

THE DOOM OF STARK HOUSE



HUGH LLOYD

*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a <https://www.fadedpage.com> administrator before proceeding. Thousands more FREE eBooks are available at <https://www.fadedpage.com>.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. **IF THE BOOK IS UNDER COPYRIGHT IN YOUR COUNTRY, DO NOT DOWNLOAD OR REDISTRIBUTE THIS FILE.**

Title: The Doom of Stark House

Date of first publication: 1933

Author: Percy Keese Fitzhugh [as Hugh Lloyd] (September 7, 1876 – July 5, 1950)

Date first posted: Aug. 19, 2020

Date last updated: Aug. 19, 2020

Faded Page eBook #20200829

This eBook was produced by: Roger Frank and Sue Clark

THE DOOM OF STARK HOUSE



HAL PILED MORE WOOD ON THE FIRE—IT WOULD KEEP THE BEASTS AWAY FOR A TIME!

A HAL KEEN MYSTERY STORY

THE DOOM OF STARK HOUSE

By
HUGH LLOYD

Author of
The Copperhead Trail Mystery,
The Hermit or Gordon's Creek,
Kidnapped in the Jungle, Etc.

ILLUSTRATED BY
BERT SALG

GROSSET & DUNLAP
PUBLISHERS : : NEW YORK

COPYRIGHT, 1933, BY
GROSSET & DUNLAP, Inc.

Printed in the United States of America

CONTENTS

- I [LOW CEILING](#)
- II [JACQUES BONNER](#)
- III [DRIFTWOOD](#)
- IV [IN CONFIDENCE](#)
- V [ON TO BEYOND](#)
- VI [STARK HOUSE](#)
- VII [THE MASTER](#)
- VIII [WHAT PRICE PRIDE?](#)
- IX [A LISTENER](#)
- X [A MIDNIGHT DECISION](#)
- XI [MORNING PLANS](#)
- XII [WAITING](#)
- XIII [SUSPICION](#)
- XIV [BLACK SWAMP](#)
- XV [THE WILD FOWL](#)
- XVI [STRATEGY](#)
- XVII [A MOMENTARY TRIUMPH](#)
- XVIII [DESPAIR](#)
- XIX [SELF-PRESERVATION](#)
- XX [AWAKENING](#)
- XXI [PHOEBE](#)
- XXII [PRISONERS](#)
- XXIII [MOONLIGHT](#)
- XXIV [PUNCH](#)
- XXV [A SILENT GUEST](#)
- XXVI [CONFESSION](#)
- XXVII [A SHOT](#)
- XXVIII [A MATTER OF TWENTY YEARS](#)
- XXIX [REGRET](#)
- XXX [REFLECTIONS](#)
- XXXI [A SAD RETURN](#)
- XXXII [SAINTE BEAUBE](#)
- XXXIII [A PROMISE](#)

THE DOOM OF STARK HOUSE

CHAPTER I LOW CEILING

A low ceiling had forced them down through the sullen, gray atmosphere and after landing them safely in the snow-banked valley, the pilot took off immediately and was even then gaily winging his way back toward distant Quebec. The two young men watched the plane intently until its shimmering wings were obscured by the gathering storm clouds.

Hal looked away and turned to view the silent, white landscape. Miles and miles of frowning forest stretched out in all directions and to the left, just this side of the timber, the dark outline of the river could be seen under its thick coating of ice.

Chester Stark drew his heavy coat about his none too robust frame, then placed a gloved hand on Hal's shoulder.

"That's Bete Noire, old top."

"Oh, yes—that Black Beast river you were telling me about. It doesn't look like such a black beast to me, Ches." Hal's deep blue eyes twinkled. "Just now it looks like an icy beast."

"It's everything you can name, Hal. Dangerous current—tricky, and yet a blessing for the trappers. Only way they can make it to Sainte Beuve in the bad months. So thick with ice they travel almost the whole distance over it. They begin to dynamite it this month, though. Settlers have to get fish. Dad wrote me they'd already blown up the ice at Beyond. We'll be able to get some trout."

"Boy, that sounds like living, Ches. But say, we're here because we're here and it's middle afternoon. Are you sure this handy man of your father's or whatever he is—are you sure he'll show up and not leave us in this solemn place for the night?"

A smile lighted up Chester Stark's gray eyes and he looked at Hal's powerful physique, admiringly.

"Bonner will be here—he'll be looking for us, don't worry. But even if he shouldn't, I have the feeling somehow that you're capable of taking care of both of us." He glanced at Hal's broad shoulders and nodded. "You look as if you could knock a hungry wolf pack silly with one straight tackle."

Hal whipped off his warm tweed cap and ran his hand over a tumbled mass of red, curling hair. Instinctively, then, he looked off across the gleaming white surface of the snow searching for tell-tale impressions. In a second he espied them, not two hundred feet from where they were standing.

“Ches, you mean wolves . . .”

