarse growl about the great dim boulders, whirled and tossed in a white confusion down the wild race of a rapid, and was lost again. How far the other bank was there was nothing to show, for even the scattered pines behind the men

were hidden now, and Seaforth stared at the tumult of froth before him very dubiously.

"She's pretty full to-night," he said. "It has got to be attempted, but I'm not quite sure how we're going through."

Alton laughed a little, and brought his hand down on the Cayuse pony's flank. "Well, if you'll come along behind me you will see," said he.

Seaforth was waist-deep next minute, and the water was horribly cold. Then he was washed against a boulder, and fancied that one of the pack-beasts kicked him in its floundering. In any case one knee seemed to grow suddenly useless, but he was not very sure of anything just then, for a burst of spray filled his eyes, and the bottom appeared to slip from under him. He found foothold again in a moment or two, and dimly saw Alton's head and shoulders above the back of a plunging beast, while another was apparently swimming somewhere between them. Then the one Seaforth led stumbled, and they went away down stream together, clawing for a foothold with the shingle slipping under them, until there was a thud as they brought up against another boulder. As he was not sensible of any especially painful blow Seaforth decided that it was the pony which had struck the rock, and had just come to this decision when his feet were swept from under him, and, still clinging to the bridle, he was pressed against the stone while the river frothed and roared about him.

Once more he felt that it was horribly cold, and flung a wet arm about the rock, but the power seemed to go out of him, and he wondered vacantly whether the pony would be able to extricate itself and him. It floundered spasmodically for a while, and then lay still. How long this continued Seaforth did not know, but it was more than twelve hours since he had left Somasco, and he had plodded up and down steep hillsides, over rock and boulder, and through deep mire and snow, most of the time, while there are limits to the domination the will of any man may exercise over his worn-out body.

Seaforth had commenced to realize, still with a curious absence of concern which was possibly the result of cold and fatigue, that as the pony could not help him it might be too late very soon unless he made a vigorous effort to help himself, when he heard a shout, and something came slowly through the sliding whiteness in his direction. Then there was another shout, and when somebody dragged the pony clear of the boulder he held on by the bridle and went floundering waist-deep up stream. The water, however, now sank rapidly, and soon he was clear of it to the knee. Then there was a clatter of hoofs on slippery rock, and he lurched dripping and gasping into the partial shelter of the pines. Somebody smote him on the shoulder, and he heard Alton's voice, "Get hold and hustle. We'll fetch Townshead's in an hour or so."

CHAPTER II
AT TOWNSHEAD'S RANCH

It was chilly and damp in the log-walled living-room of the Townshead homestead, which stood far up in a lonely valley amidst the scattered pines. The room was also bare and somewhat comfortless, for the land was too poor to furnish its possessor with more than necessities, and Townshead not the man to improve it much. He lay in an old leather chair beside the stove, a slender, grey-haired man with the worn look of one whose burden had been too heavy for him. His face was thin and somewhat haggard, his long, slender hand rather that of an artist than a bush rancher, and his threadbare attire was curiously neat. He wore among other somewhat unusual things an old red velvet jacket, and there was a little cup of black coffee and a single cigar of exceptional quality on the table beside him.

Townshead was, in fact, somewhat of an anachronism in a country whose inhabitants exhibit at least a trace of primitive and wholesome barbarity. One could have fancied him at home among men of leisure and cultivated tastes, but he seemed out of place in a log-built ranch in the snow-wrapped wilderness swept by the bitter wind. Perhaps he realized it, for his voice was querulous as he said, "I wonder if you have forgotten, Nellie, that we were sitting warm and safe in England five years ago tonight."

Nellie Townshead looked up quickly over her sewing from the other side of the stove, and for a moment there was something akin to pain in her eyes. They were clear brown eyes, and it was characteristic that they almost immediately brightened into a smile, for while the girl's face resembled her father's in its refinement, there was courage in it in place of weariness.

"I am afraid I do, though I try not to, and am generally able," she said.

Townshead sighed. "The young are fortunate, for they can forget," he said. "Even that small compensation is, however, denied to me, while the man I called my friend is living in luxury on what was yours and mine. Had it been any one but Charters I might have borne it better, but it was the one man I had faith in who sent us out here to penury."

Townshead was wrong in one respect, for it was the weakness of an over-sensitive temperament which, while friends were ready to help him, had driven him to hide himself in Western Canada when, as the result of unwise speculations, financial disaster overtook him. His daughter, however, did not remind him of this, as some daughters would have done, though she understood it well enough, and a memory out of keeping with the patter of the snow and moaning of the wind

rose up before her as she looked into the twinkling stove. She could recall that night five years ago very well, for she had spent most of it amidst lights and music, as fresh and bright herself as the flowers that nestled against her first ball dress. It was a night of triumph and revelation, in which she had first felt the full power of her beauty and her sex, and she had returned with the glamour of it all upon her to find her father sitting with his head in his hands at a table littered with business papers. His face had frightened her, and it had never wholly lost the look she saw upon it then, for Townshead was lacking in fibre, and had found that a fondness for horses and some experience of amateur cattle-breeding on a small and expensive scale was a very poor preparation for the grim reality of ranching in Western Canada.

Presently his daughter brushed the memories from her, and stood, smiling at the man, straight and willowy in her faded cotton dress with a partly finished garment in her hands, which frost and sun had not wholly turned rough and red.

"Your coffee will be getting cold. Shall I put it on the stove?" she said.

Townshead made a little grimace. "One may as well describe things correctly, and that is chickory," he said. "Still, you may warm it if it pleases you, but I might point out that, indifferent as it is, preserved milk which has gone musty does not improve its flavour."

The girl laughed a little, though there was something more pathetic than heartsome in her merriment. "I am afraid we shall have none to-morrow unless Mr. Seaforth gets through," she said. "I suppose you have not a few dollars you could give me, father?"

"No," said Townshead, with somewhat unusual decisiveness; "I have not. You are always asking for dollars. What do you want them for?"

"Mr. Seaforth has packed our stores in for a long while, and we have paid him nothing," said the girl, while a little colour crept into her face.

Townshead made a gesture of weariness. "The young man seems willing to do it out of friendship for us, and I see no reason why we should not allow him, unless he presumes upon the trifling service," he said. "To do him justice, however, he and his comrade have always shown commendable taste."

The girl smiled a little, for considering their relative positions in a country where a man takes his station according to his usefulness the word "presume" appeared incongruous. "Still, I should prefer not to be in their debt," she said.

"Then we will free ourselves of the obligation with the next remittance Jack sends in," said Townshead impatiently.

The girl's face grew troubled. "I am afraid that will not be for some little time," she said. "Poor Jack. You surely remember he is lying ill?"

"It is especially inconvenient just now," said Townshead querulously. "It has also been a sore point with me that a son of mine should hire himself out as a labourer. I am sorry I let him go, the more so because the work upon the ranch is

getting too much for me."

Nellie Townshead said nothing, though she sighed as she pictured the young lad, who had been stricken by rheumatic fever as a result of toiling waist-deep in icy, water, lying uncared for in the mining camp amidst the snows of Caribou. She did not, however, remind her father that it was she who had in the meanwhile done most of the indispensable work upon the ranch, and Townshead would not in any case have believed her, for he had a fine capacity for deceiving himself.

In place of it she spread out some masculine garments about the stove and coloured a trifle when her father glanced at her inquiringly. "The creek must be running high and Mr. Alton and his partner will be very wet," she said. "I am warming a few of Jack's old things for them. They cannot go back to Somasco to-night, you know."

"I confess that it did not occur to me," said Townshead languidly. "No, I suppose one could scarcely expect them to, and we shall have to endure their company."

A faint sparkle that had nothing to do with laughter crept into the girl's eyes, for there were times when her father tried her patience. "I wonder if it occurred to you that we shall probably starve to-morrow unless Mr. Alton, who is apparently not to be paid for it, makes what must be a very arduous march to-night?" she said.

"I'm afraid it did not," said Townshead, with a fine unconcern. "I think you understand, my dear, that I leave the commissariat to you, and you have a way of putting things which jars upon one occasionally."

A little trace of colour crept into the girl's cheek, but it faded again as she sat down beside the stove. Still, now and then she pricked her fingers with the needle, which she had not done before, and finally laid down the fabric and laughed softly. "There is," she said, "something distinctly humorous in the whole position."

"You," said her father, "had always a somewhat peculiar sense of humour."

"Well," said his daughter with a slight quiver of her lips, "I feel that I must either cry or laugh to-night. Do you know there is scarcely enough for breakfast in the house, and that I am dreadfully hungry now?"

Townshead glanced at her reproachfully. "Either one or the other would be equally distasteful to me," he said.

The girl sighed, and turned away to thrust a few small billets into the stove. She chose them carefully, for the big box whose ugliness she had hidden by a strip of cheap printed cotton was almost empty. The hired man, seeing no prospect of receiving his wages, had departed after a stormy interview, and shortly after his son followed him. Townshead discovered that sawing wood was especially unsuited to his constitution. Then the girl increased the draught a little and endeavoured to repress a shiver. The house was damp for want of proper packing,

and the cold wind that came down from the high peaks moaned about it eerily. It was also very lonely, and the girl, who was young, felt a great longing for human fellowship.

Her father presently took up a book, and there was silence only broken by the rattle of loose shingles overhead and the soft thud against the windows of driving snow, while the girl sat dreaming over her sewing of the brighter days in far-off England which had slipped away from her for ever. Five years was not a very long time, but during it her English friends had forgotten her, and one who had scarcely left her side that memorable night had, though she read of the doings of his regiment now and then, sent her no word or token. A little flush crept into her cheek as, remembering certain words of his, she glanced at her reddened wrists and little toil-hardened hands. She who had been a high-spirited girl with the world at her feet then, was now one of the obscure toilers whose work was never done. Still, because it was only on rare occasions that work left her leisure to think about herself, it had not occurred to her that she had lost but little by the change. The hands that had once been soft and white were now firm and brown, the stillness of the great firs and cedars had given her a calm tranquillity in place of restless haste, and frost and sun the clear, warm-tinted complexion, while a look of strength and patience had replaced the laughter in her hazel eyes.

Suddenly, however, there was a trampling in the snow and a sound of voices, followed after, an interval by a knocking at the door. It swung open, and two whitened objects loaded with bags and packages strode into the room. The blast that came in with them set the lamp flickering, and sent a chill through the girl, but she rose with a smile when rancher Alton stood, a shapeless figure, with the moisture on his bronzed face, beside the stove.

"Take those things through into the kitchen, Charley," he said. "I think we've got them all, Miss Townshead. I hope, sir, you are feeling pretty well."

Townshead made some answer with a slight bend of his head, but Alton appeared a trifle dubious when the girl offered him hospitality.

"I'm afraid the beasts are used up, or I wouldn't think of it," he said.

Nellie Townshead's eyes twinkled as she glanced at him. "Could you not have put it in another way?" she said.

Alton laughed, and brushed his fingers across the top of the stove. "Well, it doesn't sound quite right, but after all the meaning's the great thing," he said. "This place isn't warm enough for you, Miss Nellie."

He turned and walked to the wood-box, and after glancing into it carefully straightened out its covering. Then he strode towards the door, and stopped a moment before he opened it. "Excuse!" he said simply. "No, don't you worry; I know just where the saw and lantern are, and Charley, who comes from the old country, can talk to you for me."

He went out in another moment, but the fact that he was very weary did not

escape the attention of the girl, who also noticed the absence of any unnecessary questions or explanations. Alton was, she knew already, one who did things the better because he did them silently. Still, it was Seaforth whom, when nobody observed her, her eyes rested most upon.

It was half an hour before the former returned with a load of scented firewood upon his back, and, saying nothing, filled the box with it, packing each piece where it best fitted deliberately but swiftly; then he passed through the room into an adjoining one, and returned attired picturesquely in Jack Townshead's overalls, which were distinctly too small for him. By this time supper was ready, and Seaforth, also dressed in borrowed garments, seated at the table, but though Miss Townshead had not lost the stamp of refinement she brought with her from England. and her father was dignified and precise, Alton showed no embarrassment. He also listened patiently to Townshead's views on ranching and the mining prospects of that region, though he was already looked up to as a master of the former industry, and contrived meanwhile that the girl made a good meal instead of attending to him. When it was finished he unfolded a carefully wrapped up packet, and took an envelope out of it, though Miss Townshead noticed that several others he laid down were crumpled and wet.

"Here is a letter for you," he said.

He glanced at the girl questioningly as she took it up, and fingered one of the envelopes upon the table. "Excuse?" he said.

Nellie Townshead smiled and nodded, and then, knowing that the communication handed her was of no importance, watched him covertly as he tore open a long blue envelope. There were documents inside it, and the man's fingers shook a little as he spread out one of them. Then bewildered astonishment crept into his eyes, and was replaced by a flash of something very like anger, after which his face grew suddenly impassive, and he thrust the documents all together into his pocket.

"Get up, Charley, and bring the tray along," he said.

Miss Townshead glanced at him sharply. "What do you wish to do?" she said.

"Wash up," said Alton simply. "I don't know how you fix these things in England, but this is a good Canadian custom. Stir around, Charley."

"But," said the girl, "you don't know where the things are."

"Well," said Alton, smiling, "I figure I can find them."

He laid the cups and dishes on the tray, gave it to Seaforth, and disappeared down a passage carrying the kettle, but not before Miss Townshead had noticed that while his comrade, who had apparently been used to the smoother side of life in England, displayed some awkwardness, everything the big rancher did seemed appropriate, and, because removing plates is not a man's task, she wondered at it. They came back presently, and by that time the girl, who had opened some of the packages, held a roll of fabric upon her knee.

“If you can find a splash anywhere I’ll forfeit a dollar. Charley’s good at mopping up,” said Alton gravely. “I’m afraid that stuff’s a little wet, but it was the Cayuse’s fault. He started in kicking and burst the rope, you see.”

“It would have been wetter if it had gone into the lake,” said Seaforth.

“The lake?” said the girl.

Seaforth nodded. “Yes,” he said. “It was on the Tyee trail the pony commenced kicking.”

The girl looked up sharply, and there was a subdued brightness in her eyes, for she had more than once shivered when leading her horse along that perilous trail. Alton felt for his comrade’s leg under the table and kicked it grievously.

“There wasn’t any trouble, and the snow was soft,” said he. “You’re going to make a dress of that stuff, Miss Nellie?”

“Yes,” said the girl. “I could, however, wish the stuff was better.”

Alton smiled gravely. “Of course!” he said. “Still, it don’t count for much. You would look like a picture in anything.”

Nellie Townshead glanced at him sharply, and for a moment there was a faint sparkle in her eyes, for she had a trace of temper.

“Whatever made you say that?” said she.

Alton laughed. “I really don’t quite know. I just felt I had to,” he said with a naive simplicity. “I wouldn’t have done it if I had thought it would vex you.”

After this he listened while his comrade talked—and Seaforth on occasion could talk gracefully—until at last he said, “England’s not so very big, Miss Nellie. I wonder if you know a place called Carnaby.”

“Yes,” said the girl. “I once went to see rather a fine old hall there.”

“Carnaby Grange?” said Alton quietly.

“Yes,” said the girl with a trace of curiosity. “We spent some little time in the grounds. They lie deep in the woods, and there is a famous rose garden.”

“Yes,” said Alton. “All kinds of roses. And the old place? Tell me about it!”

“Is very picturesque,” said the girl. “It looked quiet and grey, and almost stately under its ivy that autumn day, but I could scarcely describe it you. You have nothing like it in Canada.”

“No,” said Alton gravely. “I have seen nothing like it in Canada. But wasn’t there a lake?”

The girl glanced at him curiously. “There was,” she said. “I remember it lay shining before us between the woods. It was very beautiful, quieter and calmer than our lakes in Canada.”

A slight flush crept through the bronze in Alton’s face, which grew a trifle grim, and a light into his eyes. “There is a lake at Somasco where you can see the white peaks lie shining, and the big Wapiti come down to drink,” he said. “There are cedars and redwoods about it which except for a few in California, haven’t their equal in the world, but there’s nothing about that lake or valley that’s quiet or

calm. It's wild and great and grand. No. They've nothing of that kind in the old country. Are not Abana and Pharfar better than all the waters of Israel?"

"Apposite!" said Townshead. "You apparently read the Scriptures?"

"Sometimes," said Alton simply. "They get hold of me. Those old fellows went right down to the bed rock of human nature back there in Palestine, and it strikes me there's no great difference in that between now and then."

"When," said Townshead smiling, "I was a King in Babylon."

"No," said Alton reflectively. "You're a little late on time. The Christian slave don't quite fit in."

Townshead glanced at him sharply, and said nothing, for the rancher had once or twice already somewhat astonished him.

"Well," said Alton, "tell me, Miss Nellie, were the lilies where the ashes hung over the lake? I want to know all about Carnaby."

The girl seemed somewhat thoughtful, and a trifle astonished, but she made the best use of her memory, and Alton listened gravely. "Yes," he said. "I seem to see it. The rose garden on the south side, the big lawn, and the lake. There's a little stream on the opposite side of it that comes down through the fern from the big beech wood."

"But," said the girl, "how could you know that?"

"I think I must have dreamt it," said Alton gravely. "Or perhaps my father told me. He used to talk of Carnaby, and I feel I know it well."

The girl stared at him in her wonder. "But what is Carnaby to you?" she said.

Alton rose up, and stood still a moment, somewhat grim in face. "It should have been my father's, and now when I don't know that I want it, I think it's mine," he said. "Anyway, I'm kind of tired, and I think I'll turn in. Excuse me."

He went out, and Nellie Townshead glanced at his comrade. "Do you know what he means?" she said.

Seaforth smiled and shook his head. "I've never seen Harry taken that way before," he said. "Still, we'll hope he'll be better to-morrow. He has been through a good deal to-day."

Miss Townshead did not appear contented, but she changed the topic. "Then what did you mean when you spoke about the dress packet?"

"I'll tell you," said Seaforth, "if you don't tell Harry. Well, when the packet slipped down to the edge of the big drop I'm not sure that the price of two ranches would have induced most men to follow it."

"But why did Mr. Alton go?" said the girl, with an expression which was not quite the one the man had expected to see in her face.

Seaforth smiled. "He may have fancied you wanted it. Anyway, Harry is a little obstinate occasionally, and when a thing looks difficult he can't resist attempting it. In the language of my adopted country that's the kind of man he is. Now I think I had better go after him, because I fancy he wants soothing after that

last speech of his.”

CHAPTER III
HARRY THE TEAMSTER

The sun was on the hill slopes, and there was a dazzling glare of snow, when Miss Alice Deringham stood with her travelling dress fluttering about her on the platform of the observation car as the Pacific express went thundering down a valley of British Columbia. The dress, which was somewhat dusty, had cost her father a good deal of money, and the hat that was sprinkled with cinders had come from Paris; while the artistic simplicity of both had excited the envy of the two Winnipeg ladies who, having failed to make friends with Miss Deringham during the journey, now sat watching her disapprovingly in a corner of the car. The girl was of a type as yet not common in Western Canada, reserved, quietly imperious, and annoyingly free from any manifestation of enthusiasm. She had also listened languidly to their most racy stories with a somewhat tired look in her eyes.

They were, however, fine eyes of a violet blue, and gold hair with a warmer tinge in it clustered about the broad white forehead, while the rest of the girl's face was refined in its modelling, if a trifle cold in expression and colouring. Miss Deringham was also tall, and as she stood with one little hand on the rail and the other on the brim of the hat the wind would have torn away from her, her pose displayed a daintily-proportioned figure. The girl was, however, as oblivious of her companions as she was of the dust, and her eyes were at last keen with wonder. She had seen nothing which resembled the panorama that unrolled itself before her as the great mountain locomotives sped on through the primeval wilderness, and the wild beauty of it left a deeper mark on her because her Canadian journey had been more or less a disappointment.

Alice Deringham had tasted of the best that England had to offer in the shape of sport and scenery, art and music, and had grown a little tired of it all; while, when her father had announced his intention of crossing the Canadian Dominion, partly on an affair of business and partly for the benefit of his health, she had gladly accompanied him in the hope of seeing something new. Deringham was a promoter and director of English companies, but his daughter having the fine disdain for anything connected with finance which occasionally characterizes those who have never felt the lack of money, asked him a few questions concerning one object of his journey. She only knew that the Carnaby estate, which would in the usual course have reverted to her, had been unexpectedly willed to the son of a man its late owner had disinherited, on conditions. The man, it appeared, was dead, and Deringham desired to see whether any understanding or compromise could be arrived at with the one son he had left behind in Western

Canada.

To become the mistress of Carnaby Hall would have pleased Alice Deringham, but, as she had already realized there was no great hope of that, she had prepared to enjoy her Canadian journey. It had, however, fallen short of her expectations. Ontario reminded her of southern Scotland, and there was nothing to impress one who had seen the Highlands when the cars ran into the confusion of rock and forest, lake and river, along the Superior shore. Winnipeg in no way appealed to her, and she grew weary as they swept out past straggling wooden towns into the grass lands of the West.

The towns rose stark from the prairie in unsoftened ugliness, and there was nothing to stir the imagination in the great waste of sun-bleached grass. Day by day, while the dust whirled by them, and the gaunt telegraph posts came up out of the far horizon and sank into the east, they raced across the wide levels. The red dawns burned behind them, the sunsets flamed ahead, and still there was only dust and grass, chequered here and there with bands of stubble, while driving grit and ugliness were the salient features of the little stations they stopped at.

Miss Deringham had read enough to learn that pistol and bandolier had long gone out of fashion in Western Canada, where, indeed, they had rarely formed a necessary portion of the plainsman's attire, but she had expected a little vivid colour and dash of romance. The stock-riders she saw at the station were, however, for the most part dress in faded jean, and many of them appeared to speak excellent English, while the wheat-growers rode soberly in dusty and dilapidated wagons. Still the romance was there, though in place of the swashbuckling cavalier she found only quiet, slowly-spoken men, with patience most plainly stamped upon their sun-darkened faces. Their hands were hard with the grip of the bridle and plough-stilt in place of the rifle, and the struggle they waged was a slow and grim one against frost and drought and adverse seasons.

There was, however, a transformation when she awoke one morning and found the Rockies had been left behind, and they were roaring down through the passes of British Columbia. This was a new, and apparently unfinished, world, a land of tremendous mountains, leagues of forests, such as her imagination had never pictured, and untrodden heights of never-melting snow. Glacier, blue lake, river droning through shadowy canons, rushed by, and the glamour of it crept into the heart of the girl, until as they swept down into the valley with a river two thousand feet below, she felt she was at last in touch with something strange and new.

Presently the hoot of the whistle came ringing up the pass, wheels screamed discordantly, and the pines below flitted towards them a trifle more slowly. Then, as they swung rocking round the face of a crag and a cluster of wooden buildings rose to view, Deringham came out upon the platform. He was a tall, slightly-built man, with a pallid face and keen but slightly shifty eyes, and bore the unmistakable stamp of the Englishman.

“That must be our alighting-place, and I am not sure how we are to get on,” he said. “It is, I understand, a long way to Somasco, and when we get there I really do not know whether we shall find any accommodation suitable for you. It might have been better if you had gone on to our friends, the Fords, at Vancouver.”

Alice Deringham laughed a little. “I don’t think you need worry. Mr. Alton will, no doubt, take us in,” she said. “A little primitive barbarity would not be unpleasant as a novelty.”

A trace of something very like anger crept into Deringham’s eyes. It was not very perceptible, for he seldom showed much of what he felt, but his daughter noticed it. “It is somewhat unfortunate that we shall probably have to avail ourselves of the young man’s hospitality,” he said. “You understand, my dear, that he is a kinsman of your own, and, unless he can be persuaded to relinquish his claim, the owner of Carnaby. Still, I have hopes of coming to terms with him. The charges upon the land are very burdensome.”

Alice Deringham’s face grew a trifle scornful. “You will do your best,” she said. “The thought of one of these half-civilized axemen living at Carnaby is almost distressful to me. In fact, I feel a curious dislike to the man even before I have seen him.”

There was another hoot of the whistle, a little station grew larger down the track, and here and there a wooden house peeped out amidst the slowly-flitting trees. Then the cars stopped with a jerk, and Miss Deringham stepped down from the platform. Her first glance showed her long ranks of climbing pines, with a great white peak silhouetted hard and sharp above them against the blue. Then she became conscious of the silver mist streaming ethereally athwart the sombre verdure from the river hollow, and that a new and pungent smell cut through the odours of dust and creosote which reeked along the track. It came from a cord of cedar-wood piled up close by, and she found it curiously refreshing. The drowsy roar of the river mingled with the panting of the locomotive pump, but there was a singular absence of life and movement in the station until the door of the baggage-car slid open, and her father sprang aside as her trunks were shot out on to the platform. A bag or two of something followed them, the great engines panted, and the dusty cars went on again, while it dawned upon Alice Deringham that her last hold upon civilization had gone, and she was left to her own resources in a new and somewhat barbarous land.

There were no obsequious porters to collect her baggage, which lay where it had alighted with one trunk gaping open, while a couple of men in blue shirts and soil-stained jeans leaned upon the neighbouring fence watching her with mild curiosity. Her father addressed another one somewhat differently attired who stood in the door of the office.

“There is a hotel here, but they couldn’t take you in,” said the man. “Party of timber-right prospectors came along, and they’re kind of frolicsome. They might

find you a berth on the verandah, but I don't know that it would suit the lady. It mixes things up considerable when you bring a woman."

Deringham glanced at his daughter, and the girl laughed. "Then is there any means of getting on to Cedar Valley?" she said.

The man slowly shook his head. "You might walk, but it's close on forty miles," he said. "Stage goes out on Saturday."

Deringham made a gesture of resignation. "I never walked forty miles at once in my life," he said. "Can you suggest anything at all? We cannot well live here on the platform until Saturday."

"No," said the man gravely. "I don't figure I could let you. Well, now I wonder if Harry could find room for you."

He shouted, and a man who was carrying a flour-bag turned his head and then went on again until he hove his load into a two-horse wagon, while Miss Deringham noticed that although the bag was stamped 140 lbs. the man trotted lightly across the metals and ballast with it upon his shoulders. Then he came in their direction, and she glanced at him with some curiosity as he stood a trifle breathless before them. He wore a blue shirt burst open at the neck which showed his full red throat, and somewhat ragged overalls. The brown hair beneath his broad felt hat was whitened with flour, and his bronzed face was red with the dust. Still he stood very straight, and it was a good face, with broad forehead and long, straight nose, while the effect of the solid jaw was mitigated by something in the shape of the mobile lips. The grey eyes were keen and steady until a sympathetic twinkle crept into them, and Miss Deringham felt that the man understood her position.

"Well," he said. "What's the difficulty?"

The station agent explained laconically, and the stranger gravely took off his battered hat. "My wagon's pretty full, but I can take you through," he said.

"It would be a favour," said Deringham, taking out a roll of bills. "I should, of course, be glad to recompense you for your trouble."

For a moment the man's eyes closed a trifle, then he laughed, and Miss Deringham noticed that there was nothing dissonant in his merriment. "Well," he said lightly, "there will be plenty time to talk of that. These are your things, miss?"

The girl nodded, and wondered when, heaving up the biggest trunk as though it weighed nothing at all, he laid it carefully in the wagon, because she remembered having to fee two hotel porters lavishly for handling it in Liverpool. He stopped, however, and glanced at the second one with a faint trace of embarrassment. It had burst open, and several folds of filmy fabric projected.

"My hands are floury. You might be able to shut it up," he said.

Miss Deringham stooped over the box that he might not see her face. It was merely the skirt of an evening dress which had displayed itself, but she had

guessed what the man was thinking, and remembering his excuse was not displeased with him. When the box was in the wagon she took out a dollar, and then for no special reason put it back again. The man was a bush teamster, but she did not feel equal to offering him a piece of silver. She swung herself up into the wagon with her foot in his hand, and wondered whether it could be by intent that he stood bare-headed while she did it. Then her father climbed in, and the man at the station laughed as he said, “What’s the odds, Harry, you don’t spill the whole freight on the dip to the ford?”

The teamster, who made no answer, shook the reins, and they went lurching over a horrible trail down the valley, while Miss Deringham delightedly breathed in the scent of the cedars and felt the lash of snow-chilled wind bring the blood to her face. She, however, wished that the bundle of straw which served as seat would not move about so much, and fancied her father would have been more comfortable had he not been menaced by a jolting piece of machinery. Their progress was rudely interrupted presently, for the teamster standing upright reined the horses in on their haunches, and the girl saw a line of loaded ponies straggling up the winding trail. One of the men who plodded behind them glanced at the driver of the wagon with an ironical grin, and Miss Deringham saw a warmer colour creep into the sun-darkened cheek. This was, she fancied, a man with a temper.

“Now,” he said, and then stopped suddenly. The other man’s grin became more pronounced. “You can start in,” he said. “We’re not bashful.”

The teamster said nothing, but a faint twinkle replaced the anger in his eye, when as they started again Miss Deringham glanced at him questioningly. “That,” he said, “wasn’t quite fair to me. They knew I couldn’t talk back, you see.”

Miss Deringham laughed, and when an hour or two later he pulled the horses up beside a lake and made one or two alterations to enhance her comfort, glanced at him again.

“Did you come out here from England?” said she.

The man’s face grew a trifle grim. “No,” he said gravely. “Whatever could have made you think that of me?”

There were reasons why the girl could not explain, and the man stretched out an arm with a little proud gesture that became him curiously. “I am a Canadian first and last,” said he. “Isn’t this country good enough for anybody?”

Miss Deringham was forced to admit that it apparently was. A blue lake gleaming steely blue in the sunlight stretched away before them between the towering firs, and beyond it lay an entrancing vision of great white peaks.

“You do not like England, then?” said she.

The teamster smiled a little. “That,” he said, “is not a fair question to ask me. You and your father live there, don’t you?”

Miss Deringham felt that she had trespassed, but was astonished that this

teamster should have wit enough to silence her with a compliment. She also decided that he should not have the opportunity again.

They went on, winding along steep hillsides, splashing through sparkling rivers, and lurching through the dim shadow of the bush, until when the saffron sunset flamed along the peaks they came to the head of a long declivity. On the one hand the snow towered in awful white purity, on the other scattered firs sloped sharply down into a hollow until they were lost in the fleecy vapours that streamed athwart them. “Sit tight,” said the teamster. “It’s eight miles to Hobart’s ranch, and there’s no time to lose if we’re going to get in there to-night.”

He shook the reins, and the girl clutched the side of the wagon as she felt the lash of the wind and noticed how the firs rushed past. It was jolting horribly, and she was relieved when as the trail grew steeper she saw the man tightening his grip on the reins and heard the grating of the brake. It ceased suddenly, one of the horses stumbled, then flung up its head, and they were going down faster than ever, while the man had flung his shoulders back and was dragging at the reins. It dawned upon Miss Deringham that something had gone wrong and the team were running away.

There was now only white mist beneath them and the roar of water. Trees came whirling up out of it, rock and bush swept past, while now and then the wheels hung almost over the edge of the declivity, and the girl could look down upon the sombre firs in the haze below. After one glance, however, she felt that it would not be well for her to do so. Suddenly one of the horses stumbled again, and the teamster flung her father the reins. “Get hold,” he said. “Line’s in the trace-hook.”

He was over the front of the wagon next moment, and the girl gasped as she saw him crawl out with an arm across the back of one of the galloping horses and his knees on the pole. It looked horribly dangerous, and probably was, for the wagon was lurching furiously down the declivity. Then he leaned out and downwards over the horse, clawing at something desperately, and Miss Deringham would have shut her eyes if she could have done so. In place of it she stared fascinated at the clinging figure while the trees flashed past, until it was evident that the man had accomplished his task. How he got back she did not know, but he was once more on the driving-seat when his voice reached her breathlessly.

“Get a good hold. I’m going to put them at the hill when I can,” he said.

They swept on until the hillside sloped more gently on the one hand, and the teamster flung, himself backwards, dragging at the reins. The wagon, tilting, swung partly round, then there was a horrible lurching, and the lathered beasts were floundering up a slope, smashing down the undergrowth and fern, until the vehicle stopped suddenly with a crash. The man sprang down and Miss Deringham and her father lost no time in following him, while when at last the

team stood still trembling, he crawled out from under the wagon and turned to them.

"That brake never was much good," he said. "One of the beasts stumbling jerked the line into the hook there, and the fore-wheel beam gave out when we struck the tree. I'm most afraid we'll have to stop right here tonight!"

"But that, as you will realize, is quite impossible," said Deringham, glancing towards his daughter.

The man nodded. "It looks that way now, but you wait until I've fixed things up," said he. "Then if you feel like walking eight miles I'll go on with you."

The girl noticed the swift orderliness of all he did as she watched him take out the horses and tether them, tear down armfuls of cedar-twigs, and then pack them between some flour-bag's and the side of the wagon, over which he stretched a strip of waterproof sheeting. Then he made a fire, disappeared into the mist, and coming back with the kettle, strode into the bush again. In the meanwhile Deringham, looking into the wagon, pointed to the twigs.

"Do you think you could sleep there?" he said.

The girl glanced at the twigs. They looked soft and springy, and had a pleasant aromatic fragrance, while the covering sheet was thick.

"I know I could not walk eight miles," she said. "Where has our accomplished companion gone to?"

Deringham laughed. "To look for something for supper in the bush, I believe," he said. "I also fancy if there is anything eatable in the vicinity he will find it."

The snows above had lost their brilliancy, and it was dark below, when the teamster returned with several fine trout which he skewered upon a barberry stem. He also brought a deerhide bag from the wagon, and presently announced that supper was ready, while Alice Deringham, who long afterwards remembered that meal, enjoyed it considerably more than she would have believed herself capable of doing a few days earlier. She had travelled far in search of something new, and this was the first time she had tasted the biting green tea with the reek of the smoke about it from a blackened pannikin. Grindstone bread baked in a hole in the ground was also a novelty, and the crumbling flakes of salmon smoked by some Siwash Indian a delicacy, while she wondered if it was only the keen mountain air which made the flesh of the big trout so good, or whether it owed anything to skilful cookery.

There was also, by way of background, the glow of the fire flickering athwart the great columnar trunks which ran up into the dimness above her, and the cold glimmer of the snows with a pale star beyond them when the red flame sank, while the hoarse roar of an unseen river emphasized the silence. At first she felt there was something unreal and theatrical about it all. The light that blazed up and died, awful serenity of the snow, and the vast impenetrable shadows filled with profound silence, seemed all part of a fervidly-imagined spectacle; but as the

silence deepened and gained upon her the position was reversed, and she seemed to feel that this was the reality, the environment man was created for, and she, wrapped in the tinsel of civilization, out of place in the primeval wilderness. Her father, immaculate as ever in his travelling tweeds, with his lean, pallid face, also jarred upon the picture, and Harry the teamster, bronzed by frost and sun, with the stain of the soil upon him, alone a part of its harmonies. They seemed no longer harsh and barbaric, but vast and subtle, and she felt she must go back to the simplicity she had laid aside before she could grasp their meaning.

It was the man who first broke the silence. “I was wondering if you would like a cigar, sir?” he said.

Deringham glanced at the Indian-wrought case, which was singularly artistic, somewhat dubiously, but remembering that something was due to their host, drew a cigar out and lighted it. He said nothing for a minute, and then turned to the teamster.

“Wherever did you get cigars of that kind from? They are far better than any I could find in Winnipeg,” he said.

Miss Deringham noticed the man’s eyes close a trifle, and fancied that very little would call the steely sparkle she had seen when the pack-ponies blocked the trail into them.

“Well,” he said quietly, “a friend of mine sent them me, and I believe they came from Cuba. We don’t raise cigars of any kind in British Columbia.”

Miss Deringham saw her father’s face, and felt quietly amused. He could, she knew, assume a manner which went far to carry him smoothly through discontented share-holders’ meetings, but it seemed that the men who dwelt in the wilderness were at least as exigent as those who dwelt in London. Deringham, however, glanced at the speaker.

“The least said is often the soonest mended, but if you think——” he said.

The teamster laughed. “It should come from me, but the fact is I was worrying about that wagon and forgot,” he said. “Now, if there is anything I can tell you about this country.”

“I wonder,” said Alice Deringham, “whether you know Mr. Alton of Somasco.”

“Oh, yes,” said the man, with a little smile.

“You have worked for him possibly?” said the girl.

Harry the teamster nodded. “Considerably harder than I ever did for anybody else,” he said.

The next question required some consideration, and he appeared to ruminate over it. “You mean what kind of man he is?” he said. “Well, he’s not very much to look at, and there are a good many things he don’t know.”

“So I should have fancied,” said the girl, more to herself than the listener, and wondered whether it was an effect of the firelight or the curious twinkle had once

more flashed into his eyes. “You do not seem to like him?” she said.

The man looked into the fire. “The trouble is I know how mean he is,” he said.

“Mean?” said the girl. “That is niggardly?”

“No,” said Harry; “I don’t think he’s niggardly. It’s another word for low down in this country. You see he has always had to work hard for a living, and never had time to teach himself the nice little ways you folks have in England. He’s just a big rough rancher who has fought pretty toughly for his own hand, and that’s apt to take the gentleness out of a man, and make him what you would call coarse and brutal.”

The girl seemed to shiver. “Is there nothing to say on the other side?” she said.

“Well,” said the teamster reflectively, “I think he means well, and never took more than his right from any man, while there are people who would as soon have his word as its value in dollar bills.”

“You seem to know him suspiciously well,” said Miss Deringham sharply.

“I do,” said Harry simply, as he stood up. “Anyway, as well as most people. You know where I fixed your bed up, sir, when you want to turn in. There’s nothing in this bush, miss, that would hurt you.”

He stepped back into the shadows, and the camp seemed lonely without him, while as the girl shivered in the cold wind, Deringham glanced at her curiously.

“Well?” he said.

Then the red crept into his daughter’s cheeks and a sparkle Into her eyes. “It will take a very long time to get used to. I could almost hate the man,” she said,

“It is hard to lose one’s inheritance,” said Deringham dryly.

The flush grew a trifle plainer in his daughter’s cheek. “It is not the value of the land,” she said. “But think of such a man, a brutal, cattle-driving boor, ruling at Carnaby where my mother lived.”

“Still,” said Deringham, “the value is not inconsiderable, and Carnaby would have been yours some day.”

The girl made a gesture of impatience. “That is not my complaint,” she said. “I could have let it pass without bitterness to an Englishman who would have lived in it in accordance with the traditions of his race, but this man——”

“Will no doubt cut down the timber, open the fireclay pits, and desecrate the park with brickworks,” he said. “That is, unless he has convivial proclivities, and, finding himself ostracized, fills Carnaby with turf and billiard-room blacklegs.”

The girl ground her heel viciously into the mould. “Have you any reason for going into these details?” she said.

Deringham watched her closely. “I only wished you to understand the position, and to remember that you and I are both to some extent at the mercy of our rancher kinsman,” he said.

He left her presently to seek the couch the teamster had prepared for him, and Miss Deringham retired to the wagon. She found the bed of cedar-twigs

comfortable, but it was some time before she slept and dreamed that a stranger dressed in coarse blue jean was holding high revel in the Carnaby she loved. She was awakened by the howl of a wolf, and lay still shivering, until she saw the tall, dusky figure of the Canadian approach the fire and stand there as if on guard with the red light upon him. Then with a curious sense of security she went to sleep again.

CHAPTER IV
HALLAM OF THE TYEE

The morning was still and warm when the driver of the wagon pulled up his team where four trails met in the shadow of the bush. Miss Deringham had somewhat to her astonishment passed the night very comfortably and enjoyed the breakfast their companion provided. The bracing cold of sunrise, when all the bush was steeped in fragrance and a wonderful freshness came down from the snow, had also brought her a curious exhilaration, as well as a tinge of colour into her cheeks, and now she was sensible of a faint regret and irritation when the man glanced towards her deprecatingly.

"It would please me to drive you straight through to the settlement, but there's a load of things I want at Calhoun's up yonder," he said.

He pointed to a trail that turned off sharply, and the girl glanced at her father somewhat blankly. "And what are we to do?" said she.

"Well," said the man, "you can wait here until Barscombe comes along. He'll be riding in to the settlement presently, and would be glad to take you for a dollar or two."

"But we might have to wait a long time," said the girl with a trace of imperiousness. "It would suit us considerably better to go on with you."

"Sorry!" said the man gravely. "I can't take you. Calhoun's a busy man, and he'll be waiting up at the ranch for me. I told him I was coming."

There was now no doubt about the colour in Miss Deringham's face. Few of her wishes bad been denied her hitherto, and most of the men she had met had been eager to do her bidding, while the scarcely qualified refusal of this one came as a painful astonishment. The fact that she should be left in the lonely forest to avoid keeping some rude rancher waiting was distinctly exasperating.

Deringham, however, smiled a little as he took a wallet from his pocket. "I can understand it, because I am also a busy man when I'm at home," he said. "It is a question of the value of your time and Mr. Calhoun's apparently?"

Though he possibly did not realize it Deringham's tone was a trifling condescending, and there was something in it which suggested that he believed anything could be bought with money. He was, however, a little astonished when the man regarded him gravely out of eyes that closed a trifle.

"That's just where you're wrong," said he. "If I could have taken you on to save the lady waiting it would have pleased me. As it is, I can't, you see."

He said nothing more, but dismounting pulled the boxes out of the wagon and laid some travelling wraps upon one of them, while Miss Deringham affected not

to see what he was doing. “And how long will it be before Barscombe passes?” said she.

“It can’t be more than two hours,” said the teamster quietly. “All you have to do is to sit there and wait for him.”

He took off his broad hat when the others alighted, and Miss Deringham noticed there was a trace of courtliness in his simplicity. Then he strode past her father, who was taking something out of his wallet, and swung himself lightly into the wagon. He spoke to the team, there was a creak and rattle, and next moment the vehicle was lurching down the trail. Deringham stood still a moment, his fingers inside the wallet and mild wonder in his eyes, and then smiled a little as his daughter turned towards him. There was a faint pink flush of anger in her cheeks.

“The dollar does not appear to retain its usual influence in this part of Canada,” he said dryly. “Possibly, however, the man was too embarrassed by your evident displeasure to remember his hire.”

Miss Deringham saw the twinkle in her father’s eyes and laughed a little. “I don’t think he was,” she said. “Had that been the case one could have forgiven him more easily. Well, I wonder how long Barscombe will keep us waiting.”

Deringham made a whimsical gesture of resignation. “In the meantime I notice that our late conductor has arranged a comfortable seat for you,” he said.

The girl sat down, and looked about her. It was very still in the bush, and the sound of running water drifted musically out of the silence. From somewhere in the distance there also came a curious drumming which she did not know then was made by an axe, but it presently ceased, and the song of the river rose alone in long drowsy pulsations. In front of and behind her stretched the rows of serried trunks which had grown to vastness of girth and stateliness with the centuries, and the girl, who was of quick perceptions, felt instinctively the influence of their age and silence. There was, it seemed, something intangible but existent in this still land of shadow which reacted upon her pleasantly after the artificial gaieties and glitter of surface civilization. Her impatience and irritation seemed to melt, and the time slipped by, until she was almost drowsy when with an increasing rattle another wagon came jolting down the trail.

Its driver pulled up, and regarded them with placid astonishment, but he was amenable to the influence of Deringham’s wallet, and they took their places in the vehicle. There was nothing remarkable about the man, and he ruminated gravely when as they stopped to let the horses drink Deringham asked him a question concerning their late companion.

“It might have been Thomson,” he said. “A big man, kind of solid and homely?”

“No,” said Miss Deringham reflectively. “I should scarcely describe him as homely.”

"Well," said the other, "if you told me the kind of wagon I might guess at him."

Deringham described the vehicle as well as he was able, and the stranger nodded. "That's Jimmy Thomson's outfit all right," said he. "What did he charge you?"

Miss Dillingham laughed. "It is curious that he charged us nothing," said she.

"Well," said the stranger gravely, "that was blame unlike Jimmy. There's only one man in this country would do that kind of thing, and as he hasn't a wagon to fit what you're telling me, it couldn't he him."

Miss Deringham had purposed asking who the man in question was, but the driver started his team just then, and an hour later drove them into the sleepy settlement and carried their boxes into Horton's hotel. He gravely invited Deringham to drink with him, and appearing mildly astonished went about his business when the latter declined. Deringham smiled at his daughter.

"There are, as one might expect, men of somewhat different type in this country, but I prefer the first one," said he.

Miss Deringham also fancied that she did so, though she did not admit it, and that evening was made acquainted with yet another and more different one. Horton as usual served supper at six o'clock, and all his guests were expected to partake of reasty pork, potatoes, flapjacks, green tea and fruits at the same table. To this he made no exception, and would not have done so for the premier, and when a small company of axemen and free prospectors filed in Deringham and his daughter took their places amidst the rest.

The room was long and bare, boarded with rough-sawn cedar, and furnished chiefly by the benches that ran down either side of the plain table; but the aromatic smell of the wood was stronger than that of stale tobacco, and the company avoided more than quietly respectful glances at the daintily-dressed Englishwoman.

They were quiet men with grave and steady eyes, and though they ate as if feeding was a serious business, and they had no time to waste, there was nothing in their converse that jarred upon the girl. Indeed, she saw one break off in a story whose conclusion she fancied might not have pleased her when a comrade glanced at him deprecatingly. In another ten minutes they filed out again, and Deringham smiled at his daughter. "What do you think of them?" he said.

The girl laughed. "Ostriches," she said. "Of course, I guess your thoughts. You were wondering if my kinsman resembles them. How long do we stay here?"

Deringham glanced at her covertly, and noticed the faint sparkle in her eyes and the scornful set of her lips. "That depends," he said, "partly upon our kinsman's attitude, for if he offered us hospitality we should probably stay a little. You were also right, my dear, as usual."

The girl's pose grew a trifle more rigid, and the fingers of one hand seemed to

close vindictively. “It is grotesque—almost horrible, isn’t it?” she said.

Her father nodded. “It might be,” he said. “Still, as you know, the Carnaby affairs are involved, and there is a possibility of contesting his claim under the somewhat extravagant will. It is not altogether improbable that I shall find means of persuading him to stay here with his cows and pigs.”

Deringham slightly accentuated part of the sentence, and again a faint tinge of colour crept into the face of the girl and vindictiveness into her eyes, for she understood him. The man who had on his deathbed bequeathed Carnaby to his grandson had driven out the young man’s father years ago, and approaching dissolution had possibly somewhat clouded his faculties when he made the will. Deringham, who had married into the Alton family, and figured as a legatee, was, with the exception of the disinherited, the nearest of kin, and it had been generally expected that Carnaby would fall to his daughter; but perhaps in an endeavour to treat both sides fairly, its dying owner had, in the face of his lawyer’s protests, inserted one clause which, for financial reasons, rendered a second union between the houses of Alton and Deringham distinctly advisable. There was, however, a high spirit in the girl, and she looked at her father steadily.

“But you were left the money, or most of it?” she said.

“Yes,” said Deringham grimly. “I was left the money.”

The girl asked nothing further, for there was something in the man’s face which warned her not to press that subject. She knew that her father had long acted as financial adviser to the late owner of Carnaby, but it was not astonishing that Deringham had not told her he had exceeded the discretion allowed him, and been singularly unfortunate in his speculations.

She rose, and a man who like themselves had finished his meal leisurely followed them outside into the verandah. He smiled as he drew out a chair for the girl, and then sat down opposite her father with a card in his hand.

“Glad to meet you, Mr. Deringham. I’ll introduce myself,” said he.

Deringham took the card handed him, and glanced with an air of quiet indifference at the stranger, while his daughter looked apparently straight past him towards the climbing pines. Nevertheless, she had seen the man, and was not pleased with him. He had a somewhat fleshy face, beady black eyes with a boldness in them that was more akin to insolence than courage, and a full-lipped, mobile mouth. His dress was correct enough, though he wore a somewhat ample ring with a diamond in it, and his watchchain was too heavy and prominent, but there was a suggestion of coarseness about him. Her father, leaning forward in his chair with an air of languid curiosity, the card in his slender fingers, appeared his antithesis, and yet the girl fancied there was a resemblance in the expression of the two faces. She also felt her dislike for the stranger increased when she saw for the first time the look of greed and cunning in his face reflected in that of her father. She had hitherto only pictured him as a skilful financier, but now she saw qualities

she had never suspected in him revealed as by a daring caricature.

"Willard Hallam," Deringham read aloud. "Hallam and Vose. Land and mining agents. Advances made on mineral claims."

"Yes," said the stranger, smiling. "That's me."

Deringham made no comment, but laid the card down beside him. "I wonder," he said indifferently, "how you came to know me."

The chilling evenness of his voice seemed to irritate the other man, and Alice Deringham was conscious of a faint amusement as she glanced at them. Deringham in his tweed travelling attire, which, worn with apparent carelessness, seemed to hang with every fold just where it should be, was wholly at his ease, and there was a trace of half-expressed toleration in his thin, finely-cut face, while Hallam appeared to become coarse and embarrassed by comparison. He probably did not feel so, for diffidence of any kind is not common in the West, but he may have realized that in any delicate fencing the advantage would lie with Deringham. Both, producing nothing and living upon the toil of their fellows, played the same game, but, while the stakes and counters are very similar, one played it in Vancouver and the other in London, where a more subtle finesse is demanded from the players.

Hallam, however, smiled. "I don't know that you will be pleased when I tell you, but this should explain things," he said. "Of course, since your company took hold out here I have heard of you."

Deringham took the Colonial Journal handed him, glanced down a paragraph, and passed it to his daughter. "Your maid!" he said. "I fancied it was a mistake to part with her, my dear. It is evident she has not gone home."

Alice Deringham unconsciously drew herself up a trifle, as her eyes ran down the column. It was headed "Another missing heir," and ran: "We are getting used to having our railroad-shovelling and trail-cutting done by scions of the British aristocracy, and seldom ask them what they did in the old country so long as they behave themselves decently in this one. Twice recently, as mentioned in these columns, the successor to an English property of some value was discovered, in the one case peddling oranges, and in the other digging a rancher's ditches, while now we have another instance in the Somasco valley. It appears that long ago there was a family quarrel at Carnaby, England, and though we do not know what it was all about, the owner of what we understand is an encumbered estate turned out his son, who had the good sense to come out to this country, where he did pretty well. He died and left a son, Mr. Henry Alton, well known in the Somasco district, who appears to be a credit to the country which took his father in. The owner of Carnaby dying later, left the ancestral property to him, and, as in this case there does not seem to be a wicked uncle, Mr. Deringham, the next of kin and a distinguished London financier who has, we believe, had some dealings in local mines, has come out to look for him. Mr. Alton of Somasco will probably stop

right where he is if he is the sensible man his neighbours seem to think him."

"That's correct?" said Hallam, glancing at Deringham.

"I knew who you were when I saw you."

"Yes," said Deringham. "The taste is questionable, but I can't deny its comparative accuracy."

"Then," said Hallam, "Alton stands between you and this Carnaby property?"

"I believe so," said Deringham quietly.

"It's a big estate?" said Hallam, and Alice Deringham, who knew his capabilities, wondered when her father would effectually silence this presumptuous stranger. In the meanwhile he, however, showed no intention of doing so.

"No," he said languidly. "It is a small one, and heavily in debt. I presume you know rancher Alton by the interest you show in him?"

"Yes," said Hallam, "and I don't like him."

Deringham scarcely glanced at his daughter, but she realized that her presence was not especially desired, and when she rose and went back into the building her father glanced steadily at Hallam.

"I wonder why you told me that," he said.

Hallam laughed. "Well, I generally talk straight, and I feel like that," he said. "Now, they don't keep anything that doesn't burn a hole in you here, and I've a bottle of English whisky. Don't see any reason why you shouldn't take a drink with me?"

"No," said Deringham indifferently. "I am, however, a somewhat abstemious man."

Hallam went into the building and returned with a cigar-case and a bottle. The contents of both were good, and Deringham sat languidly glancing over the curling smoke towards the glimmering snow. It towered white and cold against a pale green, shining high above climbing pines and dusky valley, while the fleecy mist crept higher and higher athwart the serried waves of trees that fell to the river hollow. Alice Deringham saw it, and drinking in the wonderful freshness that came down from the peaks and permeated the silence of the valley, realized a little of that great white rampart's awful serenity. She also wondered vacantly what the two men on the verandah were talking about; but in this she was wrong, for Hallam, overcharged with Western vivacity, was talking, and her father waiting quietly.

"No," said the former, returning to the subject with an affectation of naive directness. "I don't like Alton, and I figure he don't like me. Nothing wrong with the man that I know of, but I'm not fond of anybody who gets in my way, and Alton of Somasco has taken out timber rights all over the valley where we're running the Tyee. He got in with his claim a day or two ahead of me."

"A capable man?" said Deringham quietly.

"Oh, yes," said the other. "He's capable, so far as he sees, but the trouble is he doesn't see quite far enough. Now, there's not room enough for two men with notions round about Somasco, and a one-horse rancher can't fight men with money, so Alton's got hold of a good deal bigger contract than he can carry through. Anyway, now I've told you what I think of your relation, you can if you feel like that let right go of me."

Deringham smiled a little. "This," he said, "is the best whisky I have tasted in Canada."

Hallam laughed. "Well," he said, "I'm glad I met you, especially as you'll no doubt stop here a little, and size up the mineral resources of the country. There's lots of information lying round that should be useful to you. Anyway, you made a big mistake when you took up the Peveril. Dropped a good many dollars that time, didn't you?"

Deringham's face grew a trifle grim. "As you probably know just what the mistake cost us there is no use in me denying it," said he.

"Well," said Hallam sympathetically, "one can't always come out on top, and if you're stopping down at Vancouver I may be of some use to you, and you to me. If you'll come up to-morrow I'll show you the Tyee, and I've something better still up the valley."

"I'm sorry," said Deringham indifferently; "I'm going through to Somasco!"

Hallam glanced at him steadily. "Of course you are," said he. "Well, I've told you nothing Alton doesn't know, and I've letters to answer. You'll excuse me?"

Deringham rose with him, and strolling along the verandah together they stopped a moment at the door, close by where Alice Deringham sat at an open window. It was growing dark now, but the last of the afterglow was flung down into their faces by the snow, and it seemed to the girl that the resemblance between them had grown stronger. Her father's appeared a trifle less refined in its chiselling than it had been, and there was a look which did not please her in his eyes. It suggested cupidity and cunning in place of intellectuality.

"Well," said Hallam, "you'll call on me at Vancouver anyway, and it's possible we may be some use to each other."

The hint of a confidence or understanding between them which the man's tone conveyed irritated the girl, but she saw that her father did not resent it. "Yes," he said. "If I think I can benefit by your co-operation in any way I will not fail to let you know."

Hallam went in, and Deringham leaned upon the verandah balustrade smoking tranquilly while the shadows that left the rolling mist behind crept higher and higher up the climbing pines until at last they touched and smeared into dimness the ethereal snow. Then the girl rose with a shiver and turned towards her father as Horton lighted the big lantern at the door. Deringham's face was, she fancied, a trifle haggard.

“I wonder why you have borne with that man so long,” she said.

Deringham smiled a little. “There are many kinds of men, and presumably all of them are useful in their place,” said he.

CHAPTER V
THE HEIR OF CARNABY

The sun was dipping towards the black ridge of firs on the shoulder of a hill when Deringham and his daughter rode down the winding trail into the Somasco valley. The girl gazed about her with eager curiosity, but the man who rode in silence apparently saw nothing, and it was only when his horse stumbled into a rut that he glanced round for a moment abstractedly. Deringham had much to occupy his mind just then, for while it was generally understood that he had made the journey at a physician's recommendation, he had reasons for choosing British Columbia to recuperate in.

He still retained control of the finances of Carnaby with the concurrence of the trustees, who were country gentlemen of no business capacity, and as it suited the family lawyer to remain on good terms with him nothing more than a very perfunctory account of his stewardship had been demanded. The late owner of Carnaby had been a man of simple tastes and unbending pride, who had a faint contempt for his kinsman, and refrained from inquiries respecting finances while there was no stoppage of supplies. There were one or two men who suspected that Deringham had profited by his relative's supineness, but it was only a vague surmise, and they did not know that the legacy bequeathed him had little more than an apparent value. Deringham had been unfortunate in his latest ventures, and could foresee considerable difficulty in extricating himself from a distinctly unpleasant position if the new heir decided to take immediate possession of his property. The latter had, however, shown no great desire to do so, and Deringham had accepted a commission from the trustees to ascertain his intentions.

A company of which he was one of the promoters had also invested somewhat unhappily in Western mines, and Deringham, who purposed to see what could be done with the depreciated securities, intended that the expenses of his sojourn in the mountain province should be borne by the shareholders. He had acquired considerable facility in the art of managing them, but the owner of Carnaby was an unknown quantity and Deringham was anxious.

Presently his daughter reined in her pony. "Stop a moment, father. That must be the ranch," she said.

The man drew bridle, and for a moment forgot his perplexities as he gazed at the scene before him. Far down in the valley lay a still blue lake with a great white peak shining ethereally at its northern end. Dark pines rolled about it, growing smaller and smaller up the hillside until they dwindled with spires clean cut against the azure into a gossamer filigree. Between them and the water stupendous

forest shrouded all the valley, save where an oblong of pale verdure ran back from the fringe of boulders and was traversed by the frothing streak of a river whose roar came up hoarsely across the pines in long pulsations.

That was all Deringham saw at first sight, but he realized that it was very beautiful, and then commenced to note details with observant eyes. There was a sawmill beside the river, for he could faintly hear a strident scream and see the blue smoke drifting in gauzy wisps across the hill. The square log-house which stood some little distance from the lake looked well built and substantial, and the road that wound through the green oblong had been skilfully laid with rounded strips sawn off the great fir-trunks. Sleek cattle stood apparently ready for dispatch in a corral, the yellowing oats beyond them were railed off by a six-foot fence, and behind the rows of sawn-off stumps which ringed about the clearing great trunks and branches lay piled in the confusion of the slashing. Deringham was not a farmer, but he was a man of affairs, and all he saw spoke to him of prosperity that sprang from strenuous energy and administrative ability.

"You are very silent," said his daughter. "What are you thinking?"

Deringham laughed a little, somewhat mirthlessly. "It occurs to me that whatever our unknown relative may be he is a good rancher, if this is his handiwork," he said. "Well, we shall see him very shortly."

The girl's fingers tightened a little on the switch she held. "We know what we shall find," she said with a gesture of cold disdain. "It would be so much easier if he had only been an educated Englishman!"

"Still," said Deringham dryly, "since we are ousted from Carnaby I do not see that it makes any great difference."

Miss Deringham's eyes sparkled, and a spot of colour tinged her cheeks. Her mother had been one of the Altons who had long been proud of Carnaby, and the instincts of the landholding race were strong within her.

"No?" she said, with a little scornful inflection. "And you could look on while a cattle-driving boor made himself a laughing-stock at Carnaby?"

Deringham smiled again. "I am," he said, "inclined to feel sorry for the Canadian, but you will at least be civil to him."

Miss Deringham made a little gesture of impatience. "You do not suppose I should be openly resentful?" she said.

Her father still appeared ironically amused. "I do not know that it would be necessary, but I fancy the Canadian will have cause to regret he is an Alton," he said. "No doubt it would be some solace to you to make him realize his offences, but I scarcely think it would be advisable."

Then they rode down into the valley, through oatfields, and between the tall fir-stumps that rose amidst the fern, under the boughs of an orchard, and up to the square log-house. Nobody came out to receive them, or answered their call, and Deringham, dismounting, helped his daughter down, and tethering the horses

passed through the verandah into the house. The long table in the big log-walled room they entered was littered with unwashed plates. Torn over-alls and old knee-boots lay amidst the axes and big saws in one corner, the dust was heavy everywhere, and rifles and salmon-spears hung upon the walls. There was no sign of taste or comfort. Everything suggested grim utility, and the house was very still. The girl, who was tired, sat down with a little gesture of dismay.

"This is worse and worse," she said.

Deringham, who was fond of his daughter, laid a hand upon her shoulder reassuringly. "You can go on to Vancouver when you wish," said he. "Sit still and rest, while I see if there is anybody about."

He strolled round the homestead, and noticed that log barns and stables were all well built, while presently he found a man plucking fowls in a galvanized shed. There was a row of them before him, all without heads, while an ensanguined axe close by indicated the fashion of their execution. He glanced at Deringham a moment, and then fell to work again.

"Oh, yes, this is Somasco, and the finest ranch this side of the Fraser," he said. "Can you see Mr. Alton? Well, I figure he's busy, and you had better wait a little. Get hold of this. It's your supper."

Deringham recoiled a pace when a somewhat gory fowl struck him on the knee, and then sat down on a pile of cedar-wood staring at the speaker. "I wish to see Mr. Alton as soon as possible," he said.

The other man looked up again, and grinned. "You'd better not," said he. "Harry Alton's a bit short in temper when he's busy, and if you're peddling anything it would be better if you saw him after supper. Then if you can't make a deal you can go on to-morrow. There's plenty good straw in the barn."

Deringham was not especially flattered at being mistaken for a peddler, nor had the prospect of sleeping on straw any great attraction for him, but he had a sense of humour, and, being desirous of acquiring information, took up the fowl.

"Do you put up every stranger who calls here, and give him a fowl for supper? What am I to do with this one?" he said.

"Now, where did you come from?" said the other. "That's just what we do. A fowl's not much for a man, anyway, and Harry will eat two of them when he's hungry. What are you going to do with it? Well, you can, pull the feathers off it, and fix it for cooking, unless you like them better with their insides in."

Deringham gravely pulled out four or five feathers, and then, finding it more difficult than he had expected, desisted. "Mr. Alton is apparently not married," he said.

The man grinned. "No, Harry knows when he's well off, and it would take a woman with a mighty firm grip to manage him," said he. "Still, there's one or two of them quite ready to see what they could make of him, but Mrs. Margery scares them off when they come round bringing him little things, and Harry's a bit

pernicketty. His father was a duke or something in the old country."

"Mrs. Margery?" said Deringham inquiringly.

"Yes," said the other. "She's not here just now, but she keeps the house for him. I help round and do the cooking."

Deringham, who could adapt himself to his surroundings, nodded. "That is what you would consider a soft job in this country?"

"Well," said the man grimly, as he pointed to the deformation of one lower limb, "I am not fond of it, but it's about all I'm good for now. That's where the axe went in, and anybody but Harry Alton might have fired me. It was my own blame foolishness, too, but when the doctor told him Harry comes to me. 'You needn't worry about one thing, anyway. There'll be a job for you just so long as you're wanting it,' " says he.

"He does that kind of thing sometimes?" said Deringham curiously.

"No, sir," said the other dryly. "He does it every time, but the devil himself wouldn't squeeze ten cents out of Harry if he didn't want to give it him. But how long are you going to be stripping that fowl?"

"As I'm afraid it would take me all night, I would prefer to give you a half-a-dollar to do it for me," said Deringham.

The man straightened himself a little, and Deringham received another surprise.

"Patent medicines and hair-growers are up?" said he.

"I don't quite understand," said Deringham quietly.

"No?" said the other. "Well, you will do presently unless you get right out of this shanty. I'm fit to make my wages yet, if I've only got one handy leg, and I can put my mark on any blame peddler who talks that way to me."

"I'm sorry," said Deringham gravely. "I have, you see, just come from England, where folks are not always so well paid as you seem to be. I think I will look for Mr. Alton. Can you tell me where he is?"

The man, who appeared a trifle mollified, pointed to the bush. "He's yonder, but if he scares you, you needn't blame me," he said.

Deringham picked his way amidst the six-foot fir-stumps girdled with tall fern, over a breadth of white ashes and charcoal where the newly-won land lay waiting for the plough, in and out amidst the chaos of trunks that lay piled athwart each other all round the clearing, and stopped close by three men who were making an onslaught on a majestic tree. Its topmost sprays towered two hundred feet above them, and the great trunk ran a stupendous column to the vault of dusky green above. It was, however, the men who most attracted Deringham's attention, and he stood for a moment watching them.

Two were poised on narrow boards notched into the tree a man's height from the ground, and one was huge and swarthy, so that the heavy axe he held seemed a toy in his great gnarled hand. The other, whose figure seemed in some respects

familiar, stooped a little with the bright axe blade laid flat in one palm as though he were examining it, and Deringham, who could not see his face, turned towards another who sat at the foot of the tree sharpening a big saw. His overalls were in tolerable repair, while from an indefinite something in his face and the way he wore them Deringham set him down as an Englishman. Still, he did not think he was an Alton.

"Can you tell me where Mr. Henry Alton is?" he said. The young man nodded. "Harry!" he said.

Then the man on the plank above turned round, and Deringham felt inclined to gasp as he stood face to face with the new heir to Carnaby. The man was grimed with dust and ashes. His blue shirt rolled back to the shoulders left uncovered arms that were corded like a smith's, and was rent at the neck so that Deringham could see the finely-arched chest. The overalls, tight-belted round the waist, set off the solidity of his shoulders and the leanness of the flank, while with the first glance at his face Deringham recognized the teamster who had driven them through the bush.

He stood poised on the few inches of springy redwood looking down upon him with a grimly humorous twinkle in his eyes, but through the smears of perspiration and the charcoal grime Deringham now recognized the expression of quiet forcefulness and the directness of gaze which was his birthright.

"Mr. Henry Alton?" he said.

"Yes," said the other quietly.

There was a moment's embarrassing silence, for Alton said nothing further, and Deringham gazed at the man he had journeyed three thousand miles to see.

"I should like a little talk with you," he said presently.

"Can't oblige you," said the other. "I couldn't spare more than a minute now for a railroad director. You can tell me anything you want after supper."

Deringham lost a little of his usual serenity. "My business is of some importance," he said.

Alton smiled grimly. "I can't help that. So is mine," said he. "A lawyer, by the stamp of you. Well, you're trailing the wrong man, because I don't owe anybody money. We'll put you up to-night, and you can look for him to-morrow."

"I have come from Carnaby, England," said Deringham, watching the effect upon the man. "You are, I presume the grandson of its late owner."

This shot got home, but the effect was not altogether what Deringham had anticipated, for Alton's big hands tightened on the axe and his face grew very stern. "I'm not proud of the connection, anyway," he said. "Alton of Somasco is good enough for me."

"But," said Deringham quietly, "I have come to talk things over with you. Tristan Alton left you Carnaby."

Alton straightened himself a little and flung out an arm, while Deringham

recognized the Alton pride as with a sweeping gesture he pointed to wide lake, forest-shrouded hillside, and the clearing in the valley.

"He turned out my father because he knew his mind, and now when there is no one else leaves me the played-out property. Thank God, I don't want it, while that's all mine," he said. "What brings you here to talk of Carnaby?"

Deringham smiled a little. "The executor sent me, and I have come a long way," said he. "When I tell you that I am Ralph Deringham you should know me."

Alton nodded gravely. "Then you can tell me all about it after supper, and we'll have plenty time for talking, because you'll stay a while with me," he said. "If you'll go back to the house you'll find some cigars that might please you in the bureau. Sorry I can't come with you, but I'm busy. Are you ready, Tom?"