“Certainly, you crazy egg. You’re in the wilds of Canada and I don’t mean maybe! You’re not on the campus! Do you realize we were a few hours in that plane from Quebec? Figure it out for yourself what a nice cross-country run that would be if we had to hoof it. Sainte Beuve, which is about twenty miles from here, is nothing more or less than an outpost town. There’s a train in and out of there every other week. Beyond is twenty miles also, but north of this spot, so considering the distance between human habitations in this wild, desolate country it isn’t any wonder that wolves . . .”

“How can you tell it’s twenty miles to Beyond, Ches?” Hal interposed, glancing anxiously toward the darkening horizon.

“I’ve spent all my life around these parts, except the time I’ve been at college,” Chester answered. “I ought to know the country a little bit. But to satisfy you, Hal, I’ll tell you why I know it’s twenty miles to Beyond. Bete Noire divides a little northeast of here and she goes roaring out and over through Dirk’s Pass, plunges down into the ravine and meets the river again at a place called the Devil’s Pot. It speaks for itself; it’s the most treacherous spot on the Bete Noire. If you listen intently you’ll hear the roar of the falls at Dirk’s Pass—it seldom freezes over completely. Hear it? Well, just the sound of it tells me that the distance to Beyond is about twenty miles. And by that same token I can calculate the distance to little old Sainte Beuve.”

“Boy, it’s quite a little walk either way, huh? A fellow feels rather small when he thinks of so many miles of snow and ice . . . Gosh, Ches, how on earth can this Bonner bird find us?”

“You have to pass through this valley to get to Sainte Beuve. And if you remember, I wired Dad that if the day wasn’t so pleasant our pilot might have to land us in the valley. Dad will figure the time correctly and Jacques Bonner will be here, Hal. Don’t worry. I wish I was as certain that you’d like him.”

“What makes you think I won’t like him?”

“Because nobody likes him, except Dad. He looks like a bear and acts like a puma. He’s part Indian, but mostly French-Canadian, I understand, and talks very good English. A queer mixture. Anyway, he’s been with my father since their lumberjack days. Dad was foreman of the outfit and when he finally organized the Great Northern Lumber Company and made his pile, Jacques Bonner came into the family and he’s been with us ever since. A sort of major-domo, you know. My sisters and myself have never talked about it, but if anyone were to ask us point blank I guess we couldn’t honestly say we have any use for Bonner. Dad swears by him, and yet at times . . . Hal, I’m going to tell you something confidential . . .”

“Why, of course, Ches—go on!”

“I’ve sometimes fancied Dad is afraid of Jacques Bonner. Why, I don’t know. For that reason I just say I *fancy* it’s so. But do me a favor while you’re at Beyond, Hal. See if you notice that they’re never quite at ease in each other’s presence.”

“I don’t quite understand—”

“You will when you see Dad and Jacques Bonner together,” Chester said, looking up steadily into Hal’s ruddy face. “You’ll notice it immediately, for you’re the type of person that wouldn’t do anything else but.—This is just between you and me, you know.”

“Ches, we’re friends, the best of friends, aren’t we?” Hal said, taking off his fur gauntlet and extending his hand.

“The very best, Hal.”

They clasped hands and smiled, then stepped apart at the sudden, distant sound of tinkling bells. Chester nodded.

“It’s Bonner, all right—with the sleigh. Now you can rest easy that we’ll get to Beyond comfortably. Also, we’ll eat and I know that’s just what you were worrying about.”

“Man alive, was I! The promise of food, a blazing fireplace, the tinkle of sleigh bells . . . If it wasn’t early March I’d think it was Christmas,” Hal chuckled. “Anyway, it’s a merry sounding prospect.”

“Don’t count on too much at Stark House, Hal. I didn’t know what merriment was until I went to college and fell in with you. Dad’s always been so sad and peculiar.”

“Now, Ches, don’t start worrying about the effect your father and your house will have on me—please! I’ve lived long enough to take people as I find them; I’ve met lots of peculiar people too. You ought to know that I get a kick out of almost everything and everybody.”

“Yes, I should have remembered that,” Chester admitted, smiling.

Hal laughed heartily and flung his arm about his friend’s narrow shoulders. The sound of the bells grew louder with every second until presently they descried through the shadowy trees two spirited horses and a sleigh coming swiftly toward them over the hard-packed snow.

Chester Stark waved his arm without enthusiasm as the sleigh approached. A ponderous figure swathed in black furs returned the greeting with a nod of his enormous head. Sullen and unsmiling, the flat-nosed face and dark, opaque eyes looked almost mask-like, so devoid of expression were they. Hal was distinctly conscious of a shuddering sensation throughout his body at this first glimpse of the man.

Jacques Bonner did that to people.

CHAPTER II

JACQUES BONNER

Jacques Bonner yanked the reins with a swift, almost fierce, gesture as the sleigh slid abreast of the young men. Then he proceeded to get his unwieldy body down to the ground. Hal was astonished and moved to secret merriment as he beheld the man standing before him, for this was no giant as he had been led to believe when he saw him sitting in the sleigh. Bonner was a vast torso; his tiny, stumpy legs, giving him a height of little more than five feet, seemed to have been an afterthought of Mother Nature's.

His dark, opaque eyes were observant, however. Hal realized this at once, and he knew instinctively that the man had sensed his amusement and had already set out to dislike him. Chester Stark seemed to have sensed it also for he immediately threw himself into the breach.

"Jacques," he was saying with that wistful smile that had so endeared him to Hal, "this is my friend, Hal Keen—my great big American college chum." He laughed pleasantly. "He looks big enough to save me from any runaway horse, hey? But he almost didn't save himself."

"I'm here as proof that I did save myself though, Ches," Hal laughed.

"And how! We're both here to prove what you did, Hal. The main thing is that neither one of us feels the effects of that shake-up so much that we can't enjoy this convalescence in a great big way. Just think how that accident opened up the heart of our dear old Alma Mater and gave us a nice long pre-Easter vacation to recuperate in. In a way you ought to feel grateful to me, really you ought!"

"Did I say I didn't feel grateful!"

They had almost forgotten Jacques who stood before them looking more grotesque than ever with his immobile face and his dull eyes watching them intently and yet always seeming to look elsewhere. Suddenly he made a swift movement toward the young men's baggage and Hal noticed that his hands too were tremendous. As he gathered up the luggage he muttered:

"We get back B'yond, M'sieu Chester. Snow come soon."

"Yes, I know, Jacques. That's why the plane had to leave us here. Sky's so thick with snow the pilot couldn't take the chance of trying to make a landing at Beyond. Besides, he couldn't take the chance of losing any more time—he had to cover a lot of sky toward Quebec before night."

Jacques Bonner was piling the luggage into the sleigh by this time. He gave no sign whatsoever that he had heard Chester's remarks but motioned

both young men into the back seat peremptorily. Then without further ado he edged his unwieldy bulk into the front seat among the baggage and took up the reins.

“Say,” Hal said in a deep-throated whisper, “that bird doesn’t happen to be deaf or anything like that, does he?”

Chester shook his head and tucked the heavy robes about them.

“It isn’t deafness; it’s Jacques,” he whispered, scarcely moving his lips.

Bonner had not heard, however; he had already turned the horses about and the tinkling bells on their harness soon vied with the low moaning of the wind that came rushing toward them out of the north. Hal sank lower under the warm robes until all but his strong chin was covered.

“It’s weather what I mean, Ches!”

“This is nothing. Wait and watch if we have a nice long spell of snow and wind.”

“We’ll have something to look forward to then.”

“There’s not much else I can promise you at Beyond,” Chester said wistfully. He, too, was chin deep in the robes. “We can ski plenty, of course, and skate, and . . .”

“Quit your worrying about how you’re going to entertain me, Ches. I’m an entertainment all to myself—I’ll whoop things up at Beyond. Just leave it to me.”

Chester did leave it to him and the result exceeded his wildest expectations.

CHAPTER III DRIFTWOOD

They swung along for a few miles under the shadow of the forest, then emerged onto a snow-packed trail that followed the river. Hal noticed that the ice was broken up considerably here and that the dark water, joyous in its freedom after the winter's long imprisonment, was rushing frantically down toward the Devil's Bowl.

"Some swift current, Ches," he observed.

Chester nodded and smiled, and glanced idly at a patch of soft, wet snow that had fallen on his robe. The biting north wind was whipping some snow flurries crazily about their heads. Jacques Bonner, except for an occasional hissing order to the horses, sat motionless in the front seat.

"It took some dynamite to blow Bete Noire up like this," Chester said after a long silence. "The ice must have been terribly thick."

Hal watched the bobbing ice rushing down on the tide and let his glance wander through the murky atmosphere upstream where several ponderous branches were being borne along on the swift current. Behind them came other driftwood—an oar, part of a canoe that had once boasted a coat of bright red paint, and something else that at first glance looked like a huge box. Chester, too, had caught sight of it and partly raised himself in his seat to get a better view of it.

"Looks like a trunk or something, Hal."

"That current is enough to float anything floatable." Hal pushed himself up in his seat also.

"It's the dynamite that's largely responsible. It just gets that ice on a rampage for a week afterward. Everything is pushed along before . . ."

"Too much dynamite used at B'yond," Jacques Bonner said suddenly. He drew up the horses and turned stiffly about in his seat. "I made mistake; it blew up Stark ice house. Big lot of bank blown away and go down river."

"Whew!" Chester exclaimed with evident concern. "Nobody hurt, I hope?"

Bonner shook his head and stared out upon the river. The reins twitched in his fur-gloved hands with every jerk of the impatient horses, but the man seemed in no mind to go on. He was intensely interested in the great box which had floated downstream and was now wedged between two large cakes of ice near the bank. Suddenly he stirred, wriggled his grotesque body

out of the sleigh and, without a word of explanation, walked with a queer, hobbling sort of gait toward the river bank.

“Gol darn it, Ches, that bird’s as queer as all get-out! What’s the idea of going off and holding up this parade without even so much as saying au revoir, huh?”