He turned, and swung up the axe while the big bushman swept his blade aloft, and Deringham watched them curiously. Alton swayed with a steely suppleness from the waist, and the broad wedge of steel flashed about his head before it came down ringing. The man had a few inches of springy wood which bent and heaved beneath him to stand upon, but the great blade descended exactly where the last chip had lain, and when it hissed aloft again that of the silent axeman dropped into the notch it made. Deringham knew a little about a good many things, including sword-play, and he realized as he watched the whirl and flash of blades, precision of effort, and exactitude of time, that this was an example of man's mastery over the trenchant steel.

Presently the man with the saw rose and touched his shoulder. "I fancy we had better draw aside a little," he said. "She will come down in another minute just here."

Now Deringham had seen trees wedged over and drawn down by ropes in England, and wondered a little when the man pointed to the spot where he was standing.

"If you don't resent the question, how do you know?" he said.

The other man laughed a little. "Harry told me, and he's seldom more than a foot out," he said.

There was a groaning of fibres as Deringham drew aside, but the two figures on the springy planks still smote and swung, until simultaneously they flung the axes down and, sprang. Then the great fir quivered a little, toppled, lurched, and fell, and the hillside resounded to the thud it made. It also smote the trembling soil just where the man with the saw had indicated. Then Alton signed to his assistant, and strode away with the axe on his shoulder towards another tree. The saw-sharpener laughed a little as he sat down again.

"Now you have had your say it would be better if you waited until after supper," he said. "You see, one thing at one time is quite enough for Harry, and he really isn't in the least uncivil when you understand him. Still, it's no use trying to make him listen when he doesn't want to."

“That,” said Deringham dryly, “was always one of the characteristics of his family. You are presumably an Englishman?”

The other man laughed a little. “Yes,” he said, “I’m Charles Seaforth, better known to the boys here as the Honourable Charley, though I have no especial right to the title, and am fortunate in holding a small share in the Somasco ranch, which I owe to my partner’s generosity.”

“Do I understand that he gave it you?” said Deringham.

Seaforth nodded. “You would be near the mark if you came to that conclusion.”

“And is Mr. Alton in the habit of making similar presents?” said Deringham.

Seaforth glanced towards the sinewy figure with the glinting axe, and smiled again. “That,” he said quietly, “is one of the most generous men in the Dominion of Canada, but I should not care to be the man who attempted to take advantage of him.”

Deringham said nothing further, though he was sensible of a slight uneasiness, and presently went back to the house to rejoin his daughter, while the dusk was creeping across the valley when the men from the sawmill and clearing came home, and Deringham led his daughter out when he heard Alton’s voice in the verandah. The latter and his partner were together, and the girl at first felt a slight sense of relief as her glance fell upon Seaforth, who stood with his wide hat in his hand. He was, for that country, somewhat fastidious in dress, his eyes were mildly humorous, and his face was pleasant, while he had not as yet wholly lost the stamp of the graceful idler he had brought with him from England.

“This,” said Deringham with the faintest trace of irony, “is our kinsman, Mr. Henry Alton of Carnaby. You have seen him already. My daughter Alice, Mr. Alton!”

The girl stood still a moment, and glanced at Seaforth, whom she could not recollect having seen before, with something that suggested not altogether unpleased surprise in her face. His appearance and attitude disarmed her, but as she was about to speak to him the other man moved so that the fading light fell full upon him. He stood, tall and almost statuesque in his torn overalls, with the misty pines rolling up the hillside behind him, and a big axe in his hand—a type, it seemed to her, of Western barbarity—and a red spot, faint but perceptible, rose into her cheeks as he bent his head. Then she came near forgetting what was due to both of them in her astonishment and anger.

“You!” she said.

“Yes,” said the axeman gravely. “Still, your father made a little mistake. I’m Alton of Somasco.”

Then he turned and moved forward with a gesture that was almost courtly. “You are very welcome to this poor house of mine,” he said.

CHAPTER VI
MISS DERINGHAM MAKES FRIENDS

The Homeric supper was over, and Miss Deringham, who, sitting next to Alton at the head of the long table, had watched the stalwart axeman feed with sensations divided between disgust and wonder, was talking to Seaforth on the verandah, when her father sat by a window of the room his kinsman called his own. There were survey maps, tassels of oats, and a great Wapiti head upon the wall, while Alton himself lay almost full length in a deerhide chair. The window was open wide, and the vista of lake, pine-shrouded hillside, and snow, framed by its log casing, steeped in nocturnal harmonies of silver and blue. Out of the stillness came the scent of balsam, and the sighing of a little breeze amidst the pines.

Deringham held a good cigar, and there was a cup of coffee beside him, while he was not wholly sorry that they sat in darkness. He had realized that Alton of Somasco was by no means a fool, and waited his questions with some anxiety. The rancher, however, had apparently no present intention of asking any.

"So they've been wondering when I am coming over," he said reflectively. "I don't know that I'll come at all." Deringham looked down at his cigar to cover his astonishment. "But you are an Alton of Carnaby," he said.

"Yes," said Alton slowly. "But that is one of the things I want to forget. You see they drove my father out because he had the grit to marry the woman who loved him instead of another one who had the money, but you know all that?"

Deringham nodded, and Alton's face showed grim in the moonlight as he continued: "But what you don't know is how he fought his way uphill in this country, and what my mother suffered helping him. Oh, yes, I can remember her well, gentle, brave, and patient as she was, and know what it must have cost her to camp down alone in the bush, and fight through the hard winter in the ice and snow. Well, she was too good for this world, and she just faded out of it before the good time came. I think they must have a special place for women of her kind in the other one."

Deringham only nodded again, because this type of man was new to him, and he had learned to keep silent when in doubt; but Alton's big right hand closed into a fist.

"And now, when I have Somasco, the man who had not a dollar for his only son leaves me Carnaby," he said. "There. Look out and see. Timber, lake and clearing, cattle, mills, and crops, the finest ranch in the district. My father commenced it, and I have finished. The Almighty made him a man, and he

wouldn't sell his birthright to loaf his days away, overfed, at Carnaby."

Alton dropped his cigar, and laughed a little. "Well, I'm talking like a fool again. There are times when I can't help it. It's a way of mine."

Deringham sat still smoking, and thinking rapidly. He had never had dealings with a man of this description before, but while he surmised that Alton of Somasco might under some conditions prove himself a headstrong fool, it was evident that there were limits to his folly. The man's handiwork spoke for him, and his energy and intentness had not escaped Deringham's attentions, while the occasional utterances that might have appeared bombastic coming from other men were redeemed in his case by the tone of naive sincerity and imperious ring. Deringham was becoming conscious of a vague respect for and fear of his companion.

"We are apparently no nearer the answer to my question," he said at length.

"No," said Alton, smiling. "This thing will take some thinking over. Carnaby isn't exactly what you call a rich property?"

"It is heavily encumbered," said Deringham, almost too eagerly.

Alton nodded, "Still, it must be worth a little, and would give the folks who lived there a standing in the old country?"

"Yes," said Deringham thoughtfully, and was once more astonished by his companion's answer.

"Well," he said slowly. "I was thinking about your daughter. All this, it seems to me, is mighty rough on her. It would hurt her to be turned out of Carnaby?"

"Isn't that beside the question?" said Deringham with a trace of stiffness.

Alton took up another cigar and lighted it. "I don't quite know that it is," he said. "You see, I remember a good deal what my mother had to put up with, and it has made me kind of sorry for women who have to do without the things they have been used to. Now Miss Deringham has had a pretty good time in the old country?"

Deringham moved his head very slightly. "I scarcely think we need go into that, but it is incontrovertible that the loss of Carnaby would make a difference to her," he said.

Alton sat silent a space, and then while Deringham wondered, smiled a little. "And she might have kept it but for a very little thing that happened a month or two ago," he said. "If the juniper-twigs had broken it would have saved considerable trouble to everybody. I was back there in the mountains looking for a silver lead, you see."

"Silver mines are, I understand, not always profitable to the man who finds them, and I should have fancied you had already sufficient scope for your energies," said Deringham dryly.

Alton laughed, but there was a trace of grimness in his voice. "If I once get my stakes in on the lead this one's going to be, and if I could get the dollars I could do

a good deal for Somasco," he said. "We want roads and mills, the biggest orchard in the province, and a fruit cannery, and we're going to have them presently. That's why I wanted the silver."

"You did not find it then?" said Deringham, who was not unwilling to follow his companion from the former topic.

"No," said Alton, "not that time, but I will by and by. Well, there was a good deal of snow up in the ranges, and my feet got away from me one evening when we were crawling along the edge of a gully. There was a river and big boulders some five hundred feet below, and I slipped down, clawing at the snow, until I grabbed a little bunch of juniper just on the edge. Part of it tore up, but I got a grip of a better handful, and hung on to it, with most of me swinging over the gully. Charley was stripping off the pack-rope on the slope above, and he was mighty quick, but I knew that bush was coming away with me, and didn't think he could be fast enough. I didn't feel exactly happy, but while I've read that folks think of some astonishing things when they're starting out on the long trail, it wasn't that way with me. I could only remember there was a man I'd never got even with who'd badly cheated me."

Deringham felt a little shiver run through him, for there was a grim vindictiveness in the speaker’s tone, and he felt that Alton of Somasco would not lightly forgive an injury.

“You managed to crawl up?” he said.

“No,” said Alton simply, “I didn’t. I lay there watching Charley, and felt the bush drawing out, until the rope came down and Charley hauled me up. It would have made a big difference to Miss Deringham if he’d been a second or two longer. Well, we’ll have lots of time for talking, because you’re out for your health, and we’ll keep you right here until we see what Somasco can do for you, and just now I see Miss Deringham alone on the verandah.”

He rose, and left Deringham sitting by the window. The moon had swung higher now, and the lake was a blaze of silver, but Deringham scarcely noticed it or the ethereal line of snow. In place of it he saw a shadowy figure hanging between earth and heaven with tense fingers gripping a little bush, while a river frothed down the black hollow five hundred feet below, and remembered that even in that moment the man who hung there regretted he could not repay somebody who had cheated him. Then he rose and moved once or twice up and down the room, his fancy still dwelling upon the picture. If the juniper-twigs had yielded it would have made a great difference to him as well as his daughter. He sat down again presently and stared at the valley, seeing nothing as he remembered that Alton of Somasco might go back to the ranges again, and then with an effort shook the fancies from him. They were not wholesome for a man hemmed in by difficulties as he was then.

In the meanwhile his daughter stood with one hand on the verandah balustrade, listening to the song of the river which came sonorously through the shadows of the bush. She also breathed in the scent of the firs, and found it pleasant, but it was instinctively she did so, for her thoughts were also busy. Alice Deringham had noticed her father’s fits of abstraction as well as the anxiety in his face, and had no great difficulty in connecting them with the loss of Carnaby. She was also fond of him, for Deringham had shown only his better side to her, and sensible of a very bitter feeling towards the man who had supplanted him. In addition to this, she remembered the faint amusement in his eyes when he noticed the glint of a silver coin she held half-covered in her hand, and her pulses throbbed a little faster. The man had placed her in a ridiculous position, and had he guessed her feelings towards him he would probably not have made his appearance as he did just then.

The boards creaked behind her, and turning partly round she straightened herself with a slow sinuous gracefulness, and stood drawn up to her full height looking at the newcomer. He stood still a moment with veiled admiration in his

eyes, and this was not altogether surprising in one who had dwelt for the most part far remote from civilization in the lonely bush. Alice Deringham had been considered somewhat of a beauty in London, and it was possible that she knew the pale moonlight and the harmonies of blue and silver she stood out against enhanced the symmetry of her outline. The man stood watching her with his head bent a trifle, but Miss Deringham evinced a fine indifference. She had formed a somewhat mistaken estimate of him already.

"I want to tell you that I'm sorry," he said.

The girl fancied she understood him, and it increased her anger, for the fact that this barbarian of the bush should venture to express pity for her was galling. Still, she had no intention of admitting it, and regarded him inquiringly with a half-contemptuous indifference which she had found especially effective with presumptuous young men in England. Somewhat to her astonishment it apparently had no result at all, for Alton returned her gaze gravely and without embarrassment.

"I don't understand," she said.

"I was hoping you would, because I felt I must tell you, and I'm not good at talking," said the man. "I can't help seeing that you are vexed with me."

If Alton had intended to be conciliatory he had signally failed, because Miss Deringham had no intention of admitting that anything he could do would cause her anger.

"I am afraid you are taking things for granted," she said.

Alton smiled gravely, and the girl noticed that he accepted the onus of the explanation she had forced upon him.

"I really don't think you should be," he said. "I can't help being Tristan Alton's grandson, you see, and we are some kind of relations and ought to be friendly."

Miss Deringham laughed a little. "Relations do not always love each other very much," said she.

"No," said Alton. "Still, I think they should, and, even if it hurts, I feel I've got to tell you I'm sorry. If you would only take it, it would please me to give you back Carnaby."

The girl almost gasped with astonishment and indignation. "That is a trifle unnecessary, since you know it is perfectly impossible," she said.

She had at last roused the man, for the moonlight showed a darker colour creeping into his tan. "I don't usually say more than I mean," he said. "Now we shall never understand each other unless you will talk quite straight with me."

Alice Deringham had not lost her discretion in her anger, and, since there was no avoiding the issue, decided it would be preferable to blame him for the lesser of his offences.

"Then," she said coldly, "it was somewhat difficult to appreciate the humour

of the trick you played upon us. You may, however, have different notions as to what is tasteful in the Colonies."

Again the darker colour showed in Alton's bronzed forehead, but he spoke gravely. "I don't think that's quite fair," he said. "I am what the Almighty made me, a plain bushman who has had to work too hard for his living to learn to put things nicely, but I never came down to any meanness that would hurt a woman, and there isn't any need for a dainty English lady to point out the difference between herself and me."

"There may be less difference than you seem to fancy," said the girl a trifle maliciously. "You are Alton of Carnaby."

"Pshaw!" said the man with a little gesture of pride and impatience, which Miss Deringham was forced to admit became him. "I'm Alton of Somasco, and nobody gave it me. I won it from the lake and the forest that comes crawling in again—but I'm getting off the trail. I didn't know your father was coming here, and hadn't any notion who you were."

"That's curious, because he wrote to tell you," said the girl.

Alton flushed a little, for he was somewhat quick-tempered, and too proud to be otherwise than a veracious man. "Well," he said slowly, "I have the honour of telling you I didn't get the letter. There's a place called Somasco down in Vancouver."

Miss Deringham decided that she had ventured sufficiently far. Indeed, on subsequent reflection she was forced to admit that she had gone farther than was quite seemly, which somewhat naturally increased her displeasure against the man. In the meanwhile she, however, made a little gracious gesture. "Then I don't think the explanation was necessary," she said.

Alton laughed a little, and held out his hand. "Do you know I'm thankful that's over once for all, and now we can be friends," he said. "There are lots of things I can show you in the valley, and a good deal more that you can teach me."

Alice Deringham could not afterwards quite decide why she shook hands with him, for she had no intention of teaching him anything, just then; but she did, and felt as the hard brown fingers closed upon her own that the friendship of this curious man could in time of necessity be relied upon. In any case, and obeying some impulse, she shook off her chilliness, and asking questions about the district evinced a gracious interest in all he had to tell her, while presently induced by his naive frankness she smiled at him as she noticed him regarding her gravely.

"I presume a dress of this kind is scarcely suitable for the bush," she said.

Alton laughed. "I wasn't looking at the dress, though it's a very pretty one," he said. "You see, except my mother and Miss Townshead, I have never spoken to an English lady."

"But you must have been very young when you lost her," said the girl.

Alton took off his hat, and pointed to a hillside shrouded with sombre firs.

“Yes,” he said quietly. “She sleeps up there, and in a little while my father followed her. He was lonely without her, and because of what she had done for him, proud of his countrywomen. He often used to talk about them.”

“And,” said Alice Deringham, “you wondered if he was mistaken?”

Alton made a little gesture that in a curious fashion implied a wide chivalric faith. “No,” he said gravely, “I believe he was right.”

Miss Deringham felt a faint warmth creep into her cheek, and it was not because the speech might have been deemed a personal compliment. She saw a little deeper into the man’s nature than that, and, if she had not, the tone of grave respect would have enlightened her. Then she turned with a little sense of relief as Deringham came out upon the verandah.

“I am pleased to see you and Mr. Alton have made friends,” he said, and the girl, who noticed a faint twinkle in his eyes, turned quietly and looked down the valley as she remembered one odious clause in the will.

She rose early next morning, and flinging the window open to let in the glorious freshness heard a commotion below, while as she wondered as to the cause of it several pairs of old boots went gyrating over the balustrade of the verandah. A dilapidated saddle followed them, and then a cloud of dust rolled up, while she saw the new owner of Carnaby appear somewhat scantily attired out of the midst of it. He had a brush in one hand and seemed disturbed about something.

“Where the brimstone does Mrs. Margery keep the scrubbing soap?” he said.

Nobody answered him, and he moved back into the dust, while Seaforth was coming up the stairway carrying a mop and pail when a big empty oilcan smote him upon the chest. He dropped the pail and leaned a moment, gasping and dripping, against the balustrade.

“You might notice where you’re throwing things,” he said.

The dust rolled more thickly, and Alton’s voice came out of it. “I hadn’t time to be particular, and a sensible man would have got out of the way of it. Don’t stand there, anyway, but help me fix this place fit for a lady before Miss Deringham gets up. Then you’re going through to the railroad with the new pack-horse to wire for Mrs. Margery after breakfast.”

“I don’t think I am,” said Seaforth. “Not on Julius Caesar, anyway. He will need a little more taming before I’m fit to ride him.”

“Then,” said Alton, laughing, “I guess you can shove him, because you’ll want a horse to bring up the things you’re going to wire Vancouver for, and Tom’s off with the teams up the valley. Fetch some more water, and start in with the scrubbing. I don’t want Miss Deringham to guess we’ve been doing anything unusual.”

“If she doesn’t hear you,” said Seaforth, “she must be very deaf.”

“Now,” said Alton regretfully, “I never thought of that. Sit right down, Charley, and take your boots off.”

“I am going to the well first,” said Seaforth, who retired grinning, and Miss Deringham laughed softly as she heard the cautious movements of a big barefooted man floundering about clumsily with a brush or mop.

When she came down to breakfast, however, she was a little astonished. The room was swept, and garnished with cedar sprays, while though it smelled of some crude soap the aromatic sweetness of balsam was present too, and there were signs of taste in its decoration and the disposition of the splendid fruit upon the table. Alton had not plucked it all, and the golden apples and velvety peaches lay with their soft tinting enhanced amidst the leaves. When he came in, bright of eye and apparently glowing from a plunge in the river, she glanced at him with quiet amusement.

“You have been improving the place wonderfully,” she said.

“You are pleased with it?” said the rancher, and the girl noticed the contentment in his eyes when she smiled approvingly.

“I think,” she said, “it is very pretty.”

CHAPTER VII
ALTON BLUNDERS

Deringham spent several weeks at Somasco without arriving at any understanding with its owner. This, however, did not cause him any great concern, because he had at his doctor's recommendation decided on a somewhat lengthy absence from England, and found himself regaining health and vigour with every day he passed in the pleasant valley. He was also desirous of gaining time, because he had left negotiations for the formation of a company to take over an enterprise he was interested in in train, and, while these could proceed as well without him, a favourable termination would, by relieving him from immediate financial anxiety, enable him if it seemed advisable to adopt a firmer tone in any discussion respecting Carnaby. Alton had in the meanwhile quietly avoided the subject.

Affairs were in this position when he sat one evening with his daughter on the verandah, glancing now and then down the valley. It was very still and peaceful, and trails of white mist crept about the pines, while, though the paling light still lingered high up upon the snow, a crescent moon was growing into visibility against the steely blueness behind the eastern shoulder of a hill. Deringham, however, was listening for the thud of hoofs, and wondering if the mounted man sent down to the settlement would bring any letters for him. His daughter sat close by him, dreamily watching the darkness roll higher about the pines. She had not as yet grown tired of Somasco, and found its owner an interesting study. He was of a type that was new to her, and the girl of a somewhat inquiring disposition.

Presently she turned to her father. "How long shall we stay here?" she said.

"I don't know," said Deringham. "It depends upon the Canadian, and in the meanwhile I am picking up a good deal of useful information about the mineral resources of this country. Alton of Somasco seems to be a somewhat intelligent man."

"Yes," said the girl thoughtfully. "It is a little difficult to dislike him."

"I," said her father, smiling, "do not know that there is any great necessity, or notice signs of a marked endeavour on your part to do so."

The girl glanced at him inquiringly. "You mean?" said she.

"Nothing," said Deringham. "Only the Canadian is also a man. Well, we shall be going on to Vancouver presently."

The girl laughed a little. "That is incontrovertible," she said. "Why not go on now?"

"There are reasons," said Deringham somewhat gravely. "For one thing I hope

to be in a position shortly to make terms with him."

"But Carnaby is his," said the girl.

"Yes," said Deringham, "unless he gives it up."

His daughter appeared thoughtful. "I scarcely think he will!"

Deringham laughed a little. "It might be possible to find means of inducing him."

Alice Deringham shook her head. "From what I have seen of Mr. Alton, I fancy it would be difficult."

"Well," said Deringham dryly, "we shall see."

He had scarcely spoken when a soft drumming sound came out of the stillness. It grew steadily louder, was lost in the roar of the river, and rose more distinct again, while the girl, who realized that a man was riding up the valley, wondered with unusual curiosity what news he would bring. She also grew impatient, for that staccato drumming seemed to jar upon the harmonies of the evening, and she walked to the balustrade when the sound swelled into a thudding beat of hoofs. The man was crossing the oatfield at a gallop now. Then the sound rose muffled out of the gloom of the orchard the trail ran through, and she felt curiously expectant when once more the rider swung out into the shadowy clearing. She afterwards remembered the vague apprehension with which she watched and listened, for it seemed to her that some intangible peril was drawing nearer with the galloping horse. A minute or two later Seaforth came into the verandah with a packet of letters in his hand.

"There are several for you, sir," he said, handing Deringham some of them, and passed into the house shouting, "Harry."

Deringham glanced through his budget, and his face changed a little, while his daughter noticed the set of his lips and the clustering wrinkles about his eyes. There was a telegraphic message, but he put it aside and opened a bulky envelope whose stamp he recognized. Then the missive he took out rustled a little in his hand as he read:

"I'm afraid negotiations are not progressing well. Mortimer, as you will see by enclosed copies of correspondence, demands a revaluation which would not be advisable before he will underwrite any of the capital."

Deringham laid down the letter, and his daughter turned suddenly at his exclamation. "The fools should have bought him off!" he said.

Then he took up the telegraphic message and read, "Scheme impracticable. Cannot compromise with Mortimer. Harper and the Syndicate against us. Details following."

Deringham said nothing, but sat staring before him with a face that seemed to have grown suddenly grey and haggard, until his daughter spoke to him.

"Have you had bad news, father?" she said.

The man, who had been sitting so that the light which shone out from the room

behind them fell upon him, moved. “I have,” he said. “This message informs me that at least ten thousand pounds have been virtually taken out of my pocket. As it happened, I wanted the money somewhat badly.”

He rose, and entering the house met Alton coming out of it. The Canadian brushed past him with a letter in his hand, and Deringham turned a moment and looked after him. The financier’s face was not pleasant just then, and there was a curious glitter in his eyes, while Seaforth, who was following his comrade, stared at him as he passed, and came up with Alton on the verandah.

“What has gone wrong with Deringham?” he said.

“I don’t know,” said Alton lightly. “Do you think anything has?”

“That,” said Seaforth, “is what I am asking you. He looked condemnably ugly just now. One could have fancied that he contemplated killing somebody.”

Alton laughed. “Got a little business trip up, I expect,” he said, and moved forward as he spoke. “Here’s word from Mrs. Jimmy. She wants to know when I’m going to begin. Women are very persistent, Miss Deringham, but this one has some reason.”

“They usually have,” said the girl. “I do not, however, know Mrs. Jimmy.”

“Of course,” said Alton, smiling. “Still, I expect you’ll see her up here presently.”

It was a day or two later when Alton returned to the topic of Mrs. Jimmy, and he was then kneeling in the stern of a canoe which slid with a swift smoothness down the placid lake as he dipped the glistening paddle. Miss Deringham was seated forward on a pile of cedar-twigs, with a wet line in her fingers, and in no way disturbed by the fact that she had caught nothing. Such expeditions had become somewhat frequent of late, and though the girl sometimes wondered what she found to please her in the company and conversation of the bush rancher, the fact that she usually went with him when he crossed the lake remained.

“I have seen that trail of smoke up there before. Where does it come from?” she said languidly, pointing to a distant film of vapour that drifted in a faint blue wreath along the slope of a hill.

“That,” said Alton, “is the Tyee mine.”

“I have heard of it. They find silver there?”

“Yes,” said Alton dryly. “They find a little.”

“There is silver in those mountains, then?” said Miss Deringham.

Alton nodded. “Lots of it. Still, it costs a good deal to get out, and then it doesn’t pay for the mining occasionally. That’s the trouble with the Tyee.”

“Still, it must pay somebody, or they would not go on,” said Miss Deringham.

Alton laughed a little. “Oh, yes,” he said dryly. “It pays a man called Hallam and some others of his kind who got up the company. Still, sometime and somehow, I think he will be sorry he stole poor folks’ money.”

“You,” said Miss Deringham, smiling, “are an optimist, then?”

Alton gravely glanced about him, and the girl fancied she understood him as she followed his gaze from snowpeak down the great pine-shrouded hillside to the river frothing in the valley. “I don’t know, but one feels there’s something beyond all that,” he said. “It didn’t come there by accident, and it has all its work to do. Sun and frost and sliding snow grinding up the hillside very sure and slow, and the river sweeping what it gets from them way down the valley to spread new wheatfields out into the sea.”

“But,” said Miss Deringham, smiling, “we are speaking of men, and I don’t quite see the connection.”

“Well,” said Alton, “they have their place in the great machine too, and must work like the rest, and do something to make it more fruitful, in return for the food the good earth gives them.”

“A good many men don’t seem to realize the obligation,” said Miss Deringham.

Alton nodded. “No, but I can’t help thinking they’ll be dealt with somehow. They’re just stealing from the others.”

“You are a socialist, then?”

“No,” said Alton, “I don’t think I am. It seems to me that every man is entitled to all the dollars he can get by working for them honestly, and there’s a place somewhere in this great world for him, if he has the grit to get up and look for it as he was meant to do, but it has no use for the man who wants to sit still and think about his dinner while other folks work for him.”

“Still, he may have earned the right to do so,” said the girl.

“Well,” said Alton grimly, “most of that kind I’ve met with seemed to have stolen it, and one or two of them had, for a few thousand dollars, sent good men to their death. When you’ve seen your comrades sickening and starving on rotten provisions in the snow, or washed out down the valley by the bursting of a dam that was only built to sell, you begin to wonder whether it would be wrong to wipe out some of that crowd with the rifle.”

The veins swelled on his forehead, and there was a smouldering fire in his eyes, while the girl suspected he was alluding to some especial member of the class, and noticed that his eye seemed to follow the smoke of the Tyee. Then he laughed.

“I guess I’m talking nonsense again, but there’s a little behind it, and I feel that you can pick it out,” he said. “Now I’m not good at amusing women, but you and Mrs. Jimmy seem to understand me.”

“Who is Mrs. Jimmy, and does her husband belong to Somasco?” asked the girl, with a smile.

Alton laid down the paddle, and took off his hat. “Jimmy,” he said solemnly, “is dead. He was my partner, and his wife is a friend of mine. She was in some ways very like you.”

“They had a ranch up here?” said Miss Deringham languidly.

“No,” said Alton. “It wasn’t often they had ten dollars. She was a lady bar-keep down in Vancouver before she married Jimmy. He was a trail-chopper in this country. I don’t know what he was in the old one.”

“And,” said Miss Deringham, “Mrs. Jimmy resembles me?”

She regretted it next moment when she saw Alton’s face. It expressed subdued surprise, and the girl felt irritated with herself.

“Yes,” he said gravely. “Human nature’s much the same at the bottom, whether it has gold on the top of it or the dints of the hammer, and Mrs. Jimmy was good all through.”

“That,” said Miss Deringham, “is distinctly pretty.”

“Well,” said Alton smiling, “I didn’t mean it that way. Work was scarce in the province, and I’d lost my cattle when Jimmy went up with me into the ranges to look for silver. He brought his wife along, because he had no dollars or anywhere to leave her, and it was a mighty tough place for a woman where we camped under the big glacier. We stayed right there most of the winter. There was only frost and snow, and the wind that whirled it about the pines, and, until it froze up, we lived a good deal on salmon from the river. They were dead when we got them, and some of them rotten.”

Miss Deringham shivered. “And when the river froze?” she said.

“Then,” said Alton gravely, “there were days when we lived on nothing, and worked until we couldn’t hold the pick to keep from thinking. Still, we got a deer now and then, and we had a very little flour. It was mouldy when we bought it, but we hadn’t dollars enough for anything better. Mrs. Jimmy got sick and thin, but she never grumbled, and was always waiting bright and smiling when we crawled back into the shanty. Anyway, we found no silver that would pay for the getting, though we knew it was there.”

“How did you know that?” said Miss Deringham.

“Well,” said Alton, “a Siwash told us something. He crawled in starving one day, and though we hadn’t much over we fed him. For another thing we felt it in us that we were on the right trail.”

“That,” said the girl, “does not sound possible.”

Alton nodded. “No,” he said. “Still, one gets taught up there in the bush that there’s more in a man than what some folks think of as his reason. Well, we made a tough fight, and were beaten.”

Miss Deringham glanced at him covertly, and noticing his quiet, bronzed face, steady eyes, and big brown hands, felt that the struggle had been very grim and stubborn. “So you gave it up?” she said.

“Yes,” said Alton, “for a time, and I had my hands full with other things when Jimmy went back again. He had piled up a few dollars and left the woman behind him. He took the trail with a good outfit and a pack-horse, but he didn’t come

down again, and when Mrs. Jimmy got anxious I went up to look for him. It was a good while before I found him sitting under a pine, and he had found the silver, though it wasn't much use to him."

"Was it a rich vein?" said the girl.

"Yes," said Alton solemnly, "I think it was, from the specimens he had brought along, but, and it's difficult sometimes to see why things should happen that way, he couldn't tell me where it was. Jimmy was dead, you see."

The girl shivered visibly. "It must have been horrible."

"No," said Alton gravely. "He was sitting there very quiet in the snow with his hand frozen on the rifle, and there was a big dead panther not far away; but I was more sorry for Mrs. Jimmy than I was for him. Jimmy hadn't always been a trail-chopper, and one could see he had been carrying a heavy load he brought out from the old country. I think he was tired."

"And the silver still lies hidden up there?" said Miss Deringham.

Alton nodded. "Yes," he said. "I've hunted for it twice, but couldn't find Jimmy's trail. By and by, and because the woman wants it, I'm going back again."

"But it would belong to anybody who found it now," said Miss Deringham.

"No," said Alton quietly. "A half of what I get there belongs to Mrs. Jimmy. The dead man has a claim."

"I am not sure that most men would think so. You are generous," said the girl.

"No," said Alton. "I'm just where I can, and it hurts me to owe anybody anything, whether it's a favour, or the other thing."

Miss Deringham understood him, and reflected as she glanced at him out of the corners of her eyes that her father would do well if he dealt openly with this man. She fancied he could be remorseless in a reckoning, and she had now and then of late had unpleasant suspicions respecting Deringham's intentions concerning him.

Alton took up the paddle, and the pair found Deringham waiting them when they landed. They crossed the valley together, and the girl, who had seen little of industrial activity, became interested when at her father's desire they followed Alton into the mill. A cloud of pungent smoke hung about it, and the steady pounding of an engine jarred through the monotone of the river, which was low just then, while there was a pleasant fragrance in the open-sided building where brawny men moved amidst the whirling dust with the precision of the machines they handled. Alice Deringham could see with untrained eyes that there was no waste of effort here. The great logs that slid in at one end passed straight forward over the rattling rollers, and made no deviation until they went out as planking. Silent men and whirring saws, whose strident scream changed to a deeper humming as they rent into the great redwood trunks, alike did their work with swift efficiency, and once more the girl glanced with a little wonder at the man who had organized it all.

“This appears to be a remarkably well-laid-out mill,” said her father.

Alton laughed a little. “We shall have a bigger one by and by,” he said. “The only thing I’m proud of is the planer, and she cost me a pile of dollars. I had to cut down all round before I could buy the thing, and then I pulled her all to pieces, and fixed her up myself.”

Alice Deringham followed her father towards a big, humming machine that was tearing off the surface of the planks fed to it and flinging them out polished into whiteness. Alton glanced at it admiringly.

“Yes, I’m proud of that,” he said. “It was a tight fit buying her, and now she’s saving me dollars every day.” Then he turned to a stooping man. “You’re crowding her a little.”

Alice Deringham noticed the resentment in the man’s face, which was not a pleasant one, and that, in place of relaxing the pressure, he seemed to thrust a little more strenuously upon the plank he guided; but that was all she saw, for the next moment there was a crash and a loud whirring, and a cloud of woody dust was flung all over her.

Alton sprang forward through it, and a big leather belt suddenly stopped, but the girl could never clearly remember what happened next, for the dust still whirled about her. There, however, appeared to be a brief altercation, and as Alton moved towards him the other man dropped his hand to his belt. Guessing what the action meant, Alice Deringham shrank back with a little shiver, and her father appeared to grasp the man’s shoulder. Alton swayed suddenly sideways, and then hurled himself forward, while next moment two men fell violently against the wrecked machine. One of them seemed to be helpless in the grasp of the other, and staggering clear of the planer they went reeling through the mill. Then there was a splash in the river, and Alton returned alone, breathless and somewhat white in face.

“Sorry, but there was no other way out of it,” he said a trifle hoarsely. “Now I’ve got to size up the ruin, if you’ll excuse me.”

Deringham turned away with his daughter in time to see a dripping object crawl out on the opposite side of the river. “Are you still pleased with your tame bear?” he said ironically.

The girl laughed a little, though her colour was perhaps a trifle higher than usual. “There is a good deal of the beast still unsubdued in him,” she said.

Deringham nodded. “Still, he had some provocation, and I think he was right. So far as I could follow the discussion, the other man meant to question his ability to dismiss him, with the pistol.”

Alice Deringham said nothing further upon the subject until Alton joined them as they sat out on the verandah that night. “You are not pleased with me?” he said.

“There is nothing to warrant me telling you so, and I may have been mistaken,” said the girl reflectively.

“No,” said Alton, “that’s the pity; but couldn’t you remember just now and then that you are friends with me?”

“Things of this kind make it a little difficult,” said Miss Deringham.

“Well,” said Alton, “that machine cost me twelve months’ grim self-denial, and the fellow broke it out of temper because I spoke to him.”

“It was,” said Miss Deringham, “sufficiently exasperating, but was the rest justifiable because you were a stronger or bolder man than him?”

Alton laughed a little. “You don’t understand. I did it because I was afraid,” said he. “Now if I hadn’t been, I’d have backed that man right into the river without touching him.”

The girl glanced at him and then lapsed into a ripple of laughter. “I’m afraid I must give you up,” said she.

Just then Deringham came into the verandah, and Alton turned towards him. “It’s a little difficult to put it as I would like to, but I’m glad it was you. You know what I mean.”

Deringham appeared a trifle embarrassed. “I’m not sure that you are indebted to me at all,” he said. “I only seized his shoulder, and you would not have expected me to look on?”

Alton shook his head. “I don’t think he would have missed if you hadn’t done it, and I will not forget,” he said. “This thing will always count for a good deal between you and me.”

He went away, and Alice Deringham glanced at her father with a flush in her face. “I did not understand before. The man had a pistol and you took it from him?”

“No,” said Deringham, with a curious little laugh. “I meant to knock his arm up, and am not sure that I did it. It was, considering all things, a somewhat disinterested action.”

CHAPTER VIII
HALLAM'S CONFEDERATE

It was about the middle of the afternoon of the day following Alton's affray with the workman when the cook came limping into the verandah of the Somasco ranch, where Deringham leaned, cigar in hand, against a pillar talking to his daughter. She lay in a hide chair Alton had found for her, listening more to the drowsy roar of the river than to her father, but she lifted her head when the man appeared. He carried a tray whereon were displayed a badly dinted metal teapot of considerable size, two large, flat cakes of bread, a can of condensed milk, and a saucer swimming with partially melted butter, which had resolved itself into little lumps of whitish grease and a thin golden fluid under the afternoon sun. He laid them on the table, and after deftly picking out one or two dead flies from the butter turned to the girl with a grin in which pride was evident, though it was apparently meant to be deprecatory.

"I guess this is the kind of thing you were used to in the old country, Miss," he said. "You have only got to tell me if you would fancy a piece of cold pork or other fixings."

Alice Deringham dared not glance at her father, who seemed to be gazing fixedly down the valley, but her lips quivered a little as she turned towards the man.

"I do not think we shall want anything else," she said with a serenity that cost her an effort, though it was excellently assumed.

The man limped away with the tray, though he stopped again at the foot of the stairway. "If you take a notion of that pork after all, hammer on the iron roofing sheet there, and I'll bring it right away," he said.

Alice Deringham waited until he was out of sight, and then lay back in her chair and laughed when her father glanced at her with a little grim smile.

"Savages, my dear!" he said. "Still, their intentions are evidently kindly, which is unfortunate because it involves us in a difficulty."

"A difficulty?"

Deringham nodded. "I have a suspicion that our estimable kinsman, who seems to consider that what is good enough for Somasco should content anybody, might be offended if we slighted his hospitality, and that teapot apparently contains at least three pints of strong green tea," he said. "I do not know whether you feel equal to consuming half of it, but if it is the same as I had at breakfast I must be excused. One could also fancy from their solidity that those cups had been intended for breaking stones with."

“I can at least pour the tea over the balustrade,” said the girl. “It is the bread that presents the difficulty. It would crumble in your pocket, and you will presumably have to eat a little to save appearances.”

Deringham made a gesture of resignation. “On condition that you do as much. I am not going to be the only victim, though I fancy you could not crumble that bread in a stamp battery. This meal, and what we have otherwise seen at Somasco, confirms my theory that the folks who make money in the Colonies could save as much, or more, in England if they lived in a similar fashion.”

“Would it be worth while?” asked the girl with a little smile.

“It is a question of temperament,” said Deringham. “Personally, I do not think it would. Indeed, one could fancy that a man of taste would sooner be interred decently, which is why I will take a very little of the tea. You see, our mode of life in England, unfortunately, depends to some extent upon my retaining the good will of Mr. Alton of Somasco. He will, however, have to excuse me from tasting his butter.”

The girl poured a little of the tea into the cups, and then emptied the pot over the balustrade, which was, as it happened, a blunder, because while she endeavoured to crumble a small portion of the bread so as to convey the impression that she had been eating it, Alton and Seaforth came into the verandah.

The latter glanced at her, and, for he could not help it, a little smile flickered in his eyes.

“It is a very long while since I had afternoon tea, and I am not sure that Harry ever indulged in it in his life,” he said. “I will bring some more cups if you will give us some.”

Deringham looked at his daughter reproachfully, though his eyes twinkled, and for just a moment a flush crept into the girl’s face, but she laughed as she said, “Then I must trouble to ask the cook for more water.”

Alton hammered upon the suspended iron sheet, and in a minute or two the cook appeared again with a large plateful of sliced pork which he laid down before Miss Deringham.

“I was figuring you would change your mind, and if you want any more you have only to ask for it,” he said.

It cost the girl an effort to repress a shiver of disgust, but though she succeeded Alton saw her face, and she noticed that the bronze grew a trifle darker in his forehead. It seemed that he guessed her thoughts, but the fact that he offered no explanation and made no excuse for the uninviting fare pleased her. She fancied she understood his reticence, and that it became him.

“Take that pork away, and bring more water!” he said, and there was a faint ring in his voice, as he turned to the cook.

The man, who took up the teapot, shook it, and then, as though still incredulous, lifted the lid and gazed inside it.

“More water?” he said.

“Yes,” said Alton, a trifle harshly. “Get it right now!”

The man went away, and there was for almost a minute a somewhat unpleasant silence. Even Seaforth did not seem to know what to say, though he felt an absurd desire to laugh, and Alice Deringham was at once relieved and somewhat astonished when Alton put an end to it by a whimsical story of a raw Englishman’s camp cookery. Seaforth followed it with a better one, and the whole four were laughing when the cook came back again. He smiled at them reassuringly as he put the teapot down.

“I guess there’s enough this time,” he said. “It’s that full I could scarcely get the lid on.”

The tea was strong, and acrid with the sting of the wood smoke, but there was no avoiding another cupful, and Deringham drank determinedly, while his daughter felt that she had made full atonement when she set her cup down half empty. Then Alton, who explained that he had something to attend to, went away, and Seaforth smiled at the girl when Deringham went in for another cigar.

“I wonder if one might venture to congratulate you on your resolution?” he said.

“If I knew exactly what you meant I could answer more readily,” said Alice Deringham.

“Well,” said Seaforth reflectively, “I fancy you do, and, if it’s any comfort to you, I think Harry does too. He is considerably less of a fool than folks who do not understand this country might suppose him to be; but the point is, that if he can prevent it you will not suffer an infliction of this kind again.”

“I wonder why you thought it worth while to tell me,” said Alice Deringham. “Have I admitted that it was an affliction, or do you suppose I am very frightened of a little indifferent tea?”

Seaforth laughed. “I can’t fancy you so fond of it as the cook seems to conclude, and I don’t think indifferent was exactly the word. A stronger one would have been appropriate. Still, though I am not sure that you will understand me, I told you because I felt it was due to Harry. You see, his attitude was really the correct one, and taking him all round I am rather proud of him.”

“Hasn’t that an appearance of unnecessary patronage?” asked Miss Deringham, who was slightly nettled.

Seaforth nodded. “It has,” he said. “Only that the feeling is shared by everybody in this district, it would be sheer presumption. Good wine, you know, needs no bush.”

He went away because he had a suspicion that Alton would be wanting him, which was borne out when he found his comrade saddling a horse.

“Where are you going, Harry? We are not half way through with the sawlogs,” he said.

"No," said Alton dryly. "Still, if you work hard enough, you and Tom should get them into the water before it's dark to-night. I'm going right down to Horton's."

Seaforth laughed. "I thought you would. Horton has, however, as much taste in china as the average mule. Don't leave it to him."

"How did you guess that?" and Alton stared at him.

"That," said Seaforth, "was delightfully simple. It is a little more difficult to decide what Miss Deringham, who is a quick-witted young woman, did with the tea. As you are quite aware, she did not drink it. Still, that is not the question. I'll write you out a little list of what is wanted—I used to know a little about china once, you see, and you tell Horton to send it on to Vancouver. How much would you care to spend, Harry?"

"Just whatever is necessary, but get the best," said Alton. "Write another list of cakes and jellies and things of that kind, too. Put down plenty."

Seaforth returned by the time the horse was saddled, with an envelope, and Alton, who took it, rode out at a gallop, for it was a long way to the settlement, and the evenings at the ranch had of late become very pleasant to him. He did not wish to lose a minute of one of them. He drew bridle, however, when he came up with two men standing in the narrow trail, one of whom signed to him. He was a small rancher, but it was not until the impatient horse plunged that Alton recognized the other, who moved aside, as the man he had thrown into the river. The rancher saw the glance that passed between them.

"Hallo!" he said. "Then you two had trouble when you split? Now, Damer was telling me he'd got kind of tired of saw milling."

Alton laughed. "That's quite likely," he said. "He showed it by breaking up my planer in a fit of temper, and I fired him."

Then he touched the horse with his heel, and Damer's gaze grew venomous as he watched him ride away down the shadowy trail. The rancher evidently noticed it.

"Now I begin to understand how you got your jacket tore up and that lump on your forehead," he said. "I wasn't quite sure about your tale, anyway, and if Harry fired you it was for something mean. You'll get no horse from me."

The other man said nothing as he turned away, but his face was not pleasant as he plodded down the trail, and those words of Alton's were to cost him dear, for if Damer had obtained the horse he wanted to carry him to the railroad he would in all probability have left the country, which would have prevented a good deal of trouble. As it was, however, he restrapped the roll of blankets on his back, and trudged on with bitterness in his heart under the heat of the afternoon. He had when he left the Somasco mill headed in the direction of the Tyee mine, and passed the night in the woods; but with the morning reflection came, and he had doubled on his trail and was then making for the railroad, stiff with fatigue. Each

time he stumbled into a rut and the jolt shook him he remembered his last grievance against Alton, who had sent him on foot, and his frame of mind was not an enviable one when he limped into sight of the settlement as dusk was closing down.

He had made a long journey that day, and a good deal depended on the fact that he was weary and his boots galled him, because it had been his intention to push on to a ranch beyond the settlement before he slept, and hire a horse there. Damer was not especially sensitive, but he felt no great desire to encounter the badinage of the men generally to be found about the store, who, he surmised, would have heard by this time what had happened at the Somasco mill. Still, he was hungry and weary, and stopped a moment when he caught a blink of light between the trees. The bush behind him was very black and still, the dampness of the dew was on his dusty garments, and he shivered a little in the faint cold breeze that came down from the snow. Then more lights twinkled into brightness, a cheerful murmur of voices and a burst of laughter came out of the shadows, and the glow that broke out from the windows of Horton's store seemed curiously inviting. Damer, however, dallied still, and fumbled for his tobacco. He would sit down where he was and smoke, he said, and then attempt that last toilsome league.

As it happened, he could not find the tobacco, and having a hazy recollection of laying it on the ground the last time he filled his pipe, he shook his aching shoulders and trudged on. The loss of the tobacco decided him, and with a malediction on Alton he made for Horton's. It was also a fateful decision with far-reaching results he made just then. Supper had long been cleared away when he entered the general room of the hotel, and then stopped a moment with his hand on the door, for the one man who sat under the big lamp was the last person he desired to meet. He had, however, some papers spread out in front of him, and Damer decided to slip away quietly, but as he moved the blankets on his shoulders struck the door, which rattled, and the man looked up sharply. He had a fleshy face, and black beady eyes, which he fixed on Damer, who stood still, with a little, unpleasant smile.

"Come right in!" he said.

Damer smothered an anathema as he recognized the command in the tone. "No," he said. "If you don't mind, Mr. Hallam, I'll be getting on again."

"Come in!" said Hallam, a trifle more sharply, but for just a moment Damer remained motionless. A few steps would take him down the verandah stairway, and then the shadowy bush lay before him. Had he had a horse, he would have obeyed the impulse which prompted him to avoid the encounter; but, as it happened, owing to the fact that Alton had met the rancher who would otherwise have lent him one, he had none. So with evident unwillingness he came slowly forward, and dropping his bundles on the floor flung himself into a chair.

"Well," he said, "I'm here."

Hallam, who had been watching him, nodded reflectively. “I guess you didn’t expect to find me, or you wouldn’t have come,” he said. “Where were you going?”

“To the railroad,” said Damer. “Out of the country!”

“Without telling me? That was kind of foolish of you. Still, you haven’t much sense, anyway. You had quite a well-paid job at Somasco.”

“Well,” said Damer dryly, “I haven’t got it now.”

Hallam laughed, though the glint in his eyes did not express good will. “You have got a temper that will be the ruin of you, and don’t know when a man’s too big for you, while, now I come to look at you, there’s a lump on your forehead that makes the thing quite plain. You have been fooling with Alton, and he has ’most pounded the life out of you. Still, what do you want to leave the country for, anyway?”

Damer set his lips, and drummed with his fingers on the table. Then he made a little deprecatory gesture, and glanced at Hallam.

“You’ll hear it all by and by, but there’s one point where you’re wrong,” he said. “Now, I’m not scared too easily, but I kind of feel it in me I’ll make nothing but trouble for myself by worrying Alton. Still, it’s not the man himself I’m afraid of. I’ve met tougher ones, and come out ahead of them.”

Hallam sat silent a moment, for he knew the prospectors and survey packers who passed their lives amidst the desolate ranges and in the shadowy bush and their superstitions.

“You have had trouble with him before?” he said.

“Yes,” said Damer, “I have. He cut my partner down with an axe back there in Washington. It was in the big rush in the Baker foothills, and we had a hard crowd standing in with us; but I had to pull out, and Alton and another man made most of five thousand dollars out of the claim I left.”

“The Bluebird?” said Hallam reflectively. “I remember that rush. Alton did himself well. Wasn’t there a man called Nailer mixed up in the affair?”

“There was,” said Damer, who seemed to shiver a little. “He was my partner. We’d have had the claim, and Alton wouldn’t have worried anybody again, if Nailer had kept his nerve that night. Something went wrong with the spring of his Winchester.—and Alton didn’t give him another chance.”

The silence that followed was, somewhat impressive. Hallam was trying to remember what he had read about the affray in question in a Tacoma paper, while Damer once more saw in fancy a man spring half-dressed through the wisp of smoke that drifted about a little tent. He remembered with an unpleasant distinctness the crash of the rifle shot that rang amidst the shadowy pines, and the grim face of the man who whirled an axe that glinted in the moonlight about his head. He saw the flash of its descent—and then brushing the memories from him stretched out a hand that shook a little towards the whisky on the table.

"Well," he said, "I owe Alton a good deal, and that's why I went up to Somasco when you told me, but he has been too much for me again, and now I feel it in me that if I'm wise I'll let that man alone."

He drank a little whisky, and sat still, staring vacantly before him with a vague apprehension in his eyes, while the strained tenseness of his expression and attitude was not without its effect on Hallam, and it was unfortunate he did not yield to the impulse which prompted him to let Damer go. He, however, shook off the fancy with a little, impatient laugh.

"It's not going to suit me to have you slipping out of the country," he said. "I want you right here, though it would be quite easy to find a man with twice the grit you have in you. You let Alton whip you off your claim in Washington, and—for I've a notion of what has happened—'most pound the head off you yesterday. Now you want to light out, leaving him to laugh at you?"

Damer flushed a little, and a look of vindictive malice crept into his eyes as he rose.

"That's about enough!" he said. "You're quite a different man from Alton. I'm going on."

"Sit down!" said Hallam sharply. "I'm quite as dangerous to you. Take some more whisky, and listen to me, though I didn't think it would be necessary to go into the thing again. I was with the men who found Gordon at the bottom of his shaft on the Quatchigan."

Damer appeared irresolute, but he sat down. "Nobody knows how he got there."

"No? Well, I have a notion, and I guess Tom Winstanley and one other man could tell."

"Winstanley's dead."

Hallam laughed. "Still, the other man is on my pay-roll, but where you can't get at him unless I want you to. Now, are you going to gain anything by kicking against me?"

Damer was evidently astonished, and sat for almost a minute as though lost in reflection. Then he made a little gesture as one who abandons a struggle.

"I guess that takes me. What do you want?" he said.

"Nothing very much in the meanwhile. They'll start you rock-drilling at the Tyee, but it's quite likely I'll send you up into the ranges prospecting by and by. Still, I don't want any of the folks down here to know you're with me, and you'll start out by the railroad trail to-morrow, and wait at the lake until I come up with you. There's somebody coming now!"

Damer moved abruptly, for there was a step on the stairway, and as he reached the verandah a man brushed past him. He stopped, and for a moment Damer and Alton stood face to face. The latter, however, passed on, and swept his glance round the room, seeing only a man he did not recognize sitting at the opposite end

with his back to him. Then he swung round again, and went down the stairway shouting, “Horton!” until a man came out from a shed at the back of the store.

“Well,” he said, “I’m here. You needn’t raise the whole place, Harry.”

Alton laughed. “I’ve been up to Grantly’s, and he’s going in to the railroad to-morrow. You can send that order for the crockery along with him. Dollars are no object so long as it’s pretty. The tea is to be the best they keep in Vancouver, too.”

He swung himself into the saddle, and shook the bridle, while Damer leaned on the verandah balustrade gazing up the dusky trail he had taken until the last faint beat of horsehoofs sank into the silence of the bush. It was now very black and solemn, but away beyond it the snow still shone faintly cold and white against the sky, and once more Damer shivered a little as he turned towards the lighted store. He had meant to leave the country, but fate had been too strong for him, and remembering what Hallam had told him about the prospecting he wondered if he and Alton would meet again under that cold gleam of snow amidst the great desolation of the ranges.

CHAPTER IX
MISS DERINGHAM FEELS SLIGHTED

The morning was still and almost unpleasantly warm, but Miss Deringham looked very fresh and cool in her long white dress as she lay in a deerhide chair on the verandah of the Somasco ranch. She had hung her hat on the back of the chair, and a shaft of sunlight called up an answering brightness from the coils of lustrous hair. One foot in the scantiest form of slipper rested on the lowest rail of the balustrade, and she had slightly curled herself up in the chair in a fashion which implied a languid content with her surroundings, and that there was no longer any need for ceremony between herself and her companion. It is possible that Miss Deringham was aware of this, even if she had not intended to convey that impression.

Alton, who now wore a new jean jacket buttoned right up to the neck, leaned against a pillar, answering the questions of the girl, who glanced at him with a smile occasionally. He had, as usual, a good deal to do that day, and now and then turned his eyes towards the sun, as though noticing its height above the cedars, which did not, of course, escape Miss Deringham's attention. Still, he lingered upon the verandah, and what she deduced from this was not unpleasant to the girl. Though it still returned at increasing intervals, she had almost forgotten her antipathy to the man, and the fact that he was rapidly yielding to her refining and sometimes chastening influence was indirectly flattering. Miss Deringham experienced the more gratification in using it because he was quick-witted, and a veiled rebuke would bring a little darker colour into his sun-darkened face, and she could forgive his offences, which were indeed not frequent, for the sake of his penitence.

"You have been very patient," she said at length.

"No," said Alton with a twinkle in his eyes, "I don't think that is a thing anybody could bring up against me."

"Still," said the girl, "you have been an hour here talking to me, when you must have been dying to get away."

Alton laughed, and Miss Deringham found something pleasant in his naive directness. "Now, that's not fair. If I had been I should have gone," said he. "It would please me to stay right here and talk to you all day."

Miss Deringham shook her head reproachfully. "One should imply such things and not put them into words. Still, I scarcely think you will much longer have an opportunity. We are going on to Vancouver very shortly."

Alton's face grew clouded. "Why?" he said.

The girl laughed softly. “We have inconvenienced Mrs. Margery a good deal already, and it is evident that we cannot stay here for ever.”

Alton moved abruptly, and his companion fancied she heard a stifled sigh. “No,” he said gravely. “It’s a pity; but you could wait for another month or two.”

Alice Deringham smiled a little. “You and Charley will miss us, then?”

Alton nodded gravely, but there was a subdued brightness in his eyes, and the girl wished he would open them fully. She fancied he was putting considerable restraint upon himself. “I don’t know about Charley. He can talk better than I can for himself, but I shall miss you all the time,” he said. “This has been a revelation to me, and I feel that it is good for me to talk to you. Then, before you came I had a kind of bitter feeling against all my father’s folks in England. I figured they were wrapped up in their cast-iron pride, and ready to trample on anybody who got in their way; but you have started me thinking differently, and it seems my duty to know more of them. After all, I am an Alton of Carnaby.”

The girl smiled again. “You fancy you may have been wrong?”

The man’s face flushed a little, and there was once more evidence of the self-restraint. “Yes,” he said simply. “I know I was a fool.”

He might have said a good deal more, and lessened the effect, for Miss Deringham had seen his face and read the respect in it. Its sincerity touched her, and she felt with a vague uneasiness that it would not be pleasant to face his contempt if he found it misplaced.

“And yet you take your father’s part?” he said.

“Of course,” said Alton simply. “What would any son do? But it seems to me there might be a little allowance for my grandfather, too, and I think he and my father have fixed up that quarrel long ago.”

“They are both dead,” said the girl with a little curiosity.

“Yes,” said Alton, “and they kept their word, and died unyielding. Well, I think they were each right from their way of looking at the thing, and that being so they could only do what they did, and would respect each other for it when they meet where the long trail ends. My father was right in holding to the woman who loved him, and I think Tristan Alton knew it when he left Carnaby to me.”

Miss Deringham seemed thoughtful. The man’s grim code of honour, inflexible as it was primitive, caused her, for no apparent reason, indefinite misgivings, and she made a little gesture of weariness. “I think,” she said, “it would be better if we did not talk of Carnaby, and I was wondering if it would be possible to catch a trout if there is a little more wind presently.”

This was scarcely a correct rendering of her thoughts, for she was in reality desirous of ascertaining whether the man would, to afford her pleasure, thrust his work aside.

“Well,” he said eagerly, “I shouldn’t wonder if it would. Now, there’s the planer to fix up, but that could wait a little, and—but here’s someone coming!”

Miss Deringham was conscious of a trace of annoyance when a girl rode out of the orchard on a wiry little pony. She was dressed neatly and rode well, though the somewhat scanty skirt was evidently not the work of a habitmaker and had seen lengthy service, while the plain straw hat could not at the limit have cost more than a dollar; nor did she wear any gloves, and her hands were brown, while her face betokened exposure to frost and wind and sun. It was, however, a comely face, and Miss Deringham noticed that the girl carried herself gracefully. It was also curious that she was not wholly pleased when Alton went forward to greet the newcomer with his hat in his hand, and, she fancied, offered more assistance than was absolutely necessary in helping her down. Then they entered the verandah together, and Alice Deringham smiled in a fashion which did not pledge her to any extreme good-will when Alton presented the stranger.

"Miss Townshead, from the ranch back yonder," he said.

Miss Deringham said something of no importance, and waited with slightly unusual curiosity for the girl's answer, which somewhat astonished her. The voice was nicely modulated, and the intonation free from Western harshness and unmistakably English.

"You will come over and see us. It is a long time since we had a visit from anybody from England," she said. "Are you pleased with this country?"

Miss Deringham glanced at Alton. "I grow almost enthusiastic about it at times," she said. "Its inhabitants are also especially kind."

The man did not, however, respond as he might have done. "It's a tolerably good country," he said gravely, and then glanced at the stranger. "Nothing wrong at the ranch, I hope, Miss Nellie?"

"No," said the girl. "We have, however, heard that Jack is seriously ill, and I rode over because the spotted steer has broken away, and I found the trail led into the Somasco valley. It was one of the beasts father was sending down to sell."

Alton became suddenly intent. "Then it has not gone far. I saw its trail an hour ago," he said. "Well, we must head the beast off before it gets into the thick timber under the range, and there's no time to lose. I'll be ready in two minutes. Would you like to follow with Charley, Miss Deringham?"

The time had scarcely been exceeded when he led a horse out of the stable, held his hand out for Miss Townshead to mount by, and then swung himself to the saddle. Then he and the girl swung across the clearing at a gallop, and Alice Deringham endeavoured to assure herself that she was not angry. It appeared that her angling was of considerably less importance than the capture of the steer.

It was possibly for this reason that she was unusually gracious to Seaforth, who came along just then, and though evidently in some haste, stopped to talk to her; while when she had promised to accompany him to witness the chase, and he strode away towards the stable, her father sauntered out of the house and glanced in her direction whimsically.

“It occurs to me that one of us is responsible for some irregularity in the work upon this ranch, and that the beast it a trifle uncertain in his moods,” said he.

“It is,” said his daughter, “a little difficult to understand you.”

Deringham pointed to the two mounted figures just entering the brush, and the girl fancied that something had ruffled him. He could be unpleasant when that happened.

“Alton of Somasco is a somewhat busy man, but both he and his partner seem to have suspended their energies this morning,” he said. “No doubt wild-beast taming has its fascination, but one might fancy it was apt to prove a somewhat disconcerting and perilous amusement.”

“Yes?” said the girl in a tone of languid inquiry.

Deringham nodded. “One can never tell when the beast may revert to his primitive instincts, and do something unpleasant,” he said. “This one is also evidently of somewhat uncertain temperament. We are told that Una had a lion, but the effect of the story would have been diminished if it had been recorded that the king of the forest divided his allegiance.”

Miss Deringham was now convinced that her father was not pleased. “I have not noticed anything especially leonine about Mr. Seaforth,” she said.

“No,” said Deringham dryly. “The Honourable Charley appears to be an admirable young man of the domestic feline species, but I don’t know of any reason that would make it advisable to waste powder and shot over him.”

Miss Deringham rose languidly, but her father felt he had gone as far as was desirable, and went back to grapple with a financial difficulty from which he could see only one escape, while she rode away with Seaforth, who led out the horse reserved for her use. Alice Deringham could ride, but when they left the clearing and plunged into the bush she found that all she had been taught in England was not much use in British Columbia. There was no perceptible trail, and the horses floundered round great fallen trees, and plunged smashing through thickets of black raspberry and barberry. In places their flanks were brushed by tall, black-stemmed fern, and where the forest was more open treacherous gravel slipped beneath the hoofs that sank from sight amidst the blood-red clusters of the little wineberry. After an hour of it the girl was shaken and breathless, and she contemplated her habit somewhat ruefully when Seaforth drew bridle. Somewhere far up on a hill shoulder there was a smashing in the bush.

“Are you sure you have not lost the way?” she said. “It seems impossible for horses or cattle to get through this forest.”

Seaforth laughed. “The bush is really thin here,” he said. “Anybody used to it could get through at a gallop, while a good bushman could scarcely make five miles a day walking where it’s tolerably thick. I wonder if you know that the ox was originally a denizen of the bush. I didn’t until Harry told me. It always seemed to me a tranquil beast adapted for sober locomotion on nice green grass.”

“And isn’t it?” said the girl with indifference in her eyes. “Mr. Alton is an authority on cattle?”

“Harry,” said Seaforth, smiling, “is, although one might not always fancy so, a complete encyclopaedia on everything useful. Anyway, from the sound up yonder you will presently see some of the primitive habits of the genus *bos*, and the spectacle may be the more interesting because the beast will if possible head away up that valley into fastnesses where only a prehistoric man with a tail could follow it.”

Alice Deringham said nothing further and was glad of the rest. They had pulled their horses up on the slope of a hill which formed one side of a hollow out of which several valleys opened. There were great trees about them, and it was only here and there a ray of sunlight pierced the dim green shadow, while below them a stream went frothing down a miniature canon whose banks were cumbered by fallen timber. It was, the girl fancied, an especially difficult place for a horseman to pick his way through.

Meanwhile the sound above grew louder, and presently an object apparently travelling like a thunderbolt came out of the shadow. It was, notwithstanding the speed it made, gambolling playfully, with head tossed sideways and tail in the air, and when Miss Deringham fancied it must turn aside for a tangled brake, went smashing straight through it. As it emerged with an exultant flourish of head and tail two other objects became visible behind it, and Seaforth pushed forward when the mounted figures came sweeping down the mountain side. Here and there they swung wide round a fallen tree, but they rode straight through raspberry-canes and breast-high fern, and Alice Deringham wondered when she saw that one of them was a girl. She had left her hat somewhere in the bush, her hair streamed about her, the skirt was blown aside; but she held on with set lips and two vivid spots of colour in her warm-tinted face, a length or two behind her companion. He was riding hard, and there was a red smear across his face where a branch had smote him.

Miss Deringham turned to watch them, realizing that whatever the steer risked, its pursuers were in peril of life and limb. Sometimes one horse rose above fern and thicket, or twisted, apparently with the sinuosity of a snake, in and out amidst the clustered trunks, while once the girl lurched forward. Miss Deringham gasped, but part of the fluttering skirt was rent away, and the little lithe figure swept on again. The pair were, it was evident, closing with the steer, and the latter apparently cut off from the valley it made for by the ravine. This was not, however, to prove an insuperable obstacle, for as Miss Deringham with difficulty edged her horse nearer, the beast charged straight at the hollow, and dropped into it. Then, while she regarded its capture as certain, it rose into view again, and floundered up the almost vertical slope on the other side with no very obvious difficulty. Miss Deringham, who found this riding down of a Canadian steer

almost as exciting as anything she had seen when following the English hounds, regretted that the ravine with its fringe of undergrowth and litter of netted branches must apparently put a stop to the pursuit. Though the width was not great, no horse, she fancied, would be expected to face it, and she watched the two figures flitting amidst the trunks to see when they would pull up.

There was, however, no sign that they intended to do so, and Miss Deringham gasped a little when Alton glanced for a moment over his shoulder.

"Pull him!" his voice reached her hoarsely, and she held her breath as she saw the man's hand move on the bridle and his heels pressed home. The horse swung clear of the thicket, plunged with head down, flung it up, and straightened itself again; there was a drumming of hoofs, and man and beast had shot forward from the bank. It seemed an appreciable time before they came down amidst the fern, and then Miss Deringham drew in her breath with a little sibilant sigh.

"Oh!" she said softly, and there was a great smashing as man and beast reeled through a brake on the other side.

"Yes," said Seaforth, "it was a tolerably risky thing, but it takes a good deal to turn Harry. Where's Nellie Townshead now?"

"There," said Miss Deringham, instinctively clenching her bridle. "Surely the girl cannot be going to try it."

"Good Lord!" said Seaforth under his breath, and the second figure rushed with streaming skirt and hair at the gap cleared by Alton's passage.

Then the man turned his head, and it was a moment before he looked round again, very white in face. "Thank Heaven!" he said hoarsely. "She's over."

Miss Deringham glanced at him curiously, and then laughed a little. "Miss Townshead is evidently a determined young woman," she said, with something in her manner which led Seaforth to fancy that this was not intended as a compliment. "But what is Mr. Alton doing?"

"Getting the rope ready," said Seaforth. "It's scarcely used in this country, but Harry once did some stock-riding on the prairie. We'll push on a little."

It became evident as they did so that the position favoured the pursuers now. A rock it was apparently incapable of climbing prevented the flight of the steer in one direction, and Miss Townshead had ridden forward ready to turn the beast if it attempted escape in another. It stopped with lowered head as though meditating an onslaught upon her, then wheeled again and came back towards Alton, who rose a trifle in his stirrups, whirling the rope about his head. It shot forward presently, uncoiling in a curve, and then the man swung backwards, wheeling his horse, and there was a crash as the steer went down amidst the fern.

"That should take a good deal of the friskiness out of it," said Seaforth. "We'll go across and join them. There's a way over somewhere."

The steer was roped to a tree when they came up with the pair, and Seaforth noticed with some inward amusement the way in which the two girls glanced at

each other, and the contrast between them. Miss Deringham was almost too serene, and, he fancied, might have stepped out of a picture. Miss Townshead's cheeks were crimson, her skirt was rent, and, though she had evidently found opportunity to effect some alteration, loose wisps of hair still hung about her shoulders. They were, however, of a fine silky brown, and it seemed to Seaforth, might have been arranged in a more unbecoming fashion.

"I wonder if I might venture to congratulate you. We seldom witness horsemanship of this description in England," said Miss Deringham, with an inflection in her voice which Seaforth guessed the meaning of, and seemed to bring a slightly warmer tinge into the already carmine cheeks of the girl.

Still, she looked at the speaker with a little smile. "There is a difference between the two countries, and the scarcity of dollars in this one explains a good deal," she said.