“Jacques does those things, Hal, that’s all. He never misses a trick of any kind. That’s a chest of some kind—that box, and he’s interested in it. I guess he wants to get a close-up of it and see what it is.”

“Mm. He’s an independent cuss, considering everything. If I was employed in the same capacity that he is, I wouldn’t have the nerve to walk off like that. It’s a wonder your father’ll stand for things like that. I suppose he does stand for it, huh? It’s easy to see Bonner doesn’t give a hang for anyone.”

“I thought you’d notice it, Hal. But I didn’t think you’d have the opportunity to notice it so soon. We’re still twelve miles from Beyond and you’ve already caught on to the mystery of the Stark household. It all seems to revolve about Jacques; you’ll see that he exercises a deucedly queer influence over my father. You’d think the governor was the under dog. Jacques does just about as he sees fit.”

“Does he live right with you—in the house, I mean?”

“Oh, no. But he might as well. He’s more often in our place than in his own diggings.”

“Diggings?”

“Dad had quite a handsome cabin built for him on our place. He lives there with his wife—one of those poor, plain yes women that don’t dare say a word. He’s got a son, a replica of Jacques as far as characteristics go. He doesn’t take after his pater physically though. Rene’s quite handsome. He has rather a crush on my kid sister, Phoebe, but she won’t give him a tumble. She knows quite a nice chap, Jerard Mathieu. He’s a Quebecon—traces his family tree way back and all that sort of thing. A lot of name but perhaps not so much money. He’s visiting at Beyond now—you’ll like him.”

“Well,” said Hal hopefully, “it doesn’t look as if things are going to be so dull after all. We have Jacques to keep us from feeling too gay and Jerry to help us enjoy ourselves. He won’t mind me calling him Jerry, will he?”

“He’ll ascribe it to your extreme youth,” Chester answered with a low chuckle. “That’s what he always says when I get merry with him.”

“Why, is he so old?”

“No, only twenty-five—five years older than we. You’d think there was fifty years difference, though, the patronizing manner he sometimes takes with me. Still, Jerard’s a good sort—I suppose we’ll act patronizingly too when we get to the ripe old age of twenty-five.”

Hal laughed but his mirth was soon cut short by a low, guttural call from Jacques Bonner at the river bank. Before the echo died away in the murky atmosphere, the raucous cry of a wild fowl sounded in the distance and for a moment Hal felt strangely disturbed by its poignant note. He clutched the soft fur robe and started visibly when Chester suddenly laid a hand on his arm.

“Jacques seems to have discovered something about that chest, Hal,” he was saying. “Look, he’s waving for us to hurry . . . why, what’s the matter—you look as if you’ve had a shock or something?”

“Not as bad as that, Ches,” Hal answered with a chuckle. He slid out from under the warm robes and down to the ground. “I just got a queer, spooky sort of feeling when that fowl yipped in the wake of Jacques’ dulcet tones. Can’t account for it. Let’s go and see what he wants.”

They walked quickly away from the sleigh, silent, and observing the gray, flapping wings of the fowl which came into view and circled above the ice-choked waters of the Bete Noire. Cry after cry issued from its long, narrow throat and yet the deep silence seemed but accentuated by the dismal, wailing echoes.

Jacques Bonner’s grotesque figure was bent over the chest as the boys reached his side. He was trying desperately to force a jackknife through the mud-covered top and secure an opening.

“You pull ’em from top when I say,” he grunted without glancing up. “Mud make ’em stick fast.”

“It looks that way, Jacques,” said young Stark as he leaned down and scraped some mud away with his finger nail. “Why, it’s cedar—a cedar chest!”

“Mm!” grunted Bonner. “Cedar make it waterproof and mud make it airtight, yes?”

“It sure looks so,” Hal spoke up. “Where the heck do you suppose it came from?”

“Not far,” Jacques answered, giving Hal a quick glance from under narrowed lids. “Dynamite push ’em out of place where ’em was buried—come floating down river. ’Eem not in water long—’em buried in mud many years.”

“Hmph!” Chester Stark exclaimed. “This is interesting, Jacques. What on earth do you think can be inside of it?”

Bonner neither looked up nor answered but centered his whole attention upon getting the mud scraped away from the opening. Hal watched him and was aware after a moment that the man had a look of tense expectancy upon his swarthy countenance.

“If they had made cedar chests of that kind in Captain Kidd’s day,” said Hal, “I’d think it was another long-buried treasure of his.”

“Captain Kidd’s treasure in Canada?” Stark chuckled.

“Sure. Why not? Captain Kidd’s treasure might just as well have been in Canada as any place else.”

“It ees treasure maybe,” said Jacques Bonner softly, “but not thees Capitan Keed what you talk. Like I say, ’eem not so old, this chest—maybe twenty year. I tell by the mud and the wood,” he added with a triumphant flourish of his jackknife. “Now you pull ’eem from top.”

“Jacques seems to be nothing if not optimistic,” Chester laughed, leaning down and taking hold of the chest’s mud-covered top. “Come on, Hal, give us a hand and lend some of that six-foot strength of yours to open this lid on Jacques’ treasure.”

Hal fell to cheerfully and they forced the lid vigorously while Jacques, in his half-kneeling posture, grunted audibly and moved his jackknife back and forth in the opening. After a few moments of intensive effort, the lid gradually yielded and was forced fully open to the accompaniment of a horrified exclamation from Chester Stark’s thin lips.

“*A skeleton!*” he cried. “Hal—a skeleton in here!”

Hal was too horrified to open his lips. He could only stare into the mud-lined chest, horribly fascinated by the grinning bone structure which lay doubled up within it. Jacques Bonner was breathing heavily, but saying nothing. Hal glanced at him and was shocked.

A smile was spreading over the man’s face!

CHAPTER IV IN CONFIDENCE

The horses neighed impatiently up on the snow-packed trail and high above the river the wild fowl screamed continuously. The biting wind moaned eerily and blew the wet, clinging snow into their faces. Suddenly Jacques Bonner was aware of Hal's questioning gaze and, averting his enormous head, he raised his hand and pointed directly at the skeleton.

"Eem was shot in head, no?" he said, leveling his finger at a telltale cavity in the skull.

"Gosh—yes!" Hal exclaimed, bending his head to examine the bullet hole in the bony skull. "That's what finished that poor bird, whoever he was."

"And if that didn't," Chester Stark whispered, "being buried in this cedar chest did for him. This is gruesome—awful!" He turned to Bonner impulsively. "Jacques, you've uncovered a crime, a terrible crime. I guess some pretty big hunch guided your hand down here—I wouldn't have thought twice about bothering to open this mud-covered thing. I'd have thought it was packed full of junk and not worth opening."

"The police!" Hal said in a deep, hushed voice. "You'll have to get word to them, Ches!"

"Of course," said Chester, looking off thoughtfully. "It means a trip to Sainte Beuve for one of us. It can't be done before morning, though."

"And what about this chest?" Hal asked. "We leave 'em here," Jacques answered quickly. "We pick 'em up in morning an' take on sleigh to Sainte Beuve."

"Yes, that's the best thing to do," said Chester. "No one would be likely to come this way for weeks. You see, Hal, there's only two ways to Sainte Beuve from this side of the river—the trail from Beyond and another trail which no native would take except in late spring and summer. Even then it's a bleak trail; it's called the Black Swamp country up there. Gets its name from the fact that the river floods it pretty well in the early spring. And the reason it's undesirable in winter is because it lies pretty low and the thin ice is sometimes a terrible trap for the unwary. Besides, it's a maze there—I'll tell you about it sometime. And seldom, if ever, a native cares to take the trail through Beyond—my father doesn't invite hospitality. So we needn't worry about the chest being left here—it'll be safe from meddlers—Suppose we get away from here now, eh?"

“Good suggestion, Ches. I’m chilled mentally and physically, believe *me*.”

Without delay then, they closed the lid and pulled the chest farther up under the protection of the river bank. Hal glanced back at it as they started away and shivered. Twenty years ago that gruesome thing had been a living man . . . twenty years, Jacques Bonner had said. He looked up and watched Bonner waddling toward the trail on his stumpy legs.

“Ches, what on earth do you suppose made your Jacques smile before?”

“Smile? At what?”

“That’s what I’m asking you. I caught him smiling at that—anyway, he seemed to be smiling while we were speechless over that terrible discovery. I’m sure I didn’t mistake that look of his to be one of horror. Another thing, he seemed to be pretty certain that that chest was buried for twenty years; he said it too quick somehow.”

“Just the way it struck me, too. Still, he’s a born woodsman and he’s got enough of that Indian strain in him to guess the age of wood at first glance. They do, you know. Yet, as you say, he seemed to say it not so much out of his woodsman’s experience, as from some other experience . . . something that made a pretty vivid impression on his mind.”

“Mm,” said Hal thoughtfully, “something that happened twenty years ago, huh? What a coincidence if this chest business had something to do with . . .”

“Confound it, Hal, you’ve got an analytical mind! Now you’ve got me started thinking that there might be some connection between the two . . . the chest and Jacques!”

“In the face of everything, it’s worth some thought.”

“Yes,” said Chester, his voice almost a whisper now, “but I don’t like the thought. Particularly about Jacques. I’ve felt all my life that there was evil enough about the man without actually seeing any evidences of it. I don’t like it, Hal, I don’t like it.”

“Forget about it then. I’m sorry I brought up the blamed thing. But that’s me all over—adding one and one and getting a total of four. Another thing, I’m suspicious as all get-out.”

“You’re not, Hal—you’re just too confoundedly observing, that’s all. I can readily understand now why three generations of your family have served the American government’s Secret Service so well. It’s in the blood. I didn’t think of it when I invited you to come on home with me, but I might have known that it wouldn’t take a Keen very long to analyze the evil in Jacques Bonner.”

“Aw, forget it, Ches,” Hal protested modestly; “I haven’t been analyzing your Jacques—I’ve just been thinking about him. That’s all,” he added.