Alton glanced at both of them with a slightly bewildered expression. "Of course!" said he. "The thing's quite simple. That steer is worth so many dollars to Miss Townshead's father, and he couldn't afford to lose them."

Alice Deringham turned aside with a just perceptible gesture of impatience, which Seaforth noticed and fancied he understood, though it was not apparent to the others, and while she rode on with him, Alton appeared thoughtful as he did something to his bridle. When he had finished it he saw that his companion was smiling at him.

"It seems to me there are a good many things I don't know," said he.

"Of course," said the girl lightly. "Still, I don't think I would worry over them if I were you. They are very trivial!"

Alton nodded sagely, and odd fragments of his conversation reached Miss Deringham. "We'll send someone back for the steer," he said. "Jack's no better?"

"No," said the girl, with a little quiver in her voice. "I am afraid the work is too hard for him up there."

Alton seemed thoughtful. "I wonder if he would come down and do something for me," he said. "I could find a use for another man or two, you see."

Again the little flush of crimson crept into Miss Townshead's cheeks. "I don't think so; he seems to fancy he can get into the C.P.R. service when he is better."

"Well," said Alton, "I'm going to take a liberty. Jack wouldn't have gone up yonder if you hadn't wanted the dollars?"

Nellie Townshead looked down a moment, then swiftly raised her head, and though her fingers seemed to tighten on the bridle there was a curious steadiness in her eyes. "There is," she said, "no use in denying what everybody knows."

Alton nodded. "I know that kind of worry, and it's a bad one. Has Hallam got a hold upon the ranch?"

Miss Townshead appeared astonished, and did not answer for a moment. "I fancied you did not know, but he has," she said. "He came up to see my father a

week ago, and that is why we are selling the stock."

Alton's face darkened. "That man's of the same breed as the panther, only the panther lets up when he's full. Well, you needn't tell me any more. Interest's high in this country, but it's a pity your father———"

He stopped a moment, and appeared a trifle embarrassed when the girl regarded him with a little flash in her eyes. "My father has done his best," she said.

"Of course!" said Alton hastily. "Well, now, Hallam wants your ranch, and when that man wants a thing it's bad to keep him from getting it, but it wouldn't please me to see him take the ranch. I wonder if you can figure what his next move will be?"

The girl's fingers trembled, but there was patience and courage in her eyes. "I am afraid I can," said she. "We shall be sold up and driven out very shortly."

Alton shook his head. "I wouldn't count too much on that. Hallam's bad all through, but there are one or two other men who will have a finger in what's going to be made out of this country, and it would be a favour if when he shuts down on you, you send word to me."

The girl did not look at the man, but rode silent for a while. "I think I understand you, and you are very kind—but it is impossible."

"No," said Alton grimly. "You don't understand me. There's not room enough up here for Hallam and me, and I've a deal to square off with him already. Now when you get your notice you will send word to me?"

"Yes," said the girl, as one making a swift decision, and there was a sudden flash of hope in her eyes.

"That is a bargain," said Alton, with the little soft laugh of his. "Then when the deal's fixed up all the winnings will not be counted over by Mr. Hallam."

Miss Deringham heard nothing further, and understood very little of what had reached her, while though unusually gracious to Seaforth she found him distinctly unresponsive.

She, however, lent Miss Townshead a hat when they reached the ranch, and made no comment when Seaforth rode home with her. It was late that night when the latter found Alton smoking in a somewhat dubious mood upon the verandah.

"Is there anything worrying you?" said he.

"Oh, yes," said Alton grimly. "There's work of all kinds waiting, and nothing done to-day. Somehow women seem to play the devil with a man's plans, Charley."

"Yes," said Seaforth, "they not infrequently do."

"Well," said Alton, "I wouldn't mind so much if I'd pleased anybody, but I haven't, you see. I was talking at large about something after we'd got the steer, when Miss Nellie turned right round on me. Then I came back here, and Miss Deringham didn't seem pleased with me."

“Did she tell you so?” said Seaforth, smiling, and Alton turned upon him savagely.

“No, sir, she did not,” said he. “Anyway, it wasn’t necessary. You understand these folks from the old country, Charley?”

“It is,” said Seaforth dryly, “a tolerably bold venture to assert that one understands anybody.”

“Well,” said Alton, “you know what I mean. Now do you think Miss Deringham was vexed because she didn’t get that fishing? You see she is tolerably keen on it. Of course, if I had thought of it I might have sent you with her.”

“No,” said Seaforth, smiling. “I should scarcely fancy that was the reason, and I don’t fancy the arrangement suggested would have given Miss Deringham any great pleasure. Nor do I think I should have gone.”

“No?” said Alton inquiringly.

“No,” said Seaforth dryly. “I’m not Alton of Somasco—and Carnaby—you see.”

Alton regarded him sternly out of half-closed eyes. “There are jokes that don’t please me, Charley,” he said, and then laughed softly. “I’m a fool with a red-hot temper, but it’s a consolation that I know a bigger one than me.”

“You need not be bashful, Harry. You mean me?”

Alton nodded as he turned upon his heel, and Seaforth watched him meditatively. “I wish I was as sure of it as you seem to be,” said he. “Well, I’m occasionally thankful I’m not a rich man, nor much of a beauty.”

CHAPTER X
THE UNDELIVERED MESSAGE

The afternoon was slipping by when, some time after the capture of the steer, Alice Deringham sat waiting for Alton under a big fir. He had promised to take her out upon the lake, and the little breeze that stirred the cedars to drowsy music would, she knew, ripple the shining surface and render the capture of a big trout the less problematical. The trout of British Columbia are also at least equal to those of England in their faculties of discrimination and observation, and during the listless autumn days Miss Deringham's angling had not been especially successful. Still, though she not infrequently returned with an empty basket, the girl apparently retained an enthusiasm for it she had not always displayed at home.

The lake she declared was beautiful, and this was beyond contravention, while even when no splash disturbed its mirror-like shining she found it pleasant to slide across its black depths in a light canoe. She knew, and so did Alton, that under those conditions the silver and vermilion lure would have been quite as useful in the bottom of the craft, but the man usually seemed too content to lazily dip the paddle while the girl would lead him on to talk with judicious questions. Alton could on occasion talk well, displaying a vigour and freshness of thought which at the commencement had slightly astonished his companion, who found a curious pleasure in sounding this and that depth of his nature.

As a rule, he responded readily, and she was conscious of the same sense of power that a master of the organ might feel as his fingers touched the stops and keys. Alton had lived simply in close touch with nature, and though he had read much, his thoughts had something of the pristine purity and vigour of the land he dwelt in, and were in a fashion musical; but now and then the girl venturing overfar chanced upon a chord that rang harsh and discordant, and shrinking a little recognized, she fancied, the undertone of primitive barbarity.

On the afternoon in question she was, however, slightly angry with him. He had fixed no special time, but she had waited some while, and Alice Deringham preferred that other people should wait for her. She had also taken some pains with her toilet and though her attire was neat in place of ornate, its simplicity was the result of lavish expenditure and artistic selection. To some extent, and so far as she could ascertain it, it was also in accordance with the taste of the man who was to accompany her.

It was very still. Nobody moved in the clearing, though from beyond it rose the faint humming of saws, and the little breeze was heavy with a resinous fragrance. The log-house was silent save for an occasional clatter from the

kitchen, where Mrs. Margery was apparently busy. Alice Deringham did not like Mrs. Margery, and had reason to believe the latter returned the feeling, though she had noticed that the somewhat grim old lady had a smile that was almost gentle for rancher Townshead's daughter. Presently the rattle of plates also ceased, and the girl found the silence exasperating. The time was slipping by, and there was still no sign of Alton.

At last, however, there was a thud of horsehoofs in the orchard, and a man rode out from among the trees, but Miss Deringham, who had risen with a smile, shut the fingers of one hand a trifle viciously when she saw that it was not Alton. The man sat loosely in his saddle, and his face was a trifle flushed when he pulled the horse up.

"Is Harry Alton anywhere around, miss?" he said, and the girl noticed that his voice was uneven.

"He may be here presently," she said. "I don't know where he is."

"I've a long way to ride, and can't wait for him," said the man, swaying a little as he gathered up the bridle. "There seems to be nobody around the place, and when he comes you might tell him to go up to Townshead's as soon as he can. Miss Nellie's wanting to see him, and it's Thursday."

"Thursday?" said Miss Deringham.

"Yes," said the man. "Harry will understand. There was some more about it, but I've forgotten it. Well, you'll tell him. I must be getting on."

He lurched when the horse started, and though most men are abstemious in that country, Alice Deringham decided that he was under the influence of alcohol. She also felt distinctly displeased with him for bringing his message before she and Alton had set out for the lake. It was a favourable afternoon for fishing, and not pleasant to reflect that her amusement must be deferred at the bidding of the girl from the ranch. Then she decided that as Alton would not have received the message had he come when she expected him, it would not make any great difference if he did not hear it until their return. Miss Deringham did not remember by what reasoning she arrived at that result, but it seemed to her distinctly more fitting that Miss Townshead should be the one to wait.

Ten minutes later Alton rode up at a gallop. "Sorry I couldn't come before, but I was over at Thomson's borrowing a new trolling spoon," he said. "Jimmy's too slow for anything, and I had to look at a span of oxen he'd been buying."

"It seems to me that leisureliness is a characteristic of the country," said the girl.

Alton glanced at her with a faint twinkle in his eyes. "Now if you feel vexed with me, look at the horse," said he. "Anyway, the canoe's ready and the lake all rippling, and I've one of the new flight-hook spoons."

Miss Deringham, who saw the spume upon the bit and the horse's whitened sides, smiled graciously, and decided that Nellie Townshead's message could very

well wait until the evening.

"I will be ready in about five minutes," she said.

She kept the man waiting twenty, possibly because she believed it would be a salutary discipline, and was not displeased to notice that he stamped impatiently up and down. Then she went down with him to the lake, and it was dusk when they returned with several fine trout, in the state of content with each other which occasionally characterizes comrades in a successful angling expedition. They had also so much to talk about that Miss Deringham completely forgot the message, and her pleasure was only dissipated when she met her father alone for a minute. His pose expressed dejection and indecision as he came towards her along the verandah.

"You do not look well," she said.

"That," said Deringham dryly, "is quite possible. Things are not going well with me just now."

"Business worries?" said the girl.

Deringham nodded. "And domestic too, if the affairs of Carnaby come under that heading. In fact, I am hemmed in by difficulties I cannot see a way through, and to make it worse Alton will come to no decision until he has sent somebody over to report upon the property. I have wondered now and then if he was talking altogether at random when he told you that he was willing to give it you."

"Of course!" said his daughter, smiling outwardly to cover her indignation. "It would be preposterous to think that I could accept such a favour even if he had the slightest intention of relinquishing his claim!"

"Yes," said Deringham dryly. "Still, I fancy there are young women who would not disdain to be mistress of Carnaby."

The girl straightened herself a little, and the colour crept into her face. "Do not be foolish, father. You cannot fancy that the man was speaking seriously."

"I don't know," said Deringham. "I am not sure that he does himself, and if you do not, there is an end of the affair. Still, if there had been anything in the speech the possibility alluded to would have lifted a great load from me."

He said nothing further, but passed on, leaving the girl standing on the verandah with head bent a trifle, and a face that was less cold in colouring than usual. Presently, however, she stood upright suddenly as Alton came up the stairway, but not before he had seen her. After a swift glance at her he put his hand gently on her shoulder.

"You are in some trouble. Can't you tell me what it is?" he said.

Alice Deringham could just see his face in the moonlight, and it was gravely compassionate, but there was in it, none of the personal admiration she had sometimes noticed there, which had its effect upon her attitude towards him. He was, she felt, sorry for her because she was a woman menaced by some difficulty, and that she should be an object of pity to this bush rancher stung the pride, of

which she had a good deal. Had he tendered his sympathy because she was Alice Deringham it is possible that she would have told him something, though not exactly the simple state of the case. As it was, however, she shook his hand off, and looked at him with a sparkle in her eyes.

"Why should you suppose that, and venture to presume upon it?" she said.

"Would it be presuming?"

"It would," said the girl very coldly.

"Then," said Alton, "you can't tell me?"

"No, of course not. Is there any reason why I should?"

Here at least was an opportunity, but if the man desired to gain his companion's confidence he made an indifferent use of it. "We are some kind of relations, and you promised to be friends with me," he said.

Miss Deringham laughed a little. "One seldom tells one's troubles to one's friends," she said.

Alton seemed to sigh. "Then there is nothing I can do?"

"Yes," said Miss Deringham. "People are usually best alone when they have to grapple with a difficulty."

Alton still lingered a moment. "If you don't want to tell me, I don't know how to make you, and I'm sorry, because I might fix the thing up," he said gravely. "Well, I'm going, but it hurts me to see anything worrying you, and know that somebody else has brought it upon you."

"How could you know that?" said the girl.

The man smiled a little. "It's quite simple," said he, "You are too good and kind to bring sorrow upon yourself or anybody."

This was much better, but it was over-late now, and, for the girl said nothing, he moved away, and presently met Seaforth as he strode down the trail.

"Hallo!" said the latter. "Where are you going, Harry?"

"I know where you can go," said Alton grimly, "and that's right away to the devil."

Seaforth laughed a little. "And that's the woman's work. It's a pity Harry can't distinguish between paste and diamonds," said he.

It happened about this time that Miss Townshead sat in an attitude of expectancy in her father's house. Townshead, still wearing the red velvet jacket, sat in the old leather chair, with the resignation of the incapable stamped upon him, and the cigar and cup of coffee close by. His attitude seemed to imply that he was a very ill-used man, but had discovered that it was no use protesting. He sipped his coffee delicately, and then glanced towards his daughter with a trace of irritation.

"I wish you could keep still, my dear," he said. "There is an inquietude in your very pose that unsettles me, and with a little fortitude one can get used to anything. For instance, if anybody had told me five years ago that I could take my

after-dinner coffee without a slight flavour of old cognac I should not have believed them."

Nellie Townshead evinced a little impatience. "It might be slightly more difficult to dispense with the dinner, as well as the coffee, and that is what we shall probably have to do presently," said she. "Why did you borrow that money from Mr. Hallam, father? Any one could have seen that he was a rascal, and I believe that Mr. Seaforth warned you."

Townshead sighed. "The difficulty," he said, "is to arrive at a correct decision before one knows what will happen. Afterwards, it is comparatively easy. It appeared desirable to buy some cattle, and that I should visit Victoria, where I made an unfortunate speculation, to recuperate after my last attack. During my absence Jack, as you will remember, lost some of the cattle and mismanaged the ranch. Mr. Seaforth is also a young man who occasionally takes too much upon himself."

The girl flushed a little. "Jack worked from morning to night, and if we had spent a few dollars hiring somebody to help him, it would have been better for all of us," she said. "That, however, is not the question. What are we to do when we are turned out of the ranch, as we shall be very shortly?"

"There is," said Townshead, "no use in anticipating unpleasant probabilities. We will in the first place go down to Vancouver, where I fancy you will be able to earn a moderate sum by typewriting. The use of the instrument is, I understand, readily acquired, and while I regret the necessity for a daughter of mine to follow such an occupation, the emolument appears to be reasonable."

Nellie Townshead smiled somewhat bitterly, for the fact that she had ridden after straying cattle, and done a good many things that women do not usually undertake upon the ranch, had apparently escaped her father's attention.

"But is there anything you could do in Vancouver? You have no great knowledge of business," she said.

Townshead smiled wryly. "It is," he said, "a pity that I have so much, because on the two occasions I took an interest in it I lost a good deal of money. There is nothing for me to do here, at least. I cannot chop big trees."

"No," said the girl. "But have you nothing in contemplation?"

Townshead shook his head as though he were tired of the subject. "No," he said resignedly. "I have too much regard for my very indifferent health to worry unnecessarily."

The girl sighed a little, and felt very helpless, knowing that the task of maintaining both would devolve upon her and her brother. She was a dutiful daughter, but she occasionally found it difficult to maintain her respect for her father. Had he been beaten down after a stubborn struggle she would with almost fierce loyalty have been proud of him: but Townshead, who spent most of his time safeguarding his constitution, had never fought at all. Conflict of any kind jarred

upon him. Answering nothing, she sat still listening, until at last a tramp of horsehoofs became audible. Somebody was riding that way, but there was another ranch farther up the valley, and her pulses throbbed when her strained senses told her that the horseman had reached the forking of the trail. If he passed on the blow she shrank from might be suspended a little longer.

The man did not, however, pass by, but turned into the home trail, and she rose with a little shiver when there was a knocking at the door. A man stood outside it with a horse behind him, and a paper in his hand, while his dress betrayed him as one from the cities. He was also young, and appeared considerably embarrassed, but he took off his hat and made the girl a little bow. She flung the door open, and stood very straight and still before him.

"You may come in," she said.

The stranger glanced at her swiftly, and Nellie Townshead was somewhat astonished to see the blood mantle to his forehead. "Very sorry, but I see you guess who I am," he said, with a crisp, English intonation. "I am here to—well, you understand—on behalf of Mr. Hallam, but I really wouldn't be if I could help it."

"You can put your horse in the stable, and then I will give you some supper," said the girl, in a coldly even tone. "There is still a little to eat here, and you must be hungry."

The man appeared dubious, and stood still a moment, then touched his hat again when he saw the crimson flame higher in the cheeks of the girl.

"Of course," he said; "I'm going."

Nellie Townshead laughed bitterly. "If I had intended to shut you out I should scarcely have asked you in," she said.

The young man came back in a few minutes, and by that time there were a few plates upon the table. He sat down, and then stood up once more when he saw the girl standing close by with a tray.

"You must let me wait upon myself," said he. "During the course of my last ranching visit they set savage dogs on me, and I wouldn't trouble you, only that I've ridden fifty miles, and am very hungry."

The girl seemed to soften, for she saw he was talking at random to cover her embarrassment as well as his own. "You are an Englishman?" she said.

"Yes," said the stranger. "I'm not especially proud of it just now, but, you see, a man must live."

Townshead looked up from his chair. "I fancy that is a slightly mistaken sentiment. Some men are better dead, and I occasionally feel tempted to include myself in the category."

The young man smiled a little. "The Frenchman put it a trifle more concisely, sir," he said.

Townshead nodded. "Still, he was correct. I don't mind admitting that I looked

forward to your visit with apprehension, but I now fancy you will not jar upon me so much as I expected."

The stranger glanced at Miss Townshead, who, though she wished to, could not quite check a smile. He was very young, and had a pleasant face. "That was very kind of you," he said. "Now, I think the least that I can do is to retire to the barn or stable. I have some blankets, and can make myself comfortable."

He went out, knocking over a cup in his haste, and the girl sat still and laughed. There was not a great deal of merriment in her laughter, and the tears were close behind it, but it was a relief. Townshead, however, watched her disapprovingly.

"You should," he said, "endeavour to preserve a becoming serenity."

Nellie Townshead became grave again. "I fancy it would have been better if we had not displayed so much of it and let things drift, but that is not the question now," she said. "How could any one willing to help us do so, father?"

Townshead made a little grimace. "Are you not suggesting an impossibility?"

"But if there was somebody," persisted the girl. "What could he do on Thursday? I want to understand everything."

"Well," said Townshead, "I think this is the position. Hallam lent me money which I cannot repay him, and he sells us up. Incidentally, I fancy he has some reason for desiring this ranch, and as he has been acquiring a good deal of land lately will get somebody to buy it in. Very few of our neighbours have any dollars to spare, and the price will necessarily be a low one. Now if any man with the means to bid against him were here it would put heart into some of the others and run the prices up, and in that case Hallam would have to hand me over a balance, as well as pay a good deal more than he meant to for the ranch. I think that is simple, and I believe the manoeuvre has been used with some success in other parts of Canada."

"But," said the girl, "if the man offered more than Hallam or his nominee would outbid, he would have to take the ranch."

Townshead nodded agreement. "That," he said, "is the difficulty. Still, though I do not think there is any one who would do so much for us, I presume you would not have asked the question unless you had something in your mind."

The girl, who did not answer for a moment, stooped and stirred the stove. "No," she said very slowly. "I sent word to Mr. Alton."

"Alton?" said Townshead, and sat silent a while. "Well, although I do not altogether approve of him, I fancy that if there is anybody in this district able to help us that is the man. There remains the question is he willing?"

Nellie Townshead still busied herself at the stove. "I think he is," she said.

Townshead straightened himself a trifle in his chair. "Then, I am curious to know why he should be," he said.

"I do not know," said the girl, who rose and took up the supper dishes. "Still, I

feel sure that he is."

Townshead turned towards her. "You fancied so a moment or two ago, and now you are sure," he said. "There must be some meaning to this."

His daughter looked round and laughed a little, holding the tray at a perilous slope. "He made me promise to let him know," she said.

Her father shook his head. "A young man of Mr. Alton's description does not do anything of the kind without a motive," he said. "Now I wonder if there are minerals upon the ranch."

The colour crept into his daughter's cheeks again. "They would in any case belong to the Crown," she said. "Can you not believe that the man who packed our provisions in through flooded fords and snow would do anything out of generosity?"

She turned away and left him, and Townshead puckered his face dubiously. "I should find it very difficult, and the care of a daughter is a heavy responsibility," he said. Miss Townshead did not return for some little while, but stood above the cedar washing-board scarcely seeing the dishes that once or twice almost slipped from her hand. There was, her father had told her, one man who could help them in the only way in which assistance could be accepted, and she felt sure he would. If rancher Alton failed to keep his word she felt it would be very difficult to believe in the honour of his sex again.

CHAPTER XI
CONFIDENCE MISPLACED

There was sliding mist in the Somasco valley, and the pines were dripping when Alton and Miss Deringham stood upon a slippery ledge above the river. Just there it came down frothing into a deep, black pool, swung round it white-streaked, and swept on with a hoarse murmur into the gloom of the bush again. A wall of fissured rock overhung the pool on the farther side, and a fallen pine wetted with the spray stretched across the outflow and rested on one jagged pinnacle. A wet wind which drove the vapours before it called up wild music from the cedars that loomed through them on the side of the hill.

"I'd cast across the rush at the head of the pool and let the fly come down," said Alton. "There's generally a big trout lying in the eddy behind the boulder."

The girl nodded, and the line sweeping back towards the pines behind her went forward again. It fell lightly amidst the frothing rush, and Alton smiled approval as he watched the rod point follow it downstream towards a foam-licked rock. It swung to and fro a moment, then slid on again towards the still black stretch behind the stone, tightened there suddenly, and ran, tense and straight, upstream again, while the reel clacked and rattled.

"A big one," said Alton quietly. "Check the winch a little, and keep the butt down. He can't face the rapid, and you'll lose him unless you can keep a strain on when he turns again."

The girl flung herself backwards, with eyes dilated and a warmth in her cheeks, the rod bending above her, and the line ripping its way towards the welter at the head of the pool. There it curved inwards a trifle, and Alton shouted, "Reel!"

There was a quick rattle, something broke the water with a silvery flash, and the line was shooting downstream again.

"Let him go, unless he makes for the fir yonder," said Alton quietly.

For the space of several minutes the line swept up and down the pool, and Miss Deringham watched it almost breathlessly with fingers on the reel. Then it swept straight towards the fallen fir.

"Stop him!" said Alton. "It's a good trace. Keep the butt down."

The rod bent further, a big silvery body rushed clear of the water and went down again, while next moment the line stopped and quivered as it rasped against the fallen fir. Miss Deringham turned to her companion with a gesture of consternation.

"Oh!" she said breathlessly. "It has gone."

“I don’t know,” said Alton, “That trace is a good deal thicker than what you use in England. I’ll see if I can get him. Keep your thumb on the reel.”

He took up a net, and clambering along the ledge sprang lightly upon the log. It was sharply rounded, the bark was wet, and the way along it obstructed by the stake-like ends of torn-off limbs, but the man crawled forward foot by foot with the swift whirl of current close beneath him. Then he knelt where the tree dipped almost level with the flood, and grasping the line with one hand swept the net in and out amidst the broken-off branches, while the girl watching him fancied she could see a bright flash between the splashes. Presently he rose again shaking his head, with nothing in the net.

“Give me a yard or two when I shout,” he said.

Grasping a branch with one hand he lay down on the log, and lowered himself until arm and shoulder were in the river. Then he sank still further until his head was under too, and the girl shivered a little. It seemed to her that it would be difficult for even a good swimmer to extricate himself from the tangle of snapped-off branches between the log and the bottom of the river. Still, the clinging foot and arm were visible above the rush of frothing water. Then more of the man came into sight again, there was a half-smothered shout, and she loosed the reel, while in another moment or two Alton swung himself up dripping with part of one hand apparently thrust into a great flapping fish’s head. With the back of it pressed gainst his knee he drew the head towards him, and the long silvery body became still, while the man stood up smiling.

“Fingers were made before nets, but I wasn’t quite sure of him all the time,” he said.

Miss Deringham, who was flushed and breathless, felt very gracious towards her companion just then. It was, she realized, a somewhat perilous thing he had done to please her, and this was gratifying in itself, while the knowledge that he had postponed several affairs which demanded his attention was more flattering still. He was also, in such surroundings, almost admirable as he stood before her bareheaded and dripping, the river frothing at his feet and the sliding mists behind him. Deerskin jacket and stained and faded jean, lean, sinewy figure, and bronzed face were all in keeping with the spirit of the scene. Then a voice came out of the bush.

“Hallo, Harry! Are you anywhere around?” it said.

Alton answered, and Miss Deringham felt distinctly displeased. She had been about to say something delicately apposite, and now Seaforth, whose company she could have dispensed with, stood on the bank above them, apparently quietly amused.

“You seem to be enjoying yourself, Harry,” he said.

“Well,” said Alton a trifle curtly, “you didn’t come keeyowling through the bush like a prairie coyote to tell me that?”

"No," said Seaforth, with a sudden change in his voice which Miss Deringham noticed. "There's a man in from the settlement, and Hallam's selling Townshead up to-day according to his tale."

Alton scrambled swiftly along the log. "Just one question, Charley. Quite sure nobody came here with any message for me about it that you forgot?" he said.

Seaforth made a little gesture of impatience, and there was a trace of anger in his tone. "It is scarcely likely I should have forgotten that," he said.

Then he glanced at Miss Deringham, and was slightly bewildered by what he saw in her face. Seaforth had once or twice admired the girl's serenity in somewhat difficult surroundings, but there was now a suggestion of fear in her eyes, and she seemed to avoid Alton's gaze. It, however, passed in a moment, and she turned towards the rancher tranquilly.

"I wonder how far I am to blame," she said. "A man came here a day or two ago, and apparently endeavoured to tell me something. He was, however, unintelligible, and I fancy somebody had been giving him whisky."

"Mounted?" said Alton. "What kind of horse?"

Miss Deringham considered for a moment, and then possibly deciding that Alton would have no difficulty in ascertaining elsewhere, told him. "Tom!" he said grimly. "Well, I'll talk to him. You'll take Miss Deringham home, Charley, and then come on to Townshead's after me."

He swung away into the bush next moment, and Seaforth followed him more slowly with Miss Deringham. Neither of them spoke, but though the man's thoughts were busy with other affairs, he noticed that his companion glanced at him covertly. "The girl could have told us something more," he said to himself, and put a stern check on his impatience as he kept pace with her.

When they came out into the clearing they heard the thud of hoofs, and saw a mounted man send a horse at the tall split fence. The slip-rails were up, and the fence was unusually well put together, but there was a crash as the top bar flew apart, and presently the thud of hoofs grew fainter down the fir-shadowed trail. Miss Deringham now appeared quite serene again.

"Has he ridden off wet through as he was?" she said.

"I expect so," said Seaforth dryly. "Harry does not usually let trifles of that kind worry him, nor do I think there are many men who would have ridden at that fence."

Alice Deringham said nothing, but though she smiled Seaforth fancied that she was not pleased. Her thoughts were, however, of small importance to him, and he hastened fuming with impatience towards the stables.

It was some time later when Nellie Townshead stood by a window of her father's ranch. Jean-clad stock breeders and axemen hung about the clearing, and a little knot of men from the cities stood apart from them. A wagon, implements out of repair, old sets of harness, axes, saws, and shovels were littered about the

front of the house, and there were two or three horses and a few poor cattle in the corral. The ranchers spoke slowly to one another, and their faces were sombre, but Hallam, who stood amidst the other men, was smiling over a big cigar. The girl clenched her hands as she watched him, and then turning her head looked down the valley.

"I fancy I hear hoofs. He told me he would come," she said, but Townshead, who sat apathetically in the old leather chair, shook his head.

"He has, of course, forgotten if he did," he said.

"No," said the girl with a trace of harshness in her voice. "Mr. Alton never forgets a promise. That must be the drumming of hoofs. Can you hear nothing?"

"The river," said Townshead despondently. "He will be too late directly. They are putting up the ranch."

Confidence and dismay seemed to struggle together in the face of the girl, but the former rose uppermost, for she clung fast to hope.

"There! Oh, why can they not stop talking? That is something now," she said.

"No," said Townshead. "Only the wind in the firs."

The girl leaned forward a little, drawing in her breath as she stared down the valley. The voices drowned the sound she fancied she had heard, and the colour came and went in her face when she caught one of them. "The thing's no better than robbery. Why isn't Harry Alton or his partner here?"

Nellie Townshead had asked herself the same question over and over again that day when rancher and axemen in somewhat embarrassed fashion tendered her their sympathy. What she expected from him she did not quite know, but she had a curious confidence in Alton, and at least as much in his comrade, and felt that even if the scheme her father had alluded to was not feasible there would be something they could do. Then she drew back from the window and sat down, with a little shiver as the harsh voice of the auctioneer rose from the clearing. She caught disjointed words and sentences.

"Don't need tell you what the place is worth. You have seen the boundaries. Richest soil in the Dominion. Grow anything. Now if I was a rancher. Well, I'm waiting for your offer."

He apparently waited some little time, and then a laugh that expressed bitterness in place of merriment followed the voice of one of the men from the cities.

"Put two hundred dollars on to it," said somebody, and there was another laugh, which the girl, recognizing the voice, understood; for it was known that the bidder had probably not ten dollars in his possession and was in debt at the store. The fact that this man whom she had scarcely spoken to should endeavour to help her while her friends at Somasco did nothing also brought a little flash of anger to her eyes. Then she told herself that there was time yet, and they would come.

The voices rose again more rapidly. "Fifty more. Another to me. Oh, what's

the use of fooling. One hundred better. Twenty again to me."

Miss Townshead glanced at her father. "They'll stop presently," said he. "The place stands at a third of its value, but it would cripple most of them to pay for it if they got it now. The man from Vancouver who goes up by twenties will get it at half of what it cost me, and I don't think you need watch for rancher Alton."

Still Nellie Townshead did not quite give up hope. The bidding was only beginning, and there was time yet. She had been taught to look beneath the surface in Western Canada, and had cherished a curious respect for rancher Alton. The girl was young still, and he stood for her as a romantic ideal of the new manhood that was to grow to greatness in the wildest province of the Dominion, while now and then she fancied she saw something in his comrade's face which roused her pity and stirred her to sympathy. That, having made it unasked, the former should slight a promise of the kind appeared incomprehensible and she felt that if he did so her faith in the type he served as an example of would fall with him. There was also pressing need of some one to look to for guidance in her time of necessity, because Townshead was not the man to grapple with any difficulty, and most of his neighbours knew little or nothing about the cities.

"Father," she said, "in case the purchaser turns us out where shall we go to-night? The stage does not go in to the railroad until a week to-day, and do you think there will be anything left over to keep us for a little in Vancouver?"

Townshead glanced at her querulously. "Somebody will take us in," said he. "I should have fancied, my dear, that you would have seen I am sufficiently distressed and unwell to-day without having to anticipate further difficulties. There will, I hope, be a balance. What is the bidding now?"

The girl listened, but for a few moments there was a significant silence, and her heart sank when a single voice rose. One or two others joined in, and there was silence again until the auctioneer repeated the offer. Then she turned quivering towards her father.

"You heard him?" she said.

Townshead groaned despondently, "I am afraid the prospect of a balance is very small," he said.

Again there was a stillness in the clearing, until the auctioneer's voice rose raucously expostulating. "It is really preposterous, gentlemen," he said. "I'm giving the place away."

"Well, I'll go ten better," said somebody, and the girl held her breath,

"Twenty!" said another man, and there was a laugh.

"Then that takes me. You can have the ranch."

The voice of the auctioneer rose again. "Nobody to follow him? Your last chance, gentlemen. He's getting it for nothing. Too late in a moment. Going—going."

Nellie Townshead closed her hands and turned her head away, then sprang up

quivering with the revulsion from despair to hope. Through the silence she heard a faint drumming down the valley.

"He is coming. Stop them, father," she said.

Nobody else apparently heard the sound. The eyes of all in the clearing were fixed upon the auctioneer, and while Townshead rose from his chair he brought down his hand.

"It's yours, sir," he said, "I'll take your cheque, or you can fill this contract in if you're bidding for the smaller lots."

Nellie Townshead grew white in face as she glanced towards her father. Townshead stood still, gripping the back of his chair.

"We are homeless now," he said.

It was five minutes before the girl looked out again, and then in spite of every effort her eyes grew hazy, but it was a long time before she forgot the scene, for the groups of bronzed men in jean, cattle, clearing, and the tall firs behind them burned themselves into her memory. Hallam stood smiling close by the auctioneer's table with a cigar in his hand, and another man from the cities was apparently replacing a roll of paper dollars in his wallet. That impressed her even more than the sympathetic faces turned towards the house, for it was a token that the sale was irrevocably completed. Then the group split up as a man rode at a gallop straight towards the table. He was breathless, the horse was smoking, and there were red smears upon its flanks as well as flecks of spume. He swung himself from the saddle, and there followed the sound of an altercation while a noisy group surged about the table. It opened up again, and rancher Alton walked out, pale and grim of face, alone.

"You should have come sooner, Harry," said somebody.

The rancher turned, the group closed in again, and the girl did not see Alton stride up to a big man, and laying a hand upon his shoulder swing him round. "Tom," he said with a curious quietness, "there was a message you did not give me, you drunken hog."

The man shook his grasp off, glanced at him bewilderedly, and then while the bronze grew a little darker in his face doubled a great fist.

"If I take a little more than is good for me now and then, that's my lookout," he said. "Now I don't want any trouble with you, Harry, but I'll not take that talk from any man."

Alton's face was almost grey and his eyes partly closed, but there was a steely glint in them as he said, "Did you bring me the message Miss Townshead gave you?"

"I did the next thing," said the man. "When I couldn't find you I gave it to the lady. She promised to tell you."

"Tom," said Alton slowly, "you are worse than a drunken hog, you are——"

A man stepped in front of him before the word was spoken, while another

pinioned the culprit's arm.

"We've no use for that kind of talk and the fuss that follows it," said the first one. "Anyway, if Tom mixed things up it was my fault and Dobey's for giving him the whisky. We'd sold some stock well and we rushed him in. Well, now, if you still feel you must work it off on somebody you've got to tackle Dobey and me!"

Alton let his hands drop. "Do you know what you have done?" said he.

"It wasn't very much, anyway," said the other man. "Tom didn't want to come in; told us he'd a message for you. But we made him, and were sorry after, because when he got started he left us very little whisky."

Alton glanced at him a moment, and the man grew embarrassed under his gaze. Then he smiled wryly. "And this is what you have brought Townshead and his daughter to, and there is more behind. What you have made of me counts for little after that," he said.

Some time had passed when he walked quietly into the house. Nellie Townshead rose as he entered and stood looking at him very white in face.

"I wonder if you will believe what I have to tell you, Miss Townshead," he commenced, and stopped when the rancher turned towards him,

"My daughter has, I think, been taught that it is unwise to place much confidence in any one," he said.

Alton glanced at the girl, and stood silent a moment when she made a little gesture of agreement. "I am afraid appearances are against me," he said.

"Yes," said the girl. "So are the facts."

"Well," said Alton grimly, "the latter are of the most importance, but I think you should hear me."

"There is," said Miss Townshead, "no reason why I should. You made me a promise—why I do not know, any more than I do why I allowed you—but I was very anxious just then. No doubt you spoke on impulse, and afterwards regretted it."

"My daughter was a trifle injudicious," said Townshead.

Alton made a last endeavour. "I know what you must think of me, and it hurts," he said. "Still, that is a little thing."

The girl checked him by a gesture, and the man stopped with his meaning unexpressed. "You have made as much evident," she said.

Alton turned towards her father. "I'm afraid the suggestion I wished to make would be out of place just now," he said. "Still, I had ridden over in the hope that you and Miss Townshead would stay with us at Somasco while you decided on your next step."

"We have to thank you for your offer, but your surmise is correct," said Townshead.

Alton said nothing further, but went out into the clearing and stood apart from

the rest while the auctioneer disposed of the household effects, until a little cabinet was offered, when he moved up to the table and bid savagely. Hallam for some reason bid against him, and only stopped when he had quadrupled its value. Alton flung down a roll of dollar bills and then turned to a man close by. “Will you take that in to Miss Townshead, and not tell her who bought it?” he said. “It was her mother’s, and I believe she values it.”

“I’ll do my best,” said the other man dryly. “Still, I’m not good at fixing up a story, and Miss Nellie’s not a fool.”

“Well,” said Alton simply, “there’s another thing. Where is Townshead going?”

The rancher smiled a little. “He’s coming home with me. Susie’s driving over with the wagon.”

Alton nodded. “Now you needn’t be touchy, but we’ve fruit and things at Somasco you haven’t got,” said he. “Well, I want you to come round with the wagon.”

The rancher straightened himself a trifle. “My place isn’t Somasco, but it will be a mean day when I can’t feed my friends,” said he.

Alton laughed softly. “I don’t care ten cents about your feelings, Jack,” he said. “The girl and the old man might like the things, and there’s no reason they should know where you got them.”

The other man also laughed. “You ride straight home, Harry, before you make it worse,” said he. “One might figure that you’d mixed things up enough already.”

Alton turned away, and found Seaforth awaiting him. They mounted, and Alton rode in silence until when they were climbing out of the valley he said, “I wonder, Charley, if there’s a man in the Dominion who feels as mean as I do.”

Seaforth smiled curiously, and there was bitterness in his voice which Alton was too disturbed to notice. “I think there is,” he said. “You haven’t asked what kept me, but you will see if you look at the horse’s knees. It’s a little difficult to understand why he must get his foot in a hole to-day.”

It was late that night when they reached Somasco, but Alton found Miss Deringham upon the verandah, and she glanced at him with very pretty sympathy. Still, Seaforth fancied that she seemed a trifle anxious.

“Have you seen the man who brought the message?” she said.

“I have,” said Alton. “You were right, of course. He’d had too much whisky.”

The girl appeared, so Seaforth fancied, curiously relieved. “I was almost afraid you might think I was in some respects to blame,” she said.

“No,” said Alton simply, “That was one of the things I couldn’t do. It was right out of the question.”

He went in, and the warm colour crept into Miss Deringham’s face as she presently followed him.

CHAPTER XII
IN VANCOUVER

Autumn was merging into winter when one morning Alton and his comrade strolled along the water-front at Vancouver. It was still early, and the store and office clerks were just hastening to their occupations, but Alton had spent an hour already in a great sawmill. His face was thoughtful, and he seemed to be repeating details of machines and engines half aloud. Presently he stood still and gazed about him, and Seaforth, who followed his gaze, knew there was something working in his comrade's mind. The scene was also inspiriting and suggestive.

Across the wide inlet, mountain beyond mountain towered against the blueness of the north. To the east, sombre forest shut the sheltered basin in, its black ridge serrated by the ragged spires of taller pines, and blurred in places by the drifting smoke of mills. Between them and the water stood long lines of loaded cars, with huge locomotives snorting in the midst of them, and where the metal road which commenced at Quebec ended, the white shape of an Empress liner rose above the wharf, the clasp of the new steel girdle which bound England to the East. Above the pines which shrouded the narrows shone the topsails of a timber-laden barque, and a crawling cloud of smoke betokened a steamer coming up out of the wastes of the Pacific, while four-masted ships lay two deep beneath the humming mills. Then, rising ridge on ridge, jumbled in picturesque confusion, and flanked by towering telegraph poles, store and bank and office climbed the slope of the hill. It was a new stone city which had sprung, as by enchantment, from the ashes of a wooden one, and would, purging itself of its raw crudity, rise to beauty and greatness yet.

Alton glanced towards it with a comprehensive gesture. "What a place this will be by and by," he said. "Sometimes I'm proud I was born in this country. Now I might have been raised back there at Carnaby, and taught it was every man's chief duty to dress and talk nicely, chase foxes, and think about his dinner."

"I fancy there are men who would not have thought that a great misfortune," said Seaforth dryly. "You could also, if you liked it, do so still."

Alton laughed a little grimly. "There are two kinds of men in this world, Charley, and which of them makes it go?" said he. "The ones who have too much to eat and too little to do, or the others who have to keep on doing something because they're hungry? Well, I needn't ask you, because the conundrum was answered long ago, and that kind of talking's no great use to anybody. That was a very fine mill, and I picked up a good deal down there. Still, we will scarcely want such a big one at Somasco."

"No," said Seaforth, smiling. "I don't quite see how we are going to keep the one we have busy."

"Well," said Alton, "you will by and by, and I'm going to buy three or four new saw-fixings to-day. You don't know anything about bookkeeping, Charley?"

"You have surmised correctly," said Seaforth. "I don't know that I want to."

Alton laughed, and presently stopped in front of a building on which a brass plate was inscribed, "Bookkeeping and Shorthand taught efficiently."

"I think you're wrong, and this is the place," said he. "That's a sensible man, and he just puts down what he can do. Go right in, and ask how long he'll take to make a business man of you."

Seaforth stared at him in bewilderment. "You took nothing with your breakfast, Harry?" said he.

Alton smiled a little grimly. "I haven't had any yet. I've been too busy," he said. "Walk in, Charley, while I see whether they'll lend me twenty thousand dollars at the bank yonder."

Seaforth, who, however, knew that there was no use in arguing with his comrade, shook his head. "It's a long rest you want, Harry," he said.

He went in, and Alton, proceeding down the street, presently entered the Bank of Montreal, where he left the manager divided between astonishment and admiration. He, however, came out with just as many dollars as he carried into the building, and lighting a cigar, watched the passers-by gravely as he waited for his comrade. They were of many and widely different types; men with keen, sallow faces from eastern cities hastening as though every moment lost was an opportunity wasted; others moving with the tranquillity which proclaimed them Englishmen; bronzed prospectors, and solemn axemen from the shadowy bush, with the stillness of the forest in their eyes; sailors, Japs, and Siwash sealermen. All of them appeared well fed and prosperous, and Alton was wondering whether there was any one hungry in that city, when a girl came down the stairway of the building Seaforth had entered.

Alton did not at first see her face, but he noticed that her dress was threadbare, and she was walking wearily, while the man who read dejection in her attitude was sorry for her. She stopped in the passage, glancing at the card in her hand, then drew herself up a little and with a quick, nervous movement lifted her head. Alton saw her face at last, and though it had grown a trifle hollow and pale, he recognized Miss Townshead. Then she saw him, and he moved forward hastily.

"This is a pleasure I was not expecting," he said.

He fancied for a moment that the girl would have retreated. She, however, looked at him quietly, though something in her manner checked Alton's outstretched hand.

"Are you staying here?" she said.

"No," said Alton. "I'm going away to-morrow, but I want quite a long talk

with you."

"I do not wish to hear anything about Somasco," said the girl.

"Well," said Alton, who understood her, smiling, "we'll let that go by. Now, they begin on time in this city, and as your father doesn't like his breakfast early, I'm figuring you haven't had any. We'll get some together. I've been too busy to think of mine."

Nellie Townshead was afterwards both astonished and angry with herself. She had lost her respect for this man who had, it seemed, betrayed her confidence, and if he had given her a moment's time, would probably have dispensed with his company. As it was, however, Alton drew her out into the street with a swift forcefulness before she could frame an answer. She was also feeling very lonely and downcast then, and it was pleasant to find somebody she knew in the busy city that had apparently no place for her.

"Now," said Alton presently, "we'll go in here. It's nice and quiet for Vancouver, but I expect you know this place."

He realized that he had blundered when he saw the girl's face, but in another second she was laughing a little. "No," she said. "I'm afraid you are forgetting."

Alton apparently misunderstood her. "Well," he said, smiling, "it's quite possible you know another place that's nicer; but sit right yonder while I waken some of these people up."

Now the public breakfast is an institution in Western cities whose inhabitants frequently take no meals at home, and the appearance of the bronzed man and girl together excited no comment, while Alton was able to contrive that they had a table in a corner to themselves. His tastes were, as his companion knew, severely simple, and she wondered a little, because that establishment was one of the most expensive in the city. In the meanwhile, the man talked assiduously, if somewhat at random, and was contented when he found that he could keep the girl's attention occupied so that she scarcely noticed how often he refilled her plate. At last, as he passed a great cluster of fruit across, he said, "It's time you did the talking now. You are going right ahead in this city?"

The girl's face quivered for a second, and her fingers moved nervously, "I am afraid I have not commenced yet," she said.

"No?" said Alton. "Now Susie Thomson told me you were running a typewriter for somebody."

A tinge of carmine flickered into the cheek of his companion and faded swiftly again. "I was," she said. "The commercial school found a place for me, but it was impossible that I should stay there."

Alton half closed his eyes, and the girl noticed his big hand slowly clenched, for he fancied he understood. "It's a pity I wasn't a brother of yours, Miss Nellie. I should like to see those folks," he said. "Still, you have known me a long while, and that's something to go upon."

“I’m afraid it’s not sufficient,” said the girl hastily, with a little smile.

“Well,” said Alton, with a sigh, “you have got hold of something better.”

Miss Townshead appeared to make an endeavour to answer hopefully, but again her fingers trembled, and there was a little less courage than usual in her eyes. “Not yet, but I shall soon,” she said.

“Of course,” said Alton gravely. “Now how long have you been looking for it?”

“A month,” said the girl without reflection, and Alton nodded as though in answer to some question he had put to himself.

“And when you went into that place this morning there was nothing again?” he said.

“No,” said Miss Townshead, with a trace of despondency she could not quite conceal. “There was a post vacant, but it had some trust attached to it, and nobody knows me.”

Now while he talked Alton’s eyes had been busy, and he had noticed a curious weariness which he had not seen before in his companion’s face. Her fingers, which had grown white, were also very slender, and the well-worn dress, which he remembered, did not seem to hang about her as it had done. Her eyes, however, were brighter, and now and then a little florid colour flushed her cheeks, but that did not please him, for Alton had seen not a little of want and hunger in the snows of the North.

“You mean they want security?” said he.

“Yes,” said Miss Townshead hastily. “Still, one of the girls I met at the school told me there was somebody wanted at a big dry goods store, and I think I had better go round and see the people now.”

Alton rose, and when they went out together gravely held out his hand. “We used to be good friends, and you were kind to me,” said he. “Now is there nothing that I can do?”

“No,” said Miss Townshead hastily. “Of course there is nothing, and you will hear that I am prospering presently.”

Alton bent a trifle over the little hand in the shabby glove that rested a moment in his palm. “Well, if ever there is anything you will let me know. You are a brave girl,” said he.

Nellie Townshead turned and left him, feeling for no apparent reason a slight choking sensation, and Alton, who watched the little figure in the threadbare dress for at least a minute, strode resolutely back to the commercial school.

“I want to see the man who runs this place,” he said.

He was shown into an office, where a man, whose face he was pleased with, greeted him. “You taught Miss Townshead here?” he said.

“Yes,” said the other. “She is a lady of considerable ability, and I could recommend her with confidence.”

Alton stared at him a moment out of half-closed eyes. “Of course you would,” he said. “Well now, she has been applying for some place where they want security. Is it fit for a lady?”

“Yes,” said the man dryly. “Otherwise I should not have mentioned it to her. The storekeeper having been victimized lately, however, requires a deposit of one hundred dollars.”

Alton took out his wallet. “He can have two hundred if he likes. Now I want you to fix it up without telling Miss Townshead or anybody.”

“You are a relation of hers?” said the man.

“No,” said Alton, “I am a friend.”

“Then I’m afraid I can’t assist you,” said the other man. “It is necessary to avoid any probability of complications in my business.”

Again a glint crept into Alton’s eyes, but it vanished, and he spoke quietly. “I think you’re straight,” he said. “Well, I’m direct too, and I’m going right back to my ranch to-morrow. Anybody from that district will tell you all about Alton of Somasco. Now you’ll take the dollars, and if you hear of me hanging round this city you can send them back to me.”

The man appeared dubious, but finally nodded. “I’ll make an exception in your case,” he said. “The fact is, I’m sorry for Miss Townshead, because I fancy it is desirable that she should secure an appointment of any kind as soon as possible.”

Alton went out contented, having, so he fancied, somewhat skilfully obtained Townshead’s address, and found Seaforth awaiting him.

“They could, if I am an apt pupil, turn me out proficient for anything in three months,” he said.

Alton laughed. “They’ll have to do it in less, and we’ll find a use for all they’ve taught you by and by,” he said. “Now I came across Miss Townshead, and she wasn’t looking well or happy. We’ll call upon her father when we get through what we have to do.”

Seaforth, who appeared disturbed, would have gone sooner, but it was afternoon when they strolled round the outskirts of the city, and his face was somewhat grim as they entered the Alsatia, which is the usual adjunct of such places. It would, however, have impressed the unsophisticated Eastern observer as being well painted, respectable, and especially prosperous, for virtue is not the only thing which is rewarded and recognized in a Western city. Finally, after traversing it, they found Townshead in a little wooden house which was apparently occupied by two other families. The remnants of a very meagre meal lay before him, and he sat wearing the red velvet jacket, which looked older and more faded than ever, in a canvas chair. He greeted the two men coldly and somewhat condescendingly.

“We have not been especially fortunate hitherto,” he said presently. “In fact, this city seems to be labouring under a commercial depression, and I have been

unable to find any of the opportunities I had expected. Nor has my daughter been more successful."

Alton, who had been looking about him in the meanwhile, noticed that although the day was chilly there was no fire in the stove, while glancing at the man who lay, infirm alike in will and body, in the chair, he understood why the girl's fingers had trembled and the mistiness he had for a moment seen in her eyes. He was also wondering by what means he could lessen one difficulty, but it was Seaforth who devised one first.

"Things will get better presently," he said. "Now Harry and I often remember the pleasant evenings we spent at your ranch, and we never got suppers like those Miss Townshead made us, at Somasco."

"My daughter found it necessary to acquire the art of cookery in Canada," said Townshead a trifle distantly.

"Of course," said Seaforth, smiling. "Everybody is compelled to in this country, and I only referred to the subject because Harry seems to fancy it must be difficult to get any of the little things we are used to in the bush in the city, while your kindness to us would justify what might otherwise appear a liberty. We brought a few odds and ends you can't get quite so nice in Vancouver along. Hadn't you better go and bring them in, Harry?"

Alton glanced at him in bewildered astonishment. "Bring them in?" he said.

Seaforth shook his head deprecatingly. "You haven't forgotten already, and you are not going to escape in that fashion," he said. "If you'll ask at the hotel they'll tell you where to find the things."

Alton moved so that Townshead could not see him, and his face was utterly perplexed. "What things?" he said.

"Two or three fowls," said Seaforth reflectively. "There were some eggs, a bag of the big yellow apples, and—now it's curious I forgot the rest."

Alton's eyes twinkled. "Oh, yes," he said. "Some venison. There was the deer you shot in the potatoes, and a bag of dried plums. Our orchard has done very well, Mr. Townshead."

"I wonder if I forgot the Excelsior pears," said Seaforth. "They're as big as your two fists, and Harry's quite proud of them."

Townshead, who was not an observant man, appeared astonished, and also a trifle touched. "I'm afraid I have not always appreciated my bush friends as I should have done, and your kindness will I think lessen my daughter's difficulty respecting the commissariat," he said. "There are, of course, many of the little things we were used to which she feels the loss of."

Seaforth, who read a good deal more than his words expressed in the speaker's face, signed to his comrade, who went out and returned later with a hamper. "Somebody must have forgotten to put the venison in, but the other things are all there," he said.

Townshead assisted them to unpack the hamper, and while they were busy over it his daughter came in. It was apparently raining, for the thin white dress clung about her, and she seemed very white and weary. Darkness was drawing on, the room was dim, and at first she apparently only saw her father as she stood taking off her hat by the window.

"Nothing again to-day, and I am very tired," she said. "Still, I am to call at another store to-morrow, and I was wickedly extravagant. I was kept until it was too late for dinner, and I bought something that will please you for supper."

Then as she turned to lay the wet hat down the blood rushed to her face, for she saw Alton kneeling by the hamper and Seaforth standing in the shadow behind her father's chair. The former did not rise, but his comrade came forward smiling in another moment.

"I am glad we did not miss you, as we were about to go when you came in," he said. "These are one or two trifles Harry fancied might be useful. He is absurdly proud of all the products of Somasco, and seems to think nobody can get anything nice in the city."

Seaforth also talked a good deal, and Miss Townshead smiled now and then at him, but when she went with them to the door he lingered a moment because he felt her eyes were on him.

"Your comrade didn't support you well, and I don't think the expedient would have occurred to him," she said, with a little tremor in her voice. "Still, it was done in kindness—and I am grateful."

Seaforth smiled gravely, though his face perplexed the girl. "A little faith is a good thing, and people should believe what they're told," said he. "Now I wonder if one could take the liberty?"

"No," said the girl. "Even if he had the best intentions. I and my father have not lost our pride."

Seaforth sighed as he turned away, and, when he rejoined Alton, stared at the lights of the city savagely, while as they passed along the water-front he said, "Will you give me a cigar, Harry?"

Alton drew out his cigar-case, glanced at it a moment, and then tossed it across the wharf. "What right have you and I to be going back to dinner when that girl hasn't enough to eat?" he said. "You know what those cigars cost me. Lord, what selfish brutes we are! Now stop right here and tell me what we are going to do!"

Seaforth made a gesture of helplessness. "The difficulty is that one can't do anything," he said. "You see, we can't attempt the hamper trick too frequently, and I scarcely think Miss Townshead would care to be indebted to either of us in any other fashion."

"Well," said Alton simply, "there must be a way somewhere, and I'm going to find it."

"Then," said Seaforth, with a trace of bitterness, "for the sake of everybody's

peace of mind I hope you will. You seem especially compassionate towards Miss Townshead."

Alton glanced at him a moment, and then laughed a little. "I suppose you can't help being foolish, Charley, but you should know I've no time to think of anything beyond what I have to do just now," he said. "The biggest contract I've ever taken hold of is waiting for me."

"I am," said Seaforth dryly, "glad to hear you say so, even though your recent conduct would make it somewhat difficult for most people to believe you."

Alton glanced at him very gravely. "I don't like those jokes," he said. "You'll get more sense as you grow up, Charley."

CHAPTER XIII
THE SOMASCO CONSOLIDATED

Alton left Vancouver by the Quebec express next day, found horses waiting at the little station, and only waiting while fresh ones were saddled at a lonely ranch, took the trail again before the first faint light crept out of the east. He also spoke little with Seaforth during the journey, and stared at the latter, who drew rein when the weary horses plodded, steaming and bespattered all over, into the settlement.

"What are you stopping for?" he said.

Seaforth glanced at the wisp of blue smoke which hung about the pines behind Horton's hotel. "It's rather more than twelve hours since I've had a meal," he said. "Don't you ever get tired or hungry, Harry?"

Alton laughed. "Oh, yes; sometimes I do, but not usually when I'm busy. Anyway, if the beasts hold out we'll be getting breakfast at Somasco in two hours or so."

Seaforth groaned inwardly, but, knowing the futility of argument, shook his bridle and rode on, lurching a little in his saddle as the tired horse stumbled into mudholes and, brushed through dripping fern. By and by, however, Alton swung himself down in front of a lonely log-house with a big clearing behind it, where a man took their horses without a word and signed them to enter.

Seaforth stretched his limbs wearily, and would have dropped into a chair but that Alton stood erect until the man came back again, and dusting two seats with his soft hat pointed to them with a gesture of hospitality. His hair and beard were frosted, his face was lean and brown, and there were many wrinkles about his eyes, but he held himself very upright and pointed to the stove.

"Ye'll be in from Vancouver. I'll ready ye some pork and flapjacks?" he said.

Alton shook his head. "Don't worry, I can't wait," he said.

"Ye are very welcome," said the other.

"Of course!" said Alton simply; "still, I can't stop. I'm here to talk business, Callender."

Seaforth noticed that in face of the typical absence of protest or compliment there was nothing the most critical could find fault with in the invitation or the refusal. The old man was dressed in very curiously-patched jean, but he was almost stately in his simplicity, and nothing could have been more apposite than the little nod with which Alton made his affirmation. It implied a good deal more than speech could have done.

"Ye will be asking about the place?" said Callender. "I'm wanting three

thousand dollars. It's worth all that."

Alton nodded, and it was evident that the men understood each other, for there was no endeavour to lessen or enhance the value of the property. "It will be worth more presently, but that's about the fair thing now," he said.

"Weel," said Callender simply, "by then I may be dead. Twenty years I've lived on my lone here, and I thought at one time I would be content to lie down by between the bush and the river, but now a longing to see the old land grips me. Ye will not understand it. Ye were born in Canada."

"No," said Alton gravely. "The land that has fed me is good enough for me."

The old man made a little gesture of assent. "Aye," he said. "It's a good country, but I feel the old one calling me. It's just three thousand dollars I'm asking ye."

Alton drew a sheet which seemed covered with calculations from his wallet, and glanced at it silently. Then he looked at the rancher.

"One thousand down, one thousand in six months, and the rest any time in two years, with six per cent," he said. "You might get the dollars in your wallet if you made the deal with a land agent in Vancouver."

"Maybe," said Callender simply; "I can trust ye. I would not sell the place to anybody."

Alton stood up. "You shall have a cheque to-morrow," he said.

They had mounted within another minute, and Alton glanced with a little smile at his comrade as they rode on again.

"That," said Seaforth, "was in a sense a somewhat effective scene, but I'm not sure which of us should go to the business school."

Alton laughed. "I don't often blunder when I deal with a man," said he. "Callender and I wouldn't have been better pleased, or five dollars richer, if we'd talked all day."

Seaforth nodded, though his eyes twinkled. "You don't seem so confident about the other sex?" he said.

Alton gravely pointed to a towering fir. "That redwood would fetch a good many dollars in Vancouver. I wonder when we'll get those saws through," he said.

While he spoke a thud of hoofs grew louder, and presently a man came riding in haste towards them down the trail. He drew bridle when he recognized them, and Seaforth became curious when he saw that it was Hallam. The latter made them an ironical salutation, and sat regarding Alton covertly with his cunning beady eyes until the rancher smiled.

"If you were going down to see Callender, I fancy you're a little too late," he said.

Seaforth wondered whether his comrade saw the wickedness in the other man's face, and the slight closing of his hands upon the bridle. It was very perceptible for a second, and then he made a gesture of resignation.

“I think there was another time you got in ahead of me, and it might be cheaper to buy you off,” he said. “You haven’t answered my letter asking what you wanted for all you’re holding up here, as well as the ranch.”

Alton flung his head back a trifle, and Seaforth knew what lay behind his laugh. “No,” he said; “I put it in the stove.”

A little grey spot appeared in Hallam’s cheeks, and once more his fingers closed upon the bridle. “Well, you may be sorry by and by, but as I’m a business man first and last I’ll give you another chance,” he said. “There’s not room for two of us in this valley, and with what I’m holding I can call you any time.”

Alton’s eyes were half closed now, and there was a glint in them. “I’ve been figuring on that,” he said. “When I’m ready, I’ll let you see my hand.”

Now if Hallam had been taught his business, which was an especially mean one, in England he might have kept his temper; but he lacked finish, though his abilities were unpleasantly sufficient in the West.

“Then it is to be hoped you’ll put up a better game than you did at Townshead’s ranch. I was a little sorry for the girl,” he said. “Met her once or twice in Vancouver, and she didn’t seem well off.”

Alton said nothing, but he pressed his heels home, and the big tired horse moved forward. The trail was narrow just there, and wound through a quaggy belt where tall wild cabbage grew out of black depths of mire. There was also no room for Hallam to wheel his horse on the slippery sawn-up logs, and Alton urged his beast on, glancing imperturbably at the man in front of him.

Again the grey crept into Hallam’s face, and a very unpleasant look in his eyes, but he drew his bridle, and next moment his horse was floundering in the mire. Alton laughed a little as he rode on without glancing behind him.

“That may have been pleasant,” said Seaforth dryly, “but in view of what I saw in Hallam’s face I don’t know that it was wise.”

“Well,” said Alton, “I think it was. There’s only one way of arguing with a panther, and that beast’s a good deal less dangerous than Hallam is. Now you’ll ride in to the settlement to-morrow, and put up a notice at the store: ‘The ranchers of the Somasco district are requested to attend a meeting at 6.30, Saturday.’ At the bottom you’ll put a big ‘Important.’ I’ve got to have a talk with you to-night.”

He made a hasty breakfast when they reached the ranch, and was busy at the sawmill, from which he did not return until supper, all day, so that it was not until that meal was finished and he was waiting for Seaforth that he had speech with Miss Deringham. She sat by the stove apparently occupied with some delicate embroidery, but it was possible that her attention was not confined to the stitches. Alton sat near her, looking straight before him, in a deerhide chair, and it was significant that neither of them found speech necessary. The man’s face was somewhat grim, and the girl wondered what he was thinking.

“You apparently did not find Vancouver enlivening,” she said.

Alton laughed a little. “I took one or two little worries along, and found another when I got there.”

Miss Deringham went on with her embroidery for a While, and then glanced at the man again. “I wonder if any of them were connected with the sale of Townshead’s ranch?” she said.

Alton smiled a little. “I’m getting kind of afraid of you,” he said. “One of them was.”

Alice Deringham laughed prettily, and was inwardly contented. She had been used to influence and admiration, but there was a subtle pleasure in being the recipient of this man’s homage, while she surmised that had he not offered her all of it he would not have made the admission concerning Townshead.

“Your recent neighbour is not doing well down there?” she said. “I am sorry for Miss Townshead.”

Alton nodded, and his face was sombre as well as pitiful, “It’s very rough on a girl of that kind, and she’s true grit right through,” he said. “I’m thankful you don’t know what some women who have to earn their living doing what used to be men’s work in the cities have to put up with.”

“Still,” said Alice Deringham, “I can guess. Miss Townshead was working at something uncongenial for a livelihood, and was not especially cordial to you?”

Alton looked at her gravely. “No,” he said. “She hadn’t even found that something yet, and she was very kind. That’s what made me feel it worse.”

“Of course she would not have shown you what she thought,” said the girl a trifle dryly. “And you were not responsible in any case.”

Alton glanced at her with some bewilderment. “No?” he said. “I’m sitting here with all that a man could wish for, while that girl, who was used to all the good things you have in the old country, walks round and round the city looking for something she can earn a few dollars at, when I might have fixed things differently if it hadn’t been for Tom. It’s hard to feel there’s a meaner man than I am in the Dominion.”

Miss Deringham saw the veins rise on his forehead and the glint in his eyes, and shivered a little as she hoped the man would never discover it was not the rancher who had brought the shame upon him.

“Would it have been possible for you to do anything to help them if you had reached the ranch in time?” she said.

“Yes,” said Alton simply, “I think it would. And it would have been better for everybody in the district.”

Though the girl did not altogether understand him, his very quietness was impressive, for she knew by this time that what he stated was usually rather more than less the fact.

“Well,” she said lightly, “it was not your fault, and you will forget it presently.”

Alton smiled wryly. “I don’t know,” he said. “There are some kinds of stains that don’t wash out, but you’re only wishing to be kind to me because you understand all that better than I do in the old country.”

The girl glanced aside and dropped her needle, while when she spoke her voice was a trifle strained. “Do you know that you bushmen have made me ashamed once or twice?” she said. “I am afraid there is a great disappointment waiting for you when you see us as we are.”

Alton rose as her father and Seaforth came in, with a curious little inclination of his head which came well from him. “That simply couldn’t be,” he said. “Well, it’s a pity I couldn’t tell you all you have done for me already—and that’s one reason why I’m so sorry the other thing will not wash out. Now Charley and I have a good deal to do, and you’ll excuse me.”

He went out with his comrade, and Deringham smiled at his daughter. “He is learning rapidly. Still, I fancy the man will feel it when—and I am of course speaking impersonally—he finds you out,” he said.

Alice Deringham laughed, though she was not conscious of much amusement just then, and pointed to the bookcase close by her.

“It is really not his fault, if that is where he gets his fancies from,” she said.

“No,” said Deringham, nodding. “We grow out of them at sixteen in the old country. Of course, Tennyson, Kingsley, Scott. Now I wonder if he would find Elaine a more common type than Vivienne if he went home to Carnaby. Still, if you look a little more closely, there is literature which might throw a slightly different light upon the man’s character. I notice a bulky volume on soft-wooded trees, somebody on trigonometry, geology in relation to mining, and what I recognize as a standard work on finance and banking.”

Alice Deringham smiled. “Do you know I fancy that Alton of Somasco would with a little training make his mark at home,” she said. “Has he mentioned any intention of returning with you?”

Deringham’s face grew a trifle sombre. “He has not. We will talk of something else,” he said.

Alton and Seaforth sat up late that night, but what their conversation was did not appear until they walked into a room at the rear of Horton’s store just as supper was being cleared away on the Saturday evening. The nights were already growing cold, and a pile of pinewood crackled in the stove, while the light of two big lamps fell upon the bronzed faces of grave jean-clad men, all turned expectantly towards Alton. He sat down at the head of the table, with Seaforth beside him, and Horton, got up in a frayed-out white shirt from which his bony wrists and red neck protruded grotesquely, at the foot. The rest sat on the table and sundry boxes and barrels smoking tranquilly. They were, for the most part, silent men who waged a grim and ceaseless warfare with the forest, and disdained any indication of curiosity. Nobody asked a question, but the steady eyes which

watched the convener of the meeting were mildly inquiring when he rose up.

"I sent for you, boys, because it seemed the fairest thing," he said. "Now somebody has got to take hold with a tight grip if the dollars that are coming into it are to go to the men who have done the work in this valley. You have seen what has happened down Washington and Oregon way, and we don't any of us want it here in Canada. When the good time came was it the man who'd put in his twelve hours daily with the axe and crosscut who got the dollars, or the one who lived soft in the cities?"

There was a little growl from several among the assembly, for most of those who sat there realized that it was usually the mortgage broker and speculator who reaped where the toilers with axe and saw had sown.

"There'll have to be laws made to hold them fellows' grip off the poor man." said somebody.

Alton laughed a little. "Well," he said dryly, "it seems to me that the poor man should do a little of the holding off himself. Now I want you to listen carefully. Within twelve months you'll see a new wagon-road cut south towards the big river, and inside two years the surveyors running the line for a new railroad into the Somasco valley."

The men stared at the speaker, and there was a murmur, almost of doubt, and wonder. They knew what that promise meant, and it implied the opening of mines and mills, a market for all they could raise on the spot, and the quadrupling in value of every ranch. Alton sat quietly imperturbable at the head of the table.

"And you believe the thing's going to be?" said somebody.

"I think," said Alton quietly, "I have just told you so."

There was another murmur, of strong and patient men's unexpressed exultation, and Seaforth noticed that they had accepted his comrade's statement, without further question, implicitly. They were in some respects simple, and the complex life of the cities was unknown to most of them, but they had seen human nature stripped of its veneer in the bush and understood it well. It was a delicate compliment they had paid Alton, and the little flush in his face showed that he realized it.

"It's great news," said somebody.

Alton nodded. "Yes," he said. "Now I can't tell you exactly why I know this thing will come, and you wouldn't be any worse off if I were wrong. Further, you see I might have gone ahead and brought you up without speaking a word to you."

A man got up from a barrel. "No, sir," he said. "I'm not going to disturb this meeting, but that's just what you couldn't do. It wouldn't be like Somasco Harry."

There was grave applause, but the glint in the steady eyes was pleasant to see, and Seaforth felt a curious thrill as he glanced at his partner. Alton, however, proceeded quietly.

"I needn't tell you what it means," he said. "It may mean anything, including a

wooden city. You know it as well as I do, but I'm going to tell you this. Unless you hold tight to your own, and do a little for yourselves, when the good time comes you'll be left out in the cold. There's a man who sees this better than you or I feeling for a grip on the Somasco valley, and there'll be very little left for the rest of us if he gets it."

"Hallam of the Tyee," a growl ran down the table.

Alton nodded. "Yes," said he. "Now you have seen poor men frozen out of their ranches and claims by men with money in other parts of this country as well as across the frontier, and there's usually only one end to the battle when the man without the dollars kicks against the man with plenty. Stay right where you are with mortgages held open, timber rights that are lapsing because you've done nothing, and undeveloped mineral claims, and the man who sits scheming while you're resting will squeeze you out one by one."

"It has happened before," said somebody, and there was silence for a space. The men had spent the best years of their life hewing the clearings that grew so slowly farther into the virgin forest, faring sparingly, and only quitting that herculean toil to earn sufficient dollars railroad building or working at the mines to feed them when they continued it again. They had sown the best that was in them of mind and body, giving all they had, courage that never faltered, as well as the ceaseless effort of over-strained muscle, and as yet their fee was but the right to hope and toil. And now, they knew, it was once more possible that the full-fleshed taxer of other men's labours would sweep what was theirs into his garner.

"Yes," said Alton. "And what has happened before will happen again—unless you stir round and stop it. That's the only use in remembering things. Standing alone, Hallam and his crowd will squeeze you out one by one; standing fast together for what is your own, you're fit to choke off anybody, and what I've called you here for is to see whether we can't fix up a Co-operative Company!"

A man stood up with a light in his eyes. "Then you've hit the thing plumb where you wanted," he said. "Whose standing in with Alton of Somasco, boys?"

There was a roar this time, and then a silence as if the assembly felt that they had done an unseemly thing, but it was evident that they were all of them ready.

"I figure you've got a programme?" said somebody.

"I have," said Alton. "I'll have a bigger one by and by, but in the meanwhile it includes the selling of timber in place of destroying it, and a doubling right off of the Somasco mill. It also takes in a gristmill, the recording of more timber rights, and most of you getting in on the ground floor of a new silver mine. There's to be an office down in Vancouver, and a desiccated fruit store, and the best men we can get hold of to run them. Now sit still while I read what might do for a scheme."

They sat very still, and even Seaforth, who knew his comrade, wondered a little, for that scheme, while crude in one or two directions, was eminently

workable. It provided for a pro rata division of profits and partition of expenses, while each man would retain the control of his own holding, and those who listened nodded now and then as they noted the efficiency of some portion of the plan of co-operation.

"Now," said Alton quietly, laying down the paper. "That's my notion. I'm willing to listen if any man can bring out a better."

There was a silence until Horton rose up at the foot of the table, glass in hand. "I," he said simply, "don't think he can. Every dollar I can raise is going in, and we're all standing in with Alton. Here's the Somasco Consolidated, and to —— with Hallam."

There was a roar louder than the first one, a clink of glasses, and forgetting their reticence for once the big bronzed men thronged about the one who smiled at them from the head of the table.

CHAPTER XIV
THE COMPACT

After the first meeting of the Somasco Consolidated, Alton was frequently absent from the ranch, and spent most of the nights shut up with bulky books, while he also apparently became involved in an extensive correspondence with the cities. There were, however, times when Miss Deringham surprised him standing still and gazing into vacancy, which was distinctly unusual with him, but the girl, who had once or twice noticed his eyes fixed upon her and signs of an inward conflict in his face, was not displeased. She could arrive at a tolerably accurate deduction as well as most young women.

In the meanwhile Seaforth had gone down to Vancouver, and Deringham still appeared content to linger at Somasco. He had, his daughter knew, been ordered a lengthy rest, and it was evident that the tranquillity of the mountain ranch was benefiting him physically, though now and then the girl noticed that his face was anxious when communications from England reached him. She was also, for no reason she was willing to admit, content to remain a little longer at Somasco.

One night when she was sitting meditatively in the room set apart for her use, Alton passed the half-opened door, and noticing the curious slowness of his pace she signed him to enter. She had, somewhat to the indignation of Mrs. Margery, taken the room in hand, and with the aid of a few sundries surreptitiously brought from Vancouver with Seaforth's connivance, made a transformation in its aspect. A red curtain hung behind the door. There were a few fine furs which Seaforth had collected here and there about the ranch upon the floor, and Alton, who had just returned from a ride of forty miles through the mire and rain, stopped a moment upon the threshold. He was a man of quick perceptions, and all he saw seemed stamped with the personality of its occupant.

It was dainty, and essentially feminine, and he became, for perhaps the first time, uneasily conscious of his own solid masculine proportions and bespattered garments as he glanced deprecatingly at the girl. She lay with lithe gracefulness in a basket chair, very collected and very pretty, while he dimly understood that the fact that she did not move but only smiled at him implied a good deal. A brightness flashed into his eyes and sank out of them again.

"Come in and sit down," she said, "I have seen very little of you lately, and you seem tired. Half-an-hour's casual chatter will do you no harm, although it may appear to you a terrible waste of time."

Alton came in and dropped into a chair which creaked beneath him. His face was somewhat weary, and the girl noticed the stiffness of his movements. He also

looked about him with a curious expression which seemed to suggest reverence in his eyes.

"No," he said gravely, "it wouldn't be a waste of time."

Alice Deringham smiled a little, and moved one foot a trifle nearer the stove. It was little, and delicately moulded, and lost nothing from being encased in a very open bronze slipper. Alton, noticing the slight rustle of fabric which accompanied the movement, glanced towards it, and then turned his eyes away.

"You see I have been taking liberties," said the girl. "All this is very tawdry, isn't it?"

Alton's eyes were wistful. "No. Do you know, this place has quite an effect on me. It makes me feel—as if I were in church," said he.

Miss Deringham's face was not responsive. There were times when she was sensible of a curious compunction in this rancher's presence. "A sensation of that kind is apt to become oppressive," she said. "When we have gone you will throw these things away."

The man seemed to wince, as though the contemplation of something was painful to him, but he looked at his companion gravely.

"I think I shall screw the door up tight," he said.

Alice Deringham laughed musically. "Now I think that was very pretty," she said. "It seems commonplace to offer you a cup of coffee after it, and no doubt you will consider the indulgence in such luxuries a sign of weakness. I have reasons for believing that Mrs. Margery does."

Alton smiled somewhat grimly. "I'm just about as fond of good things as most other men," he said. "The difficulty was that I seldom had the chance of getting them."

Miss Deringham busied herself with a spirit lamp, and Alton watched her with a little glint in his eyes. Possibly the girl knew that her movements were graceful as she bent over the lamp, and that the light from the one above her struck a fine sparkle from her hair. She may also have been aware that the picture had its attractions for a man who had lived a grim life of toil and self-denial, as this one had done.

"It has occurred to me that this coffee is not the same that we had when we first came to Somasco," she said.

Alton appeared a trifle embarrassed. "I had to go down and worry Horton about one or two little things," he said. "It's good for him occasionally, and he had been sending me flour we couldn't use lately."

Miss Deringham nodded, though she was quite aware that the storekeeper was scarcely likely to supply axemen and ranchers, whose tastes were simple and dollars scarce, with what she guessed by its bouquet was the finest product of Costa Rica. If she had not been, she was capable of deducing a little from the stamp upon the packets she had seen in Mrs. Margery's store, which showed that

they had come direct from Vancouver.

Alton took up the cup handed him, and leaned back in his chair with a little gesture of content, while the girl smiled as she glanced at him.

"You bear it very well," she said.

The man looked at her with a bewildered expression for a moment or two. Then he laughed. "No," he said, "I find it wonderfully nice."

There was an underlying sincerity in his voice, and Alice Deringham driven by curiosity went a step farther.

"The coffee?" she said.

She was almost sorry next moment, for she had at other times called up considerably more than she had expected or desired from the unsounded depths of the man's nature. For a second or two there was a great wistfulness, which changed into a little glow she shrank from, in his eyes. He turned them upon her, and then away, and they were once more grave when he looked back again. Still, she guessed what that effort had cost him.

"No," he said quietly. "I did not mean the coffee. You see, I had never until you came here been used to anything smooth or pretty."

Alice Deringham smiled a little, for she understood. The man, she thought, was willing she should accept the somewhat pointless compliment as the sequence of his former speech, to cover his mistake if he had betrayed more than he thought desirable. It also increased her liking for him, since it appeared that Alton was capable of self-restraint. There was, however, no mistaking what she had seen, and the girl remembered that one of the Winnipeg ladies she travelled with, who had visited one of the weird valleys across the American frontier, described to her the fascination of throwing stones into the basin of a geyser to see how many it would take before it erupted. During her intercourse with rancher Alton, Alice Deringham had experienced the sensation.

"You have been working too hard lately, and worrying, too, I think," she said.

Alton laughed a little, and then glanced at the stove for a while in silence, as though communing with himself. When he looked up again the girl fancied that he had decided something. "Work hurts nobody. It's the worry that leaves the mark," he said, with a smile. "Of course, a good many people will have told you that before. Yes, I've been thinking a good deal lately."

"It is occasionally a solace to tell one's friends one's thoughts," said Miss Deringham.

"Well," said Alton gravely, "there's a thing I feel I should do, and yet I don't want to, because it would stand in the way of my doing something else."

"That is a somewhat common difficulty," said Alice Deringham. "It depends upon the importance to yourself, or others, of the first thing."

Alton nodded. "There are," he said, "men in this district who have worked very hard, not for the bare living the ranch gives them, because some have put a good deal more into the land than they have taken out of it, but for what it will

give them presently. Now, unless somebody does the right thing for them, another man will walk right in and take all they have worked for away. I wouldn't like that to happen, because I am one of them, you see."

"No," said Miss Deringham. "Still, surmising that you are the somebody, I wonder if you have a more convincing reason."

A little flush seemed to creep into Alton's bronzed face. "I find I can talk to you as I never did to any one else," he said. "Well, this valley's waiting to feed a host of people, and teeming with riches that somebody is wanting, and I feel it's my task to do the best I can for it. Now, when one feels that, and does nothing, he's putting a load he was meant to carry on other people's shoulders."

"Yes," said Miss Deringham. "Still, isn't it slightly egotistical? There may be other men who could do what is necessary better."

Alton laughed a little. "You get right home every time," he said. "I've been thinking the same thing, but, though I wanted to, I couldn't find the man, and there isn't much use in running away from the work that's set out for you."

Alice Deringham understood him because she was a somewhat intellectual young woman, though she had, and possibly fortunately, but seldom been required to decide between inclination and duty in any affair of importance hitherto. There was also something that touched her in the man's simple faithfulness.

"And you are going to do a good deal?" she said.

"I don't know," said Alton gravely. "I should like to. You see, we want roads and mills, and an office down there in the city."

"And," said the girl, "that means money."

"Yes," said Alton. "When a man goes round borrowing he finds out that the folks who have got the dollars like to keep them. That's why I'm going up to look for Jimmy's silver mine."

Miss Deringham shivered a little. "Winter is coming on," she said. "The last man who looked for it was frozen—and there is Carnaby."

The girl's pulses throbbed a little faster as she spoke, and there was nothing in the man's face which escaped her attention. Again the curious glint became apparent in his eyes, and the warm bronze a little deeper in tint.

"I might raise some dollars on Carnaby, but I don't want to," he said.

Miss Deringham had seen sufficient, and decided to change the topic. "So you intend to find the silver?" she said.

"Yes," said Alton simply. "I feel I have got to do that—first."

There was a significant silence, and the girl leaned back in her chair, conscious without resentment that the man was watching her. Her eyes were softer than usual, the faintest trace of colour showed in her cheek, while the light evening dress emphasized the fine sweep of curve and line that was further accentuated by her pose. The lamp that hung above her smote a track of brightness athwart her red-gold hair, until she slightly moved her head so that while part of the full round

neck showed in its snowy whiteness her face was in the shadow.

"I think you will be successful. I hope you will," she said.

It was evident that the man understood all that was meant, but he rose with an apparent effort. "And now I have a good deal to do," he said.

Alice Deringham also rose with a little stateliness, and when he had gone out sank down contemplatively into the chair again. Her hands lay open in her lap, and it is possible that she saw nothing of the sewing they rested on as she grappled with the question why had the man told her what he had done. There were two apparent reasons, for Alice Deringham realized that there was a certain greatness behind his simplicity. Granting that, she could see his standpoint clearly, though it was more difficult to understand why such a man had made it evident to her. He was, she knew, not one to stoop even to win a woman's good opinion, and would have seen that in this direction silence became him best, unless he felt that while so much was due to honour there was something due to her.

He had told her simply that it was not to please himself he was going out to look for the silver just then, and the deduction was that the expedition had no attractions for him because he wished to stay at the ranch. Allowing that, the revelation of his motive had not been purposeless. It was only his responsibility drove him away from her, and there was a vague but effective compliment in the implication that she would recognize it. Still, this train of reasoning had led Alice Deringham far enough, and she sought distraction from it in her embroidery, which during the next hour progressed but indifferently.

It was a day or two later when Alton drew Deringham into his room when he came in bemired all over from the settlement, and the financier noticed that the table and most of the floor was littered with books, survey plans, and miscellaneous papers.

"I'll have to leave this place for a little," he said. "I'm going up to find the silver, but the ranch and all that's in it is at your service just as long as it pleases you. If all goes as I expect it, I shall be back in a month or so, and would be glad to find you still at Somasco. Then, if you are ready, Charley and I will go back to the old country with you. A lawyer in Vancouver has written to an English accountant for me, and with him to help us we can fix up all about Carnaby."

Now Deringham had up to that moment still retained a hope that he could arrive at an understanding with Alton respecting Carnaby on the spot. As it was, unless he could gain time, exposure and even worse things stared him in the face. It had been comparatively simple to hoodwink his co-trustee, but it would be very different with an accountant of reputation, and he had also grown afraid of Alton's instinctive grasp of whatever subject he turned his attention to. There was, of course, much the rancher did not know, but that left him with attention the more concentrated upon issues of importance.

Deringham, however, showed but little evidence of dismay or astonishment.

Had he been liable to do so, he would not have held his own so long in the occupation he followed. His breath came a trifle more quickly, and his hand trembled a little, but he rested it upon the table, and all that Alton noticed was a curious little movement about the corner of his eyes. The rancher, however, remembered it.

"Well," said Deringham, "I must endeavour if possible to return to England with you. When you spoke of being away a month you seemed to contemplate a possibility of being absent longer."

Alton nodded. "I did," he said. "The man who found the silver is lying up there still, but I've provided for anything of that kind happening to me, as you will see in a day or two. Now I don't think we need worry any more until we get to Carnaby."

Deringham made a gesture of concurrence, but the grim irony of Alton's speech occurred to him as he went out to grapple with his torturing anxiety. At first he could scarcely think of anything consecutively, and once more the picture of a man hanging by a juniper-bush with a river frothing down the gorge below rose up persistently before his memory. It was replaced by another of a grim silent figure keeping watch with eyes that never ceased their fixed stare beside a frozen trail.

On the second day afterwards he sauntered into Horton's store and found Hallam there. The mining speculator appeared ironically amused, the storekeeper flushed and savage, but when Hallam turned to Deringham there was something in his manner that suggested they had not met by accident.

"I've been telling the storekeeper not to lay in too many Somascos just yet, and have got to put in the time here for an hour or two," he said. "Know any reason why you shouldn't have a drink with me?"

They strolled into an adjoining room, and Horton, who supplied them with a bottle and glasses, came back smiling sardonically. "Now if Hallam hadn't put it that way I mightn't have thought anything," said he. "Still, when a man of his kind takes the trouble to tell one anything it's a blame good reason for not believing him."

In the meanwhile Hallam, who filled the glasses, glanced at Deringham. "You think I can be of some use to you?" he said.

"Yes," said Deringham. "I presume you know Alton is going up to find the silver he needs to help him traverse your schemes?"

"Oh, yes," said Hallam. "Still I should have figured he could have got it out of Carnaby."

"I believe he intends to."

Hallam smiled unpleasantly. "Now I begin to understand you," he said. "You lost a good many dollars over the Peveril."

"I think that is beside the question," said Deringham.

Hallam regarded his companion steadily. “Well, I don’t know, but we needn’t argue. You don’t want him to get those dollars out of Carnaby?”

“And you don’t want him to find the silver.”

Hallam laughed. “That’s quite right,” said he. “The same thing would suit both of us.”

“I scarcely think so,” said Deringham. “In my case, I really do not mind whether he gets the dollars from Carnaby or not.”

“No?” said Hallam. “Then you’ll have to tell me what you want.”

“I don’t want him to come over to England too soon. If anything kept him up there among the mountains a month or so longer than he expected, so that I should have time to straighten up things a little, I would not complain.”

“And,” said Hallam, “you would be ready to pay for it?”

Deringham bent his head. “Yes. To a moderate extent.”

Hallam sat silent for a time, and then looked up with a glint in his beady eyes. “It could be done. Well, I don’t want him to find that silver, and if he doesn’t get through his prospecting in the next month or so he’ll not find much of anything under six feet of snow, and I’ll have fixed things up as I want them before it’s melted. Now you’re holding pretty heavy in the Aconada mine, and I’ve been wanting to get my foot in there for a long while.”

Deringham stood up, and thrust aside the bottle Hallam passed him. “Before we go any further I want you to understand that if Alton is held up there until December is over it is all I ask,” he said.

Hallam nodded. “Oh, yes,” he said. “All I want is so many of those shares transferred to me.”

They debated for a while, and then Deringham said, “I would sooner fix it through a third party.”

Hallam laughed unpleasantly. “That would suit, but I’d want your cheque to buy them with made out payable to me.”

“It would,” said Deringham, “not suit me.”

“Then we can’t make a deal. It’s me that’s putting this thing through, and if anything goes wrong I’m anxious to have somebody to stand in with me as well as pick up the dollars if it doesn’t. I’m talking quite straight. There it is. Take it or leave it.”

Deringham was silent again. Then he laughed a little. “Since I cannot apparently do anything else, I’ll take it.”

Hallam filled up both glasses. “Then that’s all,” he said. “Here’s my respects to the Somasco Consolidated.”

Deringham just touched his glass and went out, while Hallam, who sat down and emptied his, smiled ironically. “That man might have kept his dollars, and I’d be quite pleased if Alton stayed up there a good deal more than two months,” said he.

Deringham was in the meanwhile hastily writing out telegraphic messages which were to cause a little astonishment on the London stock market, and hamper the working of one or two companies. He would, so far as he could see, be a much poorer man in a few months or so, but he fancied he could gain time to save the reputation that would help him to commence again, and to men of his attainments there are always opportunities. Then he sent off a mounted messenger, and rode slowly back towards Somasco, while Horton spent some time examining a blotting-pad in his back store.

"I'm kind of sorry I can't make anything of that stuff," said he. "What's the use of wiring any one the names of cities?"

During the next day Alton drew Deringham into his room, and laid a document on the table. "I don't know if that's quite the usual thing, but Horton and I have been worrying over a lawyer's book, and I think it will hold," he said.

Deringham took up the paper, and again there was the little movement at the corners of his eye as he read.

"I, Henry Alton, of Somasco ranch, being now in sound health, and as clear of head as usual, but about to start on a journey to which there are risks attached, hereby bequeath in the event of disaster overtaking me the estate of Carnaby, England, with all its rents and revenues of any kind whatever to which I am entitled, to Miss Alice Deringham, daughter of ——. In case of my decease during the next six months, the above-mentioned Ralph Deringham and my partner Charles Seaforth, of Somasco, British Columbia, will, acting as trustees, either dispose of the estate for the benefit of Miss Deringham or install her in possession of it at her discretion."

There was a little more to the purpose, and Deringham read all of it. "This is very generous," he said.

"No," said Alton, "it's only just, and it can't be very generous, because Carnaby wouldn't be much use to me if I don't come back. I could, of course, revoke this thing if I do."

Deringham said nothing. There was a good deal he wished to say, but for once words failed him, and when he went out with the will in his pocket his face had grown a trifle grey. Yet though he suffered grievously in that moment, he was conscious of something in his brain that throbbed in time to the refrain, "Alice Deringham, mistress of Carnaby."

CHAPTER XV
ON THE TRAIL

Daylight was just creeping through the rain, and thin mist rolled about the pines, when early one morning Alton, who was setting out to find the silver, stood upon the verandah of Somasco ranch. The trickle from the eaves dripped upon two pack-horses waiting in the mire below, and Tom of Okanagan, the big axeman who had been hewing with Alton when Deringham first met him at the ranch, stood motionless with their bridles in his hand, apparently as oblivious of the rain as the pines behind him. Seaforth was at the head of the stairway with a pack upon his back, and the barrel of a Marlin rifle sloped across his shoulders. Beyond lay a blurred vista of driving rain and dripping trees.

Early as it was, Deringham and his daughter were also upon the verandah, and the girl shivered a little as she gazed northwards into the mist. It was a very wild and lonely region the rolling vapours hid, and she knew the men who ventured into it at that season of the year would find their courage and endurance tested to the uttermost. There were but three of them, but she had discovered already that they were a little more than average men, and a glance at their burdens and those of the dripping beasts was as reassuring as their bearing. It was evident that they knew what their task would be, and had prepared for it with a thoroughness that overlooked nothing. Tents, blankets, flour-bags, cooking utensils and hide packages were hung where man and horse could carry them with a minimum of effort. The place for every strap had been exactly determined, and there was an absence of concern, and a quietness about the men that had its meaning.

Presently Seaforth descended the stairway with Deringham, Tom of Okanagan moved forward with the horses, and Alton was left alone with Alice Deringham. Neither of them spoke for a moment, and it was noticeable that the girl, who knew that silence is often more expressive than speech and had acquired some skill in avoiding unpleasant situations, was for the moment unable to break it. It was, Alton who spoke first, and his voice was a trifle too even.

“You will be gone when we come back?” he said.

The girl noticed he did not look at her, and fancied she understood the reason. This was a strong man, but it seemed he knew there were limits to his strength.

“Yes,” she said. “The time we spent at Somasco has passed very pleasantly, but we shall go down to Vancouver in a day or two.”

It seemed very trivial, for Alice Deringham was quite aware that this might be the last time she would look upon her companion, but she had bidden farewell to men of his kind before. They had worn their nation’s khaki, and Alton wore

deerskin and jean, with the shovel girded about him in place of the sword; but she knew there was in him the same spirit that animated them, and that it was a silent spirit made most terribly manifest in action.

"I hope you will have a good time down there," he said.

The girl glancing at him in sidelong fashion noticed his curious little smile. "Oh, yes, I think I shall," she said. "I shall expect to hear you have come back with the silver."

Alton nodded. "Yes," he said. "When I come back I shall have found the silver."

He spoke quietly, and there was nothing unusual in his voice, but glancing at his eyes the girl understood what he had left unspoken. If this man did not return with his object accomplished, she felt it would be because he would not come back at all.

Then there was another silence more oppressive still, until Alton held out his hand. "I must be going," he said.

Alice Deringham was conscious of a little thrill as her fingers rested in his big, hard palm, and when he released them waited for a moment with a curious expectancy.

"You will take my good wishes with you," she said.

Alton bent his head. "I am doing this thing because I feel I have to," he said very slowly. "I could come and see you at Vancouver when I come back?"

The light was dim, but the girl moved her head a little so that the man did not see her face. "Yes," she said; "if it would please you."

Alton smiled gravely as he swung down his wet hat. "Then," he said, "I will come."

He went down the stairway next moment, there was a soft thud of hoofs splashing in the mud, and in another minute he had gone, and Alice Deringham glancing towards the bush saw only sliding mist and driving rain, until her father stopped close by her. "There is evidently a good deal in heredity," he said. "Our rancher kinsman occasionally makes it very evident that he is Alton—of Somasco—but there are also times when he appears to understand what would be becoming in Alton of Carnaby."

Now Deringham may have been right, and he may equally have been wrong; for, while Alton of Somasco had doubtless inherited something from the generations of land-holders who had gone before him, the man animated by a single purpose who has grappled with untrammelled nature, subduing the weaknesses of his body, and bearing hardship, peril, and toil, not infrequently attains to something of the greatness which is the birthright of humanity, and not confined to the English gentleman.

Alice Deringham, however, smiled ironically at her father. "Did you expect anything else from him?" she said. "I wonder how long it will be before he comes

back again."

Deringham did not answer her, but there was a curious look in his face, and he seemed to shiver. It was, however, very cold, and the rain drove into the verandah.

It was ten days later and the little party, clearing a path for the horses through a chaos of fallen trunks and thickets, had made with difficulty some six or eight miles a day, when Alton was awakened one night by the trampling of the beasts. He sat up in his blankets and listened intently, but could only hear the hoarse roar of a river and the little cold breeze moaning in the pines. A man new to that region would have lain down again, but Alton had taught himself to understand a little of the nature of the beasts that worked for him, and when he heard another movement crept to the tent door.

Looking out he could see the pines lifting their spires of blackness against the night where they followed the ridge of a hill. That was on the one hand, but on the other they rolled, vague and blurred, down into a vast hollow from which the mist was drifting. The sound of the river rose reverberating from its profundity of shadow, for it had cost the party most of a day to climb to the height they had pitched the camp upon. There was but little light overhead, though here and there a star blinked fitfully, and Alton shivered again, for it was very cold and but little past the hour when man's vitality sinks to its lowest.

Raising himself a trifle he listened again with ears that could distinguish each component of the nocturnal harmonies. No one but a bushman could have heard them, but to those who toil in the stillness of that forest-shrouded land the silence is but the perfect blending of musical sound. There was the faintest of crisp rattles as the withered needles shook down from a twig, and then a sigh and a whisper along the dim black vault above, as though a spirit hovered above the sleeping earth. Alton heard, and knew it was not the wind, for the little breeze had paused while the river made it answer in subdued antiphones. He had dwelt in close contact with the soil he sprang from, and there were times when he felt his nature thrill in faint response to the life there is in what the men of the cities deem inanimate things.

Then a leaf sailed past the tent, and he knew what tree it came from as it touched the earth, and strained his ears the more, wondering what he listened for, as he, and others of his kind, had done in the bush before. It could be, he almost felt, nothing material, and yet, though they did not move now, he knew the horses were also listening. That had its meaning, for man cannot measure his keenest senses with those of the beasts of the field. The little breeze awoke again, and shook fantastic harmonies out of the shivering trees, and one horse stamped. The other wheeled and snorted, and Alton sprang back into the tent, as somewhere in the bushes there commenced a sound that suggested the snarling of a great cat. It was possibly unfortunate he was not a trifle less prompt, because otherwise he might have noticed something slightly unusual in the sound.

As it was, however, he fell over Okanagan Tom, who being a very similar man to him, and not as yet wholly awake, asked no questions but gripped him silently, and proceeded to crush the breath out of him. Alton was sinewy, but he was almost choking before he freed one hand, and drove it into a tender portion of his assailant's frame. Then with a little laugh Tom of Okanagan flung him across the tent.

"Great Columbus! It's good I found out in time," he said.

Alton was almost speechless still, and, while he gasped, the object he had fallen on moved strenuously beneath him.

"You might get up," it said. "It's a somewhat unprotected place you're sitting on."

"Confound you both," said Alton. "Hand me the rifle."

Seaforth afterwards remembered that he did not ask where the rifle was, which would have been the question put by most men, and as he held it out felt the stock touch Alton's hand. Then there was a little rattle, and as Seaforth floundered to his feet a weird snarling cry broke out. Alton was out of the tent in a moment, but Seaforth afterwards recalled the fact that they were all moving when he heard the sound, and Tom of Okanagan apparently groping for his axe and throwing things about. He also decided that it might have been better if one had sat still and listened, but it is not given to human beings to always do the most appropriate thing.

Alton instinctively avoided the tent-line nearest the opening, which was unfortunate, because the peg had drawn a trifle, and Seaforth had moved it after his comrade had driven it. It therefore came about that the line was not where he had last seen it, and he went down headlong, while the rifle rolled away from him. Just there, there was a rush and a drumming of hoofs, and before Alton could pick himself up the horses were sweeping in a panic through the shadowy bush.

"Anything the worse, Harry?" said Seaforth. "We had better get off at once while there's the sound to guide us."

Alton laughed softly, as he did now and then when he might have been disconcerted. "I can't beat a Cayuse, Charley, and I don't think you'll hear them very long," he said.

Tom of Okanagan grunted approval, and the three stood still, until the drumming of hoofs was lost in the silence of the bush.

"They're gone," said Seaforth. "Do you mean to do nothing?"

"Yes," said Alton. "I am going to stop right where I am until there's light enough to trail them by. Do you know anything better, Tom?"

"No," said the man from Okanagan. "Still, I'm not quite as good at thinking just now as I would like to be. The last time I felt like this was when Siwash Bob took the back of the axe to me. I figure that was a panther."

"Yes," said Alton; "it was a panther."

“Well,” said Okanagan, “did you ever hear of one that went for a horse close up with a tent before?”

“I have,” said Alton, “seen a panther that turned on a man who wanted to get a shot at it in the undergrowth.”

“Oh, yes,” said Okanagan. “He’d got something he’d caught for dinner in the bushes, but it’s kind of curious that beasts come round and howl at us. Anyway, we can’t find out nothing until the daylight comes.”

They crawled back into the tent, and it was characteristic of them that although the loss of the horses might traverse all their plans they went to sleep again, and awakened as the beasts do, instinctively, when the first light crept over the shoulder of the hill. Ten minutes later Alton had the fire lighted, and sat down beside it with the frypan in his hand. The recovery of the horses was a question of importance, but it might well entail a day’s journey, and he knew that to commence it without his breakfast would be distinctly unwise of him. Accordingly he tranquilly held the pan, while as the mists melted and the awakening earth put on shape and form there was unrolled before him a wondrous transformation scene.

When he had last awakened the wilderness had lain formless, wrapped in blackness, primitive and pagan. Now the great pines rising row and row from the hollow pointed heavenwards with all their sombre spires, and led the eye upwards ever over the rock that lost its greyness and glinted to the gleam of snow far up in the empyrean that was sundered from earth by the vapours and wholly spiritual. Alton realized dimly a little of the motive of the scene, and felt that the world was good, for, laying down the frypan, he stood up stretching his arms above his head as he rejoiced in the strength of his vigorous manhood. Still, like most of the bushmen, he did not express his feelings in speech.

“Charley, you’ll be slow for your wedding. Turn out, the pork’s done,” he said.

They lost no time, but they did not eat in haste, and Alton glanced at Seaforth when the meal was done. “You’ll stop right here, Charley, by the tent,” he said. “I can’t quite tell when Tom and I will be back again.”

Then without another word he strode into the bush, and Seaforth, who first washed the breakfast-cans, proceeded to make a circuit of the camp. He found the spot where the horses had been tethered with but little difficulty, and also the hole out of which one of them had drawn the picket-peg. The redwoods which towered above him were vast of girth, and it would have needed a long halter to encompass them, while there was no branch for sixty feet or so. Still, though he searched diligently, he did not find any print which might have been left by the paw of a panther, and regretted that there was a ridge of rock outcrop behind the camp.

“That beast was hungry, or he wouldn’t have come so near,” he said.

It was near dusk when Alton came back leading one weary horse, and darkness

had closed down before Tom of Okanagan strode in with nothing but the pack-rope he had set out with. Seaforth had supper ready, and no questions were asked until they had eaten. Then Alton, stretching himself at full length beside the fire, lighted his pipe.

"You found nothing after I left you where the trail split tip?" he said.

"No," said Okanagan. "Anyway, not for more than a mile. Ran into rock and gravel, and lost the trail. Crawled round in rings most of the day, and couldn't strike it again. Guess the beast swam the river and lit out for home."

"Well," said Alton dryly, "I found more than that, for I ran into a man's trail, and it wasn't very old. I think he had long boots on and one was down at the heel. I spent an hour over it, and when it led me into rock came back again."

"A man?" said Seaforth. "I fancied there was nobody but ourselves between here and Somasco. What could he be doing?"

"I don't know," said Alton. "Did you find the panther's trail?"

"No," said Seaforth. "Rock again!"

Alton said nothing for a minute, and when he spoke his voice had a curious tone. "Well," he said gravely, "the rock belongs to this place and we don't, so there's no use kicking, but it would have been convenient if there had been less of it. Now it's quite possible that a few pounds of grub and a load of blankets may make a big difference before we get home again, and if we can't trail that horse to-morrow you'll go back to Somasco for another one. We'll cache the load somewhere here and make a big smoke for you at every camping."

"That means the loss of a fortnight, anyway," said Seaforth. "Time is valuable with the winter coming on."

Alton nodded. "Still, it can't be helped," he said.

"I'll lose no time," said Seaforth, who had been watching his comrade. "Are you quite sure you have told us all, Harry?"

Alton slowly drew a strip of hide from beneath him, and passed it across. Seaforth and Okanagan bent over it together, their faces showing intent in the light of the fire, while Alton laughed softly as he watched them.

"What do you make of that?" he said.

Seaforth glanced round sharply. "It's a trifle curious. That hide's thick, and yet the beast has evidently broken it, but it pulled up the peg."

"Did you find the peg?" said Alton, and Okanagan swept his glance across the faces before him. Seaforth's expressed bewilderment, Alton's was grim.

"I found one," said Seaforth—"Julius Caesar's."

"Yes," said Alton dryly. "There should have been another, and a horse that breaks his tether can't pull out the peg. Still, I don't think he broke it."

"But," said Seaforth, "the thing is broken."

Tom of Okanagan smiled in a curious fashion while Alton reached out and laid his finger on the hide. "One can't be sure of anything," he said. "Still, one could

fancy that had felt the knife before it snapped."

There was silence for almost a minute, and the shadows of the great firs seemed to close in upon the camp. Then Alton rose up and stretched his limbs wearily.

"I am kind of tired," he said. "There's a good deal to be done to-morrow."

CHAPTER XVI
CAUSE FOR ANXIETY

There was no sign of the missing horse next day, and Alton's face was grave when he returned to camp at noon. Tom of Okanagan arrived an hour or two later, and shook his head when Seaforth glanced at him inquiringly.

"Rock again. Right down to the river," he said.

Alton nodded, but did not ask if his companion had effected a crossing. "There was a good deal of water coming down?" he said.

"Oh, yes," said Okanagan. "It was cold. Boulders all along on the other side. Now if the beast got over he'll be lighting out for home, and there are some of us better than others at picking up a trail."

Seaforth understood him, and the implication pleased him though it was not openly expressed. "Had you any especial reason when you asked me to go, Harry?" he asked.

Alton smiled dryly. "I had, but I don't know that it was a very good one. You would sooner stay up here. What do you think, Tom?"

"Of course!" said Seaforth, and Alton nodded silently, while Okanagan rose to his feet.

"Now you have asked me, Charley's right," he said. "I'll be moving south in ten minutes."

He had set off in somewhat less, and the men he left behind stood still listening until the sound of his footsteps had sunk into the stillness. Then Seaforth glanced at his comrade, and Alton laughed.

"It's lonely, Charley," he said. "I don't know that you were wise, but we'll get a move on and cache some of these provisions."

Seaforth was glad of something to do. Three had started from Somasco, and already one had gone, while he felt a slight sense of depression as he glanced north towards the wilderness of rock and snow their path led into. He did not, however, tell his comrade so, and they toiled for an hour before Alton, carefully smoothing off the soil that covered what they had hidden, strewed it with cedar-twigs.

"Step it off, Charley; twenty paces east to the rock, with the big peak over the shoulder of the hill," he said.

Seaforth walked straight forward with measured strides. "A foot over!" he said.

Alton nodded. "Go back and make your traverse," he said. "Forty north with the gully over the fork of the river."

"Forty," said Seaforth, "and a half."

"Well," said Alton, "whatever you don't remember, hold tight on to that."

Seaforth felt the depression he had shaken off return to him. "There are," he said slowly, "few things that you forget."

Alton, glancing at him, understood, and then turned his eyes towards the snow of the wilderness. "It's the man that can't look forward who gets left," he said. "Now something might stop me coming back with you for that grub."

Seaforth said nothing, and he was a little graver than usual as they packed the tent and blankets on the remaining horse, and an extra load upon their own backs. A good many things might happen up there in the north, including snow-slides, floods and frost, or the downward rush of great trees in a *brulee*. That was possibly why he commenced a little jingling song of the music-halls when they took the trail again, but the white grandeur of the great peaks silenced him, or his breath gave out as they floundered into fern-choked forest which was further garnished with the horrible devil's club. Seaforth fell into a clump of it, and for several minutes his comments were venomous, for though he had been taught restraint in England and had further tuition in Canada of a grimmer description, little can be expected from the man who is gripped by that Satanic thorn.

It was half an hour before he went on again with his garments ensanguined as the result of Alton's treatment with the knife, and he gasped with relief when after a march of four miles, which occupied most of what was left of the day, they came out into the more open spaces of a big *brulee*. Some time in the hot autumn a fire had passed that way, and the great trees towered above them, stripped and blackened columns, that seemed to stretch between earth and sky. There was no limb left them, and they rose, majestic in their cylindrical symmetry, in apparently endless battalions, a vista of plutonic desolation. Underfoot there was charcoal, and feathery ashes that whirled aloft, and sprinkling the men with a fine grey powder slowly settled again.

Alton was white in ten minutes, a gritty mire defiled the horse's sides, and Seaforth floundered, coughing, ankle-deep at times, with livid circles where he had rubbed the grime away about his eyes. There was no sign of beast or bird, and the shuffle of weary feet and thud of hoofs rose muffled out of a great silence, until there was a stupendous crash somewhere in the distance. The charred trunks took up the sound, and while they flung it from one to another Alton sprang forward and smote the pack-horse with his fist.

"Jump!" he said hoarsely.

Next moment Seaforth felt himself hurled forward, and glancing over his shoulder when he found his footing again saw a big trunk tilt a little. It seemed to hang quivering for a second or two, then toppled further, and with a great humming came rushing down. Then there was a stunning crash, and he stood gasping, deafened, and bereft of sight, amidst a stifling cloud of dust which swept

into his mouth and nostrils and almost suffocated him. When he could see anything again the horse was quivering, and the dust still rising from a shapeless pile a few yards behind him. Alton, who was black and grey to the ankles, took his hat off, shook it, and put it on again in a curious unconcerned fashion which suggested that he did it unconsciously.

"Those six feet make a big difference," said he. As he spoke there was a crash a little farther behind them, another ahead, and they stood still; Alton gripping the horse's bridle, Seaforth staring about him and scarcely breathing, while concussion answered concussion, until there was a silence that was almost bewildering again.

"Now," said Alton quietly, "we'll get out of this, though I don't know that we need worry, because that should have cleared out the shaky ones. When one goes, more of them generally follow. It wouldn't have grieved Hallam of the Tyee very much if we had been a yard or two farther back."

Seaforth was possibly a little shaken, for he answered as he might not otherwise have done. "I wonder if it would have displeased anybody else," he said.

Alton jerked the horse to a standstill and looked at him. "I don't think you meant that, Charley."

Seaforth noticed the glint in his comrade's eyes, and departed a little from veracity. "No," he said. "There are times when a man is apt to talk a little at random."

Alton nodded. "You'll not forget again. The man is a kinsman of mine."

Seaforth smote the pack-horse, because he did not quite know what to answer. He had vague suspicions concerning Deringham, but was quite aware that it would be inappropriate for him to express them. Also, having seen a little of the smoother side of life in England, he knew a trifle more about young women of Miss Deringham's description than his comrade did. He admired the girl, as most men would have done, but the qualities Alton had evidently endowed her with were not especially apparent to him. He also fancied that Miss Deringham would have found some of them distinctly irksome now and then.

It was dark when they came out of the *brulee* and pitched camp amidst the boulders beside a lonely lake. The mists crawled about the pines that shut it in, and its surface was seamed with white by a little bitter wind. Sombre clouds rolled lower down the surrounding hills, and Seaforth was glad to stretch his weary limbs under the lee of a big boulder while the fire snapped and crackled in front of him.

"I wonder when we shall see this lake again," he said.

Alton, who was busy with the frypan, turned and stirred the fire, and the sparks and smoke whirled about them before a stinging blast. "I don't know," he said, glancing at a smear of whiteness that swept athwart the lake. "It depends

upon the weather, and I'm not pleased with that to-night. You see the Chinook winds would keep off the snow."

"Of course," said Seaforth, who knew that the warm breezes from the Pacific occasionally drive back the rigorous winter that turns the northern portion of the mountain province into a white desolation. "They usually do, but we'll surmise that in place of them we get the back-draughts from the Pole?"

"Then," said Alton dryly, "it would be a good deal nicer down at Somasco. Are you sorry you didn't stop there, Charley?"

Seaforth threw an armful of fir wood upon the fire with somewhat unnecessary violence. "You are not so pleasant as you might be to-night," he said.

Alton rose and stretched himself. "I wouldn't worry about me. It seems to me we are both of us feeling lonely, and that's curious, because when we had him Okanagan wasn't any special kind of a companionable man. There was a time when you would have been driving to dinner with a diamond pin stuck in you and silk stockings on about this time, Charley?"

Seaforth laughed. "I scarcely think either of the things are in common masculine use," he said. "There, however, was a time when I walked into a British Columbian mining camp with my whole wardrobe on my back and, I think, fifty cents in my pocket. Still, what you ask me suggests a not quite unwarranted question. What are you going to do with Carnaby, Harry?"

"I don't know yet. I'm not sure it's mine, you see."

"Your grandfather left it you," said Seaforth; "and it was his."

"Yes," said Alton gravely. "He did, but he tacked a kind of condition on to it, and—well, that's about all I can tell you, Charley."

"Of course!" and Seaforth smiled curiously. "I would not have asked you, only I am your partner, and when you're Alton of Carnaby you will have no more use for me."

Alton seemed to sigh. "I am," he said simply, "Alton of Somasco, and I fancy now and then that was all I was meant to be. You are my partner, Charley, and it would take a good deal more than Carnaby to separate you and me."

Seaforth smiled again, though there was more than amusement in his face, while Alton, who stopped beside the fire and filled two cans from the kettle, shook his head reproachfully as he flung their contents into the bush.

"That's what comes of talking too much. You have forgotten to put in the tea," he said.

They lay down early, rolled in the blankets, with the tent across them, for the wind that lashed the lake rendered it advisable not to erect it, but it was some time before Seaforth went to sleep. He fancied he understood Alton's assertion that he was not sure Carnaby was his, for he knew his comrade was capable under certain conditions of almost reasonless generosity. Nor did he desire a better partner, but he was not sure that in the event of Alton transferring his activities to England

their friendship would be approved of by a possible mistress of Carnaby. Women, Seaforth knew, regarded these things differently.

He slept at last, and awakening felt the tent heavy upon him. There was also a curious rawness in the atmosphere, and he glanced about him with a little gasp of consternation. The hillside gleamed coldly above him under the creeping light, and only the pines were sombre, for the earth was white with snow.

"Get up, Harry," he said, with something in his voice that roused his comrade suddenly.

Alton rose, and his face became a trifle grim. "This," he said quietly, "is going to mix up things. We'll have breakfast quick as you can get it."

They were on their way in half an hour, struggling up the hillside under the pines until at last the trees grew smaller towards the timber line. Then they floundered painfully over what had been bare slopes of rock and was now a waste of snow, with a dazzling field of whiteness. between them and the blue. Up there the frost was biting, and the snow lay fine as flour, blowing in thin wisps from under the horse's hoofs, while the men's jean and deerhide were sprinkled with glittering particles. The wind dropped towards sundown, and when, climbing a great hill shoulder, they dipped again to the forest the snows flamed crimson, against a pitiless blueness, out of which there seemed to fall a devastating cold.

Diamonds glinted upon the shivering pines, sound seemed frozen, and there was a great impressive stillness across which the jingle of the bridle rang stridently when Alton pulled the horse up near the foremost of the trees.

"This," he said softly, "is where I found Jimmy. He was sitting there with his rifle on his knee, looking straight at me, as though there were lots of things he could tell me."

Seaforth shivered a little. "He had the specimens with him?"

Alton nodded. "Yes," he said. "He had his grip right on the deerhide bag, as though he didn't want to let me have them, and I had to think of Mrs. Jimmy while I took them from him. It didn't seem quite fair of Jimmy, because they haven't much use for silver in the country the long trail leads to."

Seaforth glanced down into the great hollow that fell away beneath them, and up at the glittering snow. "You were alone, I think?"

"I was," said Alton grimly. "And most half-frozen. It was that cold there was ice in the big rapid, and I hadn't had much to eat for several days."

Seaforth shivered again, as he pictured that strange encounter between the dead and the living. Jimmy the prospector, having taken his secret with him to a region where silver is valueless, had sat within a few paces from where he stood with his fingers clenched upon the bag, and an awful disregard of the rights of the woman he had left behind in his frozen face. Seaforth could also picture his comrade stooping over him with averted eyes, but swift, resolute movements, for when there was work to be done Alton of Somasco was not the man to turn aside.

“It must have been a trifle horrible,” he said.

Alton’s eyes closed a little. “It wasn’t nice. Still, there was Mrs. Jimmy working down at the store, and that secret belonged to her.”

He stopped abruptly with a little gesture as of one shaking off a painful memory, and looked down across the climbing pines to the lake in the hollow behind them. It still shone steelily, and apparently not very far away, though it had cost the men strenuous toil all day to traverse the distance that divided them from it. Seaforth, who watched him, noticed something unusual in his attitude, for his comrade stood very still with eyes that never for a moment wavered from one point in the valley.

“Do you see anything down there?” he said.

“Yes,” said Alton grimly. “I see smoke.”

“There is nothing astonishing in that,” said Seaforth. “I damped down the bark well, and raked up the soil to shut off the draught. There was a big pile of wet green twigs, Harry.”

Alton smiled curiously. “You made one fire?”

“Yes,” said Seaforth, wondering. “We don’t usually make two.”

His sight was not equal to his comrade’s, but he could see a smear of blue vapour curl athwart the pines, for he had banked the fire with wet fuel, so that it should smoke all day in case Tom of Okanagan had overtaken the horse and was following their trail.

“Well,” said Alton dryly, “there is another one.”

Seaforth swept his gaze twice across the valley before he saw anything beyond the crowded pines, and then for a moment he caught sight of a second faint streak athwart their sombreness. It was a mere film that vanished and rose again, illusory and almost imperceptible, but for some reason it troubled him.

“It might be Tom,” he said.

Alton laughed in a curious fashion. “I don’t think it is. One fire would be enough for Tom to make his supper with, and that one’s nearer us.”

“But,” said Seaforth, “I can scarcely see the smoke.”

Alton raised one hand impatiently. “No,” he said. “Whoever made that fire didn’t want you to, and there’s no need to make much smoke if you keep clear of sap and twigs.”

Seaforth’s face grew grave. “Is there any reason why you can’t tell me a little more? If the man would sooner we did not see it, what did he make the fire for?”

Alton smiled grimly. “I don’t know any more, but a man must eat,” he said. “In the meanwhile it seems to me that fellow understands his business, and I’ve a kind of notion we shall hear from him or see him presently.”

Seaforth glanced back along the blue-grey trail that led towards the bare hill shoulder, which rose a mere ridge of the great mountain side that swept round the hollow.

“There is no controverting that, and he needn’t have much difficulty in finding us if he wants to. Is there anything to be done?” he said.

“No,” said Alton dryly. “If there was, I’d sit down here and wait for him, but there’s nothing to stop a free miner prospecting round where it suits him in this country.”

CHAPTER XVII
ALONE

The frost held for two days, and the men made small progress through the dusty snow. On the third it grew softer as they floundered wearily down into a valley, and Seaforth was aching in every limb when at last they halted at the edge of a river. Not far below them it plunged frothing into a gloomy canon, and the roar of its turmoil came out of the thin white vapour which curled through the stupendous portals of stream-worn stone. Seaforth felt moist and generally uncomfortable, as well as weary, for it was humid and a trifle warmer now, while his long boots were soaked, and at every step he dragged after him a clogging weight of snow. He leaned against a cedar, glad to rest a while, and glanced inquiringly at his comrade.

Alton, however, showed no sign of fatigue. He stood with the half-melted snow he had fallen in clinging about his deerskin jacket and trickling slowly down his tattered leggings, the bridle of the worn-out horse in his hand and a slight perplexity in his eyes.

"Now, I wonder if that will make a road to the south," he said reflectively, pointing to the canon.

"I don't know," said Seaforth dryly. "So far as my opinion goes, I scarcely think it will; but isn't that a little outside the question? Just now a road to the north would be more to the purpose."

"Well," said Alton, "a few sticks of giant powder here and there would make a difference, and one could do a good deal with a few score of men used to the pick and drill."

"It would also," said Seaforth, "take a good many dollars to pay them."

Alton laughed as he turned, and pointed upstream, Darkness was not far away, and the river came down deep and slow out of the dimness. Dark pines rolled up the hillsides that shut it in, and wisps of grey vapour drifted about them.

"There are," he said, "dollars enough to build a road right down to Vancouver in those hills, and by and by one of two men will have his hands on them."

"Isn't that a somewhat curious way of putting it?" said his companion.

"Well," said Alton, "there is as usual a reason. Whichever of those men comes out on top will not have much use for the other fellow. In the meanwhile we'll be getting on. There's a canoe under the big boulders yonder, and the island should make the horse a corral."

Seaforth said nothing, though he thought a good deal. He guessed that one of the men alluded to was his comrade and the other Hallam, and there was a grim

suggestiveness in the former's simple explanation, for it seemed that Alton understood quarter would not be given in the struggle he had embarked upon. There was also something disconcerting in the fact that they found the canoe where he indicated. That it had lain there since Jimmy the prospector, who lay sleeping on the heights above them, had last used it emphasized the desolation of the region they were pushing their way into, and Seaforth once more felt a curious depression as he glanced up the lonely valley. It stretched away before them, a road to the unknown, and he fancied that a future which was fraught with great and perilous possibilities lay hidden beyond the drifting mist.

They had, it seemed, set out upon a journey which led farther than the silver Jimmy had found, but knowing that his comrade would go on to the end of it, Seaforth shook off his misgivings, and assisted him to load and launch the craft. They made fast the pack-horse by a halter, and in ten minutes had landed the beast upon an island. Then, somewhat to Seaforth's regret, they took up the paddles and went on again. Alton smiled curiously as he glanced towards the firs that slid by them half-seen through the mist.

"We're taking Jimmy's road. He was the last man to come down here, and I wonder what he was thinking about," he said. "There would have been an ice fringe along the bank, and Jimmy was hungry. I think he knew he wouldn't get through, and it was only because of the woman he held on so tight."

Seaforth shivered a little, as his fancy called up the scene. The starving man crouching half-frozen with the paddle clenched in stiffened fingers had watched those trees slide by him, knowing that on their speed depended his fast-failing chance of life. He had, Seaforth fancied, stared at the crawling boulders with despair in his dimming eyes, and the weary man turned towards his comrade almost savagely.

"Can't you think of anything a little more pleasant?" he said.

Alton smiled gravely. "It comes to all of us one day, and the trail of the treasure-seeker leads most often to the unknown hunting grounds," he said. "We have got to keep faith with Jimmy. He did his best, and I think he knew I would come up here after him."

Seaforth said nothing further, but bent over his paddle, until an hour later they landed on a point and set up the tent. Neither was communicative over the supper, and Seaforth went early to sleep. The last thing he saw was Alton sitting, a black motionless figure, apparently staring into the darkness from the door of the tent, with his face towards the north.

It was raining when he awakened next morning. The tent was saturated, the fire ill to light, and that day was spent in unremitting toil. The stream ran strong against them, and Seaforth's wet hands grew blistered from the grasp of the paddle and his knees raw from the rasp of the craft's bottom as he swung with the weary blade. Hour by hour the rain beat on them, and the pines that crawled out of

it went very slowly by, while it was almost a relief to stand upright now and then, and with strenuous effort drive the frail shell up against the swirl of the slower rapids with long fir poles. At times they were swept down sideways before the poles could find hold again, and fought, gasping and panting, for minutes to regain what they had lost in as many seconds.

Now and then it was also needful to drag the canoe out, flounder amidst boulders or through tangled forest with her contents, and then, hewing a path here and there with the axe, painfully drag her round; but portage after portage was left behind, and they were still fighting their way yard by yard upstream while the rain came down. Seaforth also knew that it often rains for several weeks in that country when the Chinook wind that melts the snow sets in.

Darkness was closing down when at last they drew the canoe out upon a shelving bank and dragged themselves ashore. Seaforth was too chilled and wet to sleep, and his eyes had scarcely closed when Alton shook him, and he rose up, shivering, and stiff in every joint, to commence the task again. It was fortunately easier that day, for the river spread out into a narrow winding lake, and there was less current against them. Still the rain did not abate, and the afternoon was not quite spent when Alton pointed to a little cove.

"We haven't made much to-day, but unless you're anxious to go on that would make a good camping-place," he said deprecatingly. "Now there was a time when I wouldn't have thought of stopping yet, but I guess too much good living has taken a little of the stiffening out of me."

Seaforth slowly unclenched one hand from the red-smeared paddle-haft, and glanced at it. "If you feel diffident, don't worry about me," he said. "Eight hours' hard labour while you're wet through is, in my opinion, quite enough for anybody."

Alton ran the canoe in, and Seaforth staggered a little when he walked ashore. The water was draining from him, and it was several minutes before he could straighten himself. There were pools amidst the boulders, and when they had splashed through these to the edge of the forest, fallen needles and withered fern were spongy, while the dark branches shook down water on them as they swung to the chilly blast. Seaforth groaned now and then as he struggled with the tent, while Alton tramped into the forest with the axe, but he came back presently with an armful of resinous chips, and his comrade's spirits rose a trifle when a crackling fire flung its red flicker through the creeping shadows. It hissed as the gusts lashed it with the rain, but the blackened and dinted kettle boiled, and while they ate and drank the smoke-flavoured tea, a little warmth crept with the pungent vapour into the tent.

The bush was dim and shadowy before the meal was finished, but Alton flung fresh branches on the fire, and the blaze that whirled aloft rent a track of radiance through the rain, and called up the vague outlines of the columnar trunks. Then he

stretched himself out upon an armful of dripping twigs, and his garments steamed about him as he lighted an old blackened pipe. Seaforth lay amidst the packages, feeling blissfully drowsy as the warmth crept slowly into his aching limbs. Overhead the pine branches, wailed in wild harmonies, and the showers they shook down beat upon the tent.

"It seems to me this journey might have begun better," said Alton presently.

Seaforth nodded full concurrence. "It would be a little difficult to imagine it commencing very much worse. Wouldn't it have been wiser if you had waited a little longer, Harry?"

Alton seemed to notice something unusual in his companion's inflection. "You will have to talk straighter, Charley," he said.

Seaforth, who saw the glint in his eyes, laughed. "I merely meant that spring is coming, and it would be a trifle warmer then. I'm inclined to be a little cantankerous to-night, but, of course, it is not my business how long you stayed at the ranch."

"No," said Alton dryly, "I don't think it is. Spring would have been nicer, but, you see, Hallam was crowding me. Did anything else strike you, Charley?"

"Nothing of much importance," said Seaforth, smiling. "Only that while we lie shivering here Hallam is probably dining in state in the big hotel at Vancouver. Jingling glasses, good wine, light and warmth, flowers and silver on the table. The contrast's a little exasperating."

Alton glanced at the saturated canvas and his steaming clothes, while Seaforth, for no apparent reason, stretched out one foot and kicked over the dinted kettle.

"There are folks who would think that's only fit," he said. "Mr. Hallam is one of the men who are building up the future greatness of this wonderful country. At least, that's what they called him at the last big speech-making, but I don't quite see what good it would do us if you kicked the bottom of that kettle in, Charley. Now it's curious how a thing that's once started goes on. Jimmy took a notion that there was silver here, and that drew me in as well as Mrs. Jimmy. Then you came along, and presently it got hold of Hallam. The Somasco Consolidated has got drawn in, too—now there are you and I, with only the Almighty knows how much upon our shoulders, up here in the rain and snow."

Seaforth glanced at his comrade reflectively as he said, "I was wondering if there was anybody else."

Alton's face grew suddenly impassive. "Oh, yes," he said. "There's another man I don't know, the one who lighted the fire. He's back there somewhere."

Seaforth said nothing for a minute or two, but as he glanced about him the shadows seemed to grow darker beyond the flickering radiance of the fire, and the roar of wind in the branches angrier. He had been a prey to half-formed suspicions of late, and there was something sinister in the thought of that man who followed them.

“Harry,” he said presently, “you have got most of the things you wanted so far?”

“Yes,” said Alton quietly. “It wasn’t always easy, and they didn’t come to me, but I knew what I wanted, and I usually got it.”

Seaforth made a sign of comprehension. “Did it ever occur to you that you had probably as much already as is good for you?”

Alton glanced at him with half-closed eyes. “A little plainer, Charley.”

“You have Somasco, the liking of all the ranchers down the valley, the timber rights and mill. You have also Carnaby, and most folks would think you a fortunate man. Now the man who wants too much is occasionally sorry when he gets it.”

Alton’s eyes glinted. “I have a partner, too, who doesn’t know where to stop,” he said.

Seaforth met his comrade’s gaze steadily. “This,” he said reflectively, “is a good country. In fact I don’t know a better one for the man who wants to live as he was meant to in the wind and sun, watching what he has worked for slowly grow. Is it a little thing, Harry, to see the oats and timothy where the forest had been, to clear a new way for the river with giant powder, and hear the big wheels humming where there was only a frothing rapid? Orchards, barns, and homestead built by your own labour, horses and herds of cattle all your own, and by and by the railroad coming through to bring you the long dreamed of prosperity. It’s alluring, Harry?”

The glint was a trifle plainer in Alton’s eyes, and his lean fingers were closed together. “I don’t quite see where that trail leads to,” he said quietly.

Seaforth laughed a little. “It is good to rise when the sun is creeping above the firs and plunge down into an ice-cold pool. Better still to lie on the verandah, tired in body, tranquil in mind, when the snows are fading and your work is done, knowing that every redwood hewn and new plough-furrow driven has been so much added to the prosperity of this province and the Dominion. It isn’t a bad life—this one you were meant for, Harry.”

“No,” said Alton slowly. “There are times when I’m a very thankful man.”

“Well, there is another one, and I have seen very tired men playing at being amused by the trifles that sickened them. They had, however, kept up the game so long that the manhood they were once proud of was only a memory. There are a good many of them in the old country, and some of them have sacrificed all they had for the one thing that wasn’t good for them. It was too late when they found it out, Harry.”

Alton’s face was grim. “It would,” he said, “be a pity if you and I fell out, Charley.”

Seaforth laughed in a curious fashion. “It would, but I scarcely think we shall. You and I are partners, and a little more, and I will keep silent now I have

spoken."

Alton said nothing, but sat smoking and staring at the fire, until Seaforth rolled himself in his damp blankets and sank into not altogether refreshing sleep. A misty light was creeping into the tent when he was awakened by the thudding of his companion's axe, and rising stiffly with the ache at the hip-joint which every bushman knows, went out shivering.

"Coffee!" said Alton. "I left it in the deerhide bag in the canoe."

Seaforth's limbs were too stiff to be much use to him yet, and he blundered amidst the boulders, falling over one or two, before he reached the shingle where they had partly drawn out the canoe. Then he stood still, staring about him, and saw only the green-tinted water sliding by under the uncertain light, and the pines on the other side growing a trifle plainer through the mist. Turning, he hastened along the shingle until a shelf of rock shut it in, and then back to the tent again. Alton laid down the axe, for there was something in his comrade's face that troubled him.

"Have you got it?" he asked.

"No," said Seaforth very quietly. "You told me the bag was in the canoe."

"Of course," said Alton. "Well, wasn't it there?"

"I don't know," said Seaforth. "I couldn't find the canoe."

Alton said nothing further, but stumbled in haste towards the river. Seaforth followed him more slowly, and Alton stood very still when he found nothing but boulders and shingle. Then he stooped and bent over a little depression in the pebbles, and when he rose again his face was impassive.

"The water has risen since last night, but I'm not sure that accounts for it," he said. "The bank slopes a little, but we pulled most of her out."

"I think we pulled the whole of her clear," said Seaforth quietly.

Alton stood silent for almost a minute with his right hand clenched. Then he said slowly, "You'll have to go down and look for her while I push on, Charley."

Seaforth was about to speak, but he saw his comrade's eyes and did not express himself as he had meant to. "Yes," he said. "I don't know that I shall find her."

The two men looked at each other, until Alton moved his head. "Still, one of us must try," he said. "Take all you can carry, and a rifle. I'll load up as much as I'm fit for, and we'll cache the rest. You'll come on after me, or join Tom, as you think best."

Seaforth smiled a little. "I'll come on, and even if I sacrifice something else I'll take the rifle."

Alton said nothing, and for an hour they were busy about the camp. Then as they stood a moment, loaded like beasts of burden, under the dripping pines, Seaforth held out his hand.

"Harry, are you wise?" he said.

“I don’t know,” said Alton simply; “but I’m going on.”

It was noticeable that they shook hands, which they were not in the habit of doing, and that there was a very faint but perceptible tremor in Seaforth’s voice.

“Good-bye,” he said.

“Well,” said Alton with a smile, which seemed to lack heartiness. “I wouldn’t put it that way.”

He swung forward with his face towards the north, but the smile faded and his fingers closed on the rifle when he heard Seaforth struggling southwards through the bush.

“Two of them gone now,” he said. “I wonder if that is what the other fellow wanted.”

CHAPTER XVIII
IN THE WILDERNESS

Dusk was closing down on the valley, and the rain had ceased, when Alton unstrapped his load, and stood with aching shoulders amidst the dripping pines. He could hear the rattle of the twigs that met and brushed through the shrill wailing of the wind about the sombre spires that pierced the growing darkness far above him, and the harmonic murmuring that rose and fell in cadence along the dim, vaulted roof. There was, however, nothing else beyond the growl of a rapid somewhere up the valley, and stretching out his arms wearily, he stooped with a little smile that was grim rather than mirthful and caught up the axe.

Now one can usually hear the thudding of the axe a mile or more in the stillness of the woods that is not silence to the bushman's ear. Their voice is always musical, and the sounds that man makes jar through its harmonies, but only a forest rancher or free prospector would have caught the muffled sound, that was lost in the song of the pines a few score yards from Alton's camp. He knew where to find the resinous knots with their sticky exudations, and was a master of the axe, while it was noticeable that when the fire commenced to crackle he stood still and listened again before he went down to the river with the kettle. Nor did he at once return into the light, but slipped for a moment behind a wide-girthed trunk. It was only a deer he heard moving along the hillside above him, and there was nothing visible but the row of stupendous columns that appeared and vanished as the red light rose and sank. Alton set the kettle down amidst the flame, and unrolling one of the packages laid out his supper.

It was prepared and eaten in twenty minutes, and refilling the kettle for breakfast he lay smoking in a hollow between the great roots which crawled away from a cedar-trunk. Nothing moved in the bush now but a bear that was grubbing amidst the wild cabbage in a swamp, and the weary man, stretching out his hand instinctively to touch the rifle that lay within his reach, gave himself up to thought. He had also much to occupy him, and being a somewhat systematic person he proceeded to consider the questions that demanded an answer in what appeared to him their order of importance. It was characteristic that in face of recent events he placed the probable whereabouts of the silver first.

This was at the first glance a somewhat difficult problem. In front of him lay the wilderness, a trackless chaos of forest and rock and snow wherein he had to find the scar made by a stick of giant powder or the scratching of the shovel. There were, however, points to guide the searcher, and Alton could deduce a good deal from each of them. Jimmy the prospector had, it was evident, perished of

hunger and exhaustion, for Alton had traced the last stages of his journey backwards through the snow, and the grim story of human endurance and anguish was plainly legible. Here Jimmy had fallen, there lain still, and then dragged himself forward before he rose again, while the uneven footsteps had borne their own testimony. Also the bag of specimens was heavy, and Alton decided that for a man in the last stages of exhaustion, the river had furnished the only road. The silver was therefore somewhere up the Valley, and as it was winter when Jimmy found it, it would lie low down where the snow was cut off by the pines. Alton lay still a minute with a curious glint in his eyes when the firelight touched them which was a tribute to the dead man, and then filled his pipe again.

His journey had been marked by petty misfortunes, each of which might become a more serious one, hitherto, and he was now alone. This might be due to coincidence, but Alton, admitting that hypothesis, proceeded to consider an alternative one which resolved itself into two. It was generally known in Somasco that he and Jimmy had held the clue to a secret that might be valuable, and strange prospectors for timber rights and minerals occasionally strayed into the valley. Alton knew that most of the bushmen and free prospectors had a standard of honour which was somewhat higher than that usually lived up to in the cities. They were quiet, fearless, free-handed men, the antitype of the roystering desperadoes he had now and then seen them depicted as by those who did not know them. There were, he, however, knew, among them a few who it was probable had their own reasons for vacating the great Republic, and these were men of distinctly different calibre. One or more of them, it seemed, might have heard of his aspirations and be following him. If so, it was evident that he would be in security until he found the silver. Then the peril would begin.

This led to the second issue. Alton was quite aware that he had an enemy whom he had got the better of on several occasions hitherto. Partly because devious finesse is not always superior to shrewd sense and fearless honesty, he had as yet held his own against Hallam of the Tyee. Both knew that a time of prosperity was approaching for Somasco, and had decided more or less correctly that it would lead to affluence the man who had control of the valley; but while Alton had striven with arduous toil to bring about this consummation, Hallam of the Tyee was waiting while those he meant to plunder worked for him. It was also plain that there was no room for two leaders with divergent aspirations, and the rancher had seen sufficient of his opponent’s dealings to recognize that he would not scruple about any measures which promised to rid him of a rival. Therefore it became him to be careful, and once more his fingers fell upon the rifle.