“That’s all?” Chester Stark chuckled softly. “That’s enough. From my own experience with you, I happen to know that it means something when *you* think. Things just naturally begin to happen, that’s all.”

“A fellow can’t be right all the time, Ches. Perhaps this is one of the times when I’m not right—perhaps I just let my imagination run away with my head about Bonner. Anyway, we’re out here to recuperate and have some fun. Let’s forget about it, huh?”

“Sure we will,” Chester Stark answered.

Hal glanced at his friend and knew that he was only fooling himself. Neither of them could dismiss from his mind now the suspicion that in some inexplicable manner Jacques Bonner had acquired a definite knowledge of the identity of the chest’s gruesome contents some twenty years ago.

This thought was uppermost in their minds when they again settled themselves in the sleigh. Bonner’s guttural cry started the impatient horses off on a brisk trot. Once more they drove into the blinding snow and biting north winds leaving behind them the screeching fowl which still circled crazily above the dark, ice-choked waters of the Bete Noire. Long after they left the region, Hal seemed to hear its dismal, wailing echoes, and he wondered if the great wild bird sensed the tragic contents of the mud-covered chest.

He was to wonder still more about the wild fowl’s intelligence for they had not heard the last of its shrill, haunting cries.

CHAPTER V ON TO BEYOND

A premature twilight soon enveloped them. The horses found the going more difficult with every mile. Drifts seemed to pile up in no time. Jacques Bonner's orders to the animals were scarcely audible above the screaming wind. It seemed appropriate that Chester should alleviate the tedium of the journey by giving Hal some vivid mental pictures of the Stark history at Beyond.

"My father fell heir to it," he was saying in his mild voice. "There was five thousand acres of timber in all that my Grandad owned. Dad was working as foreman of his gang—Jacques Bonner was one of the gang. They were very young men together."

"So that's how the Stark-Bonner combination started, huh?" Hal asked.

"That's how Jacques and Dad got acquainted," Chester sighed. "How the combination started I don't know. All I do know is that Dad added the two wings to Stark House that make it its present size. About that time, as I understand it, Jacques came into the Stark household. My mother died around then, too. Mrs. Bonner has taken charge of the house since that time. Now she supervises two half-breed cousins of Jacques who've also been with us many years. Their half-breed husbands have helped Jacques and his son Rene about the grounds. Jacques, of course, does little or nothing—confound him. And I've reason to believe Dad has paid him handsomely all these years—they're all well paid—every slinking man and woman servant of the Bonner clan!" he added indignantly.

"In other words, the Bonner family seem to constitute your father's entire staff of employees."

"Exactly. And the Bonner family are hated in this part of the country. The talk Dad takes from them never fails to furnish a subject for the folks at Sainte Beave—they say down there that Jacques Bonner is master at Stark House; Tallman Stark is merely a puppet. Deucedly bad idea for folks to get off my father, but I'm afraid you'll not be long in discovering that it's true."

"But, I can believe . . ."

"All I ask you to do is to see it for yourself and then give me your candid opinion," Chester interposed heatedly. "I want you to watch and see if the opinion of Sainte Beave is correct when they say that Dad has practically buried himself at Beyond because he's afraid of Jacques Bonner. See if you can see it. Dad has no friends of his own—he welcomes only friends of my

sisters and myself, and even then it's only a sort of fearful welcome on his part. So you see why I warned you that Stark House isn't a cheerful place."

"Poor Ches, will you stop worrying about the effect of Stark House on the Keen personality!" Hal laughed. But suddenly he sobered, then: "Just tell me one thing, Ches—what was the idea of your father sticking it out in such a lonesome place as you represent Beyond to be?"

"He's had to do it," Chester explained. "It was in Grandad's will that Dad, in order to inherit the estate, must live in Stark House as long as the foundation stands. He wanted Dad to live there in case Harrington Stark (Dad's only brother) might some day return to Beyond. Harrington Stark was one of those worthless blighters in his youth, I guess. Grandad threw him out and disinherited him, then repented it before he died. He provided in the will that Dad should share equally with his brother if Harrington should ever return. So Dad has stayed and waited."

"And Harrington has never returned, has he?"

"No. It's grieved Dad, too, I guess, for the mere mention of Uncle Harrington's name seems to give him pain. We're careful lately not to mention him at all."

Hal said nothing; there was nothing he could say. He could only stare ahead of the sleigh into the vast, black abyss of the night and speculate as to just what was the matter at Beyond.

CHAPTER VI STARK HOUSE

Three things divided the country of Beyond, the vast forest dipping off into the trackless northwest, the miles of undulating, fertile valley and the rushing waters of the river. In the exact center of the valley stood the House of Stark, a two-storied rambling structure of logs and stone that looked more like a fortress than a home, with its several sprawling wings. The wings had all been added on to the log cabin of the first Tallman Stark.

Chester told Hal all this as the sleigh slid downward to the valley and they saw through the thick veil of the storm, a brilliant array of yellow lights grinning like so many evil eyes. Stark House supplied its own power—Tallman Stark could not bear the black gloom of night.

Two bright lights adorning the posts of the great gate gleamed coldly out over the drifting snow and cast strange shadows across the all but obliterated trail. Hal leaned out, interested in the horses which seemed filled with a sudden zest now that they were home. Their fatigue, so apparent during the last part of the journey, had miraculously disappeared and they pulled up to the gate, neighing with delight.

“Boy, that’s a touch of civilization in a lonesome place like this,” he said, nodding at the lights. “Who’d ever think to find electric lights on the gate-posts out here on the edge of things! I was expecting kerosene lamps.”

“No,” said Chester thoughtfully, “Dad’s made this place modern in every respect. By all the rules of the game, so much electric light ought to make it cheerful and warm but it isn’t—it’s too glaring. Nothing mellow about it.”

Voices shouting in broken English could be heard above the screaming wind, then the Stark gate opened and two short, fur-clad figures emerged under the light. They approached the sleigh gesticulating and talking a guttural patois to which Jacques Bonner occasionally offered a monosyllabic reply.

“That’s Ed—Edouard Bonner and Alonzo Bonner,” said Chester simply. “They’re both cousins of Jacques.”

“Now I’m beginning to get under the skin of the Bonners, huh?” Hal said whimsically.

“Nobody has ever got under the skin of a Bonner, Hal. At least I’ve never heard of such a thing. But you might be able to manage it—you do such things.”

Hal smiled. He was thinking seriously about what Chester had said. At length he asked, "What's the delay—what are they talking about? Do you understand their gibberish?"

"A little. Enough to know that they're telling Jacques they were beginning to be afraid we wouldn't be able to get the horses through the drifts. I was deucedly worried about it myself. Whoever goes to Sainte Beauve in the morning will have to go on snowshoes. Even if this stops within a few hours the horses wouldn't have a chance."

Jacques Bonner, at this point, muttered something in a decisive manner and slapped the reins smartly against the gleaming hides of the horses. Ed and Lon stepped aside and, nodding to Chester, kept pace with the sleigh as it ploughed through the snow-banked driveway.

Noble, white-spruce trees lined this circular approach to Stark House and in and around the solemn, stately park Hal glimpsed clumps of firs and balsams. Their needle-leaved boughs swung frantically in the gale, emitting weird swishing sounds in every lull of the moaning wind and over the surface of the snow their massive outlines cast grotesque shadows. Truly, they looked like some standing army ever on the defensive; the fate and fortunes of Stark House was the keynote of their existence.

A porté-cochere of glistening white stone soon cut them off from the storm and they came to a stop before four broad stone steps leading up to the wide veranda. A light flashed on over the stout log door and Jacques wormed his cumbersome frame down to the ground, pulling after him the many pieces of baggage.

With these deposited on the veranda, the cousins Bonner disappeared into the night leading the horses and the sleigh. Hal glanced after them and following Chester up the steps, said, "Do we see much of the Siamese twins?"

"Who—Ed and Lon?" Chester asked, chuckling.

"Yes."

"Only in passing, Hal. They do the outside work—stables, etc.—Jacques' under dogs. They live in his cottage; it's around the balsams on the left side of the gate. You'll see it in the morning."

"Oh, I'm not so curious, Ches. I just want to get things straightened out so I'll know who's who and what's what."

"Well, Ed's wife is Rose and Lon's wife is Agnes. They're our maids-of-all-work and twins. I can seldom tell them apart. They haven't enough personality to make any difference. Like their husbands they pass in and out and work efficiently." He lowered his voice to a whisper. "It's Jacques and Rene we have to reckon with, Hal. You'll soon find that out. But here we are."

The door opened at that juncture and a small, stolid woman with Indian-like features admitted Jacques with the baggage, then nodded impersonally to Chester and Hal. Shutting the door softly, she took their coats.

“M’sieu Stark say he wait dinner—you come in right away.”

Chester nodded and taking Hal’s arm fraternally, guided him through the wide, brilliantly lighted hall. Trophies of all kinds hung on the walls and the polished floors were covered with soft bear rugs. Over these they walked noiselessly and just before reaching the foot of the wide stairway, Hal was piloted into a doorway at the right.

“Dining room,” Chester explained. “It’s great that the gov’nor waited for us. Guess they were just about to begin.”

Hal’s entrance into that long, stately room was a never-to-be-forgotten event. The cold brilliancy of many lights shone down upon the snowy cloth of the dining table and though he was aware of a young man, aristocratic and mild-mannered looking, and a dark, sullen young woman, there were only two faces in that little group which he was distinctly conscious of. A middle-aged man was smiling at him, sadly sweet, and at his right, a small, blue-eyed, fair-haired girl watched him approach with full lips slightly parted. Hal knew them to be Tallman Stark and his daughter, Phoebe. One knew that without being told.