Alton had reached the limit of his surmises, and refilling his pipe again abandoned himself to more pleasant dreams. He heard the whistle of the locomotive ringing among the pines, and the hum of the great mills that would grind out wealth for Somasco. Then while the pungent smoke curled about him

visions materialized out of its filmy wreaths, and he saw the lake at Carnaby shining amidst the woodlands of peaceful England, and the old grey hall. In place of the sting of the resin he could smell the English roses, and when the next acrid wisp slid past him it seemed to change its form, and there grew out of it the gracious, alluring shape of a woman. Costly fabrics floated about her, there was a flash of diamonds in the red-gold hair, a face that lost its patrician serenity as it smiled, and for a setting the glitter of light and silver in the great hall at Carnaby. Alton, whose eyes were growing dim, stretched out his arms towards the darkness, and a chilling gust swept the smoke aside, while great drops of water fell splashing upon him. He was back once more in the wilderness, a wet and very weary man, with thorn-rents in his deerskin jacket and the mire clinging about him, but he smiled as he rose stiffly and stretched his aching limbs.

"I figure there's a good deal to be done before that time comes, and some of it can't wait after sun up," he said.

Then, having left the tent behind, he carried his blankets away from the fire, and rolled himself up in them between two great fir-roots that afforded concealment as well as shelter. Though he had strewn them about the blaze the blankets were still clammy, but he drew the damp folds about him uncomplainingly, and lay down with the rifle at his side. Ten minutes passed. The fire snapped and crackled, the growl of the rapid rose and fell fitfully, but the worn-out man heard neither, for he was sleeping heavily.

There are many like him who dream great dreams scattered across the new lands by the Pacific from the snow of the Yukon to Mexico, but their visions are sacred and not expressed in speech, while a smile which is half ironical flickers in the steadfast eyes when they hear them caricatured by the platform Imperialist. Their words are scanty, but their handiwork is plain; the gap hewn in the virgin forest, bridge flung over frothing river, and the raw rent of the giant powder amidst the lonely hills. It is crude and unsightly often, the creosote-reeking railroad track, and the ugly humming mills, but it means food for the toilers, good wages and trade, and in place of a pleasance for the rich to seek diversion in, a new and rich dominion won, not for England, or the Republic, alone, but for humanity.

He started with the sunrise, the pack-straps galling his shoulders, his feet bleeding in the saturated boots, clammy blankets, flour-bag, and pork upon his aching back, kettle, frypan, and rifle rattling about him, and for the first hour every stride that led him farther into the wilderness was made with pain and difficulty. Still, he made it cheerfully, for Alton had long borne the burden that was laid on Adam uncomplainingly, while his rival, sitting beyond the reach of hardship in his Vancouver office, plotted, and filched the fruits of others' toil. It was also an apparently unequal conflict they had been drawn into, subtlety pitted against sturdiness, the elusive, foining rapier against the bushman's axe, but there

are moments in all struggles when finesse does not avail, and it is by raw, unreasoning valour a man must stand or fall, while at times like these the ponderous blade is the equal of the slender streak of steel.

It was two days later when Alton, who may have made ten miles in the time, noticed something unusual on the opposite hillside. A snowslide had come down that way, and its path was marked by willows and smaller trees. Alton, of course, knew that the hollow they sprang from had been scored out deep by countless tons of debris and snow, and that prospector Jimmy would scarcely have passed the place. It also seemed to him that there was a gap in the slighter band of forest which ran straight towards the snowline up the face of the hill that suggested the work of man, and his pace quickened a trifle as he pressed forward towards the river. There he stopped for several minutes, gazing about him.

The flood came down before him stained green with the clay that underlies the glaciers, and swollen by rain and snow. There was a big pool above him, lake-like and still, but it was too wide for any weary and shivering man to swim, and the wild, white rush of a rapid close below. Alton glanced at both of them and a cluster of smaller trees across the river, and smiled somewhat grimly.

"Now I wonder," he said, "why the thing one wants the most is always on the other side."

The firs behind him were great of girth, the smallest some distance from the bank, and he was weary; but loosing the straps about him, he dropped his burdens and fell to with the axe. It was an hour before the tree went down, and at least another had passed before he had hewn off a portion. Then very slowly and painfully he rolled it to the river with skids and levers cut in the bush. He was breathless, and the perspiration dripped from him when at last it slid into the water and he seated himself astride, with his possessions on the wet bark in front of him. The device was a very old one, but there is a difficulty attached to the putting it in execution, for it is needful to lean out a little while using the propelling pole, and a log is addicted to rolling round when anything disturbs its equilibrium.

Alton, of course, knew this, but when still some distance from the opposite side, had apparently to choose between a somewhat perilous effort and an unwished-for descent of the rapid. He glanced at its foaming rush a moment, and then decided upon the former. Several times he dipped the pole and won a yard with the strenuous thrust, and then what he partly expected happened. The bark seemed to be slipping away beneath him, and, as throwing himself forward upon his belongings he flung an arm about it, the log rolled slowly, and there was a splash in the water. He had restored the equilibrium, but one blanket and the flour-bag were in the river. In another few minutes he waded ashore, and drew the butt of the log out upon the shingle before he turned to glance ruefully at the sliding water.

"If I went back and plunged for it I might get that flour," he said. "Still, I

should have to go down the rapid with it, and I mightn't want it then."

Dripping from the waist with snow water, he reslung his traps, glanced back at the sombre bush behind him and then plunged into that ahead, while the dusk was closing in when he stood panting amidst the stumps of smaller trees. The mark of the axe was on them, and somebody had piled up a mound of rock and stones. Alton drew in a long breath and shook off his burden.

"Jimmy's claim," he said. "It may mean—most anything—to me."

Then, though his pulses throbbed, and he could feel his blood tingling, he fell to work systematically, groping about the excavation the dead man had made where the snowslide had rent apart the forest and scored out the rock for him. Here and there he smashed a fragment of it with the back of the axe, or picked up a discoloured stone of unusual gravity and compared it with the pieces he took out of a little bag, until at last he stood up stiffly and flung his head back.

All round him the forest rose dim and sombre, flinging back the roar of the rapid in long pulsations of sound, and its solitude was not lessened by the presence of the wet and weary man standing so still that his outline was scarcely perceptible against the trunks behind him. Save for the light of triumph in his eyes there was nothing in the whole scene to uplift the fancy. The man's garments were tattered, the river had not washed the mire from him, and one of his boots was gaping, but the discovery he had made was fraught with great possibilities for that lonely valley, and changes in the destinies of many other men. It had lain wrapped in stillness, a sanctuary for the beasts of the forest, countless ages since the world was young, being made ready slowly by frost and sun, and now man had come.

For five long minutes Alton looked into the future, and once more the fragrance of English roses seemed to steal faintly through the resinous odours of the firs. Then he shook himself, and glanced again dubiously at the river.

"And now," he said half aloud, "I'll get supper. It's a pity about that flour."

As those who have sojourned in the bush of that country know, one can sup on reasty pork and green tea alone, when it is impossible to get anything better, but there are more appetizing compounds, and when the edge of his appetite had been blunted, Alton stopped with greasy fingers in the frypan and a little smile upon his face.

"And Somasco's mine, and Carnaby—when I ask for it, with all that lies beneath me here," he said, and sat very still a space, with eyes that had lost their keenness fixed upon the bush. He did not see the big balsam in front of him nor the dusky firs, for it was once more the picture of a woman with red-gold hair standing in an English rose garden his fancy painted him.

Then he rose abruptly, and the smile faded, while his face grew grim again. "In the meanwhile I figure there's a good deal to do," he said.

He commenced it by picking the remnants of the pork out of the frying-pan, and when he had replaced them carefully in the bag, he filled the former with

water and set it on the fire. That done, he proceeded to hew four square pegs, and spent some little time cutting, “One Discovery,” upon the largest of them. Then with a compass in his palm he strode with even paces up the slope of the hill, and drove one of the pegs in, turned sharply, and floundered into the bush, where he hammered down a second, and came back along the river until he had paced off and marked down an oblong.

“Now I’ll put in the first shot,” he said.

He toiled assiduously with the axehead and a little drill, bruising his fingers as the light grew dim, and when his left hand was smeared with blood, drew out a plastic yellow roll from one of his bundles. This he gently rammed into the hole, squeezed down a copper cap upon a strip of fuse, and, lighting the latter, retired expeditiously towards the river. Standing behind a big cedar, he watched the train of blue vapour and thin red sparks creep on through the dusk until a blaze of yellow flame leapt up, and a stunning detonation rolled across the woods. The hillsides took up the sound, and flung it from one to another in great reverberations, while the pines, quivering in all their sprays, shook drops of water down. Alton stood still and listened, silent and intent, while the discord died, until there was once more stillness again, realizing dimly a little of its significance.

It was man’s challenge to the wilderness that had lain sterile long, and he could forecast the grimness, but not the end of the coming struggle with rock and flood and snow. Other men had gone down vanquished in such a fight, he knew, and the forest they slept in had closed once more upon and hidden the little scars they made. Jimmy had also challenged savage nature, and Jimmy was dead, while the man who came after him stood alone, dripping still, and weary, amidst the whispering pines: he had more than the wilderness against him. Alton turned with a little shiver, strode back to the fire, unrolled a piece of pork, a packet of green tea, and a little bag of sugar from a strip of hide. The piece of pork was very small, and a good deal of it apparently bad. Then he laughed curiously.

“It seems to me that the sooner I can get south and put in my record the less hungry I’m likely to be,” he said. “It would be kind of convenient if I could find a deer. I wonder just how far back the other man is?”

CHAPTER XIX
FOUL PLAY

Alton looked for a deer on the morrow and during several days that followed without finding it. There are tracts of the mountain province which for no apparent reason are almost devoid of animal life, while the deer are also addicted to travelling south towards valleys swept by the warm Chinook wind before the approach of winter. Meanwhile, though he husbanded it, the piece of pork grew rapidly smaller, and Alton hungry, while there were times when he wondered somewhat anxiously when he would find his comrades. It was unpleasantly possible that he might miss them, which would have been especially unfortunate, because, as every adult citizen is entitled to claim so many feet of frontage on unrecorded mineral land which pertains to the Crown, it appeared advisable that they should have the opportunity of staking off two more claims, and his provisions were almost exhausted.

Thus it came about that one evening he tramped somewhat dejectedly back towards his camp through a strip of thinner forest high up on the hill. There was a sting of frost in the air and a little snow beneath his feet, while his belt was girded about him tightly and his fingers stiffened on the rifle-barrel. Alton had eaten nothing since early morning, and very little then, while the fashion in which he stumbled through the thickets and amidst the fern conveyed a hint of exhaustion. It was, however, fortunate that a twig snapped noisily beneath him, because the deer are difficult to see in their sylvan home, and the sound was answered by a crackle that roused him to eager attention.

Alton, knowing there was a big fir behind him, stood very still, glancing about him without a movement of his head, until he made out what might have been a forked twig rising above the thicket. He did not, however, think it was, and gazing more intently fancied he saw a patch of something that was not the fern. He knew that at the first movement it would be gone, and there was no time for any fine alignment of the sights of the rifle, so leaning slightly forward he drew his right foot back, and with eyes fixed steadily on the little patch amidst the fern, trusted to them and the balance as he flung the long barrel up. Few men can use the rifle as the Canadian bush rancher can, and there was a flash from the muzzle as the heelplate touched his shoulder. Alton had not glanced along the barrel, but the curious thud which he heard in place of the explosion told him that the heavy bullet was smashing through bone and muscle. Then thin smoke drifted into his eyes, and there was a crackling amidst the thicket.

When he floundered forward the deer had gone, but something was smashing

through the undergrowth up the face of the hill, and the weary man prepared for a grim effort as he saw the red trail it left behind. He fell headlong in a thicket where the splashes were warm upon the withered leaves, staggered up again, and presently reeled against a cedar on the crest of a depression. There was nothing visible, but he could hear a confused rattle and snapping of twigs, and shook himself as he remembered the speed with which even a badly-wounded deer can make downhill. He had his choice of a long and possibly fruitless chase or another supperless night that would be followed by a very scanty breakfast on the morrow. Alton did not care to anticipate what might happen after that, because he had discovered on previous occasions that green tea will not unassisted sustain vigorous animation very long.

In place of it he went downhill, falling into bushes, floundering to the shoulders through withered fern, and now and then stumbling over rotting trees, but the splashes grew closer, and he fancied the sound before him a little nearer. It was significant that there was any sound at all, because a deer usually clears every obstacle in its almost silent flight, and the gasping man took heart again. The quarry's strength was evidently failing as its life drained away, but darkness was also close at hand, and Alton knew that he could not hold out very long. Already there was a horrible pain in his left side and his sight was growing dim.

He went on, stumbling, gasping, falling now and then, for any man not accustomed to the bush in that country would find it sufficiently difficult to walk through, until once more a grey patch of something showed up in a thicket. Again the rifle flashed, a dim shape reeled out of the bushes, and, while the man savagely smashed through those it had quitted, plunged into another thicket. Alton, who did not see it come out again, also went in headlong, tripped, and fell upon something with life in it that struggled spasmodically beneath him. There was no room to use his rifle, for he and the deer were rolling amidst the fern together, and while he felt for its throat the long knife came out. Twice it sank harmlessly amidst the snow and leaves, and then there was a gurgle, and the man rose stiffly to his feet, with dripping hands and something smoking on the sleeve of his jacket. He glanced at it without disgust, and then down at the limp shape, which now lay very still, almost compassionately.

"Well," he said simply, "it was you or me, and the wolves would have had you, anyway."

He was busy amidst the bushes for some time, and the light had gone when he stood up with the deer upon his shoulders and the rifle beneath it. It would have pleased him better to carry the latter, but the bushman brings home a deer with its fore-legs drawn over his shoulders and grasped in front of him. Alton jerked it into the most convenient position, and then stopped a moment, panting, and glanced about him. His burden was not especially heavy, but he was weary and his camp was far away, while, though a half-moon was now growing into brilliancy above

the firs, it was dark below.

"I figure I'd not have to worry quite so much about my supper at Carnaby," he said, and laughed a little as he floundered stiffly up the hill.

It was at least an hour later, and he was limping on, encouraging himself with the expectation of resting in warm repletion beside the snapping fire, when he entered a denser growth of timber. Alton had like most of his kind been taught by necessity to hold the weaknesses of his body in subjection, but he was a man with the instincts of his fellows, and the thought of the steaming kettle, smell of roasting meat, glare of flickering light, and snug blankets appealed to him, and just then he would not have bartered the blackened can of smoke-tasted tea for all the plate and glass of Carnaby. His step grew a little steadier, and the sound of the river louder, until he stopped suddenly near a prostrate fir. There was a gap in the dusky vault above him through which the moon shone down and called up a sparkle from the thin scattering of snow. Beyond it the dark trunks stretched back, a stupendous colonnade, into the shadow again. There was nothing unusual in all this, but the man had seen something that made him check his breathing and set his lips. He knew he might be mistaken, but the glint he had caught for a moment suggested the barrel of a rifle.

He stood, as he realized instinctively, in the shadow with a great trunk behind him, and remained so, motionless, with his blood tingling, because the bushman knows the difficulty of catching the outline of anything that is still. Then there was a soft snapping, and the glint became visible, in another place, again, while Alton saw that he was not mistaken. He was also aware that the free prospector does not usually wait the approach of a stranger in silence with the rifle, and it flashed upon him that as the other man had moved there would in place of a shadowy trunk now be a patch of snow behind him. Alton regretted he had waited so long, and dropping the deer sprang backwards, feeling for the sling of his rifle.

He was, however, a second too late, for there was a thin red flash amidst the undergrowth, and he reeled with a stinging pain somewhere about his knee. It yielded and grew almost useless under him, and while his rifle fell with a rattle he lurched into a thicket of withered fern. For a moment he lay still, his face awry with pain, and groaned as he strove to draw his leg up beneath him. It felt numbed and powerless, and, desisting, he strove to collect his scattered wits, realizing that he had never needed them more than he did just then.

The rifle had fallen outside the thicket where the forest was more open and there was a sprinkling of snow, and Alton knew that an attempt to recover it would probably be fatal. He was equally convinced that the man who had shot him would not have come out on such an errand without his magazine full, or leave his task unfinished. There was in the meanwhile no sign of him beyond the smoke that hung about the bushes, and Alton turning over groaned again more loudly as he felt for his long-bladed knife. It was not done without a purpose, but he had

little difficulty in simulating a moan of pain, and when he heard a swish of leaves, lay flat, and dragged himself very softly farther into the fern.

The wet fronds brushed his face, and here and there his fingers sank into a patch of snow, but he found its chilly touch curiously pleasant, and once clawed up a handful and thrust it into his mouth. A numbness was creeping over him, his head felt curiously heavy, but he was scheming for his life with the instinctive cunning of a wounded beast rather than reason. There was now a sound behind him, but it was dulled by the roar of the river, which he realized would drown the faint rustle he made, and, when the fern grew scantier, dragged himself across an opening and crawled in amidst the raspberry briars on the other side.

The thorns scarred his face and ripped his hands, but he moved amidst them to clear space for his arms, and then lay still with the big knife beneath him. A shaft of moonlight shone down a few yards away, and he had no desire to betray his hiding-place by the glint of steel. It was also possible that he might have crawled away beyond the reach of discovery into the shadows, but that was not his intention, for, though he could never decide afterwards whether he acted from instinct or reasoned his course out, he was bent on waiting for, and not escaping from, his pursuer. Nor did he know how long he waited, but it seemed a very long while before he saw a shadowy object move round and afterwards into the opposite side of the thicket.

Then the man’s face became visible as he moved across the shaft of moonlight. It was set and grey, the mouth was awry, and there was fear in the staring eyes. It also seemed to Alton curiously familiar, but his brain was scarcely capable of receiving many diverse impressions just then, and he only realized that it was reluctantly and because his safety demanded it, the man was looking for him. Alton felt a little relief at that. He was growing colder, and there was a bewildering dimness in his eyes, but he stiffened the muscles of his arms and tightened his grasp on the knife, wondering if his strength would last until he had his hands upon his enemy.

The man swayed forward as he crossed the strip of moonlight with a little spring, then came on again with both hands on the rifle, waist-deep in the fern, glancing down momentarily at the trail his victim had made, and then about him again. Alton’s face was drawn up into a very grim smile as he lay amidst the raspberries watching him, for it was evident that the assassin fancied he had crawled straight on. The latter stopped once for several seconds, and Alton heard his heart thumping while the sound of the river seemed to grow bewildering. He stiffened his fingers upon the knife-haft savagely, for the horrible faintness he could not shake off was growing upon him.

Then with a little jerk of his shoulders the man who caught sight of the opening moved again, faster than he had done, and the watcher surmised that fear and savagery struggled for the mastery within him. The latter apparently rose

uppermost, for he came straight on through the thicket, sprang across the clear space, and would have plunged into the bush beyond it but that Alton, reaching out caught him by the ankle. Then he lurched forward with a hoarse cry, went down, and rolled over with Alton’s hand at his throat, and the blade of the knife driven through the inner side of the sleeve of his jacket.

That was the commencement of a very grim struggle. The stranger was wiry and vigorous, but the terrible hard fingers clung to his throat, and a leg was wound about him, while as he panted and smote he felt something was ripping his clothing. Instinctively he jammed the hand that held it down, rolled over on his antagonist, and then shook himself almost free again half-choked, as something that stung it sank into his shoulder. Next moment he smote fiercely at a dim white face, knowing that a bone had turned the blade, but that the result would have been different had it entered a few inches lower.

His fist came down smashing, but the terrible fingers were clinging still, and the man’s face was purple when they rolled together out of the briars and into the widening strip of radiance where the moon shone down. Alton’s hand was free now, and with arm bent between his enemy and the ground he thrust upwards with the last of his strength. There was a crash, the man writhed backwards, the rancher’s fingers slipped from their grasp, and a figure that rose partly upright reeled into the fern, while Alton felt the barrel of a rifle under him. He rolled on his side, and clawed for it, almost sightless, with one hand, and laughed harshly as he raised himself a trifle. There was a flash and a concussion, the trigger-guard sank into his nerveless finger, and a smashing amidst the undergrowth was followed by footsteps that were presently lost in the roar of the river.

Alton drew one knee under him, and listened until the sound grew altogether bewildering and the dim trunks reeled about him. Then he lurched over and lay where he fell, sensible only that it was bitterly cold. It was still night when he awakened from sleep or stupor, but the moon shone down and he saw that there was white frost on the fern. His hands were also stiffened, and there was a horrible ache in every limb, while he groaned as the cold struck through him. Twice he essayed to raise himself and fell back again, but at last by an effort crawled towards a tree and leaned his back against it while he stretched out one numbed and useless limb into the silver light. The long boots were curiously smeared, the overalls above them stiffened and crusted, while following the movement he made there was a swift spreading of the stain.

Alton shivered and set his lips as he groped for his handkerchief, then groaning the while dragged at it until it was knotted above his knee. After that he laid his finger on the overalls and saw that the stain spread past it more slowly. Then he felt for the matches in one pocket, and finding them, turned over cautiously and dragged himself towards a fallen fir. He knew where to find the resin, and tore at the smaller branches fiercely, flung them together, and striking a match, watched the flame that spread from splinter to splinter and crawled amidst the twigs. At last it sprang aloft in a great crackling blaze, and Alton swayed unevenly and fell over on his side again. After that he remembered nothing until

he saw that the sun was in the sky, and dragged himself to the thicket for an armful of frosted fern. When he had piled it on the fire a gauzy blue column that rose straight between the firs replaced the flame, and the man who watched it vacantly for a while dragged himself back groaning for another armful of the fern.

He afterwards fancied that he spent most of the day crawling between the fire and the thicket, but was never very sure of anything he did just then. Nor did he feel hungry, though now and then he clawed up and sucked a handful of snow, but he remembered that he was lying in the smoke when the bush grew dimmer and the red blaze more brilliant as darkness crept down. Presently he fancied that something broke through the monotone of the river, and after listening to it vacantly groped for the rifle. He clutched it, and raising himself a trifle with difficulty, blinked at the darkness that hemmed in the fire until footsteps came out of it. They were not furtive, but apparently those of somebody coming straight towards the light in haste. Alton smiled curiously, and wriggled until he was out of the strongest light, and found support for the barrel of the rifle. Then a cry came out of the shadows, “Is it you, Harry?”

Alton did not answer, for his voice seemed to fail him, and he blinked at the man who bent over him.

“You have been a long while, Charley, and I came very near putting a bullet into you just now,” he said.

“Well,” said Seaforth, “I did my best, and Tom’s coming along behind me. What are you doing here anyway?”

Alton glanced at him bewilderedly. “I don’t quite know, but I got the deer. It’s somewhere around here,” said he.

Seaforth’s face grew suddenly grave as he stopped and shook his comrade, then let his hand drop as he saw a red trickle spreading across the crusted overalls.

“Good Lord! Are you hurt, Harry, and what’s all this?” he said.

Alton glanced up at him with dimming eyes. “The thing’s broken out again. I think it’s blood,” he said, and while his arm slipped from under him, slowly rolled over with his feet in the smoking fern.

CHAPTER XX
THE NICKED BULLET

The grey daylight was creeping into the little tent and Alton sleeping at last when Seaforth rose to his feet. His eyes were heavy with the long night's watch which had followed a twelve hours' march, and he shivered as he went out. The morning was bitterly cold, and a fire burned redly outside the tent, but there was no sign of Okanagan, who had joined him during the night, nor had any preparations for breakfast been made.

"Tom," he twice called softly, but only the moaning of the branches overhead answered him, and with a little gesture of impatience he strode into the bush.

Seaforth had no definite purpose, but he was glad to stretch his stiffened limbs, and instinctively turned towards the spot where he had found his comrade. As he approached it he stopped, and watched the dim moving object that caught his eyes with some bewilderment. Tom of Okanagan was kneeling beside a thicket with a stick in his hand, and apparently holding it carefully in line with a fir. After moving once or twice he drove it into the soil, and crawled on hands and knees into the fern so that Seaforth could only see his boots, and surmise by the rustling that he was groping amidst the withered fronds. Once he caught a muffled expletive, after which the rustling ceased awhile, but it commenced again, and Seaforth wondered the more when Okanagan crawled out of the opposite side of the thicket, and set up a second stick in line with the other. He had not the faintest notion of what his companion could be doing.

"Are you finding anything down there, Tom?" he said. Okanagan rose up with a little grim laugh. "Thorns," he said. "There's a condemned big one in my thumb."

Seaforth stared at him with a vague suspicion that the hardships of the forced march they had made had left their mark upon his comrade, though he had never noticed any signs of mental weakness in the big axeman before.

"Aren't there plenty to be picked up in this country without looking for them?" he said.

Okanagan glanced at him with a little twinkle which was not altogether mirthful in his eyes. "Oh, yes. More than I've any use for. You were trying to figure on what I was after? The thing's quite as easy as trailing a deer."

"I was," said Seaforth dryly, and Okanagan approaching him dropped a big hand upon his shoulder.

"Come right along, and I'll show you," said he.

Seaforth followed him, until he stopped by the fir he had worked his alignment

from, where he picked up a spent cartridge and pointed to a mark in the snow.

"Nothing particular about that, anyway, a forty-four Winchester," he said. "The fellow had long boots on with one heel down, and he stood right here waiting for Harry. Harry was coming along yonder with the deer, forty yards I make it, and he jumped when the fellow started shooting."

"You think he did?" said Seaforth, slightly bewildered, and Okanagan laughed.

"No, sir, I'm sure," he said. "I could show you where his heels went in if it would do you any good. Harry was coming along quick as he could, thinking about his supper, and the other fellow was crouching here, clawing his rifle and waiting until he came into the moonlight."

The blood surged into Seaforth's forehead, and he clenched one hand. "The condemned villain! It was devilish," he said.

Okanagan nodded gravely, and his rugged face was stern.

"Oh, yes, but, slinging names at him's not much use," he said. "Well, I feel it in me that we're going to see more of that man by and by, and that's just why I'm working up the whole thing from the beginning. Now I'll show you some more of it."

They floundered through one or two thickets until Okanagan stopped again, and pointed to the red smear upon the fern and withered pine-needles. "That's where Harry lay and waited for him," he said. "He was bleeding pretty bad, but he knew the other fellow meant to finish him."

"Waited for him when he was almost helpless and the man meant to murder him?" said Seaforth, with cold rage and horror in his face.

Okanagan laughed a little almost silent laugh that had a very grim undertone in it. "Yes, sir. That's just what he did. Don't you know Harry yet?" he said. "Still, he didn't figure that all the killing would be done by the other man. See here, this is where he gripped him, and tried to get the knife in. They fell over together there. Harry was played out and bleeding hard, or that man would never have got away when he once had his hands on him."

Seaforth stared at the rent-down undergrowth, and had no great difficulty in reconstructing the scene. Smashed fern and scattered leaves as well as the red smears on the snow bore plain testimony to the fierceness of that struggle, and he pictured his comrade grappling with his adversary while his strength flowed from him with that horrible red trickle. The light that came down between towering trunks showed that his face was grey and stern, and Okanagan, who looked at him, nodded as it were approvingly.

"I've seen enough," said the former. "If I can find that man he will not get away from me."

"Well," said Okanagan simply, "we're short of the bullet now, and I'll know better what to do with Harry when we find it. It's low down in one of those cedars

yonder."

"It will be deep in at that range," said Seaforth.

"No," said Okanagan quietly. "I don't think it will. It's pretty plain from the hole it made that it wasn't a common bullet, and I'm kind of anxious to know if all of it came out again."

Seaforth shivered a little as he assisted in the search, and his lips were set when Okanagan, digging something out of the cedar-bark with his knife, laid it in his palm. It was a little piece of blackened lead that was ragged in place of round, as though the soft metal had been rent open and bent backwards. Then the two men looked at each other, and the hot fury that for a moment flushed Seaforth to the temples, passed and left him with a curious vindictive coldness and a faint shrinking from the touch of the murderous lead. Okanagan's eyes were very steady, but there was a little glow down at the back of them.

"Nicked across with a hack saw or a file—and it's not all here," he said. "It strikes me the sooner we find the rest of it the better this weather."

Seaforth drew in his breath. A strip of lead torn off that bullet was rankling in his comrade's flesh, and during the night bitter frost had laid its grip upon the forest. Wounds, he knew, do not heal, but fester under such conditions.

"You can do it, Tom!" he said, and his voice was hoarse.

"I'll try—when he wakes," said Okanagan. "You'll find some flat stones by the river. I want one with an open grit that you could grind a knife down with."

It was long before Alton awakened, and then it became evident that he was not wholly sensible. Loss of blood, over-fatigue, exposure and hunger had left their mark on him, and while he rambled disjointedly a bitter wind sprang up. It raged down the valley, bringing with it the cold of the Pole, and while the pines raised their wild voices, the water congealed in the kettle, and in spite of the great fire built outside it the tent grew icy. At noon Tom of Okanagan glanced at his patient and shook his head, while Seaforth felt his misgivings confirmed as he saw his face.

"I guess we've got to wait for to-morrow. There'll be snow to-night," he said.

It was a long day to Seaforth. Alton moved restlessly in his sleep, or talked and laughed meaninglessly during most of it, while when his eyes closed Tom, who sat in a corner, laid the stone upon his lap and ground at his knife. He had already rubbed the blade down to half its width, but was apparently not contented, and Seaforth felt colder and set his lips each time the harsh grating of steel broke through the roaring of the pines that swelled in volume as the wind increased. It was seldom that either of them spoke, though the big axeman's face would soften momentarily when Alton moaned a little in his sleep. Then it grew sombre and impassive again save for the little gleam in the eyes, and Seaforth guessed what was in his companion's thoughts as the hard, gnarled fingers tightened viciously on the steel.

Somehow the day wore through, and the snow came with the night. It beat upon the canvas and fell hissing in the fire, which snapped and crackled the more fiercely, while acrid vapour crept into the tent, and now and then one of the men's eyes would close a moment. Seaforth had indeed roused himself several times with a jerk when Okanagan pointed to the roll of blankets and layer of springy twigs, and he saw that at last Alton was sleeping restfully. Five minutes later the roar of the branches seemed to sink into a musical lullaby, and the last thing he saw was the big, impassive bushman sitting as still as the motionless figure beneath him on the opposite side of the tent. Then he was wafted back to England on the wings of dreams.

It was broad daylight and warmer when he awakened. Outside the fire crackled noisily, and the great pines rose spires of sombre green against a field of white. Alton was also awake, and smiled at him, while Tom, who stood behind him, made a sign.

"It has got to be done right now before the frost comes back, but we're not going to hurt you, Harry," he said. "You'll walk down to the river and fill that kettle up, Charley."

Seaforth wondered a little, because the snow lay a foot deep in the bush and he could have filled the kettle beside the fire, but he floundered down to the river and felt a little more prepared to face what must be done when he returned. When he did so he found that Tom had rolled back Alton's jean trousers to the knee, and saw a red smear that broadened across the brawny limb. It pulsed over the swell of the corded muscles that showed through the clear, smooth skin, and then Seaforth shivered and turned his eyes away as they fell upon the welling depression with the discoloured edges. Alton noticed the movement, and glanced at him with a twinkle in his eyes. "It isn't pretty, but I don't think Tom will keep us long," he said.

Seaforth felt the blood surge into his face, for it seemed most unfitting that the wounded man should sympathize with him, but finding nothing apposite to say he kept silent, and Okanagan shook his head at them.

"Get hold of his hands, and keep hold. The quieter you are, Harry, the quicker I'll be," he said.

Alton smiled a little. "I don't think it's necessary," he said. "Still, if it will please you, Tom."

Seaforth clutched the fingers held out to him, and felt suddenly chilly. He would have touched his lips with his tongue, for the blood seemed to have gone out of them, but that he felt Alton's eyes were upon him. Accordingly he turned his face, which he fancied was growing a trifle colourless, aside, and for a moment or two watched Okanagan, who was kneeling with one hand pressed upon the smeared whiteness of the uncovered limb. Seaforth could hear his own heart beating and the thud of snow shaken off a swinging branch upon the tent, and see

the light the whiteness outside flung in glint upon the slender knife. He saw it move a little, and sternly repressed a shiver when the lean, hard fingers closed suddenly upon his own. A tremor ran through them, and then the pressure increased, until Seaforth was glad that it grew painful. He dare not glance at his comrade, he would not look at Tom, and sat very still in torment for a space, while he felt that Alton's arms had grown rigid by the cruel grip upon his hands.

Then the tension slackened, and the injured man drew in his breath with a gasp, while Okanagan rose to one knee with great drops of sweat upon his face.

"You got it?" said Alton in a low, strained voice, and nodded when the axeman answered him.

"No," he said, a trifle huskily. "I'm going to try again. Lift him over on his side, Charley."

Seaforth trembled a little as he did it, and glanced for just a moment at his comrade's face. It was set and grey, but it went suddenly awry into the grotesque semblance of a smile.

"Tom never was in a hurry. It's rough on you," he said. Still, Seaforth, who had once held his own with men and women in quick retort and graceful badinage in England, did not answer, but only pressed the hard fingers that now lay somewhat limply in his palm and wondered vaguely whether the ordeal would never be over. It was only then he realized to the full all that Alton had been to him since the day he limped, ragged and very hungry, into a little mining camp. His friends in the old country had turned their backs on him, and Seaforth, who had been hopeless and desperate then, knew that he owed a good deal more than material prosperity to Alton of Somasco.

"Tom," he said hoarsely, "I think we're ready."

Okanagan said nothing, but stooped again, and Seaforth tightening his grasp of the contracting fingers, heard the sound of uneven breathing through the thud of snow upon the tent. He was by this time a little more master of himself, and looked steadily down on the white face with the grimly-set lips. His own was distorted into what was not a sympathetic smile, but a grotesque grin, and there was every now and then a reflection of it in the one awry with pain which looked up at him. Then Alton drew in his breath with a little quivering sigh, and there was a rattle as Okanagan dropped the steel.

"I want that bandage—quick. We are through now," he said.

Seaforth had afterwards a hazy recollection of helping him to twist the strip of fabric about the firm white flesh, and that his hands made red smears on Alton's deerskin jacket when he stooped and lifted him a little. There was no bronze in his comrade's face, but in place of it a curious yellow tinge, through which the greyness showed in patches, and with fingers that were strangely clumsy he held a flask to Alton's lips.

The latter choked, and then his eyes opened wide again. "Pass it round. I'm

figuring you're all wanting some," he said.

Seaforth to humour him touched the flask with his lips, and handed it to Tom, who did the same, and then screwing the top on it passed it back to Seaforth no emptier than when it reached him. Alton, however, raised his head a trifle further, and looked at both of them.

"You'll have to do it better. Let me see the thing," he said.

Okanagan glanced at him severely. "I guess you'll lie right where you are and keep very still, or I'll make a hole through the other leg," he said.

Alton appeared to chuckle, but his arm slipped from under him, and he dropped back heavily amidst the blankets with eyes closed while Seaforth bent over him.

"That's all right," said Okanagan. "You needn't worry. I was kind of hoping he would do it because I was anxious about the bleeding. Now we'll get everything fixed up before he comes round again."

Seaforth did what he was bidden, and nothing more, for he had been reared in England, and not amidst the firs and snows of Northern Canada where misadventures are many and doctors very few, but he envied the big bushman his skill that day, and Okanagan may have guessed it, for he once smiled a little as he said:

"There are lots of things I can't do, and it's not your fault that you were raised back in the old country, where you have other folks to put the patches on to you."

"No," said Seaforth, smiling. "Still, he is my partner, you see. Now I want to know what we are going to do with him."

Okanagan's smile was just perceptible as he held up a ragged piece of lead, but Seaforth saw that he understood all the speech implied, though he made no reference to it,

"There's half the trouble gone," he said. "The rest of it went straight through the bone, and I kind of fancy smashed it up considerable."

"Will the pieces knit as they were before?" said Seaforth very anxiously, and for a moment or two Okanagan did not answer him.

"That," he said very slowly, "is what I don't quite know. One of them bones is a rocker, and she swings on the other. That one's cut, but I don't think it's smashed right through. Now if it goes as well as the other, it's quite possible Harry will limp ever after."

Seaforth stood up with a little shiver. "Good Lord. Harry of all men a cripple! Tom, you must do something."

Okanagan slowly shook his head. "I've done my best now," he said. "We can get him down to Somasco and a live doctor up from Vancouver as soon as we can, and that's about all. There's no time to lose. We'll start to-morrow."

Seaforth cast one glance at the still figure and grey face amidst the blankets, and then clenched his hands as he blundered out of the tent. A white flake fell

upon his face, another on his hands, and he shivered again as he glanced at the forest. It was very evident that much depended upon their speed, and down between the sombre pines came the sliding snow.

CHAPTER XXI
OKANAGAN'S ROAD

The great cedar-boughs above the river bent beneath their load, and the scanty light was dimmed by sliding snow, when Seaforth and his comrade stood panting and white all over by the last portage. Okanagan by dint of laborious searching had found the canoe jammed between two boulders with her side crushed in, and had spent a day repairing her with a flattened out meat-can and strips of deerskin. The craft had notwithstanding this leaked considerably, but they made shift to descend the river in her, and now if they could accomplish the last big portage hoped by toiling strenuously to make the mouth of the canon by nightfall.

What they would do when they reached it neither of them knew, but they were too cold and jaded to concern themselves with more than the question how they were to convey their comrade over the boulders and through the thickets which divided them from the next stretch of comparatively untroubled water just then. They had spent most of the day dragging the canoe round the rapid which roared down the hollow in a wild tumult of froth, lifting her with levers from rock to rock, and now and then sliding with her down a declivity, but that was a mode of progression clearly unsuited to an injured man.

Alton lay in the snow beneath a boulder that but indifferently sheltered him, and there was a little grim smile in his face as he looked up at his companions.

"Isn't it time you got hold of me? We can't stop here all day," he said.

Okanagan turned, and stared sombrely at the wall of rock which dropped to the river close behind him, and the strip of boulders and great fallen fragments amidst which the undergrowth crept in and out between.

"There's a gully yonder, but if we worked back round the hillside I don't quite see how we're coming down," he said.

"No," said Alton dryly. "I'm not good at flying. Well, you had better start in and carry me."

Seaforth stooped and grasped his comrade round the thighs, which were lashed together with deerhide with a stiff strip of cedar-bark outside them. Okanagan passed his arms about his shoulders, and they rose with a jerk and stood swaying unevenly for a moment, while Seaforth wondered with a curious feeling of helplessness whether they would ever accomplish the journey to the canoe. It would have tested the agility of an unencumbered man, while he was almost worn out, and Alton cruelly heavy.

"Heave him up a trifle," said Okanagan. "Now then!"

Seaforth gasped, and floundered forward through a foot of snow that hid the

holes he sank into and slipped away beneath him as he clawed for a footing on the boulders, but with strenuous toil they made a hundred yards or so, and then laying down their burden stood still, panting. Alton lay silent, with half-closed eyes and the soft flakes settling on his grey face, in the snow, while Seaforth gazed about him despairingly. There was rock and shadowy forest behind them, and in front the smoking rush of the river, while though it was but afternoon the light was failing.

"Get hold again, Tom. It's not good to wait here," he said with a shiver.

This time with infinite difficulty they made fifty yards, and Alton's face showed what his silence had cost him when they set him down again. Seaforth stooped and drew the blanket about him with a great gentleness.

"We did our best. I'd change places with you, Harry, if I could," he said.

Alton smiled a little, but said nothing, and in five minutes they went on again, Seaforth gasping from exhaustion, with a horrible pain in his side and his feet slipping from under him as they struggled up a sloping face of rock, but they had won forty yards when Tom went down and Alton, who fell heavily upon him, rolled over. Seaforth held his breath a moment until he heard the voice of the injured man.

"I wouldn't worry about my head. It would take an axe to hurt me there," he said. "Look at the lashings."

The lashings, however, had not slackened, the cedar-bark was intact, and once more they took up their burden, while Seaforth could not remember how often they had rested when at last they came out upon a smooth strip of sloping rock close to the last of the portage. He was dragging a clogging weight of snow with him, and the white flakes were in his eyes, while now and then his breath failed him and he heard Okanagan growling hoarse and half-articulate expletives.

"You have got to hold out, Charley. There's the canoe below you," he said.

Seaforth braced himself for a last effort, and was never sure whether he or Okanagan stumbled first, but his feet slipped from under him and he fell upon Alton as Tom went down. Then the three slid together down the slope of rock, and fell heavily over the edge of it. Seaforth was partly dazed when Okanagan dragged him to his feet, but, he could see that Alton lay very still with his face awry and that there was consternation in the eyes of his comrade.

"Have we hurt you, Harry?" he said hoarsely.

Alton groaned a little, and his lips moved once or twice before Seaforth caught any audible answer.

"I don't know that you did it, but I think that bone has gone," he said.

Okanagan, saying nothing, dropped on hands and knees, and while Alton groaned drew the bands tighter about the shattered cedar-bark. Then he rose up and looked at Seaforth, and the two stood silent for almost a minute with the snow whirling about them. There was something very like despair in Seaforth's eyes,

and at last his comrade solemnly shook his fist at the forest.

"We have got to get him home straight off," he said. Seaforth did not ask how it was to be done when they had the range to cross, but as one dreaming laid hold of his comrade again, and floundered towards the canoe, which lay close by them now. He was still partly dazed when he took up the paddle and dimly saw the white pines sliding past through a haze of snow. Nor did he remember whether he or Okanagan set the tent up when they reached the island near the canon, but he was sitting inside it holding out a smoking can of tea to Alton when some time after darkness had closed down Tom came in. The snow had ceased in the meanwhile and a biting frost descended upon the valley through which the roar of the canon pulsed in long reverberations. Okanagan dropped the rifle he carried.

"I might have left the thing. The horse is dead," he said.

"Dead?" said Seaforth vacantly.

Okanagan nodded. "Yes," he said. "Somebody has saved me the trouble. Two bullets in him."

Seaforth was almost past anger now, but the tea splashed from the can he still held as he realized the thoroughness of the work of their enemy.

"Then how are you going to pack Harry and the other things over the range?" he said.

Okanagan's face was almost expressionless. "We're not going to. It can't be done."

Seaforth said nothing. The last fall had shaken him severely, and he had realized since they started that the task before them was almost beyond the power of any two men, but had refused to contemplate what must happen if they failed in it. Now he could see that it was impossible, but dazed with utter weariness as he was he could not think consecutively, and only felt a numbing dismay that in some strange fashion softened the blow, while in place of considering the future his memory reverted without his will to the incidents of that strange journey. They rose blurred before him as the creations of an evil dream, the wild descent of a rapid, the desperate effort of the portage, the long hours of toil at the paddle, and endless unrolling of whitened pines that crawled by them through the snow. Now at least, when he could do no more, that stupendous toil was finished. Turning, he glanced at Alton, who had with apparent difficulty swallowed a little of the tea. He lay amidst the blankets with eyes closed, breathing unevenly.

"Then you'll go on to Somasco, Tom, and send back the boys for us. They may be in time," he said.

Okanagan strode softly to the entrance of the tent and drew the canvas back. A moon hung red with frost in the pitiless heavens, the stars shone steelily, and it was evident that the cold of the icy North was laying its grip upon the valley.

"Harry wouldn't have much use for them when they came. There's an ice fringe round the boulders now," he said.

Seaforth stared out into the glittering night, and groaned, for he knew what happened to wounded men unsheltered from the frost. His voice was low and harsh as he asked, “Then what is to be done?”

Okanagan replaced the canvas before he answered quietly, “There’s the canon.”

“Yes,” said Seaforth. “Still, no man has ever gone down it.”

“No. But the water’s lowest in winter, and a canoe once came through. I can’t see why another shouldn’t do as well with men in it. It’s easy getting in, anyway.”

Seaforth laughed mirthlessly. “Oh, yes. The question is, will any of us come out again alive?”

As he spoke the sound of the river’s turmoil swelled in a great pulsation about the tent, and Seaforth involuntarily drew in his breath. The curious glow he had seen there before, however, grew a trifle brighter in his companion’s eyes.

“That,” he said solemnly, “only the Almighty knows, but if we stop here there’ll be an end of Harry. Now, there are some folks in the old country who’d be sorry if you don’t come back?”

Seaforth smiled a trifle bitterly. “I don’t think there are. They had an opportunity of showing their affection before I came out to Canada, and didn’t take it. I found the best friend I ever had in this country—and as there seems no other way we’ll try the canon.”

Okanagan sat down again, and hacked away with Alton’s knife at a piece of redwood he was fashioning into a paddle. Both of them knew that the effort they were to make on their friend’s behalf might well cost their life, but big, untaught bushman and once gently-nurtured Briton were in one respect at least alike, and that was a fact which would never again be mentioned between them.

It was an hour or thereabouts later when Alton opened his eyes.

“I don’t know that I asked you, though I meant to, but you and Tom staked two more claims off?” he said.

Okanagan appeared a trifle embarrassed, but Seaforth laughed. “I’m afraid we didn’t. You see, we started in a hurry, and I forgot.”

Alton stared at him a moment in bewilderment, and then through the pain that distorted it a curious look crept into his face.

“I figure you’re lying, Charley, and you don’t do it well,” he said. “Folks don’t usually forget when they leave a fortune behind them.”

Seaforth smiled a little. “Well, I may have been, but a fortune didn’t seem very likely to be much use to me then or now,” he said.

Alton gravely shook his head, but the two men’s eyes met for a moment, and Seaforth felt embarrassed as he turned his aside. There was no need to tell the injured man that his welfare had appeared of more importance to his comrades than any profit that might accrue to them from the silver mine.

“Well,” he said simply, “you or Tom should get through to Somasco.”

“I hope so,” said Seaforth, as Okanagan signed to him. “You see, we are all going there together by the shortest way, down the canon.”

Alton stared at him a moment. “Now I had——” he commenced, and then stopped abruptly.

Once more Seaforth smiled. “Then you had thought about it, Harry?”

Alton’s eyes closed a little. “I’m not one of the folks who go round telling people all they think,” he said. “There’s no way down that canon.”

Seaforth understood what was passing in his comrade’s mind, and knew that Alton had not kept silence because of the risk to himself, for whatever was done the chances were equally against him.

“I’m afraid we can’t contradict you, but we shall discover to-morrow whether you are right or not,” he said.

Alton’s glance grew a little less direct. “I would stop you if I could.”

“Of course,” said Seaforth, smiling. “Still, you see you can’t, and when you go out mining with feather-brained companions must take the consequences.”

Alton, who said nothing further, apparently went to sleep, and there was silence in the tent save for the roar of water and the rattle of Okanagan’s knife.

They launched the canoe with the first of the daylight, dragging her through the crackling ice fringe under the bitter frost, and as they slid down the smooth green flow towards the stupendous rent in the mountain side the river poured through, Okanagan glanced towards it and then at the still figure lying huddled in the blankets in the bottom of the canoe.

“That, I figure, is one of the most useful men in the Dominion, and between Somasco and the place in England he has a good deal in his hands,” he said.

Seaforth understood him, and smiled grimly. “We brought nothing into this world—and we’ll be very close to the next one in a few more minutes,” he said. “Hadn’t you better get way on, Tom?”

They dipped the paddles, and the canoe slid on smoothly under the clear sunlight and the frost towards the film of mist where the oily green now broke up into the mad white tumult that poured down the canon. Then the strokes quickened, the craft lurched beneath them, and the sunlight was blotted out as they plunged into spray-filled dimness. High through the vapour towered smooth walls of stone, and the river that rebounded from them was piled in a white track of foam midway between. The canoe swept onwards down it apparently with the speed of a locomotive, and Seaforth, crouching in the bows, gripped his paddle with bleeding fingers that had split at the knuckles with the frost. He watched the smooth walls whirl by him mechanically, and remembered that the canon could not last forever. There was comfort in the reflection, because the miles would melt behind them at the pace they travelled at. That was so long as the stream flowed straight and even, but he did not care to contemplate what would happen if it foamed over any obstacle.

For a time he saw nothing but froth and spray and flitting stone, and then the roar that came back from the towering walls swelled into a great diapason terrifying and bewildering. Seaforth glanced over his shoulder and saw that Okanagan was dipping his paddle.

"A fall or a big rapid. We've got to go through," he said.

Seaforth swept his gaze aloft for a moment while the bewildering roar grew deafening. Nothing that had life in it could scale the horrible smooth walls that hung over them, and through a rift in the vapour he could see a filigree of whitened pines that seemed very far away projected against the blue. They were, he fancied, at least a thousand feet above him, and he and Okanagan alone far down in the dimness of another world with their helpless companion. Then he nerved himself for an effort as he looked forward into the spray and vapour that whirled in denser clouds ahead. Nothing was visible through its filmy folds, but his flesh shrank from the tumult of sound that came out of it.

"Hold her straight," cried Okanagan, in a breathless roar, and Seaforth just heard his voice through the diapason of the river.

Then the canoe lurched beneath them, and sped faster still, plunging, rocking, rolling, while the froth beat into her, and Seaforth whirled his paddle in a frenzy. The shrinking had gone, and he was only conscious of a curious unreasoning exaltation. A pinnacle of rock flashed by them, there was a roar from Tom, and straining every sinew on the paddle they swung, with eyes dilated and laboured breath, sideways towards the wall of stone. Then the froth that leapt about it swept astern, and they were going on again, faster than ever, and apparently down a declivity, the spray beating upon them and the canoe swinging her bows out of a frothing confusion. Seaforth heard a cry behind him, but could attach no meaning to it, and whirled his paddle mechanically, until the craft appeared to lurch out from under him, and fall bodily with a great splashing. Twice, it seemed to him, she swung round a great black pool, and then they were driving forward again a trifle more smoothly, while here and there a stunted pine that clung to the rocks came flitting back to them. He felt Okanagan's paddle in his shoulder, and glanced round a moment. There was a green strip behind them that seemed to roll itself together and fall roaring into the pool, but a wisp of mist that blotted out everything drifted across his eyes.

Seaforth retained no very clear impression of the remainder of that day's journey, but it was late in the afternoon when the walls of rock fell back a little on either hand, and it seemed to him that they lay motionless in the bottom of a great pit while the hills slowly rolled away behind them. Here and there a strip of shingle now divided rock from river, and when presently Okanagan called out, Seaforth felt by the change of motion that he was backing his paddle. Looking forward he saw the cause of it, for there were boulders in the channel, and a great fir lay jammed across them. They were almost upon it when the bows reached the

shingle.

Okanagan helped him to carry Alton ashore, and then stood still looking at the fir, which was of a girth seldom seen in any other country.

"She's lying right across, and we've got to chop our way through," he said. "You'll fix the tent and make supper while I take first turn."

He came back dripping presently, and Seaforth was waist-deep in icy water when he reached the tree. The shingle slipped beneath him, the stream frothed about his limbs, and he felt very puny and helpless with that great log before him. His hands were split and opened by the frost, and the wounds bled at every stroke, but while the red glare of the fire Okanagan was feeding with washed-up branches flickered about him he panted and smote, until the power went from him, and his comrade took his place.

It was apparently a task for demigods, but it is no unusual thing for the men who come to grips with nature unsubdued in the frozen North to attempt, and accomplish, more than flesh and blood seem capable of, and all night long they fought their grim battle, hewing until sight and breathing failed them, and then staggering back to lie dripping and gasping by the fire. Arms grew powerless, eyes were dim, the rents in their wet hands gaped, and there was blood upon their deerskins; but little by little the notch widened, until at last the steel splashed in the water that deflected it, and Seaforth fancied they were beaten. Still, there was no relaxing of effort, and as the stars were paling in the rift high overhead he heard a sound that was not the monotone of the river. Another man heard it, too, for Okanagan came floundering towards him through a tumult of foam and wrested the axe from his hand. For five minutes he smote fiercely, and then raised a hoarse, half-articulate cry of triumph.

"She's going."

There was a smashing and snapping. The huge trunk rolled a little, rent, and swept away, and Seaforth reeling shorewards sat down with bleeding hands in the ashes, laughing foolishly, until Okanagan stooped and smote his shoulder.

"Get up," he said. "It's time we were going."

There was not light enough to see by, and they had eaten nothing during all those hours of heroic toil, but Seaforth seemed to realize that the issue lay beyond them now, and it did not matter greatly what they did or failed to do. He was also consumed by a desire to escape from that horrible place of shadow, and striking the tent in clumsy haste they launched the canoe. After that he remembered little, though he had a hazy recollection of stopping somewhere and helping Tom to make a fire, for there was wood in abundance everywhere. Whether he ate anything he did not know, but all day the canoe slid on comparatively smoothly, and they toiled at the paddle until hands and arms seemed to move of their own volition. Seaforth felt that he would gladly have lain down and frozen, but an influence which had apparently nothing to do with his will constrained him to

labour on.

At last, when the stars were shining and the moon hung red in a broader strip of sky, the curious sustaining animus seemed to desert him, and he lurched forward with a little gasp, while the paddle almost slipped from his stiffened fingers.

"Hold up," said Okanagan. "Stream's running slow, and the hills are opening there. I'm not sure that we're not close on the Somasco valley."

Seaforth made a last effort, but his fingers lost their grasp, and when he slipped forward again his paddle slid away behind them. Then he groaned a little, and lay still in the bottom of the canoe. The next thing he was clearly conscious of was the ringing of a rifle and he raised himself as the woods flung back the sound. They seemed some distance from him now, and the moon shone down on a broadening strip of water. Again the rifle flashed, and he wondered vacantly whether the twinkle that perplexed his hazy sight could be lights that blinked at them.

"Where have we got to, Tom?" he said.

Okanagan laughed softly. "Tolerably close on Somasco," he said. "I think they've heard us at the mill."

Then as Seaforth listened, a shout came ringing across the glinting space before them that seemed curiously still. "Hold on. We're coming. Is that you and the others, Tom?"

Okanagan laughed again, and the canoe stopped amidst the ice when the paddle fell from his hand.

"It's a good deal less of us than there was when we started out," he said.

CHAPTER XXII
MISS DERINGHAM DECIDES

It was a clear winter day, when a big side-wheel steamer bound for way ports down the Sound lay at the wharf at Vancouver waiting for the mail. Towering white in the sunshine high above the translucent brine, she looked with her huge wheel-casings, lines of winking windows, and triple tier of decks more like a hotel set afloat than a steamer, and the resemblance was completed by the long tables set out for breakfast in the white and gold saloon. No swarm of voracious passengers had, however, descended upon them as yet, for though winter touches the southern coast but lightly, it is occasionally almost Arctic amidst the ranges of the mountain province, and the Pacific express was held up somewhere by the snow.

Bright though the sunshine was, a bitter wind came down across the inlet from the gleaming hills that stretched back, ridged here and there by the sombre green of pines, towards the frozen North, and Deringham and his daughter, who were setting out on a visit to a town of Washington, had sought shelter in the saloon. Alice Deringham leaned back in a corner, a very dainty picture in her clinging furs, with the ivory whiteness of the panelling behind her. Her father sat close by, with a face that was slightly puckered, and thoughtful eyes, turning over a packet of letters that had reached him from England the day before, and his daughter fancied that their contents by no means pleased him. There were a few of her passengers in the saloon, and one couple attracted her languid attention.

She could see the man plainly, and he was one of the usual type of Western citizen, keen-eyed, quick and nervous of movement and gesture, and incisive of speech. He had a bundle of papers before him, and appeared to be making calculations in pencil while he dictated to his companion. Now and then she caught disjointed fragments of his conversation.

“Got that quite straight? Fall in securities, silver depreciating. Now did I put in anything about the Democrats going in?”

Miss Deringham could make but little of this, and had always cherished a faint contempt, which she may have inherited from her mother, who had been born at Carnaby, for anything connected with business. Still, she was mildly interested in the man’s companion, whose face she could not see. The girl was dressed very plainly, and Miss Deringham decided that the fabric had not cost much to begin with and was by no means new. It, however, set off a pretty, slender figure, and the girl had fine brown hair, while the little ungloved fingers on pencil were white and shapely. Alice Deringham wondered with a languid curiosity what her face

was like, and felt a half contemptuous pity for her. She did not consider such an occupation fitting for a woman.

Then her attention was diverted as a boy with a satchel calling out "*Colonist*," in a shrill nasal drawl, came in, and she vacantly watched a man who purchased a paper spread out the sheet.

"They've got that fellow up at Slocane," he said to a companion. "Yes, sir, sent him down for trial, and it took a special guard to keep the boys off him. I guess if he'd done it down our way they wouldn't have worried, but put him in a tar-keg and set a light to him. They're way behind the times in the Dominion."

"Killed him in his sleep for a hundred dollars," said another man, glancing over the reader's shoulder, but Miss Deringham was not interested in the murder she remembered having heard about. She was, however, a trifle astonished to see that her father was watching the gathering group with a serious look in his eyes, but he glanced down somewhat hastily at his papers when he met her gaze. Then the voices grew less distinct, and that of the man dictating broke monotonously through them until a steward approached her father with an envelope in his hand.

"Mr. Forel has just sent it down, sir," he said. "You're Mr. Deringham?"

Deringham tore the envelope open, and while he sat staring at the paper inside it his daughter noticed that there was a little pale spot in his cheek. His hand also appeared to tremble slightly when, saying nothing, he passed the telegram across to her.

"Regret to inform you that my partner met with accident in the ranges, and his condition is critical," it read. "Can you send us nurse or capable woman? Mrs. Margery ill. Seaforth, Somasco."

Alice Deringham shivered a little. "He is evidently dangerously injured."

"It appears so," said Deringham, and his daughter afterwards remembered that his voice was hoarse and strained.

The girl, however, said nothing for a while. She was not impulsive, and her face remained almost as cold in its clear whiteness as the panelling behind it, but her heart beat a little faster than usual, and she was trying somewhat unsuccessfully to analyze her sensations. In the meanwhile the voices of the men who now surrounded the one with the paper reached her, and she noticed vacantly that her father seemed to be listening to them.

"They'll hang him, anyway," said one.

"Made no show at all when they got him hiding in the bush," said another. "Still, you couldn't expect much from that kind of man. Killed him for a hundred dollars in his bed."

"Yes, sir," said the first speaker. "And he didn't get all of them. The man was his own cousin, and too sick to do anything. Well, thank God, we haven't got many vermin of that kind in the Dominion."

Deringham, who had picked up the telegram, let it slip from his fingers as he

rose, and the girl wondered at the change in him. He seemed to have grown suddenly haggard, and the lines upon his face were much more apparent than usual.

"You will excuse me a minute," he said, and the girl noticed the curious deliberation of his movements and the stoop in his shoulders as he crossed the saloon.

Deringham had faced more than one crisis in the past, and the difference in his pose might not have attracted a stranger's notice, though it was evident to his daughter that something had troubled him. Why he should be so disturbed by the news of Alton's condition she could not quite see, but that appeared of the less importance, because she was endeavouring to evade the question why the telegram should also have caused her a curious consternation. He was a half-taught rancher, and she had been accustomed to the homage of men of mark and polish in England—but it was with something approaching dismay she heard that the man who had supplanted her father was, though she could scarcely contemplate the possibility, dying.

In the meanwhile Deringham walked into the bar, and leaned somewhat heavily upon the counter as he asked for a glass of brandy. He spilled a little of it, and the steward, who saw that his fingers shook, glanced at him curiously as he set it down.

"I guess that will fix you, sir," he said. "You're not feeling well?"

Deringham made a little gesture of assent, and the man drew him out a chair. "That is good brandy," he said. "You'd better sit down there quietly and have another. Here's *The Colonist*. They've got that fellow up at Slocane, but one feels sorry the boys didn't get hold of him. Hanging's not much use for that kind of man."

Deringham's fingers trembled as he thrust the journal aside, but his voice was even. "The brandy is rather better than any I've had of late," he said. "You can give me another glass of it."

For at least ten minutes he lay somewhat limply in the chair, and his reflections were not pleasant. He had speculated with another man's money and lost most of it, as well as profited by several transactions which were little better than a swindle; but that was as far as he had gone hitherto, and he had in a curious fashion, retained through it all a measure of inherited pride. Now, however, the disguise was for a moment torn aside, and he saw himself as he was, a thief and a miscreant, no better than the brutish bushman who had slain his sick kinsman for a hundred dollars. There was, as he had read already, nothing to redeem the sordid, cowardly treachery of that crime.

Deringham was, however, proficient at finding excuses for himself and shutting his eyes to unpleasant facts, and the phase commenced to pass. He had, he recollected, plainly stated that he merely desired Alton to be detained a little

amidst the ranges, and it became evident to him that what had happened was the result of Hallam's villainy. Hallam had injured him as well as Alton, while there was no controverting the fact that the rancher's decease would relieve him of a vast anxiety, and his first indignation against Hallam also melted when he rose composedly from the chair. He felt that Seaforth expected something of him, and it appeared advisable to consider what could be done, while a project already commended itself to him. In another five minutes he had rejoined his daughter, looking more like the man who urbanely presided over the not always contented shareholders' meetings. He realized, however, that he had a slightly difficult task before him.

"You seem to take the news rather badly, father," said the girl.

Deringham smiled deprecatingly. "I have not been quite so well lately, and it upset me a trifle," said he. "I have a regard for our Canadian kinsman and have been inclined to fancy that you shared it with me."

"Of course," said the girl indifferently. "Mr. Alton has been especially kind to us."

"Yes," said Deringham. "Mr. Seaforth must also be very helpless up there alone, with his comrade seriously ill. Now there is no great necessity for my journey down the Sound, and I have no doubt that the business could be handled almost as well by letter. I do not know that there is very much that would please you to be seen in the Washington townships either."

Alice Deringham glanced at him thoughtfully. "And?" she said.

Deringham glanced down a moment at his shoes. "I was wondering if you could be of any use up there."

His daughter laughed a little. "I think that is readily answered. I cannot cook, and neither can I wash, while I have never attended to a sick person in my life."

"No," said her father with a trace of embarrassment. "Still, one understands that it comes naturally to women. In any case your mere presence would in a fashion be an advantage."

Alice Deringham watched him in silence for a few seconds and then smiled again. "It is somewhat difficult to believe it. I am sincerely sorry for Mr. Alton, but I can see no reason for intruding at Somasco now."

Deringham regarded her steadily, and the girl knew it would be advisable for her to yield. This did not displease her, for, though she had negatived his suggestion, her father's wishes coincided with her own. She, however, desired to visit Somasco as it were under compulsion, and to feel that she had not done so of her own inclination.

"I think there is a reason—and it would please me," he said.

"Then I should be pleased to hear it."

Deringham appeared to consider, because the motives which influenced him were ones he could not well reveal. "We are his only relatives in this country—

and there is the look of the thing," he said.

The girl moved a little, and her father watching her noticed her fine symmetry, and how her red-gold hair gleamed against the white panelling. It was possibly because of this background he also noticed the faint flicker of warmth that crept into her face and neck, and that there was a glow in her eyes he had not seen there previously.

"That," she said with a cold distinctness, "is precisely what I object to."

Deringham laughed a little. "I think that aspect of the question will not be evident to Alton."

"No?" said the girl, while the tinge of colour deepened a little. "Still, it is very plain to me."

Deringham said nothing, and the two sat still while the voice of the man dictating jarred upon one of them. "Very little interest taken in mineral claims, no inquiries for ranching properties."

Alice Deringham turned, and saw the girl's fingers flittering across the paper, but her face was still hidden and the monotonous voice continued, "We made a few advances during the last week or two."

The other passengers had gone out of the saloon, and it was very quiet save for the soft flow of words and rattle of the pencil, when Deringham once more unfolded the telegram.

"I am afraid it is going hardly with the man," he said suggestively. " 'My partner met with accident—his condition is critical.' The message left Somasco yesterday."

There was a rustle at the adjoining table, and the girl's pencil fell to the floor.

"Will you wait a moment, please?" a voice said, and the dictation broke off abruptly, while when the girl rose Alice Deringham found herself suddenly confronted with Miss Townshead. Deringham, who stood up, made her a little decorous inclination.

"I am pleased to see you again," he said.

The speech was apparently lost upon the girl, who did not seem to notice his daughter's greeting.

"I could not avoid hearing a few words of yours," she said. "Mr. Alton—or his partner—is seriously ill."

Deringham handed her the telegram, and stood watching her curiously while she read it. He saw her lips set a trifle, and a slight lowering of her eyes, but though the girl seemed to draw in her breath he fancied it was not with consternation.

"That is all we know," he said.

Miss Townshead gave him back the message, but Deringham did not see her face, for she and his daughter seemed to be looking at each other. They formed a somewhat curious contrast, for Alice Deringham appeared taller and more stately

than she was in her costly furs, and Nellie Townshead very slight and almost shabby in her thin and well-worn dress. Neither spoke for a moment, but the half-amiable condescension in Miss Deringham's attitude was a trifle too marked.

"I am afraid that is all we can tell you," she said. "Mr. Alton has evidently met with a serious accident, and we are going up at once to Somasco to see what we can do for him."

Deringham moved a trifle and glanced at his daughter. She had said very little, but there was a subtle something in her tone and bearing which implied a good deal, and he fancied it was not lost upon Miss Townshead.

The latter, however, glanced round towards her employer, and her face was once more expressionless as she said, "Then I hope you will find him progressing favourably, and it would be a kindness to my father and myself if you or Mr. Seaforth would send us word."

She went back to her duties, and Deringham smiled a little as the monotonous voice commenced again. "That's all right, Miss Townshead. Now where was I? Oh, yes, we should not recommend any further advances. Did I tell him we had to negotiate Tyrer's bond at a discount?"

"You seem to have reversed your decision somewhat suddenly," he said. "I had not noticed it before, but Miss Townshead is distinctly pretty. She was, I believe, on tolerably good terms with our afflicted kinsman."

Miss Deringham laughed as she answered him. "That is one of our privileges, but you had better inquire about my baggage. I think I hear the train coming in."

She turned a moment as she went out of the saloon, and glanced back towards the table. She could only see that Miss Townshead's head was bent lower over the paper than it had been, but she had a suspicion as to what the girl was feeling. It was also partly, but not more than partly justified, for Nellie Townshead was writing mechanically just then, though now and then she drove the pencil somewhat viciously into the paper when the hasty words grew faster. "Don't consider your recommendation workable. We are sending you ore to test. Finish it up in the usual way."

Then the locomotive bell on the wharf was answered by the roar of the steamer's whistle, and the man folded up his papers. "You will have to get ashore, but we have done a good morning's work," said he. "Those were friends of yours from the old country?"

"No," said Nellie Townshead with a curious expression. "They are from the old country, but I only met them once or twice at Somasco."

The man glanced at her thoughtfully. "Yes," he said. "I kind of fancied the lady didn't mean to be nice to you."

Miss Townshead smiled, though there was an ominous brightness in her eyes. "I scarcely think she would take the trouble to make me feel that," she said. "Miss Deringham is, I understand, a lady of some importance in the old country."

The man once more regarded her with grave kindliness. “Folks of that kind can be very nasty prettily. I’ve met one or two of them. Well, you’re one of the smartest business ladies I’ve come across yet in this country, and I should figure that’s quite as good as the other. Now—well, of course, we held back a little when we engaged you, and you can tell the cashier to hand you out another two dollars every Saturday.”

Nellie Townshead felt that the colour was in her cheeks, but she thanked the man, and gathering up her papers hastened down the gangway at the last moment. She stopped a moment breathless when she reached the wharf and saw Deringham and his daughter drive away, and shut one little hand. Then she laughed, and turned towards the city with a gesture of impatience. “The two dollars are badly needed—and I’m a little fool, but it hurt, all of it,” she said.

CHAPTER XXIII
THE AWAKENING

The snow had ceased an hour or two earlier, and the moon shone down upon the glistening pines that shook off their white covering under a bitter wind, when a wagon came lurching into the Somasco valley. Four weary horses floundered in front of it, a thin white steam rising from them into the nipping air, and Okanagan swayed half asleep upon the driving-seat, growling inarticulate objurgations when the vehicle sank creaking into a hollow he could not see. He had, wearing out several horses during the journey, driven close upon a hundred miles through the frost and snow, and had ceased to encourage his companions during the last hour or so. In fact, he was almost as incapable of speech just then as they were of comprehending him.

They had, however, won his admiration, which he was somewhat slow of according city folk, for although there had been times when, as he dragged the worn-out team up steep hillsides through the blinding snow, he almost despaired of reaching Somasco, he had heard no complaint from either Deringham or his daughter. The man had helped him where he could, and when there was nothing that he could do sat silent beside him smoking tranquilly, while, with the flung-up snow whirling about them, the team went floundering down almost precipitous gully or rutted declivity, where a stumble would have hurled them all into the tops of the pines below. Nor had a cry escaped the girl who sat behind them, gripping the side of the bouncing vehicle, when once a horse went down, and on another occasion the wagon left the trail and drove into a hemlock. Okanagan also remembered that though it had been necessary to lift her down when twice they stopped to change the team at a lonely ranch, she rose smiling with blue lips when it was time to go on again.

"Yes, sir," he afterwards said to Seaforth, "there wasn't any weakening down in either of them, and the girl's a daisy."

Deringham, however, was now sitting amidst the straw in the bottom of the wagon, with his arm about his daughter, who nestled close to him for the sake of warmth. A bitter frost had set in during the last hour or so, and the snow was frozen in white patches upon her wrappings, while it was with numbed senses she vacantly watched the pines flit past her. It seemed that they would crawl up out of the darkness and slide by, white beneath the moonlight, forever.

Nor could she recollect much of the journey, which had only left a hazy memory of biting cold and blinding snow, fierce struggles through the drifts, and brief interludes of warmth and brightness in forest-shrouded ranches, where her

chilled flesh shrank from the task before her when she rose to go on again. There was Alton blood in Alice Deringham, and more than a trace of the Alton pride, but she did not know what motive had sustained her or why she had borne it all so patiently, and in this she differed from her father. Deringham seldom did anything without a purpose, and he had one now.

His daughter had been asleep with her head on his shoulder when a shout roused her two hours earlier, and with a drumming of hoofs they came lurching into the settlement. For a blissful moment she fancied the journey was at an end, for there were lights and voices and a pleasant smell of firwood smoke, but Okanagan shouted to his team, and the lights faded away behind as they plunged into the silence beneath the pines again.

"Father," she said faintly, "do you think he has gone the wrong way? It seems ever so long since we left the settlement."

Okanagan may have heard her, though the words were almost indistinguishable. "You lie right where you are for another ten minutes, and keep warm, miss," he said; "then I'll show you something."

Alice Deringham shivered all through. "It is a little difficult," she said.

Okanagan spoke to his horses, and after what appeared an interminable time looked down again.

"There," he said, with a curious, almost silent laugh, and the girl saw a red blink amidst the pines across the valley. "That's Somasco."

Alice Deringham let her head drop back on her father's shoulder with a little sigh. "It seems a very long way," she said, "and I am very cold."

It was some time later when the wagon stopped with a jerk, and she roused herself as a glare of light shone about her. Voices came out of it, somebody held out a hand, and a man whom she did not recognize lifted her from the wagon. Then she walked unevenly into the brightness of a log-walled hall and grew faint, while a tingling pain ran through her with the change of temperature. A woman whom she did not know clumsily took her wrappings from her, and then led her into a room where Seaforth drew a chair up to a table beside the stove. Alice Deringham's head was throbbing, but she could see that he was white and haggard.

"How is he?" she said, and the tingling pain grew more pronounced as she waited the answer.

Seaforth's face was very grave. "I think it is touch and go with him—but if he wears the night out he may pull through. It was very good of you to come."

Alice Deringham made a little gesture of impatience. "But there is hope?" she said, and her voice was very low and strained.

Seaforth glanced round sharply as the woman, knocking over something, went out of the room.

"A little, I believe, if he could sleep," he said huskily. "The doctor is with him

now—scarcely left him the last four days. We have nobody to help us. Mrs. Margery broke down. The woman you saw is incapable. Harry has been delirious—and asking for you—half the time."

Seaforth looked at his companion as he spoke, and the girl met his gaze directly. There was no room for anything but frankness at such a time.

"Ah," she said simply. "I am glad I came."

Seaforth's eyes seemed to grow a little misty, and Alice Deringham, who suddenly looked aside, wondered whether it was only the effect of weariness. Whatever he felt, he, however, quietly poured something into a cup and handed it to her. "But you must eat," he said.

Hungry and cold as she had been, the girl could eat but little, though the steaming liquid in the cup put a little life into her, and presently she rose up and shook off the coarse shawl which somebody had wrapped about her shoulders.

"I am ready now," she said.

Seaforth glanced at her a moment with open admiration. The girl to hide her weariness stood very straight, and Alice Deringham knew how to hold herself. The pallor in her face intensified the little glow in her eyes and the ruddy gleam of her lustrous hair under the lamplight. She was, it seemed to him, almost splendid in her statuesque symmetry, but there was also a subtle change in her, and a sudden sense of confusion came upon him. He remembered his previous distrust of her, and that it was to save his comrade she had come.

"No," he said quietly; "you must rest and sleep before you go to him."

Alice Deringham smiled a little, but there was a vibration in her voice that stirred the man. "Do you think I could?"

This time there was no mistaking the faint haziness in Seaforth's eyes. "God bless you," he said simply. "He is my friend—and I think you are the only one who can do anything for him."

Alice Deringham had in her a trace of greatness which was instinctive, and not the result of the training that had taught her serenity. So, though the man had not hidden his meaning, she made no protest nor asked any question.

"All this is new to me," she said; "but I will do the best I can."

Seaforth led her into a room where a dim light was burning. It was most of it in shadow, but she could see the still form on the bed, and for a moment or two nothing else. The face on the pillow was very white and hollow, the half-closed eyes had a curious glitter, while a lean hand was clenched upon the coverlet. Alice Deringham had seen very little of suffering of any kind, and nothing of sickness, and for a moment she stood motionless, horrified at the sight of what was left of the man who had parted from her on the verandah the incarnation of resolute virility. As she watched him he moaned a little, and the sound, which was scarcely human and suggested the cry of some unreasoning creature in pain, sent a thrill through her. Her eyes dimmed a little, and moving forward softly she laid a cool

palm on the flushed forehead.

"Don't you know me, Harry? I have come to take care of you," she said.

The man's eyes opened wider, and though it was evident that there was not complete comprehension in them he sighed as with a great contentment. Then they closed altogether as he turned his head a trifle on the pillow. The girl did not move, but stood stooping a little, and looking down at him with a great compassion, until a man who had been watching her nodded unseen to Seaforth as he also bent over the bed. He waited for almost a minute, and then straightened himself wearily as he spoke in a just audible whisper.

"Quiet at last, and sleep may come! Miss Deringham, I think?" he said.

The girl bent her head, and moved softly with him towards the door. "He knew me?" she said.

The doctor shook his head. "No—not altogether, I think. Still, he is quiet, and that is everything. Now I may be wanted—presently—and for a little there is nothing I can do, while Mr. Seaforth and I have reached our limits. If Alton opens his eyes, let him see you, and you will give him the draught yonder in an hour from now. It is of vital importance that he should take it. If he does not, tap on the door for me."

Alice Deringham bent her head again, and, when the doctor went out with Seaforth, sat down beside the bed. Her fatigue had gone from her, and though she had never done such things before, she gently drew the coverings higher about the man, and once ventured to raise his head a trifle and smooth down the pillow. Alton opened his eyes, and for a moment they seemed to follow her, but the gleam of understanding went out of them when she sat down again. Then he lay very still, and there was an oppressive quietness through which she could hear the crackle of the stove and the night wind moaning about the ranch. Alton's eyes were shut now, and the girl sat and watched him, too intent almost to wonder at herself. This was the man she had striven to despise, and yet she, who had never concerned herself with woman's work before, forgot her weariness as she waited to minister to him. It was but little help that she could offer—a gentle touch that checked a restless movement, a wrinkle smoothed from the pillow—but it was done with a great tenderness, for fibres in the girl's nature that had lain silent long awoke that night and thrilled.

Now and then Alton moved a little, and once or twice he moaned. The firewood snapped and crackled in the stove, the sigh of the pines came up in fantastic cadence across the clearing, and so while the dark angel stooped above the lonely ranch the night wore on.

There was, however, one man in Somasco ranch who needed sleep that night and found it fly from him. Deringham, who had spoken with the doctor, lay fully dressed in an adjoining room, listening to the ticking of his watch, and for any sound that might rise from beyond the cedar boarding where his daughter kept her

vigil. He had gathered that before the morning Alton of Somasco and Carnaby would either have laid aside his activities for ever or be within hope of recovery, and while Deringham dare not ask himself just then whether he desired the death of his kinsman, the suspense was maddening. If the flame of vitality that was flickering so feebly went out Carnaby would be his daughter's, and the burden which almost crushed him lifted. If it burned on there was at the best a long struggle with adversity before him, and at the worst disgrace, and possibly a prison.

A very little thing, he knew, would turn the scale, an effort made in delirium, a draught that struck too shrewdly on the fevered frame, and the issue, of stupendous importance as it was to both of them, lay in his daughter's hands. Seaforth and the doctor slept the sleep of exhaustion, and Deringham could have laughed with bitter mirthlessness at the irony of it all. Until she had quarrelled with her maid, Alice Deringham had apparently been incapable of putting on her own dresses unassisted, and it seemed that the grim, mysterious destiny which treated men as puppets and traversed all their schemes was the one factor to reckon with in that comedy. Deringham, however, found little solace in such reflections, and could not lie still, and rising, strained his ears to listen. There was nothing but the moaning of the wind, the ranch was very still, and the sound of his watch grew maddening. If Alton was sleeping now, Deringham knew it was ticking his last hold on good fame and fortune away. Twice he paced up and down the room with uncovered feet, and then, quivering a little when the floor creaked, opened the door that led into the one adjoining.

"Alice," he said, and, for he had thrown off the mask now, his daughter wondered at his face.

"Hush," she said almost sternly, and then moved very quietly away from the bed. Deringham came in and leaned upon the table beside her.

"The great question is still unanswered?" he said.

His daughter bent her head, and then looked at him steadily. "I think we shall know in an hour or two. Is it important to you?"

Deringham, who was not wholly master of himself, made a little grimace, and the girl glanced away from him with a curious shrinking. Under stress of fatigue and anxiety the veneer had worn off both of them, and in that impressive hour, when the spirit is bound most loosely to the clay, each had seen something not hitherto suspected of the other's inmost self. In the girl's case the sight had been painful, for all that was good in her had risen uppermost just then. In Deringham's there was very little but veneer, and craven fear and avarice looked out through his eyes.

"Yes," he said in a voice that was the harsher for its lowness; "and to you. I did not tell you, but if that man dies you will be the mistress of Carnaby."

Alice Deringham made a little half-contemptuous gesture of impatience, but

the colour showed in her cheek. “You are over-tired, father, or you would not have thought of that—just now.”

Deringham glanced at her curiously with an unpleasant smile. “You apparently did not comprehend me,” he said. “Would you be astonished to hear that Alton, who seems to have anticipated disaster, left you Carnaby by will?”

The girl rose and met the man’s gaze directly, though the colour had crept beyond her cheeks now. “No,” she said very quietly; “though I never thought of this. I know him better than ever you could do. But it is time I gave him the medicine, and you must go.”

Deringham did not move, but watched his daughter as she took up the glass and phial. “It is important that he should have the draught?” he said.

“Yes,” she said in a voice that thrilled a little as she stood very straight before him. “I think it would make all the difference between—a girl without a dowry, and the mistress of Carnaby.”

Then she pointed as it were commandingly towards the door, and Deringham went out with a white face, as though she had struck him upon it, while Alice Deringham shivered and sank down limply into the chair. She sat still for a moment with eyes that shone mistily and a great sense of humility, and then, rousing herself with an effort, moved towards the bed and touched the sick man gently. He opened his eyes as she did so, and there was no glitter in them now, but a dawning comprehension. He seemed to smile a little when she raised his head.

“You must drink this,” she said.

Alton made a gesture of understanding, and drained the glass, then let his head fall back, and feebly stretched out his hand until it touched her fingers. The girl did not move, and his grasp tightened suddenly.

“Hold me fast. I am slipping—slipping down,” he said.

Alice Deringham returned the pressure of the clinging fingers, and as she saw a curious unreasoning confidence creep into the haggard face her eyes once more shone through a gathering mistiness. “I will hold you fast,” she said.

“Yes,” said the sick man in a strained voice. “You will not let go. It’s five hundred feet to the river—in the dark below. I’m slipping, slipping—no holding in the snow.”

He ceased and looked up at her suddenly as though the fear had left him, and the girl said very softly, “Don’t you know me?”

“Yes,” said the man. “Of course. I was sliding back into the gully, but I knew you would help me.”

He stopped again, and the strained expression suddenly sank out of his eyes, while the girl flushed to the temples when they met her own.

“Now,” he said very softly, “I shall get better. Nothing can stop me. You will hold me fast, and not let go.”

He drew her towards him, and Alice Deringham, seeing that the brief flash of

reason was fading again, yielded to the feeble pressure, and sank to her knees holding fast the hot fingers that drew her hand to his breast. Then moved by an impulse swift and uncontrollable she bent a little farther and kissed him on the cheek. Alton said nothing, but opened his eyes and smiled at her, and then lay still.

For a space of minutes the girl dare scarcely breathe. Everything, she had been told, depended upon the sick man sleeping, and now he was very quiet. Then she raised her head and glanced at him. He had not moved at all, and his face was tranquil, but the hot fingers still clung to her hand. It was borne in upon her that she could in verity draw him back from the darkness he was slipping into, and with a great fear and compassion she held the hot fingers fast. There was no longer any snapping in the stove. The roar of the pines grew louder and the room grew cold, but while the minutes slipped by Alton slept peacefully, with the hand of the woman he had dispossessed in his, and she forgetting her fatigue watched him with eyes that filled with tenderness.

Still, she was not more than a woman, and at last the eyes grew hazy, while every joint ached. There was a horrible cramp in her shoulder, and to lessen it she moved a trifle so that her arm rested on the pillow. That was easier, and while she struggled with her weariness her head followed it, until it sank down close by Alton's shoulder. Then for five minutes she fought with her weakness, and was vanquished, for her head settled lower into its resting place, and her eyes closed.

It was some little time later when Seaforth came very softly into the room, and stopped with a little gasp. He could just see his comrade's face, and it was still and serene, but there was a gleam of red-gold hair beside it on the coverlet, and now a shapely arm was flung protectingly about the sick man's shoulder. The girl was also very still, and a little flush of colour crept into Seaforth's face as he stooped above her and saw the clasped hands.

"Thank God!" he said.

Then he moved backwards on tiptoe towards Deringham's room, but apparently changed his intention, and presently knocked at the doctor's door.

"Time's up, and I thought I'd better rouse you," he said. "Shall I go in, and look at your patient?"

The doctor rose up fully dressed, and Seaforth, who watched him enter the other room, nodded to himself, while the man he had left stooped above the sleeping pair and smiled with a great contentment. He had done what he could, but he knew that a greater power than any he wielded had driven back the dark angel which had stooped above the sick man's bed.

The sun was in the heavens when, finding other procedure unavailing, he gently touched the girl, and Alice Deringham rose silently and turned to him some moments later almost proudly with a soft glow in her cheeks, and a question in her eyes.

"Yes," said the doctor, smiling. "I fancy we have seen the worst."

Then the girl's strength went from her, and she caught at the rail of the bed, shivering, until the man touched her arm and led her from the room. "You have done a great deal, I think, and must sleep," he said.

It was afternoon when Alice Deringham resumed her watch, and she met Seaforth on her way to the sick man's room.

"I want to thank you, Miss Deringham. He is my partner, and the only friend I have," he said, with a slight huskiness.

The girl regarded him steadily. "You mean it?"

Seaforth winced a little. "Yes," he said.

Alice Deringham still fixed her eyes upon him. "And yet you distrusted me once?"

Seaforth's face was haggard, but it was less pale than it had been when he bent his head. "I can only throw myself on your mercy. I was more of a fool than usual then."

Alice Deringham laughed softly but graciously. "I could not blame you—and you may have been right," she said.

Then she passed into the room, and saw the light creep into Alton's eyes, which had apparently been fixed upon the door. Her blood tingled and her neck grew hot, for it was evident that while his mind was clear at last he remembered a little.

"The river is farther away now, but I want you still," he said.

CHAPTER XXIV
HALLAM TRIES AGAIN

There was frost in the valley when one clear morning Alton lay partly dressed in a big chair beside the stove at Somasco ranch. Outside the snow lay white on the clearing, and the great pines rose above it sombre and motionless under the sunlight that had no warmth in it, while the peaks beyond them shone with a silvery lustre against the cloudless blue. It was a day to set the blood stirring and rouse the vigour of the strong, and Alton felt the effect of it as he lay listening to the rhythmic humming of the saws. The sound spoke of activity, and raising himself a trifle in his chair he glanced at his partner with a faint sparkle in his eye.

"It's good to feel alive again," he said.

Seaforth's smile was somewhat forced, for he had reason for dreading the moment when his comrade would take an interest in the affairs of life again. There was something that Alton must know, and glancing at his hollow face he shrank from telling him.

The struggle had been a long one, for fever had once more seized Alton when he was apparently on the way to recovery, and there had been times when it seemed to Seaforth that two angels kept the long night watches with him beside his comrade's bed. One was terrible and shadowy, and stooped lower and lower and above the scarcely breathing form; the other bright and beautiful, an angel of tenderness and mercy, and if Seaforth was fanciful there were excuses for him. His endurance had been strained to the uttermost as day and night he kept his vigil, while the humanity of the girl who watched with him had become etherealized until her beauty was almost spiritual. The coldness had gone out of it, and now and then it seemed to the worn-out man that a faint reflection of a light that is not kindled in this world shone through the pity in her eyes. That spark was all that had been lacking, and Seaforth, who had doubted, bent his head in homage when it came, for it appeared to him that in sloughing off her pride and becoming wholly womanly the girl had reached out in her gentleness and compassion towards the divine. When at last the turning had been passed, and Alice Deringham went down with her father for a brief rest to Vancouver, she took Seaforth's limitless respect and gratitude with her, though it occurred to him that she had gone somewhat suddenly as though anxious to escape from the ranch. They were, however, to return that evening.

"I talked a good deal, Charley, when I was sick?" said Alton.

Seaforth smiled dryly. "There is no use in denying it, because you did," he said.

Alton's face grew clouded. "I'd have bitten my tongue right through if I'd known. There were one or two things I'd been through that would come back to me, things one would sooner forget."

Seaforth appeared thoughtful, but evidently decided that frankness was best. "There certainly were occasions when your recollections were somewhat realistic."

Alton groaned, and his face was a study of consternation. "Lord, what brutes we are," he said. "There was the trouble over the Bluebird claim down in Washington. Did I talk about that?"

Seaforth crossed over and sat down on the arm of his comrade's chair. His expression was somewhat whimsical, but there was a suggestion of tenderness in his eyes, for he saw the direction in which Alton's thoughts were tending, and that he should speak of such matters to him betokened the closeness of the bond between them.

"I don't think you need worry about it, Harry." he said.

"No?" said Alton sternly. "Are those the things you would like a dainty English lady who knows nothing of what we have to do now and then to hear?"

Seaforth smiled again as he said, "Miss Deringham struck me as an especially sensible young woman. Now you need not get savage, for I am speaking respectfully, but I fancy that Miss Deringham knows almost as much about the ins and outs of life as many bush ranchers of seventy. Young women brought up as she has been in the old country not infrequently do, and as it happened you mentioned nothing about that last affair in the bush; while though one or two incidents were somewhat startling, there are, I fancy, girls in the old country who would be rather inclined to look with approval on—the type of man she might have reason for supposing you to be. In any case, there was no word of any other woman."

Alton drew in his breath. "No," he said simply. "Thank God, there never was another."

Seaforth's expression perplexed his comrade, and his voice was a trifle strained. "Yes," he said. "That is a good deal to be thankful for, Harry."

Alton looked at him thoughtfully in silence for a space. Then he said, "I never asked you any questions about the old country, Charley, and I don't mean to now, but I have fancied now and then that you brought out some trouble along with you."

Seaforth glanced down at his comrade, smiling curiously. "I may tell you some time—but not now. You do well to be thankful, Harry, and do you believe that any woman would think the worse of you because you cut down the man who meant to take your life, you big, great-natured fool?"

Alton sighed. "Well," he said very slowly, "perhaps it is better over, because that and other things would have to be told; but though I had only an axe against

his pistol I can't get that man's face out of my memory."

Seaforth's face was somewhat awry just then. "You can tell your story without a blush—if you think it necessary, but I have not the courage to tell mine—and the silence may cost me very dear," he said.

Alton seemed a trifle bewildered. "When you can I'll listen, but there's nothing you could tell me would make any difference between you and me."

Seaforth laughed mirthlessly. "I'm glad of that, but it wasn't you I was thinking of just then," he said. "Still it seems to me that we are both a little off our balance this morning, and may be sorry for it afterwards."

Alton rose up and moved somewhat stiffly towards the window, where he leaned against the log casing, looking out greedily upon the sunlit valley. Then he limped back to the table and rested both hands upon it.

"I figure it's because I haven't used it, but this leg doesn't feel the same as it used to," he said. "Did it strike you that I walked kind of stiffly?"

Seaforth knew that the moment he feared had come, but he felt his courage fail him and turned his head aside. "I was not watching you," he said.

Alton, who appeared a trifle perturbed, sat down, and glanced at the partly finished meal upon the table disgustedly. "Tell them to take those things away, and bring me something a man can eat. Then I want my long boots and the nicest clothes I have."

"They will not be much use to you. You're not going out for another week, anyway."

Alton laughed a little. "Well," he said, "we'll see. Bring me a good solid piece of venison, and take those things away."

He made an ample meal, dressed himself with wholly unusual fastidiousness, and when Seaforth left him for a few moments strode out of the room. One leg felt very stiff and he clutched the balustrade a moment when he came to the head of a short stairway, then stiffened himself, and, putting all the weight he could on the limb that was least useful, stepped forward resolutely to descend it. His knee bent suddenly under him, he clutched at the rails, and missed them, reeled and lost his balance, and there was a crash as Seaforth sprang out of his room. He was in time to see his comrade rise and lean against the logs at the foot of the stairway very white and grim in face, and shivered a little as he went down.

"What's the meaning of this, Charley ?" said Alton with an ominous quietness. "I just put my weight on my left foot—and down I came."

Again Seaforth shrank from his task. "You were warned not to try to walk much for a week or two."

"Pshaw!" said Alton with sudden fierceness. "There's more than that."

Seaforth laid his hand compassionately upon his comrade's shoulder. "It had to come sooner or later—and I was afraid to tell you before. You will never walk quite as well as you used to, Harry."

Alton clutched the balustrade, and a greyness crept into his face. “I,” he said very slowly, “a cripple—all my life!”

Seaforth said nothing, and there was a silence for almost a minute until Alton slowly straightened himself. “Well,” he said quietly, “there is no use kicking—but this was to have been the best day of my life.”

Seaforth understood him and saw his opportunity. “I don’t think that will make any difference, Harry.”

Alton seemed to choke down a groan. “I had so little before,” he said.

Again Seaforth laid his hand upon his shoulder, “Shake yourself together, Harry. After all, I don’t think it is the things that one can offer which count,” he said. “Let me help you back.”

Alton resolutely shook off his grasp, and moved very slowly and stiffly towards the living-room. “No,” he said. “I’m not going back there any more. Get me a big black cigar, Charley—and then go right away.”

Seaforth did as he was bidden, for there were many things which demanded his attention, but he glanced at his comrade as he went out, and the sight of the gaunt figure sitting very grim and straight in a chair by the window would return long afterwards to his memory.

“He takes it badly—and a little while ago I should have thought he was right,” he said.

It was several hours later when Seaforth returned to the house, and found Mrs. Margery in a state of consternation.

“Where’s Harry?” he said.

“ ’Way down to the settlement,” said the woman. “Okanagan was fool enough to hoist him on a horse, and though I talked half-an-hour solid I couldn’t stop him.”

Seaforth smiled dryly. “I scarcely think you could. Harry is himself again. What has taken him to the settlement, anyway?”

The woman glanced at him contemptuously. “All men are fools,” said she. “He went to meet that girl from the old country, and find out his mistake.”

Seaforth said nothing, but went out in haste and saddled a horse, for although it had been apparent to him that there was no affection wasted between Alice Deringham and Mrs. Margery, her words had left him with a vague uneasiness.

In the meantime Alton dropped very stiffly from the saddle in front of Horton’s hotel, and, limping up the stairway, found the man who kept it upon the verandah.

“Glad to see you coming round, Harry; but you’re looking very white, and walking kind of stiff,” he said.

“Yes,” said Alton dryly. “I shall probably walk just that way all my life.”

Horton made no attempt to condole with him. He knew Alton tolerably well, and felt that any sympathy he could offer would be inadequate. “Well,” he said,

“here’s a letter Thomson brought you in from the railroad.”

Alton tore open the envelope, and read the message with a faint relief, for it was from Deringham, and stated that an affair of business would prevent him returning to Somasco for some little time. Then he remembered that to delay a question which must be asked would but prolong the suspense.

“I’m going through to the railroad, but the ride has shaken me, and I’ll lie down and sleep a while,” he said.

“Well,” said Horton, “you know best, but you look a long way more fit to be sitting beside the stove up there at the ranch. That was a tolerably bad accident you had?”

Alton glanced at him sharply, but his voice was indifferent as he answered. “Oh, yes, I came to grief bringing in a deer, and lay out in the frost a good while before they found me. Have you had many strangers round here?”

Horton nodded. “The bush is just full of them—looking for timber rights and prospecting round the Crown lands—Hallam’s friends, I think. There was one of them seemed kind of anxious about you lately.”

Alton’s eyes grew a trifle keener, but he was shaken and weary, and made a little gesture which seemed to indicate that he would ask questions later.

“You’ll give the horse a light feed, and let me know when supper’s on,” he said.

It was dark when he mounted with Horton’s assistance, and the horse plunged once or twice. Then it started at a gallop, and Alton had some difficulty in pulling it up, for the snow was beaten down and the trail was good. He had not been gone half-an-hour when Seaforth, whose horse was smoking, swung himself down before the hotel.

“Where’s Harry?” he said.

“On the trail,” said Horton. “I wanted to keep him, but he lit out a little while ago, and borrowed a rifle. What he wanted it for I don’t know, but he wouldn’t be lonely, anyway. One of the boys who was staying here pulled out for the railroad just before him.”

“Did you know the man?” asked Seaforth with unusual sharpness.

“No,” said Horton. “He was timber-righting, but I’d a kind of fancy I’d once seen somebody very like him working round Somasco.”

Seaforth said nothing further, but swung himself into the saddle and rode off at a gallop. He had been unsettled all day, and now it was with vague apprehensions he sent his heels home and shook the bridle.

In the meantime Alton was riding almost as fast, though the saddle galled him and he was stiff and aching. His senses also grew a trifle lethargic under the frost, but he knew there would be little rest for him until he reached Vancouver, and strove to shake off his weakness. The horse was, however, unusually restive, and would at times break into a gallop in spite of him where the trail was level, but

Alton, who fancied there was something troubling the beast, was more than a little dubious of his ability to mount again if he got out of the saddle. Until that day he had not ventured outside the ranch.

The shadowy pines flitted by him, here and there the moon shone down, and the drumming of hoofs rang muffled by the snow through a great silence which was curiously emphasized when twice a wolf howled. Still, plunging and snorting now and then, the beast held pluckily on while the miles melted behind them, and midnight was past when Alton, turning, half-asleep, in his saddle, fancied he heard somebody riding behind him. For a moment his fingers tightened on the bridle, but his hearing was dulled by weakness and the numbing cold, and pressing his heels home he rode on into the darkness.

It would probably have occurred to him at any other time that the beast responded with suspicious readiness, but his perceptions were not of the clearest just then, which was unfortunate, because the trail led downwards steeply through black darkness along the edge of a ravine. The rain had also washed parts of it away, and no ray of moonlight pierced the vaulted roof of cedar-sprays. The drumming of hoofs rolled along it, there was a hoarse growling far down in the darkness below, and Alton strove to rouse himself, knowing that a stumble might result in a plunge down the declivity. He could dimly see the great trunks stream past him on the one hand, but there was only a gulf of shadow on the other.

Suddenly a flash of light sprang up almost under the horse’s feet. The beast flung its head up, and next moment they were flying at a gallop down the winding and almost precipitous trail. Alton’s strength had not returned to him, and he set his lips, realizing the uselessness of it as he shifted his numbed hands on the bridle. Twice the horse stumbled, but picked up its stride again, and the man had almost commenced to hope they might reach the foot of the declivity when it stumbled once more, struck a young fir, and reeled downwards from the trail.

It all happened in a moment, but there was just time enough for Alton to clear his feet from his stirrups, and though he was never quite sure what next he did he found himself sitting in the snow, shaken and dazed by his fall, while the horse rolled downwards through the shadows beneath him. He heard the brushwood crackle, and then a curiously sickening thud as though something soft had fallen from a height upon a rock. After that there was an oppressive silence save for a faint drumming that grew louder down the trail.

Alton unslung the rifle which still hung behind him, and crawled behind a big hemlock that grew out of the slope. He could hear nothing but the increasing thud of hoofs for a while, and then there was a sound that suggested stealthy footsteps in the darkness up the trail. Alton crouched very still and waited, but the footsteps came no nearer, and then pitching up the rifle fired in their direction at a venture. The sound ceased suddenly, and while the great trunks flung back the concussion it was evident that the rider was coming on at a furious gallop, and Alton rising

sent out a hoarse cry, “Pull him before you come to the edge of the dip!”

The beat of hoofs sank into silence, and a shout came down. “Hallo. Is that you, Harry?”

“Yes,” said Alton. “Lead your beast down.”

It was five minutes later when Seaforth found him leaning against a tree with the rifle in his hand.

“What was the shooting for, and where’s your horse?” said he.

Alton appeared to laugh softly and venomously, and his voice jarred upon the listener. “Down there, and stone dead. The last drop’s most of a hundred feet,” he said.

“But how did he get there?” and Seaforth felt a little chill strike through him.

Alton grasped his arm, and his voice was harsher still. “This is the second time.”

“Good Lord!” said Seaforth, who understood him, huskily.

“Well,” said Alton, “I think the thing’s quite plain. If we could get down to the poor beast I figure we’d find something that had no business there under the girth or saddle. The rest is simpler—a little coal oil or giant powder, and—just at the turning yonder—a lariat across the trail. That man knows his business, Charley.”

“Good Lord!” said Seaforth once more. “It’s devilish, Harry. You’re not going to tell anybody, and repeat the mistake you made?”

“Yes,” said Alton grimly. “That’s just what I figure on doing.”

“But,” and Seaforth’s horror was evident, “he may try again. There are more than the Somasco ranchers who would be sorry if—he was successful—Harry.”

Alton laughed, but the grating cachination sent a shiver through his companion. “Yes,” he said, “I think he will, and that’s why I’m waiting. He may give himself away the third time, and then it will be either him or me.”

Seaforth stood silent for almost a minute. “If you would only listen to me—but of course you will not. Can’t you see that you are in the way of somebody who stands behind that man?”

“Yes,” and Alton’s smile was now quietly grim. “It don’t take much genius to figure out that. Before I’m through I’ll know just who he is, and all about him.”

Once more Seaforth was silent a space. Then he spoke very slowly. “Are you sure you’re wise?”

Alton gripped his comrade’s arm so that he winced with pain. “It’s the second time you’ve asked me that,” he said. “There will not be room for you and me in this province if you ask it me again.”

Seaforth shook his grasp off. “You are my partner, Harry, and the only friend I have. God send you safe through with it. Now, is there any use in looking for the fellow with the lariat?”

“No,” said Alton in his usual voice. “There isn’t. He would have been waiting up there ready to whip the thing away, and by this time he has doubled back down

the trail. If you met a man riding along quietly what could you do to him?"

"It's devilish," said Seaforth, as a fit of impotent anger shook him.

"Oh, yes," said Alton languidly. "Still, there isn't much use in slinging names, and I'm kind of tired. Help me up into your saddle, and lead the beast by the bridle. We'll head for Gordon's."

CHAPTER XXV
ALTON IS SILENT

There is a ridge of rising ground on the outskirts of Vancouver City where a few years ago a pretty wooden house stood beneath the pines. They rose sombrely behind it, but the axe had let in the sunlight between the rise and the water, and one could look out from the trim garden across the blue inlet towards the ranges' snow. To-day one would in all probability look for that dwelling in vain, and find only stores or great stone buildings, for as the silent men with the axes push the lonely clearings farther back into the forest the Western cities grow, and those who dwell in them increase in riches, which is not usually the case with the axeman who goes on farther into the bush again.

Still, one moonlight evening, when Alton waited upon its verandah, cigar in hand, the house stood upon the hillside, picturesque with its painted scroll-work, green shutters, colonnades of cedar pillars, and broad verandahs. Its owner was an Englishman who had prospered in the Dominion, and combined the kindliness he still retained for his countrymen with the lavish hospitality of the West. He knew Alton by reputation, and having business with him had made him free of his house when he inquired for Deringham, who was his guest, during the former's absence in the State of Washington. That was how Alton came to be waiting for dinner in company with a young naval officer. Deringham and his daughter had returned during the day, but they had driven somewhere with their hostess and not come back as yet.

Alton had seen Commander Thorne for the first time that day, but some friendships are made rapidly and without an effort, and he was already sensible of a regard for his companion. He was a quiet and unobtrusive Englishman, with the steadiness of gaze and decisiveness of speech which characterized those who command at sea, and had discovered that he had, notwithstanding the difference in their vocations, much in common with rancher Alton.

"Yes," he said. "It is very good of you, and if we stay at Esquimault I will come up and spend a day or two among the deer. Atkinson told us what a good time he had with you, but we were a trifle astonished to see the fine wapiti head he brought back with him."

There was a faint twinkle in the speaker's eyes which Alton understood, for Atkinson, who was not an adept at trailing deer, had shot more than a wapiti. Still, he was not the man to allude to the misadventures of his guest.

"He killed it neatly—a good hundred yards, and in the fern," he said.

"Well," said Thorne with a little laugh, "you were with him, and know best.

You had, however, a tolerably mixed bag on that occasion?"

Alton checked a smile. "A wapiti, a wood deer—and sundries."

Thorne laughed again. "I wonder if you have forgotten the hog? You see, Atkinson told us one night at mess, and I was inclined to fancy he came near including you in the bag."

Alton's face was suspiciously grave, but his answer strengthened the incipient friendship between the men.

"It is a little difficult for a stranger to distinguish things in the bush."

Thorne nodded. "You had Deringham and Miss Deringham staying with you?"

"Yes," said Alton. "They are connections of mine, and Miss Deringham did a good deal for me when I was sick a little while ago. You knew them in the old country?"

There was, though he strove to suppress it, something in his voice which caused the naval officer to glance at him sharply. "Oh, yes," he said. "I knew them—rather well."

The men's eyes met, and both were conscious that the words might have been amplified, while it was with a slight abruptness they returned to the previous topic and discussed it until there was a rattle of wheels in the drive. Then Forel, their host, came out upon the verandah, and there was a hum of voices as several people descended from the vehicle beneath.

Mrs. Forel came up the stairway first with Alice Deringham, and when a blaze of light shone into the verandah from the open door Alton saw the girl draw back for a second as her eyes rested upon his companion. She, however, smiled next moment, and Alton did not miss the slight flush of pleasure in the face of Commander Thorne. He was also to meet with another astonishment, for Deringham and Seaforth came up the stairway next together, and Thorne dropped his cigar when he and the latter stood face to face.

"Charley! Is it you?" he said.

Seaforth stood quite still a moment looking at him, and then, being possibly sensible that other eyes were upon him, shook hands.

"Yes," he said. "I heard the gunboat was at Esquimault, but did not expect to see you."

Then there was a somewhat awkward silence, and Alton fancied that both men were relieved when Mrs. Forel's voice broke in, "Jack, you will look after the men, but don't keep them talking too long. We picked up Mr. Seaforth, and there are one or two more of our friends coming."

Alton followed his host, wondering at what he had seen. It was evident that Miss Deringham had not noticed him, and he fancied she had been for a moment almost embarrassed by the encounter with Thorne. That and what the man had told him had its meaning. He had also noticed that when the latter greeted his comrade there had been a constraint upon both of them, but decided that what it

betokened did not concern him.

Returning he found Mrs. Forel waiting for him, and having been born in a Western city her conversation was not marked by English reticence or the restraint which is at least as common in the Canadian bush.

"Dinner is ready, and you will have to talk to me and the railroad man during it," she said. "I had thought of making you over to Miss Deringham until Commander Thorne turned up. Jack and he are great friends, but he didn't seem able to get over here, until he heard Miss Deringham was staying with us."

Alton laughed a little. "Now what am I to answer to that? Miss Deringham was very good to me."

The lady fancied that his merriment was a trifle forced. "You will just sit down, and eat your dinner like a sensible man," she said. "You are a Canadian and not expected to say nice things like those others from the old country. They don't always do it very well, and, though Jack is fond of them, they make me tired now and then."

Alton took his place beside her, and speedily found himself at home. Save for the naval officer and two English financiers the men present had a stake in the future of that country, and as usual neither they nor their womenkind considered it out of place to talk of their affairs. They were also men of mark, though several of them who now held large issues in very capable hands had commenced life as wielders of the axe. Most of them had heard of Alton of the Somasco Consolidated, and those who had not listened with attention when he spoke, for it was evident that they and the rancher had the same cause at heart. Alice Deringham noticed this, and, though he was not conscious of it, little Alton did that night escaped her attention.

She saw that while he rarely asserted himself, these men, whom she knew were regarded with respect as leaders of great industries, accepted him as an equal when they had heard him speak, but that caused her less surprise than the fashion in which he adapted himself to his surroundings. She had already discovered that he was a man with abilities and ambitions, but she had only seen him amidst the grim simplicity of the Somasco ranch, and now there was no trifling lapse or momentary embarrassments to show that he found the changed conditions incongruous. His dress was also different, but he wore his city garments as though he had worn nothing else, and there was, she fancied, an indefinite stamp of something which almost amounted to distinction upon him that set him apart from the rest. Even Seaforth wondered a little at his comrade, but both he and Alice Deringham overlooked the fact that Alton had not spent his whole life at Somasco ranch.

He, on his part, as the girl was quite aware, glanced often at her. She did not, however, meet his gaze, for once Alton was on the way to recovery, she had left the ranch somewhat hastily, and there had been as yet no defining of the relations

between them, while neither she nor her father were cognizant of the actual cause of his wound. In the meanwhile she made the most of Thorne, and by degrees Alton lost his grip of the conversation. He had never seen Alice Deringham attired as she was then, and, for his hostess had made the bravest display possible, the profusion of flowers, glass, and glittering silver which it seemed appropriate that she should be placed amidst, in a curious fashion troubled the man. This, he knew, was a part of the environment she had been used to, and he sighed as he thought of the sordid simplicity at Somasco. There was also Commander Thorne beside her, and the naval officer was one upon whom the stamp of birth and polish was very visible. This man, he surmised, would understand the thoughts and fancies which were incomprehensible to him, and was acquainted with all the petty trifles which are of vast importance to a woman in the aggregate.

Alton's heart grew heavy as he watched them, noticing the passing smile of comprehension that came so easily and expressed so much, and heard through the hum of voices the soft English accentuation which by contrast with his own speech seemed musical. He knew his value in the busy world, but he also knew his failings, and the knowledge was bitter to him then. There were so many little things he did not know, and he saw himself, as he thought the girl must see him—uncouth, which it was impossible for him to be, crude of thought, over-vehement or taciturn in speech, a barbarian. The misgivings had troubled him before, but they were very forceful now, and at last he was glad when Mrs. Forel smiled at him.

"You have been watching Miss Deringham, and neglecting me," she said.

For a moment Alton looked almost confused, and the lady laughed as she continued. "Very pretty and stylish, isn't she? Now we have pretty girls right here in Vancouver, but I fancy they can still give us points in one respect in the old country. You think that is foolish of me? Well, I wouldn't worry to tell me so; I think Commander Thorne could do it more neatly."

"He is apparently too busy," said Alton. "Still, I fancy if you asked him he would support me."

Mrs. Forel smiled mischievously, "Well, though one could scarcely blame you, jealousy wouldn't do you any good. Those two were great friends in the old country."

"That," said Alton, "is a little indefinite."

"Of course, but I don't know anything more," said his companion. "Lieutenant Atkinson, who knew them both, told me. Thorne wasn't rich, you see, but he comes of good people, and not long ago somebody left him all their money. Quite romantic, isn't it? Still, don't you think Miss Deringham would be thrown away upon anybody less than a baronet."

Alton did not answer, but his face grew somewhat grim as once more he glanced across at Thorne. This, he thought, was a good man, and he had all that

Alton felt himself so horribly deficient in. In the meanwhile Mrs. Forel was looking at Seaforth, who was talking to the wife of an English financier.

"I like your partner, and he is from the old country, too," she said. "Of course you know what he was over there?"

It was put artlessly, but Alton's eyes twinkled. "I'm afraid I don't, though I've no doubt Charley would have told me if I'd asked him," he said. "He is a tolerably useful man in this country, anyway, and that kind of contented me."

The lady shook her head at him reproachfully. "And I thought you were slow in the bush," said she. "Still, Thorne will know."

Alton fancied his hostess intended to be kind to him, but he was glad when the dinner was over and he gravitated with the other men towards Forel's smoking-room. There, as it happened, the talk turned upon shooting and fishing, and when one or two of the guests had narrated their adventures in the ranges, one who was bent and grizzled told in turn several grim stories of the early days when the treasure-seekers went up into the snows of Caribou. There was a brief silence when he had finished, until one of the Englishmen said:

"I presume things of that kind seldom happen now?"

"I don't know," said Seaforth, who spoke in the Western idiom. "We have still a few of the good old-fashioned villains right here in this country, and that reminds me of a thing which happened to a man I know. He was a quiet man, and quite harmless so long as nobody worried him, but generally held on with a tight grip to his own, and he once got his hands into something another man wanted. That was how the fuss began."

There was a little pause, during which Alton glanced bewilderedly at his comrade, and Deringham glanced round as he poured himself out a whisky and seltzer.

"It's not an uncommon beginning," said Forel. "What was the end?"

"There isn't any," said Seaforth, "but I can tell you the middle. One day the quiet man, who was living by himself way up in the bush, went out hunting, and as he had eaten very little for a week he was tolerably hungry. Well, when he had been out all day be got a deer, and was packing it home at night when he struck a belt of thick timber. The man was played out from want of food, the deer was heavy, but he dragged himself along thinking of his supper, until something twinkled beneath a fir. He jumped when he saw it, but he wasn't quick enough, and went down with a bullet in him. His rifle fell away from him where he couldn't get it without the other man seeing him, and he was bleeding fast, but still sensible enough to know that nobody would start out on a contract of that kind without his magazine full. It was a tolerably tight place for him—the man was worn out, and almost famishing, and he lay there in the snow, getting fainter every minute, with one leg no use to him."

Seaforth looked round as though to see what impression he had made, and

though all the faces were turned towards him it was one among them his eyes rested on. Deringham was leaning forward in his chair with fingers closed more tightly about the glass he held than there seemed any necessity for. His eyes were slightly dilated, and Seaforth fancied he read in them a growing horror.

"He crawled away into the bush?" said somebody.

"No, sir," said Seaforth, "he just wriggled into the undergrowth and waited for the other man."

"Waited for him?" said Forel.

"Yes," said Seaforth. "That is what he did, and when the other man came along peering into the bushes, just reached out and grabbed him by the leg. Then they both rolled over, and I think that must have been a tolerably grim struggle. There they were, alone, far up in the bush, and probably not a living soul within forty miles of them."

Seaforth stopped again and reached out for his glass, while he noticed that Deringham emptied his at a gulp and refilled it with fingers that seemed to shake a trifle.

"And your friend got away?" said somebody.

"No, sir," said Seaforth. "It was the other man. The one I knew had his hand on the other's throat and his knife feeling for a soft place when his adversary broke away from him. He did it just a moment too soon, for while he was getting out through the bush the other one dropped his knife and rolled over in the snow. He lay there a day or two until somebody found him."

Seaforth rose and moved towards the cigar-box on the table. "And that's all," he said.

"Dramatic, but it's a little incomplete, isn't it?" said the Englishman.

Seaforth smiled somewhat dryly, and once more glanced casually towards Deringham. "It may be finished by and by, and I fancy the wind-up will be more dramatic still," he said. "You see the man who would wait for his enemy with only a knife in his hand while his life drained away from him, is scarcely likely to forget an injury."

There was silence for several moments which was broken by a rattle, and a stream of whisky and seltzer dripped from the table.

"Hallo!" said Forel. "Has anything upset you, Deringham?"

Deringham stood up with a little harsh laugh, dabbing It the breast of his shirt with his handkerchief.

"I think the question should apply to my glass, but the room is a trifle hot, and my heart has been troubling me lately," he said.

Forel flung one of the windows open. "I fancy my wife is waiting for us, gentlemen, and I will be with you in a few minutes," he said.

Alton and Seaforth were almost the last to file out of the smoking-room, and when they reached the corridor the former turned upon his comrade with a glint in

his half-closed eyes.

"You show a curious taste for a man raised as you have been in the old country," he said. "Now what in the name of thunder made you tell that story?"

Seaforth smiled somewhat inanely. "I don't know; I just felt I had to. All of us are subject to little weaknesses occasionally."

Alton stopped and looked at him steadily. "Then there will be trouble if you give way to them again. And you put in a good deal more than I ever told anybody. Now you haven't brains enough to figure out all that."

Seaforth laughed good-humouredly. "It is possibly fortunate that Tom has," he said.

"Tom—be condemned," said Alton viciously, and Seaforth, seeing that he was about to revert to the previous question, apparently answered a summons from his host and slipped back into the smoking-room.

Alton waited a moment, and then moved somewhat stiffly towards a low stairway which led to a broad landing that was draped and furnished as an annex to an upper room. One or two of the company were seated there, and he hoped they would not notice him, for while he could walk tolerably well upon the level a stairway presented a difficulty. He had all his life been a vigorous man, and because of it was painfully sensitive about his affliction. Just then Mrs. Forel came out upon the landing, and when the girl she spoke to turned. Alton saw that Alice Deringham was looking down on him. For a moment there was a brightness in his eyes, but it faded suddenly, and while his knee bent under him he set his lips as with pain. Then he stumbled, and clung to the balustrade. For a moment he dare not look up, and when he did so there was a flush on his forehead which slowly died away as he saw the face of the girl.

She had also laid her hand as if for support upon the balustrade, for it was unfortunate she had not been told that one effect of Alton's injury would be permanent. At the commencement of their friendship she had been painfully aware of what she considered his shortcomings, but these had gradually become less evident, and something in the man's forceful personality had carried her away. Possibly, though she may not have realized it, his splendid animal vigour had its part in this—and now dismay and a great pity struggled within her. It was especially unfortunate that when Alton looked up the consternation had risen uppermost, for the man's perceptions were not of the clearest then, and he saw nothing of the compassion, but only the shrinking in her eyes.

His face grew a trifle grey as he straightened himself with a visible effort and limped forward, for he was one who could make a quick decision, while to complete his bitterness Thorne came up behind him and slipped an arm beneath his shoulder.

"You seem a little shaky, I'll help you up," he said. "An axe-cut? The effect will probably soon wear off."

Alton understood that Thorne was talking to cover any embarrassment he may have felt, but was not especially grateful just then. “No,” he said; “a rifle-shot.”

He fancied that Thorne was a trifle astonished, and remembered Seaforth’s story, but they had gained the head of the stairway now, and he looked at Alice Deringham as he added, “And the effect will not wear off.”

Thorne passed through with the others into the lighted room, and Alton stood silent before the girl. She was a trifle pale, and though the pity for him was there, it is possible that she had understood him, and she was very proud. Thus the silence that was perilous lasted too long, and her voice was a trifle strained in place of gentle as she said, “I am so sorry.”

Alton, who dared not look at her, now bent his head. “You are very kind—still, it can’t be helped,” he said. “I think Mrs. Forel is coming back for you. Somebody is going to sing.”

Their hostess approached the doorway, and Alice Deringham found words fail her as she watched the man, though she knew that the silence was horribly eloquent. It was Alton who broke it.

“You had better go in. I”—and he smiled bitterly—“will wait until the music commences and they cannot notice me.”

The girl could stay no longer, though at last words which would have made a difference to both of them rose to her lips, but Alton waited until he could slip into the room unnoticed, and heard very little of the music. During it Mrs. Forel managed to secure a few words with Thorne.

“You seem to have made friends with rancher Alton,” she said.

Thorne smiled a little. “Yes,” he said. “Of course I know little about him, but I think that is a man one could trust.”

The lady nodded, for he had given her an opportunity. “You know more about his partner?”

Thorne’s manner appeared to change a trifle, which Mrs. Forel of course noticed. “Yes,” he said.

The lady thoughtfully smoothed out a fold of her dress. “Well,” she said with Western frankness, “I want to know a little about him, too.”

Thorne smiled as he saw there was no evading the issue. “So I surmised from what your husband asked me. Seaforth was considered a young man of promise when I knew him in England, and his family is unexceptional. His father, however, lost a good deal of money, which presumably accounts for Charley having turned Canadian rancher.”

Mrs. Forel turned so that she could see her companion. “That is not what I mean, and I think I had better talk quite straight to you. Now I like Mr. Seaforth and Mr. Alton, too, and as Jack is mixed up in some business of theirs and they are going to stay down in Vancouver we shall probably see a good deal of them. Jack, however, is sometimes a little hasty in making friends, and I want to know

the other reason that brought Mr. Seaforth out from the old country."

"You fancy there is one?" Thorne said quietly.

"Yes. Lieutenant Atkinson made a little blunder one night when he spoke of him."

"Atkinson never had very much sense," Thorne said dryly. "I, however, fancied a man took his standing among you according to what he did in this country."

"Yes," said Mrs. Forel. "The trouble is that the man who has crossed the line once may do so again. Well, you see who these people are, and if he meets them here it means that I vouch for him."

Thorne sighed. "If Atkinson has blundered, I am afraid that I must speak. Now I don't think you need be afraid of Seaforth crossing that line again. He was not worse than foolish and somebody victimized him, but he has had his punishment and borne it very well—while if you knew the whole story you would scarcely blame him."

"And that is all you can tell me?"

"Yes," said Thorne, very quietly. "Still, I can add that if Charley ever comes back to the old country I—and my mother and sisters—would be glad to welcome him."

"That I think should be sufficient," said Mrs. Forel, who was acquainted with Commander Thorne's status in the old country.

It was a little later when Alton glanced towards Thorne, who was talking to Alice Deringham. "I could get on with that man," he said. "You knew him, Charley?"

"Oh, yes," said Seaforth with a curious expression. "He is a very good fellow, and has distinguished himself several times. Somebody left him a good deal of money lately."

Alton seemed to sigh. "Well," he said slowly, "he is to be envied. They wouldn't have much use for him in your navy if he was a cripple."

The party was breaking up before Alton had speech with Alice Deringham again, and as it happened the girl had just left Commander Thorne. Alton spoke with an effort as one going through a task. "I never thanked you yet for what you did for me," he said.

The girl smiled, though her pulses were throbbing painfully. "It was very little."

"No," said Alton gravely. "I think I should not have been here now if you had not taken care of me, and I'm very grateful. Still"—and he glanced down with a wry smile at his knee, which was bent a trifle—"it was unfortunate you and the doctor did not get me earlier. There are disadvantages in being—all one's life—a cripple."

As fate would have it they were interrupted before Miss Deringham could

answer, and Alton limped down the stairway very grim in face, while Thorne appeared sympathetic when he overtook him. “That wound of yours is troubling you?” he said.

“Yes,” said Alton dryly; “I’m afraid it will. Now I was a trifle confused when you helped me. Did I tell you how I got it?”

Thorne remembering Seaforth’s story answered indifferently, “I concluded it was an axe-cut.”

He passed on, but Alton had quick perceptions, and made a little gesture of contentment. “He is almost good enough, anyway,” he said wearily.

When all the guests had gone Deringham came upon his daughter alone. “I noticed Mr. Alton was not effusive,” he said.

“No,” said the girl languidly, though there was a curious expression in her eyes. “I do not remember that he told much beyond the fact that he would be a cripple—all his life. He mentioned it twice.”

CHAPTER XXVI
WITHOUT COUNTING THE COST

There had been a revival of speculation in industrial enterprise, and it was unusually late at night when Miss Townshead rose wearily from the table she had been busy at. Her eyes ached, her fingers and arms were cramped, but that did not distress her greatly, for Townshead needed many comforts, and she was earning what would have been considered in England a liberal salary. It was very quiet in the room at the top of the towering building, where, however, another young woman, who as it happened was jealous of her companion's progress, still sat writing, and a light blinked in the adjoining one across the passage in which one of the heads of the firm would probably remain most of the night. Trade is spasmodic in the West, and those who live by it work with feverish activity when the tide is with them.

"You're through?" said Miss Holder. "Well, if you can wait ten minutes I'll come along with you."

Nellie Townshead was not especially fond of her companion, but at that hour the streets were lonely, and she sat down again when she had put on her hat and jacket. While she waited a little bell began to ring, and Miss Holder rose with an impatient exclamation.

"Get your pencil, Nellie," she said, as she took the telephonic receiver down from the hook.

Miss Townshead took a sheet of paper from a case, and waited until her companion spoke again. "Oh, yes, I'm here. A little late to worry tired folks, isn't it? No. Mr. Hallam's away just now. Wire from Somasco just come in—and we're to let him have it as soon as we can. Oh, yes, I understand you. 'Platinum, galena, cyanide, Alton, oxide. In a vise.' You've got that, Nellie? Do I know when Hallam will get it? No, I don't. Good-night."

Now a man would probably have at once enclosed the message in an envelope, but a Western business lady not infrequently takes a kindly interest in the private concerns of her employer, especially if they are not quite clear to her. Accordingly Miss Holder sat down and read over the message, after which she shook her head.

"I wonder what it's all about, and I don't like that Hallam," she said. "He's an insect. A crawling one with slimy feet, and to pin a big diamond in front of one as he does is horrible taste. Give me the book, Nellie. It reads like our cypher. Oh, yes. 'Instructions to hand. No legal improvements done and claim unrecorded. Will relocate.' Now we've nothing that silver stands for, and it reads quite straight. 'Will relocate the silver claim as soon as prospecting is possible. Alton

cannot take action.' He means he's got him in a vise."

Miss Holder crossed the landing and tapped at the door of the adjoining room, while Nellie Townshead walked to the window and looked down on the city. It stretched away before her, silent for once under its blinking lights, sidewalk and pavement lying empty far down beneath the mazy wires and towering buildings, but she saw little of it as she glanced towards the block where the Somasco Consolidated had their offices. The message had troubled her, for she recalled many kindnesses shown to her and her father by the owners of Somasco ranch. She also owed one of them a reparation, for she had seen the man who miscarried the message in Vancouver, and knew that the delay, when the ranch was sold, was not Alton's fault. Nor had she forgiven Hallam for the greed and cunning which had effected her father's ruin, and now it seemed that he held Alton of Somasco and his partner in his grip. That there was treachery at work she felt sure, and grew hot with indignation as she determined that if she could prevent it neither Alton—nor his partner—should suffer.

It might have occurred to a man that what she contemplated implied a breach of confidence, but Nellie Townshead was a high-spirited girl, and only realized that Hallam was about to wrong her friends just then.

There would also be no difficulty in warning him, for Alton had taken over the office of the Somasco Consolidated on his arrival at Vancouver, and while she considered the question a voice came out of the adjoining room.

"Hallam's at Westminster, and it will have to wait until he comes round in the morning. Don't stay any longer, and take Miss Townshead with you. It's later than I fancied."

Five minutes afterwards the two girls went out into the silent streets, and Miss Townshead, who left her companion at the corner of one of them, turned round again and walked back somewhat slowly part of the way she had come. She did not notice that Miss Holder had also turned and was watching her, for she realized for the first time that what she was about to do admitted of misconception. Still, remembering how Hallam had tricked her father, she went on, and only stopped for a moment when she entered the great building in the upper part of which was the office of the Somasco Consolidated. It was very silent. The rooms which had hummed with voices all day long were shut, and one blinking light emphasized the darkness of the big empty corridor. Scarcely a sound reached her from the city, but she had seen that two windows high up were lighted, and went up the stairway resolutely. The warning could be delivered in less than a minute, and she fancied that Alton would not be alone, while she knew that the conventionalities as understood in England are almost unknown in the West.

As it happened Alton, who, though Miss Townshead did not know this, lived in the room adjoining his office, was busy about the stove just then. In those days, when Vancouver had more inhabitants than it could well find room for and its

hotels overflowed, single men taking their meals in the public restaurants lived as best they could, over their stores and offices, or in rude cabins and shanties flung up anywhere on the outskirts of the city, while it is not improbable that a good many of them live in much the same fashion now. Alton had, however, missed the six o'clock supper, for reasons which the sheaf of papers on his desk made plain, and was then engaged in cooking something in a frying-pan. A portable cedar partition partly shrouded the little table set out with a few plates, and the stove, while his old worked-deerhide slippers and loose jacket indicated that the man was just then not so much in his place of business as at home. He had been busy in the city and at his desk for ten hours that day, for the Somasco products were becoming known, and men had been toiling in the valley, driving roads, and building a new sawmill in the frost and snow. Part of Alton's business in the city was to raise the money that was needed to maintain them, and already he could foresee that if the time of prosperity was delayed it might go hardly with the Somasco Company.

He had laid down the frying-pan and was shaking a pot of strong green tea when there was a tapping at the door, which opened while he wondered whether there would be time for him to alter his attire. Then he stood up with the teapot in his hand, and made a little whimsical gesture of dismay as Miss Townshead stood before him. She coloured a trifle, but took courage at Alton's soft laugh, for it was clear that he was as yet only concerned about the plight in which she had found him. Alton, she remembered, had not been brought up conventionally in England, and she knew his wholesome simplicity.

"I'm very glad to see you, but if I'd known who was there I'd have fixed the place up before you got in," he said. "Sit right down beside the stove."

Nellie Townshead stood still a moment, but she was tired and the night was cold, so she took the chair he drew forward, and then shook her head as he laid a cup before her.

"It's Horton's tea, and bad at that, but it will help us to fancy ourselves back in the bush," he said. "Your father is keeping all right?"

The girl made a little gesture of impatience. "Yes," she said. "I am almost afraid I am doing wrong, but I felt I must warn you. Now don't ask me any questions, but take it as a fact that Hallam has sent up somebody to locate your silver as soon as it can be done. He seems to consider he has you at a disadvantage because you have not put in your legal improvements."

Alton thrust his chair back and clenched one hand, while the girl noticed with relief that he had almost forgotten her.

"Hallam," he said, and stopped a moment, while his voice was harsh as he continued, "going to restake my claim. Well, there is time still in hand and he can't do it yet. Now——"

The girl stopped him with a gesture. "You must ask me nothing," she said.

"You can understand what I told you?"

A slow glow crept into Alton's eyes. "Oh, yes, it's all quite plain," he said. "When you find a mineral claim you have got to record it in fifteen days, or it goes back to the Crown, and I couldn't do that, you see, because I was lying for weeks at Somasco. Well, while the claim is unrecorded anybody can jump it, but I couldn't get back up there through the snow, and didn't figure Hallam's man knew just where to find it. Now you've told me we'll get in ahead of him yet, and the man he sends up there will have his journey for nothing. Do you know that what you have done means just everything to Somasco?"

Alton stopped suddenly, and there was consternation in the girl's face as she glanced at him.

"I think there's somebody coming," he said slowly.

Now there was still just time for Alton to have shut the outer door, but he remembered for the first time that the girl's visit at that hour might be considered unusual, and it appeared probable that she would not approve of the action, while having as yet only dealt with men, his usual quick decision deserted him. He glanced once from his companion to the partition and the door of the inner room, and shook his head. Then he sprang forward towards the outer door, forgetting that he was lame. That, however, did not alter the fact, and as he stumbled a little the tray on the table he struck went down with a crash, scattering its contents about the room, while before he reached the door it swung open and a man stood smiling in the opening.

"Hello! I seem to have scared you," he said. "Got anything you don't want folks to know about in here?"

The stranger moved forward another step, and then stopped abruptly with a little gasp as his glance took in the overturned tray, scattered crockery, and the rigid figure of the girl standing with a flushed face beside the stove. Then he glanced at Alton, and noticing the old jacket and deerhide slippers, appeared to have some difficulty in checking a smile, for this was a young man who knew nothing of the simple strenuous life of the bush, but a good deal about the underside of that of the cities.

"I'll come back in business hours to-morrow," he said. "Sorry to disturb you, but I hadn't a minute all day, and there was a question I figured we could best talk over quietly."

"Then you had better start in with it," said Alton quietly. "This lady, who came here on business, is just going."

"Of course," said the stranger. "I think I have had the pleasure of meeting her."

He turned with a little smile which broadened into a grin Alton found intolerable, for there was a patter of feet on the stairway, and when he looked round except for himself and Alton the room was empty.

“The fact is I’m awfully sorry,” he said. “But how was I to know?”

The veins were swollen on Alton’s forehead, and his eyes half-closed. “Now,” he said sternly, “I don’t want to hear any more of that. I think I told you the lady you saw here came in a few minutes ago on an affair of business.”

It was unfortunate that Alton had a difficult temper and his visitor no discretion, for there are men in whom Western directness degenerates into effrontery.

“Of course!” said the latter. “My dear fellow, you needn’t protest. Considering the connection between her employers and Hallam, who is scarcely a friend of yours, that is especially likely.”

Alton stood very straight, looking at the speaker in a fashion which would have warned any one who knew him. “I figure you can’t help being a fool, but I want to hear you admit that you’re sorry for it,” he said.

He spoke very quietly, but it was unfortunate for both of them that the other man, who was growing slightly nettled, did not know when to stop.

“I told you I was sorry—I looked in at an inopportune time—already, and I’ll forget it right off,” he said. “Now that should content anybody, because there are folks who would think the story too good to be lost.”

He got no further, because Alton stepped forward and seized him by the collar, which tore away in his grasp. Then there was a brief scuffle, a scattering of papers up and down the room, and Alton stood gasping in the doorway, while his visitor reeled down the first flight of stairs and into the wall at the foot of it. Alton glanced down at him a moment, and seeing he was not seriously hurt, flung the door to with a bang that rolled from corridor to corridor through the great silent building, before he turned back into the disordered room with a little laugh.

“I’ve fixed that fellow, anyway, and now I’d better go through those plans until I simmer down,” he said.

He picked up the overturned table and his scattered supper, while it was characteristic of him that when an hour later he rolled up a sheet of mill-drawings in a survey plotting of the Somasco valley, he had forgotten all about the incident, which was, however, not the case with the other man. In another twenty minutes he was also fast asleep, and because men commence their work betimes in that country, had disposed of several car-loads of Somasco produce before he breakfasted next morning. During the day he noticed that some of the younger men he met smiled at him curiously, but attached no especial meaning to it. Alton had taught himself to concentrate all his faculties upon his task, and he worked in the city as he had done in the bush, with the singleness of purpose and activity that left no opportunity of considering side issues. He had also, as usual, a good deal to do: buyers of dressed lumber, cattle, and ranching produce to interview; shippers of horses to bargain with: railroad men and politicians to obtain promises of concessions from, and men who had money to lend to interest. The latter was the

most difficult task, and now and then his face grew momentarily grave as he remembered the burdens he had already laid upon his ranch and the Somasco Consolidated.

"Still, what we're working for is bound to come, and we'll hold on somehow until it does," he said to Forel, who occasionally remonstrated with him. "When you've helped me to put the new loan through I'll bring Charley or the other man down, and go up and relocate the claim. After the late snowfall nobody could get through the ranges now, but Tom and I could make our way when it wouldn't be possible to any of Hallam's men."

Possibly because he had been successful hitherto, Alton was slightly over-sanguine, and apt to make too small allowance in his calculations for contingencies in which human foresight and tenacity of purpose may not avail. It happened in the meanwhile, though he was, of course, not aware of this, that Deringham had an interview with Hallam in the smoking-room of the big C.P.R. hotel. They did not enter it together, for Deringham was sitting there when Hallam came in, about the time the Atlantic express was starting, which accounted for the fact that there was nobody else present. Deringham appeared a trifle too much at his ease, though his face was pale, for he had not departed from veracity when he informed Forel that his heart had troubled him after listening to Seaforth's story. He nodded to Hallam, and picked out a fresh cigar from the box upon the table before he spoke.

"It is fine weather," he said.

"Oh, yes," said Hallam dryly. "Still, I guess you didn't ask me to come here and talk about the climate."

"No," and Deringham glanced at his cigar. "I meant to tell you that the little speculation you recently mentioned does not commend itself to me. In fact, I have decided that we can have no more dealings of any description together."

"No?" said Hallam, with a little brutal laugh. "Dollars running out?"

Deringham glanced at him languidly. "As you know, that is not the reason. Now I do not ask for a return of the money you obtained from me—but I want the thing stopped immediately."

Hallam poured out a glass of wine. "You will have to put it straight."

"Well," said Deringham, "if you insist. I am sincerely sorry I ever saw or heard of you. You, of course, remember the conditions on which I made that deal with you. I desired Mr. Alton kept away from Somasco—for a time, and now I want a definite promise from you that he will be free from any further molestation."

"Then," said Hallam, with a grin, "what's your programme if I don't agree? You would put the police on to me?"

"No," said Deringham, making the best play he could, though he realized the weakness of his hand. "That would not appear advisable—or necessary. It would

be simpler to warn my kinsman."

Hallam laid his hand upon the table, and Deringham noticed that it was coarse and ill-shaped, but suggested a brutal tenacity of grasp.

"Bluff, with nothing behind it. You don't take me that way," he said. "Now I'll put my cards right down in front of you. Alton is not a fool, and you couldn't tell him anything he doesn't know already. The trouble is, he can prove nothing. He has a tolerably short temper, and one day he 'most hammered the life out of another man in the Somasco mill. That man didn't like him before, and it's quite possible he fell foul of Alton after it, but where does that take in me? Got hold of that, haven't you? Well, then, there's just this difference between you and me. I could tell Alton one or two things about you he didn't know!"

"I would be willing to take my chance of his believing you," said Deringham.

Hallam laughed. "For a man of business you have a plaguy bad memory. Now it seems to me quite likely that the man I talked about has had quite enough of fooling with Alton, and we'll let what you asked for go at that, because there's something else we're coming to. There was a cheque you gave me, and I had who it was drawn by and payable to put down on the slip when I passed it through my bank. Now I've got that slip, and after I'd had a talk with him, Alton wouldn't wonder what you gave me all those dollars for."

Deringham was silent almost a minute, for he knew his opponent had seen the weak point. Then he said, "If I admitted that you were right?"

Hallam raised his big hand, and pressed his thumb down slowly and viciously on the table. "It don't need admitting. I've got you there," he said. "Still, I don't know that I want to squeeze you. Well, I once kept Alton out of Somasco to please you, and now I want you to keep him right here in Vancouver for a while."

"I could not do it."

"Well," said Hallam, grinning, "if you couldn't, I figure your daughter could."

Deringham had all along been struggling with a sense of disgust, and now his anger mastered him. It was, however, the rage of a weak man which is not far removed from fear.

"You infernal scoundrel," he said.

Hallam laughed brutally. "That may do you good, and it makes no difference to me," he said. "I want Alton to stop here just three weeks from to-day. He'll stay without pressing for two of them, I think—and you've got to keep him during the third one. There's nothing going to hurt him, but it wouldn't be wise to fool things, you understand?"

He took up his hat as he spoke, and moved towards the door, while Deringham's eyes blazed when it closed behind him.

"Damn him!" he said, almost choked with impotent fury, and then sat down limply with a face that grew suddenly blanched. His hand shook as he seized his glass, and some of the wine he needed was spilled upon the table, for his eyes

grew dim as the faintness came upon him. Deringham had been recommended a rest from all excitement and business anxieties before he sailed from England, and passion was distinctly injudicious considering the condition of one of his organs.

CHAPTER XXVII
THE FORCE OF CALUMNY

As Hallam had surmised, one or two affairs of importance detained Alton in Vancouver. The winter had been exceptionally rigorous, and he knew that the claim was guarded securely by frost and snow. Having also, he fancied, effectually silenced his indiscreet visitor by flinging him down-stairs, he thought no more about that affair, and spent one or two evenings pleasantly at Forel's house, where Alice Deringham greeted him with slightly reserved cordiality.

She fancied she understood his reticence on the memorable evening when he had stumbled on the stairway, and was not altogether displeased by it. He had, it seemed, been over-sensitive, for he was but slightly lame, while she had reasons for surmising that he would realize there was no great necessity for the self-sacrifice in time. Alice Deringham was not unduly vain, but she knew her power, and Alton had in his silence betrayed himself again and again. Still, it seemed only fitting that he should make the first advances, now the moment when she might have done so had passed. She also fancied she understood the motive which prompted his answer when her father spoke to him respecting Carnaby.

"I can't go over now," he said. "Your lawyers and agents can look after the place a little longer, and I needn't worry if you're content with them. Anyway, all of it does not belong to me and we will see what we can fix up between us when I go over by and by."

This was pleasant hearing to Deringham, who commenced to hope that he would be able to give a satisfactory account of his stewardship when the time came, and winced at the recollection of the folly which had placed him in Hallam's grasp. Of late his health had given way again, and that served as an excuse for remaining at Vancouver, which he had scarcely the courage to leave.

Affairs were in this condition when Miss Deringham sat listening to the conversation of other visitors in the house of a friend of Mrs. Forel's one afternoon. Now and then a veiled allusion reached her, and at last she glanced inquiringly at her hostess.

The lady smiled deprecatingly and shook her head. "It is really indiscreet of Helen, but she seems to believe it is true," she said. "These things do happen, even in the old country."

Alice Deringham laughed. "I am afraid I cannot controvert you if that is uncomplimentary, because I don't know what you are alluding to."

Her hostess looked thoughtful. "Then you haven't heard it yet?" she said. "Well, I am not the one to tell you, and it is quite possible they haven't got the

story correctly."

Miss Deringham was interested, but she asked no more questions, and had changed her place when she once more heard a subdued voice she recognized behind a great lacquered screen.

"One would be sorry for Hettie Forel, but her husband was always a little unguarded. Opened his house to everybody, you know."

"It was the big bushman I saw there?" said another person, and Alice Deringham felt a curious little quiver in her fingers as she waited the answer.

"Yes. Hettie will feel it. She made such a fuss of him, but it mayn't have been his fault altogether. He is quite a good-looking man, if he is a trifle lame, and the girl may have thrown herself at him. They sometimes do."

Alice Deringham set her lips and turned her head away from her companion as one of the voices continued. "Hettie has not heard it yet, and Tom did not seem sure about it when he told me. In fact, Forel brought the man over to see us the night before, but it is quite evident now the girl had been living there. Yes, Tom heard he had rooms behind his office."

Miss Deringham had recovered her outward serenity, and the flush had faded from her face, leaving it very colourless as she turned to her companion.

"You heard that woman?" she said.

The lady beside her nodded, though there was a little pink tinge in her cheeks. "I am sorry that you did, my dear."

Alice Deringham stood up, and looked down at her with a sparkle in her eyes. "I know," she said, "that it cannot be true."

"We must hope so," said her companion, who appeared distinctly uncomfortable. "Still, the story is being told all over the city, and several of the houses Forel took the man to are closed against him already."

Alice Deringham seemed to shiver a little. "But—it is impossible."

Her companion shook her bead. "My husband is a member of the company which employed Miss Townshead, and as the man's business affairs were antagonistic to theirs she was dismissed immediately."

Alice Deringham found it very difficult to conceal the effect of this last blow, and was turning away when two women rose from a divan behind the screen. "The tea is cold. Shall I ask for some more for you?" said one of them. "Pleased to see you again, Miss Deringham."

She got no further, for the girl, who looked her full in the face, passed on, and the other woman flushed a trifle.

"I'm afraid she must have heard you," said somebody. "Miss Deringham is, I believe, a connection of Alton's, and Hettie Forel hinted there was something more than that between them. It would be an especially suitable match because of some property in the old country."

The lady she spoke to smiled somewhat sourly. "Then one would be a trifle

sorry for the rancher," she said.

It cost Miss Deringham a good deal to talk to her hostess until she could depart without attracting attention, and she walked back to Forel's house with a blaze in her eyes. As yet she could not think connectedly, for the astonishment had left no room for more than vague sensations of disgust and anger and a horrible rankling of wounded pride. Mrs. Forel as it happened was busy, and the girl slipped away to a room that was seldom occupied and sat there in the gathering darkness staring at the fire. The story was, she strove to persuade herself, utterly impossible, for she had probed the man's character thoroughly, and seen that it was wholesome through all its crudities—and yet it was evident the horrible tale must have some foundation, because otherwise refutation would be so simple.

Almost incredible as it was, the belief that it was borne out by fact was forced upon her, and too dazed to reason clearly she shrank with an overwhelming sense of disgust. She had, it seemed, wilfully deceived herself, and the man was, as she had fancied at the beginning, without sensibility or refinement, brutal in his forcefulness, and swayed by elementary passions. Then she writhed under the memory of the occasions on which she had unbent somewhat far to him, and the recollection of two incidents in the sickroom stung her pride to the quick; while when the booming of a gong rolled through the house, she rose faint and cold with an intensity of anger that for the time being drove out any other feeling. It would have gone very hardly with Alton had chance afforded her the means of punishing him just then.

As fate would have it the opportunity was also given her, for that evening Deringham, who had heard nothing of the story, was able to secure a few minutes alone with his daughter. He was, she noticed, looking unusually pale and ill, and that reminded her that he owed all his anxieties to Alton.

"Our kinsman is going back to Somasco very shortly, and then on into the ranges. I wish he could be prevented," he said.

The girl laughed a little. "I think it would be difficult to prevent Mr. Alton doing anything he had decided on."

"Yes," said Deringham. "He can be exasperatingly obstinate, but—and I put it frankly—he might listen to you. The journey he contemplates would be apt to prove perilous at this season."

Alice Deringham looked at her father with a smile the meaning of which he could not fathom. He did not know that she had of late been disturbed by unpleasant suspicions concerning his connection with Hallam.

"I fancy you are mistaken. You are of course influenced by a desire for his safety?"

Deringham winced, for he recognized the tone of sardonic scepticism, but he was horribly afraid of Hallam, and could not afford to fail.

"Well," he said, with a gesture of weariness, "I am afraid I must make an

admission, I am hemmed in by almost overwhelming anxieties, and I have come to no understanding yet with Alton respecting Carnaby. Now if disaster overtook him in the ranges it would entail an investigation of the Carnaby affairs, and the withdrawal of a good deal of money from my companies, which would seriously hamper me. I have once or twice had to slightly exceed my duties as trustee, and Alton would approve of steps I have taken which a lawyer or accountant would consider irregular. Of course, if you had any knowledge of business I could make it more clear to you, but I can only tell you that I am anxious about Alton's safety for my own sake as well as his."

Alice Deringham turned towards him with a trace of impatience. "We may as well be honest, and I fancy Mr. Alton is used to risks," she said quietly. "Whether he encounters more than usual just now or otherwise is absolutely no concern of mine."

Deringham saw the change in her and wondered, but resolved to profit by it.

"I want him kept here a little longer. It is important to me," he said,

The girl saw the hand of Hallam in this, and surmised that it would not be to Alton's advantage if he postponed his journey, but she was vindictively bitter against him then, and glanced at her father inquiringly. It was evident that he was anxious and ill, and she was sensible of a pity that had yet a trace of contempt in it for him.

"Still, I do not see how I could induce him to remain," she said.

"Well," said Deringham slowly, "there is a way. Forel will be here in a minute —but if you would listen to me."

Deringham seemed to find a difficulty in commencing, and there was a curious expression in his restless eyes, while once or twice he stopped and proceeded somewhat inconsequently. He had made tools of a good many men and befooled the public without any especial scruples, but there was a shred of pride left him, and this was the first time he had stooped to drag his daughter into his schemes. His story lacked plausibility, and the girl was not deceived, but he was her father, and it was his cause she was asked to further against the man who had humiliated her and dispossessed him. She glanced away from him when he had finished, but her voice was quietly even.

"I think I shall be sorry for it ever afterwards, but I will do what you ask," she said.

Deringham, who was slightly bewildered by something in her attitude, sighed with relief, and then turned with the grotesque resemblance of a smile in his face to greet Forel, who came in.

"Gillard has been called away south on business and has sent me word he can let me have the places at the opera-house for both nights," he said. "No doubt you have seen the great man in England with his regular company, but a treat of the kind is appreciated here, and Gillard bought up a row of places, the best in the

house. My wife is wondering who she should ask, and would like to know if Miss Deringham has any preference."

Deringham glanced at his daughter, and then smiled at his host. "One feels a little diffident about returning a favour at somebody else's expense, but my kinsman Alton was very kind to us in the bush," he said.

Forel appeared a trifle embarrassed, and Alice Deringham felt her neck grow warm as she watched him. "We can talk about it later, but I scarcely think Mr. Alton would come just now if he was asked," he said.

The girl turned away, for she could comprehend Forel's discomfiture, while as they followed him her father touched her.

"Get Mr. Alton there on the second night, and that is all I ask," he said.

It was two days later, when Alton returned to his office in a somewhat uncertain temper. He had called at Forel's house the previous evening, and been informed that Mrs. Forel was not at home, though the blaze of lights and music made it evident that she was entertaining a good many guests. He had also waited a considerable time for a banker who had been apparently willing to make him certain advances a few days earlier, and when he came to complete the transaction, raised wholly unexpected difficulties. Afterwards he called upon a dealer in tools and sawmill machinery, who, after professing his willingness to deal with him on usual easy terms, demanded a cheque with the order. Alton fancied he recognized the hand of Hallam in this, but there was also something else which troubled him. Some of the men he had business with had been a trifle abrupt in their greetings, and others smiled sardonically when they saw him.

As he strode down the corridor the keeper of the building signed to him. "There was a young man here asking for you," he said. "Told me he was Mr. Townshead, and he'd be back again."

Alton had scarcely reopened his office when a produce broker he had dealings with came in. "I've worked off the first two car-loads, and you can send some more along," he said. "Now, it's not quite my business, but if you'll not stand out about the usual commission I can put you on to a man who wants a hundred fat cattle."

"It's a deal," said Alton, glancing thoughtfully at his visitor, whom he considered an honest man. "Now I think you know a good deal about all that goes on in this city?"

"Oh, yes," said the other man, "I have to. Glad to be of any use to you I can."

"Well," said Alton, "I've noticed men smiling at me kind of curiously, and I want to know right off what's the meaning of it. There's nothing especially humorous about me."

"You don't know?" and his visitor appeared to reflect when Alton shook his head.

"Then to put it straight, there are folks who would not believe you. No, stop a

little, I mentioned nothing about myself. Have you done anything lately, that might have hurt the susceptibilities of Mr. Cartier?"

Alton laughed grimly. "Yes," he said, "I hope so. I hove him out of this place one night and he fell downstairs."

"Well," said the other man, smiling, "that accounts for a good deal. Do you happen to be on good terms with Mr. Hallam? Cartier is."

"No," said Alton dryly, "I don't. When Mr. Hallam and I feel at peace one of us will be dead."

"Now, this thing is getting a little more clear to me. I wasn't willing to believe all I heard, anyway."

"That," said Alton, "does not concern me. The question is what did you hear?"

The other man appeared embarrassed and sat silent a space. "I think it's only right that you should know," he said. "Well—according to Cartier—there was a lady here when he came in close on midnight, and he gave folks the impression that she stayed here altogether. That wouldn't possibly have counted for so much, but it also got about that she made use of her place to give you information that was worth a good deal about the business of Hallam and the folks she worked for."

Alton's face grew almost purple, but the dark hue faded and left it unusually pale again. "That," he said very slowly, "is a damnable lie. The lady alluded to was here once only, and for at the most three minutes."

The other man grew a trifle uneasy under his gaze. "Of course," he said, "your word will do for me. Still, she was here, you see—and it's difficult to rub out a lie with that much behind it. I'm afraid you'll find it stick to you both like glue, especially as her employers turned the girl out immediately. Anyway, I'll do what I can for you, and now about that other car-load and the cattle?"

Alton brought his hand down crashing on the table. "The cattle? Oh, get out and come back to-morrow or next month, when I feel less like killing somebody!"

The other man appeared quite willing to accept his dismissal, and Alton vacantly noticed that a black stream of ink was trickling across the table. Mechanically he dabbled his handkerchief in it and then flung it and the ink-vessel into the grate, after which he sat still with a black stain upon the cheek that rested on his fist.

"The plucky little soul—and they've turned her out," he said. "Lord, but somebody has got to pay for this!"

He did not move for at least ten minutes, while the clamour of the city vibrated through the silent room, and when his first anger passed away became sensible of a great pity for the girl who had risked so much for him. It appeared only too probable that because of the modicum of truth it was founded on the lie would stick to both of them, and now when it was too late Alton regretted his folly. He had been fully justified in kicking Cartier out of his rooms, but he knew that

everything that is legitimate is not advisable, and groaned as he saw what the story must cost the defenceless girl who had a living to earn and her father to maintain. There was so far as he could see no way out of the difficulty yet—and the one that concerned himself was almost as formidable, for he knew Alice Deringham's pride, and the damning fact remained that he could not deny the whole story.

He had flung himself back wearily in his chair when there was a step in the passage and a young man came in. He walked straight forward, and stood with one hand on Alton's table looking down on him with wonder and anger in his face. His eyes were unusually bright, and there was a great contusion on his forehead.

"Jack," said Alton simply. "Well, sit down there, and I'll try to talk to you. This is a devlish mess I've got into. Only heard about it ten minutes ago."

Jack Townshead did not move at all. "I'll stand in the meantime." he said harshly. "Unfortunately there are more concerned than you."

"Yes," said Alton wearily. "Don't rub it in. I know. Who was it told you?"

"That's beyond the question," said the lad. "Still, last night one of our men who'd been down here came in and was telling the story in the boys' sleeping-shed. I knocked him down—that is, I meant to, and started out by the first train. I'm at the mine on the south road now."

"You haven't been home?"

"No," said Townshead grimly. "I came straight to you, and in the first place you're coming with me everywhere to deny this story."

Alton sat very still for a space, and the lad seemed to quiver as he watched him. "I can't—that is, not all of it."

Every trace of colour faded from Jack Townshead's face. "Good Lord! Damn you, Alton—it can't be true."

Alton rose up slowly and stretched his hand out, while the veins swelled out on his forehead. Then he dropped it again.

"You'll be sorry for this by and by, Jack," he said. "Don't you know your sister better—you fool? Now sit down there, and I'll tell you everything."

The lad was evidently spirited, but he was a trifle awed by what he saw in Alton's eyes, and did as he was bidden. The hoarse voice he listened to carried conviction with it, but his face was almost haggard when the story was concluded. "Now," said Alton very slowly, "that's all, and for your sister's sake you dare not disbelieve me."

Jack Townshead groaned. "Thank God," he said, with a tremor in his voice. "But, Harry, what is to be done? I simply can't tell the old man—and there's Nellie. You can't deny sufficient to be any good—and the cursed thing will kill her. Now I'm trying not to blame you—but there must be a way of getting out somehow—and it's for you to find it."

Alton leaned upon the table a trifle more heavily, his eyes half-closed, and one

hand clenched.

"Yes," he said slowly. "There is a way—and I'm beginning to see it now. Get your hat, Jack, and in the first place we'll go right along and see Mr. Cartier."

The lad rose, and then, possibly because he was over-strung and needed relief in some direction, laughed harshly. "I think you had better wash your face before you go," he said.

Twenty minutes later they entered an office together and Alton signed to a clerk. "Tell Mr. Cartier I'm wanting to see him right now," he said. "You know who I am."

The man smiled, for he probably also grasped the purport of Alton's visit. "Then you had better come back in a week," he said. "He went across to Victoria yesterday."

"That," said Alton grimly, "was wise of him."

They went out, and the lad glanced at his companion. "It is of the least importance. There is more to be done!"

"Yes," said Alton simply. "You have my sympathy, Jack, but just now I can't do with too much of you. Go right away—to anywhere, and don't come back until you're wanted. I've got to think how I can best do the thing that's right to everybody."

CHAPTER XXVIII
ALTON FINDS A WAY

Daylight was fading, and it was growing dim in the little upper room where Miss Townshead sat alone. The front of the stove was, however, open, and now and then a flicker of radiance fell upon the girl, and showed that her eyes were hazy, and there were traces of moisture on her cheek. Her patience had been taxed to the uttermost that day, but Townshead, who had spent most of it in querulous reproaches, had gone out, and his daughter was thankful to be alone at last, for the effort to retain a show of composure had become almost unendurable.

It was with a sinking heart she glanced down across the roofs of the city into the busy streets where already the big lights were blinking, and remembered all she had borne with there during the last few days. Somebody, it seemed, had industriously spread the story of her dismissal, and a refusal had followed every application she made for employment; but while that alone was sufficient to cause her consternation, the half-contemptuous pity of her former companions, and the fashion in which one or two of them had avoided her, were almost worse to bear, and sitting alone in the gathering darkness the girl flushed crimson at the memory. There was also the grim question by what means she could stave off actual want to grapple with, and to that she could as yet find no answer, while her eyes grew dim as she glanced about the little room. Townshead had changed his quarters, and many of the trifles that caught his daughter's glance had cost her a meal or hours of labour with the needle after a long day in the city, but they made the place a home, and she knew what it would cost her to part with them.

Twice she had raised her head and straightened herself with an effort, while a flicker of pride and resolution crept into her eyes, only to sink back again limply in her chair, when there was a tapping at the door, and she rose as some one came into the room. Then she set her lips and stood up very straight as she saw that it was Alton.

"I could find nobody about, and there was no answer when I knocked," he said. "So I just came in."

The girl moved a little so that she could see his face in the light from the stove, and it was quietly stern, but the movement had served two purposes, for her own was now invisible.

"And you fancied you could dispense with common courtesy in my case?" she said.

Alton made a little grave gesture of deprecation. "I wanted to see you—very much—but please sit down."

Nellie Townshead took the chair he drew out, and was glad that it was in the shadow, for Alton stood leaning against the window-casing looking down on her with grave respect and pity in his face.

"I am a little lame—as you may have heard," he said, as though to explain his attitude.

"Yes," said the girl, whose composure returned as she saw that he was temporizing. "I am sorry."

"Well," said Alton quietly, "so am I—especially just now—but I did not come to talk to you about my injury."

Nellie Townshead appeared very collected as she glanced in his direction, for she had a good courage, and had been taught already that when an issue is unavoidable it is better to face it boldly.

"One would scarcely have fancied that was your object."

"No," said Alton very quietly. "Now I am just a plain bush rancher, and don't know how to put things nicely, but I don't know that there's any disrespect in a straight question, and I came to ask if you would marry me."

The girl was mistress of herself, and the man's naive directness was in a fashion reassuring. She was also, for a moment, very angry.

"It is a little sudden, is it not?" she said. "Did I ever give you any cause for believing that I would?"

"No," said Alton, "I don't think you did."

Nellie Townshead afterwards wondered a little at her composure and temerity, but she fancied she knew what had prompted the man, and, because it hurt her horribly, all the pride she had came to her assistance, and in place of embarrassment she was sensible of a desire to test him to the uttermost.

"Then," she said, "one should have a reason for asking such a question, and, at least, something to urge in support of it."

Alton moved forward, and leaned over the back of her chair, where because he did most things thoroughly he attempted to lay one hand caressingly on her hair. Miss Townshead, however, moved her head suddenly, and the man drew back a pace with a flush in his face.

"It is very lonely up at the ranch, and I have begun to see that I have been missing the best of life. Mine is too grim and bare, and I want somebody to brighten and sweeten it for me."

The girl was very collected. What she had borne during the last few days had turned her gentleness into bitterness and anger. Thus it was, with a curious dispassionate interest she would have been incapable of under different circumstances, she continued to try the man, realizing that though it was no doubt unpleasant to him, there was one great reason which precluded the possibility of his suffering as he would otherwise have done.

"But you are going to live in the city now," she said.

“Yes,” said Alton gravely. “That is why I want you more. You see I know so little, and there is so much you could teach me. I want somebody to lead me where I could not otherwise go, though I know it is asking a great deal while I can give so little.”

This, the girl realized, was, though somewhat impersonal, wholly genuine. The tone of chivalrous respect rang true, and she could comprehend the half-instinctive straining after an ideal by one whose belief in her sex was, if slightly crude, almost reverential. It touched her, though she knew that to benefit him it could only be offered to one woman, and she was not that one.

“And that is all?” she said.

“Of course!” said Alton too decisively, because he remembered, as Miss Townshead quite realized, that the other reason must always remain hidden. This was also as balm to her pride, and there was a trace of a smile in her eyes.

“It is, as you appear to understand, very little.”

“Well,” said Alton, who seemed to take courage, “now when I see your meaning there is a trifle more.”

Again he moved a pace, and the girl fancied he would have laid his hand upon her shoulder. “No,” she said decisively.

Alton sighed, and his face became impassive, but it seemed to the girl that there was relief in it.

“I think I could be kind to you and make things smooth for you,” he said very simply. “I should always look up to you, and I wouldn’t ask for very much—only to see you happy.”

He stopped apparently for inspiration, and Nellie Townshead smiled a little. “Do you think that last was wise?”

Alton turned towards her with a little glint in his eyes, and the girl, who knew his temperament, felt that she had gone far enough. He had borne it very well, and it seemed to her that other men might have handled the situation, which was difficult, less delicately.

“I asked you a question, and it seems to me that it still waits an answer.”

The girl rose and stood looking at him with a little colour in her cheeks and a flash in her eyes, but there was that in her attitude which held Alton at a distance. “If you were not the man you are, and I was a little weaker, I should have said yes,” she said. “As it is—there is nothing that would induce me to marry you.”

It was almost dark now, and Nellie Townshead could not see her companion’s face, but she was no longer careful to keep her own in the shadow, even when the radiance from the stove flickered about the room.

“Will you not think it over?” he said very quietly. “I know how unfit I am for you—and I am a cripple—but——”

The light was now more visible in Nellie Townshead’s eyes, but her voice was gentle. “No,” she said, “There are two very good reasons why it is impossible—

and you know one of them. Now do you believe I do not know what brought you here to-day?"

"I think I have been trying to tell you," said Alton sturdily. "If you fancy it was anything else you are wrong."

The girl shook her head. "You are a good man, Harry Alton, but not a clever one. Only that it would have been a wrong to you, you would almost have persuaded me—by your silence chiefly. Still, you must go away, and never speak of this again."

Alton stood still a moment glancing at her with pity and a great admiration. The girl was good to look upon, he knew her courage, and now as she flung all that he could offer her away and stood alone and friendless with the world against her, but undismayed, all his heart went out to her, and what he had commenced from duty he could almost have continued from inclination.

"Please listen just a little, and I'll be quite frank," he said. "You told me there were two reasons."

Possibly the girl read what was passing in his mind, for she smiled curiously.

"I think you had better go—now—and leave me only a kindly memory of you. Do you think I should be content to take—the second place?" she said. "Nothing that you could tell me would remove one of the obstacles, and you will be grateful presently. When that time comes be wise, and don't ask for less than everything."

Alton said nothing further, and when his steps rang hollowly down the stairway the girl sat down and sighed. Then she laughed a curious little laugh and stopped to brush the tears from her eyes.

As it happened, while Nellie Townshead sat alone in the darkness Miss Deringham was writing a note to Alton. Spoiled sheets of paper were scattered about the table, and though there was nobody to see it the girl's face was flushed as she glanced down at the last one. The message it bore was somewhat laconic and ran, "We are going to the opera-house on Thursday, and as there is a place not filled I would like to see you there before you start for the ranges, if you know of no reason why you should not come."

She gave it to a maid, and sat still until she heard a door swing to, then rose swiftly and ran down the stairway. She met the maid at the foot of it, and said breathlessly, "I want to add something to the letter."

"It's too late, miss," said the maid, who was a recent importation from Britain. "I gave it John the Chinaman, and he went off trotting as usual. I couldn't overtake him."

Alice Deringham smiled a little, though her voice belied her as she said, "It is of no importance. I can write another."

She knew, however, that no second message she could send would repair what she had done, for Alton had timed his departure for the ranges next day, and several must elapse before Thursday came. He would, she also felt assured, not

fail to come.

Miss Deringham was justified, for a few days later Seaforth stood waiting in the snow with a pack-horse's bridle in his hand, and several brawny men with heavy packs slung about them close by, when Tom of Okanagan drove into the clearing as fast as his smoking team could haul the jolting wagon.

"You can sling all those things down again," he said. "Thomson rode in with a wire from the railroad, and Harry's not coming."

"Not coming?" said Seaforth bewilderedly as he opened the message. "We've no time to lose—now."

Then he crumpled the strip of paper angrily. "We'll push on slowly, boys, until he comes up with us, but you had better wait for him, Tom," he said, and added half aloud, "The devil take all women!"

Miss Deringham went to the opera-house on Thursday with a somewhat distinguished party, and though a storm of applause greeted the eminent English dramatist, and the play was a popular one, saw very little of him or the first act of it. Then when the glitter of lights filled the building as the curtain went down she looked about her with veiled expectancy. She knew Alton of Somasco, and that if he intended to keep the assignation he would then come when everybody could see him.

She had also surmised correctly, for just then Alton, who had shouldered his way through a group in the corridor, moved down it under a blaze of light, his head erect, and his face somewhat grim as he saw the smiles and glances of disapproval of those who made way for him. As the rancher who was fighting Hallam and the capitalists behind him he was already known in that city, and the story that the woman who was spoken of with him had assisted him from the beginning by betraying the secrets of those who employed her at his instigation had spread, and told against him.

Alton saw it all, and did not for a moment turn aside so long as the smiles and whispers were directed at him, but he stopped and waited, leaning on a chair some distance behind the spot where Forel's party were until the curtain rose again. The next act commenced, as he knew, with a night scene, and while most of the audience had no eyes for any one but the great tragedian, he moved forward quickly, and Alice Deringham turned her head a trifle as a shadowy form slipped into the vacant place beside her. She could scarcely see the man, and was not certain that she desired to, but she would have known who he was had he been wholly invisible.

"It is you," she said softly. "I knew that you would come."

"Yes," said Alton. "You asked me to, but now I know that I should not have done so."

"And that I should not have asked you?" said Alice Deringham. "You should have been on your journey already."

Alton laughed a little. “That was not what I meant—as of course you know,” he said. “Still, I wanted to see you—and I had to come.”

“Why?”

Alton was silent a little. “It may be the last time.”

Alice Deringham shivered. “But there is no reason?”

“No—and yes,” said Alton grimly. “I—and it is due to you and another to tell you this—have done no wrong, but there are reasons why I should not intrude myself into your company, and I am going back up there into the snow to-morrow.”

“But,” said the girl, feeling horribly guilty, “there are times when one’s friends can do a good deal for one.”

Alton seemed to laugh a trifle bitterly. “Yes,” he said. “Still, I do not care to trouble mine in that direction. One must stand alone now and then, and things have not been going well with me lately. I had another blow to-day. I asked Miss Townshead to marry me—and she would not.”

Alice Deringham said nothing for a space, and then her voice was different. There was no shade of expression in it. “And you are going back to look for the silver tomorrow? I hope you will be successful.”

“Thank you,” said Alton. “It would mean a good deal to everybody—and now I think I have already stayed too long.”

Alice Deringham heard the creaking of a chair, and when she looked round he had gone, but she said very little to any one when the curtain came down again, while Alton, turning in a doorway for a moment, set his lips as he caught the gleam of her hair.

“I think I have done the right thing all round, but it was condemnably hard,” he said as he went down the corridor.

By chance he came face to face with Forel a few moments later, and both men stopped. “I am glad I found you,” said Alton. “It is only fitting to tell you that for a minute or two I joined your party.”

Forel looked uncomfortable. “To be frank, there are unpleasant tales about you, and while they needn’t interfere with business one has to——” he said, and stopped.

Alton nodded. “You needn’t be too explicit. The tales, so far as you have heard them, are not true. I tell you so on my word of honour—and I want you to show that you believe me by finding Miss Townshead something to do. You can draw on me for the salary if it’s necessary.”

Forel, who was a good-tempered man, flushed a little. “If there was anything in the stories I should take this very ill.”

“Of course,” said Alton. “I shouldn’t have objected if you had knocked me down, but, as I see you are not quite sure yet, for just five minutes you have got to listen to me.”

Forel did so, and nodded when Alton concluded, “I think you should do what I want you to, because in the first place it will give you very little trouble, and if you can’t take my word so far, I’m not fit to be trusted with your interests in the big deal we have in hand.”

“And in the second?” said Forel, who stood to benefit considerably by the success of the Somasco Consolidated, dryly.

Alton laughed. “I think it would be more tasteful to leave that unexpressed, because it’s connected with the other one,” he said.

“Well,” said Forel, “frankly, I should have doubted what you have told me had it come from most other men, but in this case I will see what I can do. We are, as it happens, in want of somebody at Westminster, and I’ll send them down a line to-morrow.”

“Thanks,” said Alton, with a little sigh of relief. “Now I think I’ve straightened up everything, and I can go back to the ranges contented.”

CHAPTER XXIX
THE PRICE OF DELAY

It was raining with pitiless persistency when Alton and Tom of Okanagan came floundering down into the river valley. The roar of the canon rose in great reverberations from out of the haze beneath them, and all the pines were dripping, while the men struggled wearily knee-deep in slush of snow. The spring which lingers in the North had come suddenly, and a warm wind from the Pacific was melting the snow, so that the hillsides ran water, and the torrents that had burst their chains swirled frothing down every hollow.

The men were chilled to the backbone, for it had rained all day and they had passed several nights sheltered only by the pines. Garments and boots were sodden, and Alton's face was set and drawn, for though he could now walk without much visible effort upon the level, a journey through the ranges of that country would at any season test the endurance of the strongest whole-limbed man, and his forced march had only been accomplished by stubborn determination and disregard of pain. Still, it was not physical distress alone which accounted for his gravity. He had put off his journey to the latest moment, and now when time was scanty the weather promised to further delay him. They had stopped a moment breathless, when Okanagan broke the silence.

"Plenty water. I'm figuring we'll find Charley Seaforth somewhere here," he said. "The jumpers would have it drier, if they headed out from lower down the railroad over the bench country."

Alton nodded as he listened to the roar of the river, which warned him that their road up the valley would be almost impassable.

"It can't be helped," he said, and Tom of Okanagan, who saw how grim his face had grown, understood the reason. If Hallam's emissaries had gone up before them any further delay might cost Alton the mine.

Nothing was said for another minute, and then Okanagan pointed to a dim smear of vapour below them that was a little bluer than the mist.

"Smoke. Charley's held up by the river," he said.

They went on in moody silence, knowing that where the hardy ranchers Seaforth had with him had failed there was little probability of any man forcing a passage, and presently the smell of burning firwood came up to them through the rain. Then a red flicker appeared and vanished amidst the dusky trunks, and in another few minutes Alton was shaking his comrade's hand. The faces of both of them were unusually grave, and there was dejection in the growl of greeting from the men, who sat half seen amidst the smoke watching them.

“That’s the whole of us,” said Seaforth, who noticed his comrade’s glance. “We can’t get on.”

“How long have you been here?” said Alton, with significant quietness.

“Two days. It’s unfortunate you didn’t come earlier, Harry, because we could have got right through a week ago. Was it the leg that kept you?”

“No,” said Alton, with a little mirthless laugh, “it wasn’t the leg. I should have come, but one can’t always do two things at once, and I had to choose. I’ve a good deal to tell you.”

Seaforth glanced sharply at his comrade. “I fancied you had. You are not the man I left at Vancouver, Harry. Well, you will be hungry, and supper’s almost ready.”

It was several hours later, and the men in the bigger tent were fast asleep, when Seaforth and Alton sat swathed in clammy blankets under a little canvas shelter. The drip from the great branches above beat upon it, and the red light of the snapping fire shone in upon the men. Neither of them had spoken for some time, but at last Alton laid down his pipe.

“This is a thing I wouldn’t tell to any man if it could be helped, but as you will hear it told the wrong way when you get back to the city, you have got to know,” he said. “I’d have been where I was wanted if it hadn’t happened, and now I can’t help feeling I have given you and the rest away. It hurts me, Charley, but what could I do? It would have been worse to let two women suffer for my condemned folly.”

Seaforth was in no mood for laughter, but his eyes twinkled faintly. “Two of them? You have been getting on tolerably fast down there, Harry.”

Alton stopped him with a gesture. “My temper’s not what it was a few weeks ago,” he said. “Now, you sit still and listen to me.”

He had scarcely commenced his story when the smile died out of Seaforth’s eyes. He seemed to listen with breathless intentness, and his voice shook a little as he said, “And you asked her to marry you. Did you think for a moment that she would?”

Alton appeared to consider. “I didn’t think at all,” he said. “It seemed the one thing I could do, and I did it.”

“The city hasn’t made much difference in you,” said Seaforth, watching his comrade intently. “It must have been a load off your mind when she refused you?”

Alton straightened himself a little. “I don’t like the way you put it, Charley. Whoever gets Miss Townshead will have a treasure. The girl’s good all through. Now I think I’ve told you everything, and I don’t ask if you believe me.”

There was a flicker of warmer colour under Seaforth’s bronze, and a curious glint in his eyes.

“Yes,” he said slowly; “I think she is too good even for you, and you have done all that any one could have expected of you, without keeping up the farce

any longer. I am glad you did not ask if I believed you—because I could scarcely have forgiven you that question. Do you think I don't know—both of you—better?"

The last words were a trifle strained, and Alton stared at his comrade in bewildered astonishment, for Seaforth had betrayed himself in his passion. Then there was silence for a full minute until he said very quietly—

"And I never guessed."

"No?" said Seaforth, still a trifle hoarsely. "And now I think you know."

Alton nodded, and there was a very kindly smile in his eyes. "Yes; I'm beginning to understand—a good deal," he said. "I'm very glad, for there are not many girls like Miss Townshead in the Dominion. Charley, you're a lucky man, but why have you been so long over it? It never struck me that you were bashful."

Seaforth smiled mirthlessly. "If you will listen a few minutes you will see how fortunate I am. You never asked me what brought me out from the old country, Harry."

Alton gravely pressed his arm. "There are times when one must talk. Go on, if it will do you good," he said.

It was not an uncommon story Seaforth told that night, and Alton, who had heard it, slightly varied, several times already, could fill up the gaps when his comrade ceased, and the drip from the branches splashing upon the canvas replaced his disjointed utterance. Seaforth was very young when it happened and the woman older than him.

"Now you see what kept me silent. It wasn't a nice thing to tell—you," he said.

Alton glanced at him with grave sympathy, and then stared at the fire. "And what became of her? I saw her picture once—in a twenty-five cent album," he said. "A woman of that kind would know what she was about?"

Seaforth smiled wryly. "I was not the only fool," he said. "When I'd flung away everything a richer man came along."

Alton was silent a space. "Three thousand pounds," he said, "is a good deal, even in the old country."

"Yes," said Seaforth wearily; "though it goes a very little way as I spent it, it is, and I've been paying it back, at first a few dollars at a time, ever since I came out to the Dominion. You see, the old man paid off everything, though I know now money was very scarce with him then, and I've wondered sometimes how far it helped to break him. He died soon after the crash came—and the girls had nothing."

"I think you told me your sisters were married now?"

"Yes," said Seaforth, "Flora sent me back the last exchange somewhat indignantly, which was why I was able to take my share in the Consolidated. Still, all that is a little outside the question, isn't it?"

Alton smiled at his partner, and laid a sinewy hand on his shoulder. “I wouldn’t worry too much about it, Charley,” he said. “You were a young fool, but you have lived it down, and there’s the room there has always been for a good many more like you in the Dominion. Look round in high places, and you’ll see them—good men, and better than they might have been but for that little trip-up when they were young. Yes, I’ve wondered where your dollars went to—and I’m glad we have done so well now I know. You can stand straight up, Charley, and face the world again.”

Seaforth laughed wryly. “The trouble is that it isn’t the world I care about,” he said.

“No,” said Alton. “Well, for one has to do the square thing, I think I’d chance telling somebody the story you told me—though of course you’d have to put parts of it differently.”

Seaforth made a little gesture of despondency. “I’m afraid I haven’t the courage, and—with all that behind me——”

“It—is—behind,” said Alton. “And somehow I fancy it would only be fair to give the person it might concern the opportunity of hearing you.”

Seaforth appeared to check a groan. “There are things that one can never quite rub out. I was twenty-three then, and now when it is five years ago, and she is alone in that horrible city, I must keep silent still. Harry, it’s almost unendurable, but, because I must tell that story, to speak now would be to throw my last chance away.”

Alton nodded with grave sympathy. “Yes, I think you’re right, and you must wait. Well, it’s time to turn in. With the first of the daylight we’re going on again.”

He was asleep in another ten minutes, but Seaforth lay awake shivering under his clammy blankets most of the night, and rose aching when he heard his comrade’s voice through the patter of the rain in the misty darkness of the early morning. They made four miles that day, and floundered waist-deep in water amidst the boulders during most of it. The hillsides above them were steep and almost unclimbable, and no man could have driven a canoe upstream amidst the grinding ice-cake which cumbered the river, that was frozen still in its slower reaches. There they found better travelling through the slush that covered the rotten ice, but those reaches were few and short, and they went back to the boulders when the swollen river burst its bonds again.

It came down in savage tumult between the rocks, whose heads just showed above the foam, and its banks were further cumbered by a whitened driftwood frieze over which the men must clamber warily, clawing for a foothold on the great battered trunks, or smashing through a tangle of brittle limbs. At times they were stopped altogether by a maze of washed-up timber no man could struggle through, and the axes were plied for an hour or more before they went on again.

The second day was like the first one, though their toil was if anything more arduous still, and on the evening of the fourth they came, worn out, dripping, and dejected, to a spot where the valley narrowed in. A strip of forest divided the rock from the river on the opposite shore, but between them and it a confusion of froth and foam swirled down, while the hillsides seemed to vibrate with the roar of the rapid. One glance sufficed to show that the crossing was wholly impossible for either beast or man. On their side of the river a wall of rock hemmed the little party in, and even Seaforth wondered, while Okanagan growled half-aloud, when Alton, knee-deep in water, plodded steadily on. There was not more than another hour's daylight, and Seaforth remembered that the gorge extended for a league or so, while the flood had spread across it in front of them, but he knew his comrade and said nothing. Presently he slipped from a boulder, and sank almost shoulder-deep in a whirling pool, but somebody grabbed his arm, and after a breathless flounder he felt the shingle under him and the froth lapped only to his knee. Then they crawled amidst the driftwood which washed up and down beneath them, tearing garments and lacerating limbs, until they stood once more panting on dry shingle, with a broad stretch of froth before them, and the light growing dim.

The river had spread from side to side of the constricted valley, and the crash of the ice it brought down rang hollowly from rock to rock until it was lost high up amidst the climbing pines. It seemed to Seaforth that to go on was impossible, and he glanced at his comrade anxiously, Alton stood alone upon a driftwood trunk, his figure silhouetted in rigid outline against the whiteness of the foam, for his drenched garments clung in sodden folds to every curve of it. His face was as immobile in its wet grimness save for the smouldering glow in his eyes, and there was a low growl of half-articulate expostulation from those about him as he turned and pointed to the river.

"What are you stopping for? The silver's yonder, and there's our road," he said.

None of them protested. They knew no rancher or prospector in the province could traverse the road he pointed to, but in their long grapple with the forest they had not infrequently attempted things that appeared beyond the power of man, and speech seemed useless when the river would answer for them. Therefore, when Alton once more took to the water they followed him, bracing overtaxed muscle against the tireless stream until the man who pressed on a dozen yards in front went down. Then while Seaforth held his breath there was a cry from Okanagan, who clutched at an arm that rose from the flood. Seaforth had his hand next moment, somebody clung to him, and they went downstream together for a space, with the shingle slipping beneath them, and their burdens dragging them down, panting, floundering, choking, but still holding on, until they found a foothold in the slack of an eddy, and Seaforth saw that Alton was on his feet again. His hat had gone, and there was a red gash on his forehead from which the blood ran

down. He said nothing until they stood less than knee-deep, when Seaforth glanced at him.

"You will be contented now?" he said.

"Yes," said Alton, with hoarse breathlessness. "I'm beaten. Well, we'll go back and make a traverse across the ranges."

Seaforth glanced for a moment at the slope of rock that ran up into the dimness above him. Here and there it afforded a foothold to a juniper or stunted pine, but that was all, and there was a gleam of slushy snow high up above it, where though the pitch was flatter the firs could scarcely climb. Whether any man could reach those heights or cross them through the melting drifts he did not know, but at the best the journey would cost a day for every hour it would have done had it been possible to follow the valley.

"You know what day it is?" he said.

"Yes," said Alton very quietly. "If Hallam's men are up there it will be too late when we get through. That means tolerably bad times for Somasco."

"I," said Seaforth, "wasn't exactly thinking about Somasco."

Alton's face was very grim. "Well," he said dryly, "it means a good deal less to one of us than it would have done a few weeks ago."

They went back, and it was dark when they camped in the dripping undergrowth, but while Seaforth fancied that Alton did not sleep that night, he was the first upon his feet when they rose in the darkness of the morning, and commenced the slow ascent. There was no man in the party who did not feel that the journey would be useless, but they went on nevertheless, hewing a path through thickets, crawling up steep rock faces on hands and knees, and wading through the drifts to the waist in melting snow. So with toil incredible they left the leagues behind, one, and when they were fortunate, two to the day, and evening was at hand when at last they came scrambling down from fir to fir into the rain-swept valley. There was nothing visible beneath them but a haze of falling water and the tops of dripping trees, but Alton stooped now and then as though listening, and Seaforth could guess at the torments of suspense he was enduring.

"We shall know in a few more minutes," he said. "I can see the river now."

"Go on," said Alton hoarsely. "Oh, get on."

Five minutes had scarcely passed when they stopped again, and the men stared at each other in silence as a thudding sound came up to them through the rain. It was just distinguishable, and they might be mistaken, but a full minute went by before one of them glanced at Alton. He stood very still, with one knee bent a trifle, leaning against a pine until the sound grew plainer and was followed by a voice.

"We're too late, but we'll go down and see it out," he said.

Ten minutes later they plodded into the glare of a fire, and stopped, worn-out and dripping in front of a rude bark shelter. A few men were scattered about it

eating their evening meal, and for a moment or two they stared at the newcomers silently, until Alton stepped forward and stood where all could see him, hatless and tattered, with a clotted bandage about his head.

"What are you doing on my claim?" he said.

A big man rose up slowly with an axe in his hand, and pointed to a board with rough letters cut in it nailed to a tree.

"It may have been yours one time. It's ours now," he said. "There's no getting over the laws of this country."

Seaforth expected an outbreak, and heard a growl from his comrades, who commenced to close in behind him, but Alton only closed one hand a little.

"Where's the man who brought you here?" he said.

"Gone out," said the other, "to record the claim. Now we don't want any unpleasantness, but the mine is ours, and there are enough of us to keep it, you see. Come in and have some supper, and take it reasonably."

Alton looked at him for a space out of half-closed eyes, and the man appeared to grow uneasy.

"You condemned jumper! These are honest men," he said, pointing to those who followed him. "We'll go back and camp up yonder, boys."

It was close on midnight when Seaforth crept up to Alton, who lay huddled against a cedar in the smoke of the fire. His face showed drawn and puckered in the flickering light.

"Don't take it too hard, Harry," he said.

Alton smothered a groan. "I'm feeling very mean tonight," he said. "Lord, what a mess I've made of everything. Every ranch in Somasco mortgaged to the last rod, the new mill not finished, roads half made, and not another dollar to be had in the city. And there's not a man or woman who believed in me but I've dragged them down."

"I think," said Seaforth, "they believe in you still. You did all that any man could have done, Harry."

"No," said Alton. "I stayed down in Vancouver when I should have been here. That can never be quite wiped out—but what could I do?"

Seaforth laid his hand on his comrade's shoulder. "Don't worry too much about what is done with, but look forward. You'll find your friends behind you yet."

Alton shook off his grasp. "My friends! I've done them harm enough, but you are right. This thing isn't finished yet."

Seaforth smiled a little. "That is a good deal better, Harry. One wins at the last round now and then."

Alton looked at him steadily. "You don't understand. All that was worth winning has gone already—but Hallam must fight."

Seaforth saw the smouldering fire in the half-closed eyes, and the instinctive

closing of the lean, hard fingers, and went back to his lair in the wet undergrowth contented. Hallam had won hitherto, but he knew his comrade, and the struggle was not over yet.

CHAPTER XXX
SEAFORTH'S REINSTATEMENT

There is on the road between Vancouver and New Westminster a strip of primeval bush. Beyond it the Fraser meadows stretch, open to wind and sun, westwards to the sea, but beneath the great black pines it is dim and shadowy, and Seaforth was glad of that as he stood leaning against a hemlock one sunny afternoon. He would have found the task he had undertaken almost impossible in the glare of the white road that ran straight under the open sky, but the stillness of that green realm of shadow where all things were softened in the faint half-light had made it a trifle easier. Also, the essence of the spring, which had come suddenly, was in the scent of pine and cedar, and it had given him courage, and set his pulses throbbing faster. It is possible that the man did not realize all the influences that upheld him then, but something that sprang from the steaming earth and the life that was stirring in every towering pine reacted upon him, and he gathered hope when he saw the reflex of it in the eyes of his companion.

She sat a pace or two apart from him on a cedar-trunk, and a dusty bicycle rested against the farther end of it. The dust was also thick upon her simple dress and the cotton gloves that lay in her hands. Her fingers had tightened upon them, and there was a flush in her cheeks when for a moment she glanced at the man. His face was a trifle colourless, but the girl looked aside again as she saw the tense anxiety in his eyes.

"And that is all," he said, with a little tremble in his voice. "You will think it is horribly too much?"

Nellie Townshead glanced away into the shadows of the bush, and there was pain and a trace of shrinking in her face, but it had vanished when she turned again, and her voice had a little imperious ring.

"And what made you tell me now?"

Seaforth spread his hands out with a little deprecatory gesture. "I expected this. The story I have told you should have shown you what I am—and while I wanted to tell it earlier I was afraid."

The colour was a trifle plainer in the cheeks of the girl, and her voice slightly more imperious still.

"That leaves the question unanswered. I still want to know what gave you the courage now?"

Seaforth understood her, and knew her pride. "I think Harry gave me some of it. You see, I never had a great deal."

"Harry?" said Miss Townshead, with a trace of astonishment that was not

quite free from disdain.

Seaforth moved his head. “Yes,” he said. “What I have told you I told him, and he seemed to think that one could live—even that kind of thing—down. He is, you see, a somewhat exacting man, and that gave me the hope that you would be as merciful.”

“Still, you have not answered me.”

Seaforth flushed a little. “I know what you mean—but would even what I have told you warrant you thinking that of me?”

“I must know,” said the girl.

Seaforth was silent a moment. “There is a distinction—but it is difficult to draw,” he said. “Well, I could not bear to think of you struggling on down here alone with everything against you. There were times when it almost maddened me, and at last, though I knew it might cost me all I hoped for, I had to speak.”

The girl’s face softened. “And there was nothing else. You did not think that—because of anything which had happened—I should be more apt to listen?”

Seaforth was usually undemonstrative in bearing and speech, but he stood up stiffly, and his voice was a trifle strained. “That is what I have been trying to make clear, and I can only give you my word that I did not,” he said. “If I had had more courage I would have told you that story long ago.”

Nellie Townshead’s eyes were very gentle now. “I felt I must make quite sure, because had it been otherwise I should never have forgiven you.”

“And,” said Seaforth slowly, “you can forgive the rest. I can make no protestations, but if I have gone straight in this country it was you who helped me, and I should never have gone down into the mire if I had known you in the other one. And now I have nothing, not even moderate prosperity to offer you.”

“You think that would have counted?” said the girl.

“No,” said Seaforth quietly, “not with you. It is because I have so little to offer I venture to ask so much. All the giving must be done by you.”

Seaforth had, though not an eloquent man, pleaded his cause efficaciously, for although his words might have been better chosen, the inference behind them was plain; and while parts of his story had brought the colour to the cheeks of his companion, his blameless life in Canada was a very acceptable offering since he owed it to her. It is pleasant to feel oneself a refining influence, but it was not gratified vanity which stirred the girl. She had a wide charity, and was one of those whose mission is to give without looking for a return. She rose up slowly, and stood before him with eyes that had grown a trifle hazy.

“All that counts the most is yours still,” she said. “And as to the rest—I think it is done with, Charley. You have lived it down.”

Seaforth stretched out his hands and drew her to him. “God bless you, my dear, but you are wrong,” he said, “All I had was yours two years ago.”

It was some little time later when a creaking wagon swung round a bend of the

road, and the bronzed rancher on the driving-seat laughed softly to himself as he saw Miss Townshead sitting demurely but with downcast face on one end of the cedar, and Seaforth, who appeared suspiciously unconcerned, at least six feet away. That was not just how he had seen them when with the soft dust muffling the rattle of wheels he and his team came out of the shadows which hung athwart the bend. The wagon was old and weather-scarred, the harness rudely patched with hide, but it is possible there was room in the life of strenuous toil the bushman lived for the romance that brightens everything, and he shouted a mirthful greeting to them as he whipped his team. Then as the wagon jolted on out under the sombre archway into the brightness of the sun there came drifting back to them the refrain of a song. It was one sung often in the bush of that country at the time, and the two who sat listening in the green stillness that sunny afternoon grasped the verity that underlay its crude sentimentality. Shorn of its harshness, by the distance the voice rang bravely through the thud of hoofs and rattle, of wheels, and there was in the half-heard words and jingling rhythm what there was in the sunshine and scent of steaming earth, the life and hope of the eternal spring.

Seaforth laughed a little as he stretched his hand out to the girl, but the light which shone back at him from her eyes was softer than that of mirth.

"I think that man knows what we know," he said. "Come out into the sunlight. The world is not what it was an hour ago."

They were plodding down the dazzling road, one on either side of the dusty bicycle under the open sky when he spoke again.

"All this makes me sorry for Harry."

"Yes," said the girl reflectively, for she saw there was more to follow.

Seaforth bent his head. "He has so little now. Hallam has beaten us all round, and Harry's face takes my sleep away. Everything he hoped for has been taken from him, and he is lame, you see."

Nellie Townshead glanced at him swiftly. "One would scarcely notice it. You have something in your mind, Charley."

Seaforth's face was troubled as he answered her. "It is a little difficult to put into words, and if it was anybody else than Harry I would not try. Still, Alice Deringham is almost as much to him as you are to me—and I don't think she knows the truth, you see."

Nellie Townshead flushed a little, and there was a trace of anger in her eyes. "If Miss Deringham is punished for her wicked pride what is that to you?"

"Nothing," said Seaforth quietly. "Still—because of what I saw at the ranch—I am sorry for her, and Harry, who has been a very good friend to me, is being punished too. We have so much, you and I, and he has nothing now."

The girl did not answer him for at least a minute, and appeared concerned about something that rattled in the bicycle. Then she stopped and looked up at the man with a great tenderness in her eyes.

“You want to tell her? Well, it will be very difficult, but I will do it for you.”

Seaforth stooped and kissed the little ungloved hand on the bicycle reverentially. “I don’t know how I asked you, and knowing how much has been given me I am almost afraid,” he said.

Nellie Townshead smiled at him, but she said nothing further until they parted, and Seaforth turned back towards Vancouver city. He was brimming over with good-will to everybody when he reached it, and as it happened found storekeeper Horton, who came down there occasionally, waiting for him. Horton was by no means a genius or well versed in legal procedure, but he had a ready wit, and Seaforth felt prompted to tell him the story of their first disastrous march, which Alton had hitherto but partially narrated, though he suppressed its final incident. Horton listened gravely with his most magisterial air.

“Harry’s no fool, but he don’t know everything,” he said. “Now I see where you and me can take a hand in.”

“Yes?” said Seaforth thoughtfully.

Horton nodded. “It was Damer who recorded your claim.”

“Damer?” said Seaforth. “That was the man Harry pitched into the river at Somasco.”

Horton chuckled. “You’re right. Harry’s just a trifle too handy at slinging folks into rivers and down stairways. Well, the fellow was hanging round my store, and I thought I knew him and wasn’t sure, but when I saw his name down on the Crown mining record that fixed me. Now you’re quite ready, you and Tom, to swear to the story you told me?”

“Of course, but still I don’t see——”

Horton’s eyes twinkled. “You will presently. That’s where being a magistrate comes in. I’m going to take hold of Damer for horse-stealing.”

A thought came swiftly into Seaforth’s mind, and he smote the table. “But I can’t swear it was Damer. You would never convict him.”

Horton laughed the bushman’s almost silent laugh. “I don’t know that I want to. Anyway, I can keep on remanding him, and when I sent him up for trial it would be a rancher’s jury. That’s going to give us a pull on Mr. Hallam, who is standing in somewhere behind the whole thing—and I kind of fancy there’s another man with him.”

Seaforth’s face grew grave. “Then, as Harry wouldn’t like it and there’s nothing in it, I’d get rid of that fancy. Now, of course, you know what you can do, but isn’t it playing a little too much into your own hand? And you see folks might get talking about the thing.”

Horton put on his most impressive air. “There’s justice by statute, and there’s equity, as well as a lot more you never heard about,” said he.

Seaforth could not check his smile. “And which of them is what we’re going to do?”

"This," said Horton solemnly, "is—all of them. It's the square thing. Is there any reason why a man shouldn't do what is right because it suits him? Anyway, it needn't worry you, because you can just sit up and watch the circus begin."

"Just one question. Was Damer the man who rode out for the railroad one snowy night, shortly before I started after Harry?"

Horton nodded, and wondered a little at the change in his companion, for there was a little flash in Seaforth's eyes and his voice had a ring. "Then," he said grimly, "I'm going to take a hand in, but there are several good reasons why we should not tell Harry."

It was a week later when Forel came home one night looking somewhat anxious and depressed. He said little during the evening meal, but after it spoke to his wife alone, and Mrs. Forel came upon Alice Deringham soon after she left him.

"I'm not going to get the new ponies after all," she said. "Poor Tom has been unfortunate again."

"I am sorry," said Alice Deringham. "You mean in the city?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Forel with a little sigh. "He is always a trifle sanguine, and he put a good many dollars into a venture Mr. Alton recommended. Tom expected a good deal from it—but the dollars have all gone."

Alice Deringham did not look at the speaker. "They have lost the money?"

"Well," said Mrs. Forel, "I believe they will do. I don't understand all of it, but Tom tells me that he can't see any hope for Alton unless a new railroad's built, or the Government does something for the Somasco country, and that does not seem likely."

"Please tell me all you know."

Mrs. Forel looked thoughtful. "It isn't a great deal. The land and ranches up at Somasco are not worth very much just now, but Alton persuaded Tom they would be presently, and he helped Alton to borrow more dollars from everybody who would lend them. Then they built mills and things which will not be much use to anybody unless a railroad comes in. The people would only lend him the money for a little while, and Alton had hoped to pay them out of a silver mine, but Hallam, it seems, has been working against him and got somebody to relocate the mine because Alton did not get there in time. Now unless Alton and his company can pay those dollars back the other people will take all he has away from him, and if the railroad is ever built it is they or Hallam, who has been trying to buy the mortgages from them, who will benefit."

"But," said Alice Deringham, "how was it that Mr. Alton did not make sure of the mine?"

"That is just what puzzles Tom. He stayed down here too long, and then there was a flood or something that delayed him. Still, if he had gone when he intended he would have been in time."

Mrs. Forel glanced at her companion curiously, but the girl sat very still with her face turned aside. It was almost a minute before she spoke again.

"And Mr. Alton takes it hardly?"

"Tom doesn't seem to know. Alton, he thinks, must be beaten, but he told him he meant holding on until the last dollar had gone. After all, I can't help feeling sorry for him. It must be hard to get oneself crippled and then lose everything, while Tom declares there was nothing in that other affair about the girl."

Alice Deringham said nothing, but Mrs. Forel saw the blood creep into the polished whiteness of her neck, and wished that she would look up. The girl's rigid stillness was, she fancied, a trifle unnatural, and suggested that there was a good deal behind it.

"Well," she said presently, "that is all I know, and I think Tom is waiting for me."

Mrs. Forel went away, and Alice Deringham sat where she had left her, white in face now, with something that was not wholly unlike horror in her eyes.

"And," she said, "I kept him."

Half an hour passed, and she did not move. Anger against her father and horror of herself were held in check as yet by a tense anxiety as to the end of the struggle she had plunged the man who loved her in. She could picture him standing with his grave quietness face to face with ruin, and holding on until the last faint hope had gone. Still, it seemed almost impossible that he should be beaten, and the curious confidence she had had in him reasserted itself and crept as a ray of brightness into the darkness of her humiliation. That might be borne or grappled with afterwards if Alton came out triumphant, but in the meanwhile she dare not think of herself or what she had done. Presently there was a tapping at the door, and a maid came in.

"There's a lady—Miss Townshead—waiting to see you, miss," she said.

Now Alice Deringham was the reverse of a timid woman, but for a few moments she felt her courage fail. Every instinct in her shrank from that meeting, but the maid had no cause to suspect it when she rose languidly and followed her. The interview was not of long duration, and nobody ever heard all that passed between the two, but when Seaforth, who had been waiting anxiously, handed Miss Townshead into the cars her eyes were misty.

"Was it very hard?" he said.

"No," the girl said slowly; "not after the beginning. I was angry when I went in, and I came away only sorry for her. There is a great deal more that is lovable in Miss Deringham than I ever fancied there could be."

"Yes," said Seaforth sapiently. "But it's much better when there's nothing else, which is the case with somebody I know. I like my gold free from alloy."

It was the next day when Deringham found his daughter alone in the sunny corner of the verandah. He carried a handful of papers, and the girl noticed that

while he looked ill and haggard there was relief in his face. It was, however, with a vacant curiosity she waited for him to speak, for she had risen heavy-eyed and listless after a sleepless night. Deringham leaned against the balustrade in front of her, and appeared to find it somewhat difficult to begin.

"I have just spent an hour with Mr. Alton and a lawyer, and have something of importance to tell you," he said.

"I am listening," said the girl languidly, though Deringham fancied there were signs of a sudden intentness in her face.

"We will commence at the beginning. Alton appears to have been doubtful respecting his right to Carnaby, and seems to have felt in the first place that it would not be fitting for him to receive as a favour what was his father's by right. I do not know that many men would have regarded it in that light."

"I think," said the girl with a little quickening of her pulses, "that Mr. Alton's view was right!"

"Well," said Deringham, with a little smile that seemed to indicate that the point was not important, "that brings us to his other motive, which displays a very creditable feeling. Tristan Alton, as you know, only relented upon his deathbed, when, as I pointed out to our kinsman, his senses were, in the opinion even of those who signed his will, a trifle clouded, and Alton was reluctant to profit by a half-delirious fancy which deprived us, or to be more literal, you, of what was virtually your own. As I told him no man in the possession of all his wits would have made such a will, and there was a probability that it could he successfully contested."

"Then I think you blundered, father," said the girl.

Deringham raised his hand as though to indicate that he did not purpose to discuss the question. "I have been trying to show you that Alton never regarded Carnaby as his. You follow me?"

"No. I go farther," said the girl with a curious smile. "All that you have told me was quite clear to me some while ago."

"Now we come to the present. Alton has proved to myself and the lawyer that he is solvent. That is if he sold everything he could just pay his debts, but because he does not intend to sell, he stands figuratively speaking with his back to the wall, and appears to consider that financial ruin may overtake him. That being so he has while he has the power made over all his rights in Carnaby to you."

Alice Deringham rose up with a little gasp, quivering. "Father," she said in a strained voice, "I don't think I can forgive you."

Deringham smiled deprecatingly. "I think that is beside the point," he said. "It seems to me that Alton has acted most becomingly, and if he survives his difficulties we could, of course, come to some amicable understanding with him respecting the partition of the property."

The girl's face grew a trifle plainer, for one word had an ominous ring.

“There is more than you have told me,” and once more it struck her that Deringham was curiously haggard.

“Well,” he said, “life is always a trifle uncertain, and Alton has twice met with disaster in the ranges.”

The girl stood still looking at him steadily with a vague terror in her eyes. Then she said slowly, “And I am the mistress of all the Carnaby property. It is mine to do what I like with. I could borrow money upon it, or sell it?”

“Under conditions,” said Deringham with a little smile of relief, though his face grew clouded again. “Alton has made it yours, almost too absolutely.”

Alice Deringham did not remember what next passed between them or how she dismissed her father, but presently she sat alone staring down across the blue inlet with eyes that saw nothing. She was numbly sensible of a horrible humiliation, but that troubled her the least. Alton was standing with his back to the wall and in some vague peril of his life, and it was she who had helped to betray him. She almost hated her father, and she loathed herself, and yet a ray of hope shone through her fears. Carnaby was wholly hers, and with it she held the power to help him. That something which would test her courage to the uttermost must be done before he would accept help from her she knew, but the pride which had been a curse to her was in the dust, and when the vague project slowly grew into shape she rose and sought Forel. She was very composed in speech and bearing, but when the merchant heard what she asked him he gasped with astonishment.

“I want it done as soon as possible,” she said.

CHAPTER XXXI
“THE THIRD TIME”

Horton was essentially practical, and once he saw his way usually set about the following of it without any of the misgivings which might have proved a hindrance to more intellectual men. There were, however, times when Seaforth wondered uneasily whether he was doing well, but he decided that as the outlook could not be much more unfavourable any variation would almost of necessity be an improvement, and that one could not afford to be over-scrupulous in a struggle with a man of Hallam’s description. Accordingly he hoped for the best, and resigned himself to Horton, who grew more assured of the beneficence and legality of his proceedings during the journey to Somasco, where Seaforth accompanied him, and as soon as he arrived there sent round demanding the attendance of all the ranchers in that vicinity at his store, in the name of the law. He, however, contrived that the summons should not reach the few who, having refused to join the Somasco Consolidated, were suspected of complicity with Hallam, until it was too late, and though Seaforth ventured a few protestations, appeared perfectly contented with himself.

“I’m put right here to scare off malefactors and encourage honest men, and I’m doing it, the best way I can,” he said.

The ranchers came, as did Captain Andersen, the venerable Scandinavian constable, whose duties had hitherto consisted in keeping his neighbours’ gardens free of depredating hogs and improving his own land. Horton also made a speech to them, and appeared somewhat offended when some of them broke into the bushman’s silent chuckle.

“We have,” he said, “no use for fooling. This is the most serious and solemn kind of thing.”

“Oh, yes,” said one of the assembly. “That’s just what it’s going to be if Damer’s friends stand by him. Damer isn’t going to come along to prison because Andersen tells him.”

Horton regarded the speaker with a gravity that was tempered by semi-contemptuous pity. “Then,” he said, “because I’m going to swear you in as special constables, you and the boys will make him.”

There was another lapse into half-audible laughter and one of the men touched Seaforth’s shoulder. “I’m wondering what Harry would think of this,” said he. “It would sound kind of curious in the old country.”

Seaforth smiled as he made a little gesture of resignation. “The point is that he doesn’t know. Anyway, we haven’t done much to be proud of while we acted

sensibly, and now and then foolishness seems to pay as well as wisdom."

"Well," said the other, grinning, "I wouldn't call old Horton a fool altogether."

Horton interrupted him by calling up six of the biggest men, and very gravely swearing them in, after which he produced a paper. "This," he said, "is a warrant for the apprehension of one Roger Damer for horse-stealing, and all you have to do is to go up and get him. You will meet here at daylight to-morrow, every man with a horse and provisions, but while I'll do the best I can for you I'm not quite sure the Government will pay for them."

Once more there was soft laughter, but early next morning six silent men, whose bronze faces bore no trace of merriment now, rode out of the settlement, with rifles slung behind them, and four more followed later leading heavily-laden horses by the bridle. Time was not of vital importance, and though all of them were at home in the bush they prospected for the easiest road, which led them through valleys few men of their race had ever set foot in before. Twice a few of the Siwash, who come down the rivers with the spring, awoke when the moon was in the sky, and heard a trampling of horses high up amidst the pines that shut in a lonely valley, and once a solitary prospector, camping close beneath the snow, rose drowsily beside his fire, and wondered whether he was dreaming as he saw a line of mounted men with rifles flit by and vanish beyond a black hill shoulder. They rode in silence, and save for the muffled ring of iron and faint jingle of steel, he could have taken them for disembodied spirits in place of living men.

Horton, however, had in him a trace of the general, and did what his mind could grasp with a grim thoroughness, while, as the result of it, there was blank astonishment one morning in a mining camp as he and the men who followed him appeared as by magic from amidst the pines surrounding it. They were also armed, and the miners, who rose from their breakfast, stared at them motionless in silence, that is, all save one, who slipped into a tent and afterwards out through the back of it. Horton, however, saw him, and his command was to the point—"Stop him."

There was a rustle of branches, and Tom of Okanagan rose out of the thicket the fugitive had almost gained, with a rifle in his hand. He laughed somewhat grimly as he said, "Stop right where you are."

Then there was for a space a somewhat impressive tableau, that had in it humorous as well as tragic possibilities. Hallam's men had doubtless been chosen because of qualities which are more tolerated farther south than they are in that country, but they had nothing handy to enforce their protests with beyond their camp utensils, and it did not appear advisable to make a move in search of more effective weapons. Accordingly they stood silent, with the smoke drifting about them, all save one of them, who, with impotent fury in his face, backed step by step into the opening before their shanty, as Tom of Okanagan beckoned him. Nobody else moved at all, for Horton's company were commandingly posted

beneath the surrounding pines, and there was a grim twinkle in the eyes of one who carried a rifle, and had risen out of the undergrowth between the shovels and axes and their legitimate owners. How long the spectacle would have lasted Seaforth did not know, but at last the man, who had backed away before Okanagan, tripped on a tent line and went down headlong. That broke the silence, and the big man, who had on a previous occasion spoken with Alton, stepped forward.

"Now what the —— is all this about?" he said.

"Stand back," said Horton solemnly as he drew out a paper. "It's the hand of the law. Here's a warrant for Roger Damer, and it's his body we've come for. You will put the handcuffs on him, Constable Andersen, and if he tries to stop you Tom has full authority to pound the wickedness out of him."

"Hold on," said the big man. "That's your way of it. Now has it struck you that there are things we might do?"

"Oh, yes," said Horton with undiminished gravity. "You're going to stop where you are, like lawful citizens, because there are enough of us to make you if you don't want to."

The argument was incontrovertible, and there was only a growl of protest as the venerable Scandinavian did his duty. Then while two men stood on guard over their prisoner Horton turned for the last time to the miners.

"I'm kind of sorry I don't know quite enough about you to take the rest of you along," he said. "Still, if I can find out anything we'll come back for you again. Well, boys, we'll be going. Hitch that lariat on to the prisoner's wrists, and keep a good hold on it, Constable Andersen."

Nothing more was said, for Horton's men marched out of camp as silently as they had come, and it was only when the pines had closed about them that a hoarse laugh went back in answer to the volley of vituperation that rose out of the hollow behind them. Damer spoke no word to any man all that day or the next, but when they camped on the second night high up on the hillside he signed to Seaforth, who passed the fire where he lay a little apart from the rest.

"Somebody is going to be sorry for this," he said. "Now a sensible man would wonder what you expect to make by it."

"You mean that we can't connect you with the horse-stealing?"

"Yes," said the man, "if there was any. Now there are men behind me who will make you and Horton very sorry you ever fooled with me."

Seaforth smiled outwardly and with his eyes, for he surmised that the prisoner was willing to bargain for his freedom, but his lips were set and he found it difficult to restrain the rage that welled up within him.

"Well," he said, "I don't know that it is of any great importance whether we do or not. It will be enough to hold you by until we find out all that happened one snowy night when somebody fixed a lariat across a trail, and there was another

affair up in the bush."

The light of the fire was on them, and the man's face betrayed him, though his words were bold enough. "You don't take me with a hand like that!"

Seaforth trembled a little as his anger shook him, for he had seen enough. "I think you are the man we want," he said.

He had desired to make quite certain and succeeded, but he afterwards regretted it, for the effect of that speech upon the prisoner, who did not answer him, was considerably more than he had anticipated. The man, who appeared, as Seaforth decided later, suspiciously cowed and dejected, said nothing to any of his captors all next day, and lay down at night in apathetic sullenness, but when the rancher who slept beside him awoke in the morning he had gone, and by way of ironical farewell somebody had hung a pair of rusty handcuffs whose snap-spring was evidently defective upon a neighbouring tree. One man had kept watch beside the fire, which he had left for a few minutes to bring in more wood, and another by the horses; but while neither of them had seen or heard anything, the fact that their captive was no longer with them remained, and half-an-hour spent in very pointed and personal recriminations did nothing to solve the mystery. It was Horton who terminated the discussion.

"We've no use for more talking, boys," he said. "The man was here last night, and he isn't now, and it don't count for very much how he got away. Head right away for the railroad, two of you. Another two will strike for the pass in the main divide, and if you get through quick enough you'll turn him off into the back country. The rest of you will stop right here and help Okanagan to pick up his trail."

There was a hurried saddling of horses, four mounted men went crashing through the undergrowth downhill at the risk of neck and limbs, and an hour later Seaforth and Okanagan stopped a few moments breathless beside a frothing stream.

"He'll have gone this way for the river, sure," said the latter. "You can tell Horton to send Thomson and Andersen across to watch the canon."

Seaforth looked at the bushman, and his face was curiously grim. "You know who he is, Tom? We must have him at any cost, and I think it is my fault he got away."

Okanagan laughed a little almost silent laugh that had no mirth in it. "If the boys can head him off from the railroad I'll find him sure," he said. "Oh, yes, I think I know him. When we get him I'm figuring we'll find the marks of Harry's knife on him."

Okanagan found the trail again lower down the valley, and he and another tireless man headed for the river through a country no horse could traverse all that day, leaving Seaforth behind them worn-out at noon. He sat down to wait for Horton considerably disturbed in mind, and his anxieties would not have been

diminished had he known that Alton was starting for Somasco by the Atlantic express that afternoon.

It was next day when Alton reached the settlement and found the few women there in a state of excitement, while when he had heard their story he borrowed the best horse he could find and rode out at a gallop towards the ranges. He had also spent several days in the bush without finding any trace of the party when he camped one evening on the edge of one of the many deep ravines the torrents wear out of the hillsides. It stretched, a dim shadowy chasm, across his path, and looking down he could faintly see the firs that clung here and there to the sides of it loom faintly black through the drifting mist. It was too dark to seek for a way of descending or round the head of it, and he decided to remain where he was until the morning. Twenty minutes sufficed to make his simple camp, and he sat with his back to a cedar-trunk and a can of green tea beside him, while the shadows crept higher up the hillsides and night tame down to meet them out of the dimness of the east.

The fire crackled joyously. There was hope in all the smells of spring, and the stir of life in every growing thing, while the chill that came down from the white peaks fired the blood like wine; but Alton sighed as he glanced up at the stars above him and his face was sombre. There was, it seemed, no possibility of the railroad being built to Somasco, he could only see disaster in front of him, and knew that with the hope of prosperity a brighter one had gone. He would be a poor man, and was a cripple, and—for he had not forgotten his deficiencies—could have laughed at the folly which had led him to grasp at that which could never be his. Then his slow, enduring stubbornness came to his help again as he remembered that there yet remained to him the fight with Hallam.

“I was a fool. She only wanted to be kind,” he said.

Still, he groaned in a fit of passion as the memory of one moment at midnight in Somasco ranch returned to him, for all his pulses throbbed feverishly as he felt in fancy the warm white arm steal round his neck.

“I must have dreamt it—with the rest,” he said. “And if I didn’t, that was enough to remember. God bless her for her gentleness.”

Again he flung the memories from him with an effort that brought a dew to his face, but the conflict which must be fought every day was over, and he stretched his long limbs amidst the soft cedar-twigs and lay down to sleep with a stolid acquiescence that if wholly free from bitterness was but little brightened by the victory. The man’s life had been a struggle almost since its beginning, and he was stubborn, but his own headstrong passions had been the most obdurate enemy he had ever brought into subjection.

Sleep came and brought him forgetfulness. The fire sank to a lambent flicker above the white-flecked embers, the pines sang their mystic songs about him as a little breeze awoke, and their soft sighing was answered by the growl of the torrent

far down in the ravine. Now and then the horse stamped restlessly and tugged at the lariat that was pegged down within reach of Alton's arm, and once came up and looked down on him. Alton usually slumbered lightly in the bush, but man's primitive instincts reassert themselves in the wilderness, and because it is possible that his senses were not wholly dormant and there was some subtle sympathy between him and the beasts that served him he did not awaken.

Then the horse grew restless and pricked its ears, stood still snorting, and backed away to the length of its tether as a face looked out from the undergrowth. The sinking light of the fire was on it, and it was an evil face with the stamp of hunger on it, and malevolence in the staring eyes. Again the horse snorted and trembled as an arm was thrust out of the bushes and something glinted in the hand, but Alton still lay motionless with the pack saddle under his shoulders.

Then a man crawled clear of the undergrowth, rose up, and stooped over the lariat with a knife in his hand. He needed a horse badly, and one stroke with the blade would give him one; but he needed food and a saddle almost as much, and moving forward a few paces gazed at the sleeping man. He saw the pack that had been seized to the saddle, and guessed that there were several days' provisions inside it, while a wolfish gleam came into his eyes as he straightened himself and stood very still listening. His garments hung in thorn-rent rags about him, weariness was in his very attitude, but his face had written on it the cunning and courage of desperation, for he had been hunted by tireless men who were then close behind him, and had travelled for the most part starving and without sleep. With a good horse and provisions he could yet escape his enemies, and the man looked scarcely human as he stood watching the sleeper with a sullen glow in his eyes.

There was nothing audible but the sighing of the pines and the faint sound of breathing, and moving a pace nearer he stopped again. The man he watched was very still, but a little breeze fanned the fire, and when the flickering radiance passed across his face the watcher almost betrayed himself with a cry as he recognized him. There was only one course open to him now, and with the muscles of his right arm contracting and the lean soil-stained fingers he had clawed his way up the ravine with closing on the knife, he crept forward another pace. He had no great fear of anything Horton and the ranchers could do without the help of this man who could condemn him, and he knew his capabilities. Now one swift thrust would silence him forever, and once he could reach the railroad there was a man who for his own sake would help him safely out of the country with as many dollars as he might demand. Still, he slipped out of the firelight next second, and the knife shook a little in his hand.

Alton had lain with his right arm under him, and the starched shirt he had worn when he left the city showing white where the jacket and blanket had fallen apart, but now the arm was stretched across his body. Still, his eyes were closed, and the

man who surmised that he must have moved while he glanced at the provisions closed with him swiftly, crouching. He stopped again, stooping further, for the arm and blanket were in the way, and he knew he might have no opportunity for a second thrust. Something must be risked, and moving his eyes from the sleeper's face he endeavoured to draw the blanket gently aside.

That was a blunder, for the soil-stained fingers had scarcely touched the fabric when a fist was dashed full in his face, and as he staggered backwards something hove itself partly upright and fell upon him. After that neither of them knew all that had happened, but the knife fell from a hand whose wrist yielded under a crushing grasp, and was kicked away and trampled on. Then breathing stertorously they reeled into a fir, and the assailant's hand was free again, while stones rattled beneath them as Alton, half-suffocated, flung him almost at arm's length from him. Then the ground seemed to slip away beneath him, and he wound an arm about his adversary as he smote again.

Faint as he was with the blow, Alton did not, however, strive to shake him off now, but grappled with him the more closely, and next moment they had rolled crashing through a juniper. Then the other man came down undermost and struck a stone, there was a swift glissade over rattling shingle and through smashing undergrowth, and Alton lay still alone, while something rolled on down the slope beneath him, until hearing a splash below he rose with a little hoarse cry and swung himself off the ledge which had arrested him. He rolled over several times, but came down, as he discovered later, whole in limb, for he could think of nothing then as he groped in and out amidst the pools and boulders for his enemy. When he found him the man lay with his face apparently in the water, and only moaned a little when Alton shook him.

Then suddenly his passion fell from him, and with a gentleness that was in no way akin to pity he dragged the limp body from the water, and sat down to wait for morning with the wet head upon his knee. The morning was also a very long while coming, but at last, when the stars were paling and the dark pines slowly grew into shape and form, there was a sound of footsteps on the heights above and a voice he recognized came down:

"Come right along. Here's his fire, but the man has gone."

"Charley!" cried Alton, and there was an exclamation of astonishment followed by a scrambling, and presently Seaforth stopped with a little gasp by his comrade. Alton's face showed drawn and grey in the creeping light, and there was another more blanched one in the wet fern beside him.

"Good Lord!" said Seaforth. "What's the meaning of this, Harry?"

"Look at him," said Alton gravely. "You should know him. I think this is the third time."

"Damer!" said Seaforth hoarsely. "We were trailing him, and knew he couldn't be far off when we saw your fire. We took it for his. Is he dead?"

“No,” said Alton gravely, “I hope not. We have some use for him. Go back and get the lariat, and we’ll try to heave him up.”

CHAPTER XXXII
ALTON HOLDS HIS HAND

It was very quiet and somewhat chilly in the little back room of Horton's hotel when Damer, who lay on a trestle-cot, moved his head a trifle and made a feeble sign. The fire had sunk in the stove, and it was then towards two o'clock in the morning, when man's vitality is at its lowest. The young doctor Horton had brought in from a distant settlement shivered a little as he rose and stooped over the bed.

Damer glanced at him out of glazing eyes, and made a faint gesture. "I have no use for you," he said. "It's Alton I want."

The doctor crossed over to Horton, who sat in a corner. "If there is anything you want to ask him lose no time," he said. "The man can't last until the morning."

"Well," said Horton gravely, "it would be a favour if you went down for Neilson, the surveyor. He's sitting up waiting. You see we want some witnesses not connected with the thing in case he's going to tell us anything. Harry, you'd better talk to him."

Alton crossed the room and sat down by the bed. He had, as it happened, come out almost scatheless from the fall into the ravine, which was not the case with his assailant, who had been carried down to the settlement with the life just clinging to his crushed body. All that was possible had been done for him, and now Alton waited with intense suspense, with something akin to compassion in his eyes, and his anger diverted from the dying wretch to the man who had made use of him.

"You're going to talk?" he said. "Well, it's only square to warn you that it will be all put down."

Damer glanced at Horton, who sat with a pen in his hand and a paper on his knee, and from him to the surveyor holding one or two Government appointments, who came quietly in.

"That's all right," he said very slowly. "Well, I wanted to kill you, but I don't know that I've a great deal against you now. You and the boys did what you could for me, and it was a man in the city who held me to it. Oh, yes, he's sitting down there raking in the dollars, and don't care two cents that the man he sent up to make them is dying here. The thing's not square, anyway."

Alton was sensible of a faint disgust, but he remembered that he could not afford to be fastidious, because the men he had drawn into his venture must stand or fall with him.

"We want to know who he is," he said.

There was a glimmer of malice in Damer's face. "Well," he said, and the strained voice grew clearer, "it was Hallam of the Tyee. There was something I did that gave him a pull on me, and that man has no mercy for anybody."

Alton heard the scratching of Horton's pen. "And Hallam hired you to murder me?"

"Yes," and Damer glanced at Horton. "You have got that down? At first he only hired me to go up to Somasco and watch you while I worked for you. You're a tolerably smart man, Harry Alton, but it's kind of curious you didn't know me."

Alton stared at the drawn face with a bewildered expression, and then moved a trifle in his chair. "Good Lord!" he said. "Black Nailer's partner! Well, I didn't see you that often—and it was dark when——"

Damer's face went awry with pain, but his gesture implied comprehension.

"Yes," he said feebly. "When you got him with the axe. Nailer had been on the whisky, and that gun of his was a little stiff on the magazine-spring; but he was the best partner I ever had, and I left a good claim behind when you and the boys chased me right out of that part of Washington. Now you've got the beginning. Give me a little more brandy."

The doctor came forward softly and held a glass to the cracked lips, then lifted the dying man a little. After that there was silence for at least five minutes, and Alton sat rigidly still, choking down his fierce impatience as he saw his last hope slipping away from him. Then he drew in his breath with a quivering sigh as the feeble voice commenced again.

"Get it down. You haven't much time."

Horton's pen scratched and spluttered, as sinking now and then almost beyond hearing, the disjointed words fell from the lips that could scarcely frame them; but it was nevertheless with a horrible vividness that Damer told his story, and those who sat listening gasped with relief when at last it was finished and everything was plain. Then he signed to the doctor, who raised his head a trifle and once more held a glass to his lips.

"Read it. I want to see you've got it straight," he said. For a space Horton's voice rose and fell monotonously as he read in haste. Then he approached the bed with the paper, and the dying man seized the pen. He traced a few straggling characters upon the document, and let it fall again, watched with strained impatience while Horton and the surveyor signed, and then turned his head from the light.

"Now," he said, "I guess I've fixed the man who held the whip over me up quite tight."

It was probably ten minutes before he moved again, and then he signed to Alton very feebly with his fingers, while a curious look that afterwards puzzled the rancher, who could not forget it, crept into his eyes. There was vindictiveness in it, but whether there was more than this he could never tell.

"There's just another thing," he said in a hoarse, strained whisper as Alton bent over him. "Come nearer—a little nearer still. Now there was another man as well as Hallam."

Alton glancing round saw that the others had not heard, and stooped a trifle further as the cracked lips moved again. Nobody caught what Damer told him, but when he straightened himself again his face was white and grim, and he went out without a word to any one. Then the flicker of a smile came into the eyes of the dying man, and he moved his head so that his face was hidden. The doctor, crossing over softly, looked down on him and signed to the others that they might leave the room.

"He may last an hour or two, but I don't think he will speak again," he said.

In the meanwhile Alton strode with hands clenched into the shadows of the silent pines. He had long been troubled by vague suspicions, and had driven them away, but he could not doubt what Damer had told him, and groaned as he stood face to face with the verity. He had been too proud to stoop at any time to take an unfair advantage of an enemy, but he could not lightly forget a wrong, and there was a trace of stubborn vindictiveness within him. Hallam had brought him down to ruin, and thrice struck at his life by treachery, and now Damer's testimony had placed his enemy in his hand. He had but to close it and crush him, but he also realized with fierce anger what this would cost him, for Hallam had, it seemed, protected himself effectively. If he dragged Hallam down Deringham must fall with him, and while that consideration alone would not have stayed him in spite of the curious pride of race and family which he had become sensible of of late, it was evident that his daughter must suffer too. She had done no wrong, and Alton, who thought of her with a great tenderness, dare not contemplate all that the revelation would cost her.

It would have been bitter to let his enemy go free, had he stood alone, but that was, he realized, what no man can do, and there were behind him with their future linked to his the ranchers of Somasco whose safety demanded that he should put it out of Hallam's power to do them a further injury. It would also be so simple. He had but to hold his hand, and Horton would take all the action that was needful.

Then it became more plain to him that even at the cost of his loyalty to his comrades he could not allow the woman he loved to suffer with the guilty. He knew her pride and that the blow would crush her, but again through all his pity for her a gust of rage shook him, and he ground the soft cedar-twigs viciously beneath his heel. He could not face the thought of the woman's humiliation. Everything must go, his pride, his faith, his vengeance, before that came about, and he stopped in his restless pacing and leaned against a pine as the conflicting emotions gave place to a quiet resolution. At last he could see the stars between the great branches high above him, and shivered a little as a chilly breeze sighed across the silent bush. Something in its stillness reacted upon him, and the last

trace of his passion melted away. If he did wrong he alone would be responsible, and at least his enemy's daughter should not suffer.

Walking very slowly he went back to the hotel, and found Horton writing. He glanced at Alton curiously and then answered the unasked question.

"Yes," he said; "he's out on the trail now, and one would kind of wonder where it was taking him. Where have you been all this time, Harry?"

"How long have I been?" said Alton.

"Two hours, anyway. Well, you needn't tell me if you don't want to, but it's quite easy to see that something is worrying you."

Alton concealed his astonishment. "I've had things to think about," said he. "Wasn't there a paper you took from Damer?"

"Oh, yes," and Horton flung him several crumpled sheets across. "Nothing much to be made of that. It has been given him to send cipher telegrams with."

Alton glanced at the paper with apparently vague curiosity, but his brain was busy and he had a good memory.

"I think I'd let the folks in Vancouver have it," he said with a yawn. "Now I want a few hours' rest, because we're going back at sun up to restake the claim."

Horton looked thoughtful. "I'm not quite sure you could hold it. It hasn't been declared open."

Alton laughed a little. "Well, I think I can," he said. "Damer hadn't got his patent, anyway, and it's scarcely likely that the man who sent him will protest against me."

Then he slowly strolled away, but once the door closed behind him moved with quick resolute steps to his room. There he sat busy with pen and paper for several minutes, and then descending softly found Okanagan in the store.

"Get your horse as quietly as you can, and ride in to the railroad with this message as if the devil was after you," he said.

Okanagan stretched himself sleepily. "Horton's sending in at sun up."

"Yes," said Alton dryly. "I want my message on the wires some hours before his, but nobody need know of it beyond you and me."

Okanagan nodded, and in another five minutes Alton looked into the room where Horton was still writing.

"I fancied I heard somebody riding down the trail, but it's not quite easy being a magistrate, and my head's got kind of mixed," said the latter. "Still, I've nearly got this thing fixed, and if the folks down in Vancouver don't fool over it, when Hallam hears what's happened to his partner he'll be under lock and key."

"Oh, yes," said Alton. "We'll hope for the best, though that man's kind of slippery."

In the meanwhile Tom of Okanagan was riding at a gallop down the trail, with the thin mist whirling by him and the stars above him growing dim, and there were several leagues between him and the settlement when daylight crept slowly

into the valley. Thus it happened that Horton's dispatches to the police at Vancouver were not the first that left the station, and that evening Deringham, who was sitting with his daughter on the verandah of Forel's house, turned from the girl with a little closing of his lips as he saw Hallam coming up the pathway. His movements suggested nervous haste, and though he was usually neat in dress, his unbuttoned coat had evidently been flung on, while the glance he cast behind him towards the wharf where one of the Sound steamers was about to sail savoured of apprehension. This did not escape Alice Deringham.

"Mr. Hallam seems to be in a hurry," she said. "I wish he had not come now, because I do not like that man, and you have not been well lately. You will not let him disturb you?"

Deringham rose and looked down on her with a curious little smile. "I don't know that it can be helped, but I am no more pleased to see Mr. Hallam than you seem to be," he said.

For a moment, and though the breach between them had not been healed, the girl's heart smote her. Deringham had beguiled her into an action whose memory would, she fancied, always retain its sting, but he was her father, and seemed very worn and ill. Also some instinctive impulse prompted her to detain him.

"Father," she said pleadingly, "don't see him. Go in at once, and I will tell him that quietness is necessary to you."

Deringham had almost yielded to the hand upon his arm when Hallam glanced in their direction and signed to him. Then he shook off the girl's grasp and she shivered a little for no apparent reason as they went in together. There was nobody else about, for Mrs. Forel and her husband had gone down to the city, and she sat alone on the verandah while a murmur of voices reached her through an open window. Though his words were inaudible her father appeared to be expostulating. Then he came out, and as she noticed there was an unusual pallor in his face and that his hands were trembling, she remembered he had looked as he did then once before when a partial failure of the heart's action had almost cost him his life.

"You must send Mr. Hallam away at once," she said.

Deringham made a gesture of impatience. "I shall be rid of him altogether in a few more minutes. You have some money by you?"

"Yes," said the girl. "I am not fond of going to the bank, and got Mr. Forel to change my English cheque into currency, but why do you want it?"

"Hallam has to catch the steamer, and the banks are shut. Don't ask questions now, but get me the money quick."

Alice Deringham went in, and returned with a little satchel. "This is all I have, and I don't feel very willing to lend it Mr. Hallam," she said.

Deringham took the satchel from her and moved away; then, as though acting under impulse, he stopped and looked back at her.

“Thank you, my dear,” he said, with a curious gentleness. “It has relieved me of a good deal of anxiety.”

He went away, and Alice Deringham, hearing the door close behind him, wondered a little. When she next looked up she saw Hallam swinging with hasty strides down the road, and a little later the roar of a whistle rang about the pines as a big white steamer moved out into the inlet. A cloud of yellow vapour rolled from her funnel, there was a frothing wash beneath her towering sides, and the girl watched her languidly until the pines which shroud the Narrows shut the great white fabric from her sight and left only a moving trail of smoke.

Then she felt happier. The steamer had at least taken Hallam away, and her father was not now the courtly though somewhat reserved gentleman who had treated her with indulgent kindness until Hallam crossed his path. It was a fine evening, and she sat still on the verandah wondering how the rift had imperceptibly widened between them, until again the blood crept to her forehead as she remembered that it was at his instigation she had detained Alton. Still, though she realized that this could not be wholly forgotten, she took her part of the blame, and felt sorry for the harassed man whose anxieties were intensified by his solicitude for her welfare. He was in difficulties, his health was failing, and she decided upon an attempt at reconciliation. The respect she had cherished for him could never be quite restored, but she could be a more sympathetic daughter, and help him to bear his troubles. Then as she glanced down across the inlet with eyes that grew softer, Forel and his wife came up through the garden.

“Still alone?” he said. “Where is your father?”

“I think he is in your room,” said the girl. “Mr. Hallam came in to see him.”

“Hallam? Now I wonder——” said Forel, and stopped, but Alice Deringham had seen his face, and being a woman took instinctive warning.

“I don’t think he wanted anything of importance, and he was only in a minute or two,” she said.

They went in together, but Forel was behind the girl, when she pushed open a door and then stopped just inside it. Deringham was sitting before a table, and there was something that perplexed her in his attitude. He seemed curiously still, and his head had fallen forward.

“Father,” she said, and her heart beat a trifle faster, for Deringham did not move.

His face was not visible, and moving forward she grew suddenly faint and cold as she touched his shoulder. There was no response from the man, and she now noticed that he seemed huddled together; but she saw nothing more, for just then a hand was laid upon her arm. Shaking off the grasp, she turned and saw her growing horror reflected in Forel’s face.

“You must come away, my dear,” he said hoarsely.

Alice Deringham shivered, but she stood very straight a moment, staring down

with dilated eyes at the grim figure in the chair.

"Touch him. Speak to him," she said in a voice that set Forel's nerves on edge, and then as the last faint hope died away, stretched out her hands with a little half-choked cry.

"Come away," said Forel very huskily.

He was sensible that the girl's hand was very cold as he drew her from the room, but he left her with his wife on the verandah and then went back hastily. Forel was a kindly man, but he knew that speculation in Western mines has its under-side, and it was for the girl's sake he stripped off the top sheet of the blotting-pad, which had a recent impression on it, and afterwards poured the remaining contents of a wineglass out into the stove. Then he glanced all round the room before he went out to send for a doctor. It was an hour later when he found his wife alone.

"How is she?" he said.

Mrs. Forel's eyes were hazy. "I think she has given way at last—it was awful at first when she would only sit and look at me," she said; and then her voice sank a little, "How did it happen, Tom?"

"Heart disease," said Forel. "The doctor is quite sure of that."

"But," said Mrs. Forel, "what brought it on?"

"Well," said Forel slowly, "anything that upsets one is apt to prove perilous in cases like his, and I rather fancy that Deringham had a quarrel with Hallam. They had dealings together, and I think Deringham must have lost a good deal of money. You will not, however, mention it to anybody."

Mrs. Forel looked at her husband curiously, "No, of course," she said. "I wish I knew what to do for the girl."

CHAPTER XXXIII
MISS DERINGHAM'S CONFESSION

Several weeks had passed since Deringham's funeral when one evening Forel, sitting alone on his verandah, saw Alton coming up the pathway. His face was once more bronzed by wind and sun, but it had not wholly lost the sombreness Forel had noticed when he had last seen him in Vancouver.

"I'm glad to see you, Forel, for I've just come in from Victoria, and there's a good deal I want to know," he said.

"You generally do," and Forel became suddenly grave. "You heard what happened to your kinsman?"

"Yes," said Alton. "It was some time before I got your letter. I was back up there at the mine, you know. Very sudden, wasn't it?"

Forel nodded. "Still, it was not altogether astonishing. The doctor had warned him a few days before it happened that any unusual exertion or excitement might prove perilous."

"And, so far as you know, was there anything of that kind?"

Ford watched his companion closely as he answered:

"I have told nobody else, but Hallam called here and saw him shortly before it happened."

Alton's face remained impassive, but his voice was not quite in accordance with it as he said, "The police have no word of him?"

Forel smiled. "As there cannot well be a prosecution without a prisoner they are somewhat reticent. Still, Hallam caught the Sound steamer, and late that night one of the officers came round here, while I was eventually able to glean a few details. The steamer had called at one or two ports before they got the wires, and while the American police might have shadowed him, you cannot arrest a Canadian across the frontier until you get your papers through. By the time that was done there was no trace of Hallam. Still, I'm a little puzzled, because he seems to have cleared out at a moment's notice, and it's difficult to see who could have warned him."

Forel fancied that Alton seemed relieved. "He has gone, anyway," he said. "Still, if he had only time to catch the steamer the banks would be closed, and he couldn't go very far without dollars. They generally want two signatures to a cheque in a concern like his."

Forel looked Alton steadily in the face. "I happen to know that he took a good big cheque with him, and it was negotiated in Tacoma," he said. "It has transpired since that his partner was away that day, and his cheque-book not available."

Alton's eyes closed a trifle, and though he made no other sign Forel saw that the shot had reached its mark. "Then," he said slowly, "I would rather you didn't mention it. Hallam is scarcely likely to venture back again."

"No," said Forel. "There were, I fancy, things his partners didn't know, but when he had gone they commenced inquiring, and it is currently believed that what they discovered slightly astonished them. Then there was an indignation meeting of the Tyee shareholders and talk about prosecuting the accountant."

There was relief in Alton's face, which softened suddenly as he said, "And how is Miss Deringham?"

Forel smiled. "I fancied you were about to ask that question first," he said. "The girl seemed to take it very hard, and at last I sent my wife and her away up to the hotel in the Rockies. Hettie has persuaded her to stay on here, and I expect them home very shortly."

"But she would be wanted at Carnaby?" said Alton.

"Well," said Forel, once more watching him, "I believe the lawyers wrote for her, but she seems to have a horror of the place, and Hettie dare scarcely mention it to her. I'll tell you nothing more until you've had dinner."

Forel adhered to his resolution, and it was more than an hour later when he returned to the subject as they sat, cigar in hand, on the verandah, watching the lights of the vessels blink across the inlet. "We are going to keep Miss Deringham as long as we can," he said. "She has no kinsfolk she thinks much of in England, and Hettie is very fond of her. Did I tell you that Thorne called upon her?"

"No," said Alton, with a curious vibration in his voice. "Well," said Forel, "I meant to. No doubt he felt it his duty, but Hettie seemed to fancy there was something else. Still, I think she was mistaken, because he said good-bye to us when he went away, and we heard since that he had sailed for another station."

"He was a good man," said Alton gravely.

Forel glanced at him curiously. "Women are subject to such fancies, and Hettie had another once," he said. "In fact, I think she was quite sorry when it apparently came to nothing."

Alton laughed mirthlessly. "Wasn't it a trifle foolish of Mrs. Forel? Miss Deringham is a lady of position in the old country, and I a bush rancher, standing on the brink of ruin, and a cripple."

"Of course," said Forel, "you know best. Still, I can't help fancying you are unduly proud of your affliction, because it is scarcely perceptible to other people, while Miss Deringham has not a great deal to maintain her position with. You see the death duties are heavy in the old country, and from the letters she has shown me Deringham appears to have involved the estate considerably during his stewardship."

Alton laid down his cigar. "It seems to me that we are taking a liberty in discussing Miss Deringham's affairs," he said dryly.

"Well," said Forel, with a little smile, "you have a good deal to tell me."

Alton nodded. "I went back to the mine after Damer's death," he said. "Got there just before sun up, and we had our stakes in before Hallam's men quite realized what we were after. Of course there was a circus, but we had expected it and fixed things accordingly. Hallam's men went out and I came down to see the Crown people in Victoria. Two or three of the others, however, called on the nearest recorder's at the same time as me. We came down in the same cars, you see."

"Have we any chance at all?" said Forel.

Alton smiled dryly. "I left Okanagan and Seaforth with enough of the boys to hold the claim sitting tight," he said. "Talked to the chiefs in Victoria, and showed them Damer's testimony. They told me that nobody had a patent, and that everything that had been done was informal, and because they would probably have to submit the case to Ottawa it would take time for them to come to a decision. And now for Somasco. The new mill's finished, but it has got to live on the local demand, and just now there isn't any. We're half through with the desiccatory, but as it seems the Government will not make us roads, the California people with their cheap transport will beat us easily. I've got thirty men chopping out a new trail one could haul a loaded wagon on, and don't quite know how to pay them. We've raised a piece of the cannery, but for want of dollars don't go on, and, to put it straight, unless that railroad comes in, Somasco will be busted when the loans come due."

"Well," said Forel, "I've some news for you. One of my clients who seems to think a good deal of the future of Somasco offers dollars enough to help you considerably—in fact, half as much again as you were asking for lately."

Alton's face brightened, and then grew clouded again. "The other folks have security, and as I don't know that we have anything we could offer this one, I'm not sure it would be square," he said.

"The dollars," said Forel, "are now in my hands, and I fancy that if you will go through the books with me tomorrow we can find something that would figure as security. In fact, the lender left me a tolerably wide discretion and would almost as soon I sank the dollars to take a share of the profits as put them out on loan."

Alton appeared astonished. "Considering our present credit, that is somewhat curious."

"There it is, anyway," said Forel, smiling. "There are, it seems, still people who believe in Somasco and you, but we'll see what we can fix up to-morrow."

Alton stood up and straightened himself to his full height, while his voice trembled a little as he said, "Then I think whoever it is is going to save us yet."

Forel made no answer, but he fancied that his client would have been contented had she seen how Alton seemed to shake off the grim hopelessness that had been too apparent through all his resolution.

It was with a lighter heart that Alton went away, and having little leisure or inclination for company, he did not go back to his friend's house until the evening of Mrs. Forel's return. The sun had dipped behind the pines when he reached it, and Forel and his wife sat with Alice Deringham upon the verandah, for which the girl was grateful, because the presence of others rendered their conventional greetings easier, and she at once shrank from and desired an interview with Alton alone. By and by it, however, happened that Forel, who may have received a warning from his wife, remembered that he had some business to attend to, while Mrs. Forel went away, as she explained, to instruct the Chinese cook, and Alice Deringham was left face to face with a task that now appeared almost impossible. She could not commence it directly.

"And now I want you to tell me all about Somasco," she said.

Alton leaned with his back against a pillar looking down on her, and the girl, who lay in a long chair, wished that she had chosen a position where the light did not fall so directly upon her. That was in one respect curious, because she had taken considerable pains with her toilet, and knew that the sweeping lines of the long black dress became her. Its sombreness also emphasized the ivory whiteness of her neck and hands, while the pallor and weariness of her face awoke a tenderness that was far more than pity in the man. He caught the glint of the lustrous red-gold hair as she moved her head a trifle, and then turned his eyes away with a little restless movement that did not escape his companion.

"We may hold the mine after all," he said.

"Yes?" said Alice Deringham, with an evident eagerness which puzzled him. "That is very good news. And your other difficulties? You see, I made Mr. Forel talk about them occasionally."

The interest that this implied was not lost upon the man, but he glanced away again.

"They are less than they were," he said gravely. "Still, I don't know that you would care to hear about these things."

"That is not very friendly," said Alice Deringham, with a little smile.

Alton glanced down at her in swift surprise, and then his face became a mask again. "Well," he said slowly, "when I think we would have been beaten without it, somebody lent us enough dollars to carry us through. It sounds very simple, but it has made a new man of me. To have dragged down all the men who trusted me would have hurt me horribly."

"And this loan or whatever it is will prevent that happening? It was opportune?"

"Yes," and a little glow came into Alton's eyes. "It was very opportune."

"You were not so laconic at the ranch," said the girl, who smiled at him. "Once upon a time you would tell me all about your plans."

The man seemed to quiver as he met her gaze, and then slowly straightened

himself. “I have been taught a good deal since then and know what an egotistical fool I was,” he said. “Still, this loan makes too great a difference to me to be expressed in words. You can scarcely understand—I think no woman could—what it is to feel utterly beaten.”

“Still,” said Alice Deringham, with a little flash in her eyes, “I don’t think you ever quite felt that, and now you will have everything you hoped for again?”

Alton’s fingers closed suddenly as he looked down on the gleaming hair and whiteness of the neck beneath it, for the girl’s face had been turned from him. “No,” he said slowly. “I wanted so much, you see.”

“And yet you once seemed to think there was nothing impossible to the man who was resolute enough—and I fancied you were right,” said the girl. “Still, the things one used to admire occasionally lose their value.”

She glanced at him a moment, and was afraid to look again. The man’s face was very grim, but she had seen what was in his eyes, and waited almost breathless, until he stooped and laid his hand upon her shoulder.

“Will you look up and tell me that again?” he said.

Alice Deringham was never quite sure whether she looked up or not, but she felt her cheeks glowing and the man’s hand tighten on her shoulder. “I—I can’t,” she said.

Perhaps her voice betrayed her, for Alton had evidently flung restraint to the winds. “Then,” he said, with the quietness which she knew was most often a mask for his vehemence, “I have something to tell you.”

It cost Alice Deringham an effort she remembered all her life, but she shook off his grasp, and stopped him with a little imperious gesture. “No,” she said, “you must listen. Go back to the rail.”

Alton stood a moment irresolute, the veins on his forehead swollen and passion in his eyes. Then he stretched out his hand with a little laugh, and Miss Deringham knew that unless she used all her strength that tale would never be told. She rose up, and stood looking at him, very statuesque and cold now in the long trailing dress. Alton let his hand drop and bent his head.

“I am only a bushman, and I am sorry,” he said. “Now you will sit down again.”

It was evident that he had put a stern restraint upon himself, but the girl knew that he would listen.

“I have a confession to make,” she said quietly. “You will remember the sale of Townshead’s ranch, but you do not know I kept back the message Miss Townshead sent you.”

Alton laughed a little. “Nothing would convince me of it. The man who should have brought it was not sober. He told me himself.”

Alice Deringham had not anticipated this, and the man’s unwavering faith in her was worse to bear than his anger would have been. “Still, the message was

plain, and I remembered it," she said.

Alton made a little gesture of impatience. "No," he said resolutely, "you did not, and if you had done you would have had a reason that would have made it right."

The girl sat silent a few moments, her thoughts in confusion, almost angry with the man for his loyalty. "But there is more. You were going back into the ranges to relocate the mine—and I knew that it would cost you a great deal when I sent the note that stopped you."

The bronze faded suddenly in the man's face, and there was a dew upon his forehead, while the girl felt very faint and cold as she realized how he would feel the blow. Yet she could not spare either herself or him, and she struck while she had the courage left.

"I knew you would risk everything if I asked you to, and that was why I sent the note. I wanted to hurt you."

Alton's hand tightened upon the balustrade, and then turning slowly he paced along the verandah, while Alice Deringham choked back a sob as she noticed that now his steps were uneven. She had accomplished the task that was laid upon her, and it only remained for her to keep silence and hide her suffering. In another moment he would descend the verandah stairway and she would never see him again. Alton, however, went past the stairway as though he did not see it, moving clumsily, with a limp that pained the girl more than his face had done. Then he turned and she felt her heart beat faster, for there was a change in him when he came back again. He stopped and stood still close by her.

"You must try to forgive me—but it hurt," he said.

Alice Deringham turned her face away from him, and for a moment wonder almost drove all other emotion out of her.

"I—I don't understand. It was I who did that horrible thing."

"Then," said Alton very gravely, "you were driven to it. My dear, you could of your own will do no wrong."

Again his great faith in her brought the blood to the white face of the girl, and her humiliation almost overwhelmed her. Still, she was determined that he should know all, and she struck again.

"No," she said, with a cold incisiveness, though her voice was faint and strained. "I did it because I hated you—and longed for any means of punishing you."

Alton seemed to shiver, but his eyes were fixed on her steadily, and next moment he had laid his hand upon her shoulder and forced her to look up at him.

"Then we will forget it together," he said. "There was a mistake somewhere—for I do not think you could have hated me."

Alice Deringham made a last struggle; it was a very bitter one, for she realized the all-sufficiency of the love that would believe no evil. "It is impossible, and it

will always be," she said. "Will you not see what I am, and how very different that is from what you think of me?"

Alton smiled gravely. "My dear, I want you as you are. How could it make a difference whether you had done right or wrong—and I shall still hold you blameless when I know everything."

Passion was once more kindling in his eyes, and Alice Deringham, who saw it, rose stiffly upright, holding on to her last strength. Her face was very weary, but there was something in her eyes which restrained the man.

"I can bear no more," she said, with a downward glance at the long black dress. "Have you forgotten? You have shown me what a man can rise to, Harry Alton, but I will not wrong you further by marrying you. Now you must say nothing, but out of pity for me go away."

The appeal was effective, for Alton bent his head. "I am going—but there is nothing impossible, and I will come back," he said, and moved slowly towards the stairway.

Alice Deringham watched him cross the garden, and then the last vestige of the resolution that had sustained her melted, and she went very wearily into the house, where, as it happened, Mrs. Forel was waiting for her. The elder lady asked no questions, for she saw her face, but drew the girl very gently down beside her.

"I am sorry, my dear," she said.

Alice Deringham let her head sink down upon her companion's shoulder and sobbed aloud.

"There can be very few men like Harry Alton," she said disjointedly. "And because I could not abuse his goodness I sent him away."

CHAPTER XXXIV
THE CONSUMMATION

It was hot outside in the noisy streets, but the Somasco Consolidated offices were quiet and cool when Alton entertained two of his friends there one afternoon. There is no special sanctity attached to a place of business in the West, and nobody who knew Alton would have been astonished to find plates of fruit upon the papers which littered his table, and a spirit lamp burning on the big empty stove. A very winsome young lady also sat in a lounge-chair, and Forel close by glanced at her with a most unbusinesslike twinkle in his eyes. Seaforth had been married recently, and his wife had called in to see, so she told Alton, that he was not working him too hard.

"You will give Mrs. Charley some tea," said Alton. "Your husband, madam, has been brought up well, but there was a time when I had real trouble in teaching him. Forel, you'll find some ice and soda yonder as well as the other things."

Nellie Seaforth laughed a little as she thrust the cup away. "No," she said; "I know where that tea comes from, and I would sooner have some ice and soda with out the other things. Have the strawberries gone up, Harry?"

Alton nodded. "That's a fact, and I am very glad," he said. "You see, we are sending out about a ton of them every day, and there are none to equal ours in the Dominion. Still, if Charley wasn't so lazy he'd give you some. Can't you find that ice, Forel? There was a big lump yesterday."

"That is quite possible," said Forel dryly, "but it has gone, and it is apparently running out of your plans and estimates now."

"Then you will have to fall back upon Horton's tea," said Alton, smiling. "Nobody knows where he gets it from except that it isn't China, but he seems to think it's my duty to buy it from him, and the rasp of it brings the bush back to me. Makes one smell the cedars, and see the lake flashing, and I'm very tired of the city."

Mrs. Seaforth laughed as she glanced at the bottles Forel was pitching out of a box, for as yet he had not found one with anything in it.

"Have you a mineral water factory at Somasco, too?" she said.

"Not yet," said Alton gravely. "But we may have by and by, though some of my partners would have more use for a distillery. We're going to have everything that will pay, but we've been too busy making roads lately."

Forel stood up, looking a little more thoughtful. "You are, at any rate, running up a confoundedly long bill," he said. "You will get very few new dresses, Mrs. Seaforth, unless you make your husband stop him. Of course you heard nothing,

Alton, from the roads and trails?"

Alton laughed softly. "That's where you're wrong. I wrote them wanting to know if they thought it my duty to open up the country for them, and I got a letter that the affair is receiving consideration. If the bush country members can get the new appropriation through, the surveyor's going up to look at what we've done."

"Effrontery is the thing that pays," said Forel. "But have you heard from Tom?"

Alton's face grew a trifle graver. "He and more of the boys are sitting on the claim, and there's another crowd camped down with stakes ready right in front of him. He tells me he finds it hard to keep his hands off them, and I'd have gone up only that I'm waiting for the Crown folks' decision."

"I think they can only declare the claim open," said Forel, "and that being so they couldn't well send you an intimation before they made the fact public."

Nobody said anything for a little. Forel had told them nothing new, and they could guess at the suspense Alton had been enduring, for the decision of the Crown authorities meant a good deal to all of them. If the claim were declared open, the first man to restake it and get in his papers could take possession.

"It would be dreadful if Harry lost it," said Mrs. Seaforth. "Still, I don't think he will."

Alton laughed a little. "I don't mean to if I can help it," he said. "I've had Thomson prospecting for the fastest road down, and he has found one that is rideable."

Forel nodded. "That reminds," he said. "Hettie wants to get away from the city, and I thought of taking her and Miss Deringham up to Somasco. You will lend us the house for a week or two?"

"Of course," said Alton. "Go as soon as it's possible. I want a man with a business grip up there. My head will scarcely hold all the things I've been trying to cram into it lately."

Mrs. Seaforth glanced at him with a little smile of sympathy, for although the Somasco affairs looked a little more promising now, Alton had been doing the work of several men, and the strain had told on him. She also remembered her husband's sleepless nights.

"We shall all be glad when the anxiety is over, but one can't help thinking that you men have the best of it now and then," she said. "At least you can work—while we can only sit still."

Forel smiled upon her. "Well," he said, without reflection, "there is one woman who has done a good deal for Somasco."

He saw his blunder next moment, for Alton rose up suddenly. "I would like to hear that again," he said.

Forel was manifestly uncomfortable, but he glanced towards Mrs. Seaforth as he said, "I think Charley will back me up."

"Of course," said Seaforth, whose tone, however, chiefly expressed bewilderment; but Alton made a little forceful gesture.

"Pshaw!" he said. "You're fooling, Forel, and you would never disclose who your client was that lent us the money."

"No," said Forel resolutely. "Nor do I mean to. Sit down again, Harry, and don't get fancying things."

Alton moved a pace forward with a dark flush in his face. "Forel," he said, "where did all those dollars come from?"

Forel looked almost abject, and in his desperation glanced towards Nellie Seaforth.

"I think you had better tell him now," she said.

"You know, too?" said Forel.

Nellie Seaforth smiled a little. "I think I knew all along," she said. "Still, Charley didn't. He is, of course, a man."

"Then one of you has got to tell me," said Alton.

Nellie Seaforth raised her hand with a little imperious gesture. "As you know half of it I think you had better hear it all," she said. "Well, if I had been Miss Deringham I would have taken that way of giving you back Carnaby. It is possible to raise money on an estate in the old country."

There was no need of further questions, for the answer was written on Forel's flushed face, and Alton sat down with his lips firmly set. Then there was an awkward silence until he spoke again.

"And I cannot return it. Every dollar has been sunk in the mills and roads except what we took up the first loan with."

Nellie Seaforth nodded with a pretty gravity, for the bond between them all was stronger than friendship usually is.

"No," she said, "and I can't help thinking that it is just as well. One cannot shirk his responsibilities, Harry, and you are an Alton—of Carnaby. You see, nobody could take your inheritance from you, nor, though you did your best, could you give it away, and there is, I fancy, only one meaning to that. Fate is too strong for you. You will redeem Carnaby again, go over there, and be—what you were born to be."

Alton's face was once more flushed, and the girl fancied his fingers quivered a little, but while he sat silent there was a tapping at the door and an urchin flung a journal into the room.

"*Colonist*," he said, and vanished suddenly.

Forel, who appeared glad of the diversion, picked up the paper, and then stood up. "News at last," he said excitedly. "I fancied we would have had it first, but the news agency fellows have beaten us, Harry; it's more than probable they're going to rush the railroad through."

Alton's eyes glittered. "Great news, but it will keep," he said. "No, don't

worry over any more of it. Look at the notices."

Forel folded back the sheet. Then it rustled in his hand, and his voice shook as he read disjointedly: "Vacant Crown lands. To all it may concern. Mineral claim on left bank headwaters Somasco River in unsurveyed territory, frontage declared to be——"

"Give it to me, or get on," Alton said hoarsely.

The paper was shaking visibly. "Is declared to be on or after 12 P.M. on the date undermentioned eligible for relocation," and Forel ended with a little gasp, "You have lost it, Harry."

Alton was on his feet by this time and snatching out his watch. "No, by the Lord!" he said. "I've still rather a better chance than most other men. Head straight for the freight traffic man, Charley, and tell him I'm going up with the fast Atlantic freight they're sending our empty cars back on. Forel, run across and send in your stenographer. There are lots of things I've got to do, and the freight will be going out in an hour or so."

Nellie Seaforth laughed a little. "Then Mr. Forel will not have time, and there's another woman anxious to do a little for Somasco. Give me a pencil, Harry, and begin right away."

Alton only flung her a grateful glance, and dictated rapidly, until Seaforth appeared in the doorway flushed with haste, when shouting his thanks after him he ran down the stairway.

Nellie Seaforth laughed a little. "Good fortune go with him. That is Alton—of Somasco," she said. "I wonder whether he will remember to put on his hat."

"I don't think it's likely," said her husband. "Nellie, I can't help wondering if you were right just now."

Mrs. Seaforth smiled at him curiously. "It was right I did," she said. "Possibly the distinction is too fine for you, but I think the future will justify me."

Then she drew off her gloves, and endeavoured to remember only that she had been considered a capable business lady.

Forel went up to Somasco next day, and one afternoon sat with his wife and Miss Deringham upon the verandah of Horton's hotel. Horton himself was pacing up and down, and a group of bronzed bush ranchers stood in the dust below. They spoke more rapidly than was usual with them, their movements were curiously restless for impassive men, and their eyes were fixed upon the shadowy trail that led down the valley beneath the sombre pines. The afternoon was still, and a drowsy resinous fragrance hung heavily about the hotel. There was no sound but the low voices, and the murmur of sliding water in the distance.

Alice Deringham was pale and very quiet, though there was an intentness in her eyes, and when Horton stopped close by her she looked at him.

"They have heard nothing yet?" she said.

"No," said the storekeeper. "Still, some of them should have been here by

now."

The little nervous tremor in his voice did not escape the girl, and though it had all been explained to her before, she said, "Then you expect more than Mr. Alton?"

"Well," said Horton, who seemed glad to find an outlet in speech, "I don't quite know. You see there was a man brought a wire in before Harry got through, and once the claim was posted vacant anybody could stake it. There's a holy crowd of jumpers hanging round the mine, and because there'd be such a circus nobody could be sure who'd got his pegs in first, the Crown people would probably listen to the man who got through and recorded. Oh, yes, they'll be pounding down the trail as if the devil was after them now, but there's none of them got the relays of horses we've fixed up for Harry."

Horton moved away, and the girl sat still listening, while Mrs. Forel stirred nervously, and her husband apparently found it necessary to light his cigar again every now and then. The voices had died away, and there was no sound but the faint song of water and the patter of restless feet. How long the silence continued Alice Deringham did not know, but a quiver went through her as a hoarse shout rose up, "They're coming!"

Then there was silence again, and she watched a bronzed man rubbing down a great black horse whose blood had not come from a Cayuse pedigree until a faint drumming grew louder down the trail. It swelled into a sharp staccato, and the murmurs commenced again. "Two of them. Another man behind. Riding like brimstone. Can you see them yet?"

The drumming sound sank, and rose again in a confused roar as the horsemen crossed a wooden bridge while Alice Deringham stood up, when once more the voices rose stridently.

"One of the jumpers first. Harry's coming along behind. Cayuse played out. Lord, how they're riding!"

Then lips were set tight, and steady eyes blazed, as a man grimed with sweat and dust who reeled in his saddle swept out from the forest on a jaded horse. Most of those who watched him had a heavy stake in that race, for it was with Alton's prosperity they must stand or fall; but the bushman's code of honour is as high as it is simple, and they sprang aside to give the rider a free passage. The man blinked at them in a curious dazed fashion, as he rode on, the dust whirling behind him and the lather dripping tinged with red from the horse's whitened sides.

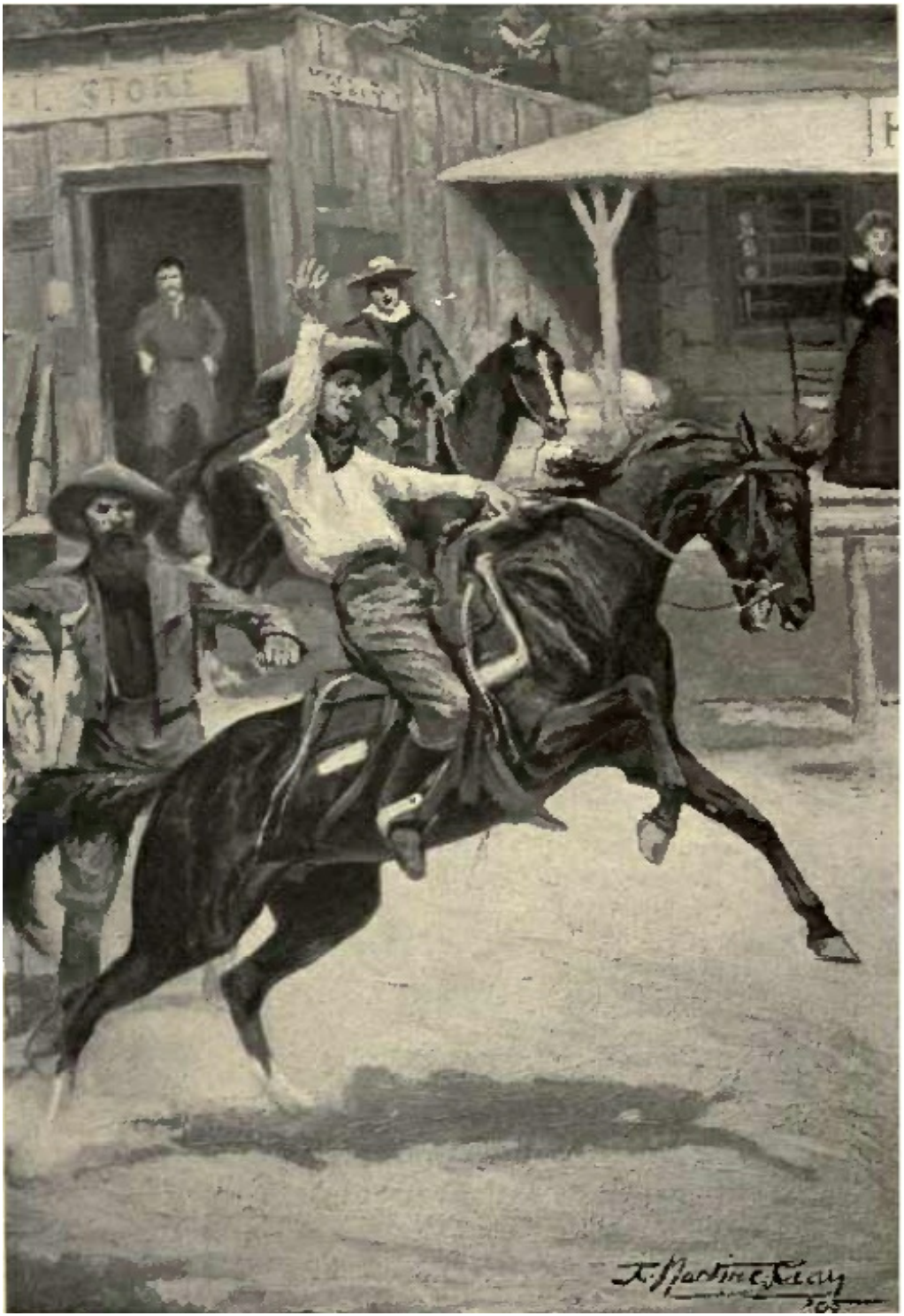
Still, the drumming behind grew louder, and he had scarcely sunk into the shadows when Alton, stripped to shirt and trousers, rode in. He, too, swayed in the saddle, and his face was foul with dust, but it was firmly set, and there was a glint in his eyes, while as he swept out of the shadow of the pines two men led the horse out into the trail. He reined his beast in upon its haunches, swung himself down, thrust aside the pitcher somebody tendered him, and with a swing that rent

the white shirt was once more in the saddle. Then there was a scattering of the crowd and a shouting broke out.

"You'll have him in a league, Harry. Another horse ready at Thomson's ranch."

Alice Deringham held her breath as, while a third beat of hoofs grew louder behind, Alton gathered up the bridle and drove his heels home. The horse, frightened by the clamour, reared almost upright and then backed across the trail, while the girl wondered with a tense anxiety whether the man would look up. Then for just a second he turned his head, and saw her standing on the verandah with a blaze in her cheeks and a dimness in her eyes.

"Off with you, Harry, and remember you're riding for all of us and Somasco," cried somebody.


STORE

Alton had the beast’s head up the trail now, but as he sent his heels home he swung up his right hand, and the girl smiled down on him bravely out of misty eyes.

“And for Carnaby,” he cried. “I can’t be beaten.”

Then the horse shot forward, and he was away, his torn shirt fluttering as the wind rushed past, while Alice Deringham hastened to the end of the verandah with Forel to see the last of him just as another man rode in at a floundering gallop.

The trail led straight beneath the pines, and her heart throbbed painfully while she watched the second rider closing with the one in front of him, until the two figures became blurred before her eyes, and she turned suddenly cold.

“He’s fouling him,” cried somebody, and a roar of execrations went up. “Both of them for the same company. The condemned jumper’s right across the trail.”

There was silence once more, and the two objects seemed to rush together, then another roar went up.

“Down. Oh, yes, the jumper’s down. Harry rode straight into him—the fool might have known his horse was blown. The other one’s used up. Somasco’s leading clear again.”

Alice Deringham was trembling visibly, and knew that Mrs. Forel’s eyes were upon her, but that did not seem to count at all. She could see a figure standing over a fallen horse up the trail, while another that had already left it far behind was sinking into the shadow of the pines. The jumper was beaten, but Alton was riding still—for Somasco and Carnaby—with a fresh horse beneath him.

Then she turned to Mrs. Forel with a softness in her eyes which somewhat astonished the elder lady.

“I should like to go back to Somasco now,” she said. “I am a little tired, and I know that he will win.”

A wagon was awaiting them, and Forel several times came near overturning it in his excitement as he drove them home to the ranch.

It was a week later when one evening the leading inhabitants of the district assembled in Somasco ranch. Those who were married had brought their wives with them, and the cook and Mrs. Margery had toiled since morning to set out the table in a fashion befitting the occasion, for the chief roads and trails surveyor and a member of the Provincial Government were to be entertained that evening.

The sombre green of cedar-sprays relieved the red-veined panelling, there were flowers and early fruits upon the table, and the fragrance of the firs came in through the open windows, while when the bronzed men filed in there was expectancy in their steady eyes. Several of them had ridden here and there with the surveyor all that day, and he had expressed grave approval of all they had shown him. Once, too, he appeared a trifle astonished when pointed out the new

road they had driven under Alton's guidance along the mountain side. It would reduce the distance to the settlement several miles, but it had cost many dollars and weeks of perilous toil, while the surveyor had only stated that it was well done, and the men of Somasco had as yet no answer to the important question whether the Government would complete what remained unfinished or in any way recompense them.

Supper was served with as much ceremony as was possible at Somasco, but the meal was a somewhat silent one. The ranchers were a trifle anxious while the surveyor spoke most to Alice Deringham, who sat next him near the head of the table, and the member of the Government divided his observations between the wife of a big axeman and Mrs. Forel. All of those present knew that events of great importance to them were happening in the city, but save for a brief telegram from Alton stating that he had been allowed to record the mine and would return in a day or two they had no authentic news.

It was almost a relief when the meal was over, and there was a sudden hush of attention as the surveyor rose up. Every eye was turned upon the grave-faced gentleman at the head of the table.

"I have spent a good many years building roads and bridges in various parts of the Dominion, and have never seen better work than you have shown me to-day," he said. "Now I don't quite know if you expected me to talk business on this occasion, but I'm going out early to-morrow, and I fancy your good ladies are as anxious as you are about the welfare of Somasco."

A woman with hard brown hands turned in her chair.

"Oh, yes," she said. "We are that, anyway, and because we're most of us working twelve hours every day just for the right to live, we've sent out our men to make the roads that are to bring the dollars that will make things easier in. The Government don't help us, we're doing the work ourselves, and we'll go out, too, with the drill and shovel if the men are beaten."

There was a deprecatory murmur that had yet in it grim approval, and the surveyor smiled a little.

"That, I think, is the spirit which is going to make this province the greatest in the Dominion," he said. "Well, I may tell you that I was sent up here with a tolerably wide discretion, and after seeing the rock cutting by the lake I'm going to use it now. Nothing better has been done in the province, and the man who planned it for you had courage as well as genius. It is a most daring and successful piece of engineering."

A little flush crept into the bronzed faces, and Mrs. Forel noticed the brightness in Alice Deringham's eyes, for the man who had spoken was a famous engineer.

"Well," he said gravely, "we are going to take over that road—as from the beginning—and finish it for you. That is, you will be paid by the province for

every day you spent upon it, and I leave it to the man who commenced it to see the work through. His pay orders will be honoured, and I should very much like to see and compliment him."

A murmur ran along the table, for the Government pay is good and a road-making grant a coveted boon in each lonely valley, whose inhabitants are usually glad to keep the work in their own hands.

"Boys," said somebody, "this is what comes of trusting Harry."

It was a simple speech, but the second murmur which followed it and the confidence in the bronzed faces stirred Alice Deringham. She had been taught a little about these silent men, and knew the value of their testimony.

The surveyor sat down, and the member stood up. "I can add a little, gentlemen," he said. "Roads are always useful, and we'll give you a good one, and, if my word goes far enough, a grant to cut across trails with and improve your bridges, but you're going to have a better one than any you can build."

He stopped a moment, and there was not a sound in the room. The men sat still as statues, the women drew in their breath, and the song of the river came in through the windows in slow pulsations. Every eye was on the speaker, and now and then a hard brown hand quivered a little, but in the midst of their suspense there was no man weak enough to ask a premature question.

The surveyor smiled a little. "Gentlemen," he said slowly, "you have all heard conflicting rumours, but I have had a message, and you can take it as a fact that you will have the steel road very shortly."

This time there was a roar that shook the rafters, and a rattle of flung-back chairs as the men rose to their feet. They had toiled and hoped for this, holding on with grim endurance when hope had almost gone, and now all that they had looked for was to be given them. There was no man present who did not know that his ranch was worth treble what it had been a few days ago, or woman who could not see that henceforward there need be no more ceaseless drudgery. One, indeed, laughed inanely, clasping her hardened hands, and a dimness crept into eyes, more than one pair of eyes, from which the care that had long lurked there had vanished suddenly.

Then a man swung up a brimming glass. "Boys," he said, a trifle hoarsely, "it's only cider this time, but you can drink what I'm going to give you in champagne when the railroad's through. Here's the man who stood right with us through everything, the man who beat off Hallam, and brought the railroad in."

There was a jingle of glasses, and the surveyor and the member stood up with the rest, while, for the men had let themselves go at last, a great shout rang out, "Harry Alton, Alton of Somasco."

Then there was silence, and while the men stood with flushed faces too stirred as yet to remember that they had done an unusual thing, Seaforth, who had come up on some business from Vancouver with his wife, moved out a little from the

rest.

"Boys," he said, and his voice shook a little, "I would have tried to thank you on behalf of the best comrade you or I ever had, only that I fancy he will be here in a minute to answer for himself."

He stopped abruptly, and through the silence that followed all heard a drumming that might have been made by the hoofs of a galloping horse, and Mrs. Forel wondered as she glanced at the girl opposite her across the table. Alice Deringham had like the rest been stirred out of her reticence, and now she seemed almost transfigured with the warm flush in her cheeks and the pride discernible through the softness in her eyes.

The beat of hoofs stopped presently, and a man came hastily through the verandah. Alice Deringham could not see him, but the flush in her cheeks grew deeper, for she knew that slightly uneven step. Then there was a move towards the door, and she sat almost alone at the head of the table, knowing that somebody was shouldering his way through those who thronged about him in her direction. Still she could not look until a man dropped into the vacant chair beside her. Then she saw that Alton was glancing down at her with a question in his face.

"You are pleased that we have won?" he said.

"Yes," said the girl, who felt that speech had its limits. "I knew you would."

Alton seemed to sigh with a great contentment. "Then," he said quietly, "if it was only to hear that I would begin it all again."

He had no opportunity for further speech. There were questions to be asked and answers given, while it was some hours later and most of the guests had departed when he found Alice Deringham alone upon the verandah. The moon hung over the cedars on a black hillside, the lake flung back its radiance steelily, and the stillness was made musical by the sound of falling water. Alton had come out from the presence of the surveyor with a glint of triumph in his eyes.

"There is only one thing wanting to make this the greatest day of my life, but without it all the rest counts for nothing. You know what it is," he said.

"Yes," said Alice Deringham simply. "But why did you not ask for it earlier, Harry? It would have saved one of us so much."

Alton laughed a little, and glanced down at his knee. "Well, I fancied—but, pshaw, I was a fool," said he.

"Yes," said Alice Deringham. "I think you were—for I was only sorry then. And—after all that has happened—are you not foolish still? I am not the woman you fancy I am, Harry, and you know how I have wronged you."

"You are the one I want," said Alton gravely. "And I know who it was gave all she had to help me when I was beaten."

Alice Deringham still drew back from him. "It was your own, and you do not quite know all yet," she said. "I am a penniless girl——"

Alton laughed exultantly as he stooped and caught her wrist. "All that I want

the most you give, and when you sent me away I knew it was mine," he said. "But Somasco, and the silver up yonder, is mine, too, and that when we have redeemed Carnaby will be quite enough for two."

Alice Deringham made no further resistance, but glanced up into his eyes as he drew her to him, and then felt his arm close round her with a great contentment.

It was half an hour later when she met Nellie Seaforth in a corridor, and the latter stretched her hands out impulsively and kissed her.

"You need not tell me, and I am very glad," she said. "Of course you will be happy. He is a good man."

Alice Deringham coloured in a fashion Nellie Seaforth had not believed her capable of, and there was a depth of grave tenderness in her eyes.

"Yes," she said simply. "And because of his goodness I must try to be a better woman."

She passed on, and Nellie Seaforth, who found her husband, smiled at him. "It has all come right, and I don't think Harry will be sorry, though he might have been had it happened earlier," she said,

"That strikes me as a little mixed," said Seaforth dryly.

Mrs. Seaforth shook her head at him. "No. It's quite plain," she said. "I think Miss Deringham has been taught a good deal, and whatever she may have been she will only be lovable as Mrs. Alton."

Seaforth smiled gravely. "Now I understand—fellow-feeling prompts me to, and of course you are right," he said. "There must be a special blessing on those who, like you and Harry, ask very little, and give with an open hand."

THE END

[The end of Alton of Somasco by Bindloss, Harold]