Tallman Stark rose out of his chair, a powerful man with an almost delicate complexion and white, bushy hair. With both capable hands outstretched, he welcomed his son and Hal simultaneously. A smile played about his generous mouth but the look of fear in his wide gray eyes belied all suggestion of mirth.

Being almost of a size with Hal he put a paternal arm about his broad shoulders and introduced him around the table. Della Stark, his elder daughter, was the dark young woman; she greeted the guest with a wan, impersonal smile. Jerard Mathieu, the young man, aristocratic and mild-mannered looking, acknowledged the introduction with a bland countenance.

It was Phoebe, however, Tallman Stark’s younger daughter, of whom Hal was still conscious after he had been assigned a place at the table and the soup was being served. He was still thinking of what she said and how she said it, and for some reason he could not keep his eyes from tracing the delicate rose-like pattern of color in her fair cheeks. How well did she like Mathieu? Hal pondered the deep question, then suddenly became aware that his host was speaking to him.

“The journey to Beyond must have seemed interminable to a city-bred chap like yourself, Hal,” he was saying.

“Not interminable, Mr. Stark,” Hal answered after swallowing his crumpet almost whole; “just interesting. I didn’t think there was so much space—I felt swallowed up in it. You’re certainly on the edge of things up here.”

Mr. Stark’s haunting gray eyes sought his plate and he nodded his majestic white head several times. His voice had a tired sound when he spoke again.

“On the edge of things, yes,” he said more to himself than to his guest. “Strange I never thought of it that way before. But it just covers the situation . . . on the edge of things.” He looked up almost startled, then smiled quickly at Hal. “There’s been seven generations of Starks at Beyond. Some of us have gone away but we always come back sometime.” He bit his full under lip and a look akin to pain passed across his smooth face.

“We Starks may be isolated here, Mr. Keen, but we’re happy,” Della interposed suddenly. Her voice was high-pitched and icy, and a frown furrowed the olive smoothness of her forehead. Clearly, she was on the defensive, for she added: “We have each other.”

Hal’s handsome face lighted with a brilliant smile.

“And you’re very lucky, Miss Della,” he said serenely, “not only to have each other, but to live on the edge of things. I wasn’t being critical—I was envious. Your brother Ches, here, can tell you what a weakness I have for being on the edge of things. It’s the danger of not knowing whether or not one can keep from falling off. That’s what I love—the danger!”

A hush had fallen over the table and Hal cast a furtive glance around to find that Tallman Stark again sat with downcast eyes. That pained look too was again evident and Hal had the uncomfortable feeling that his remark was the cause. Why, he could not understand and he looked from one to another, questioningly.

“We don’t fall off anything and there’s absolutely no danger up here,” snapped Della with narrowed eyes. “It’s silly to suggest such a thing. One would think we were up in the Barren Lands. Of course, we have long, cold winters but there’s sport to be found outdoors.”

“Ripping sports too, old chap,” Jerard Mathieu said in a thin, piping voice. He looked at Hal, his light blue eyes seeming to wander all over his head.

Hal studied the fair-haired aristocrat and was trying to make up his mind whether or not he liked the fellow, when Phoebe’s low, sweet voice fell on his ears.

“Jerard isn’t being terribly truthful with you if he’s trying to make you believe that you’ll find any sports outdoors tomorrow,” she was saying. “It’ll be days and days before the river’s packed enough again for us to skate and

the sledding won't be good until the snow's packed hard. But if you like skiing . . .”

“Talking of skiing, Dad,” Chester interposed suddenly, “there's one of us or some of us will have to go to Sainte Beauve the first thing in the morning. Jacques made a very interesting discovery just below Black Swamp. He saw this thing come floating down the river—we thought at first it was a great big box, but . . .”

“Pardonnez, M'sieu Chester,” Jacques Bonner's guttural voice interrupted from the kitchen door. He was looking straight at Tallman Stark and a vague smile flitted about his swarthy face. “It wasn't box, M'sieu Chester think it was—it was . . . what you call 'eem chest, cedar chest. 'Eem was buried maybe twenty year because I pick 'eem open with jackknife and we see in the mud inside a skeleton.”

“*Skeleton!*” screamed Phoebe, horrified.

“Oh, I say!” Jerard Mathieu exclaimed.

Della Stark's tight-lipped mouth was drawn into a thin, red line. She was looking anxiously at her father and Hal, following the line of her gaze, saw something that caused him anxiety too.

Tallman Stark was rising from the table slowly and staring at Jacques Bonner's smiling face like one transfixed.

CHAPTER VII THE MASTER

An ominous hush fell over the group and Chester jumped quickly from his place and hurried to his father's side. Mr. Stark straightened up and succeeded in forcing a wan smile over his stricken-looking features, then leaned on his son's arm with a gesture of extreme fatigue.

"Just one of my nervous spells," he said, glancing from Hal to Jerard. "I get them at odd times—they stifle me and—and I have to stand on my feet. My family are used to them," he added, looking appealingly from Della to Phoebe and then at Chester. Then, apologetically: "They're deucedly inconvenient."

Hal rose then, offering to lend his own capable support, but his host waved him back to his place smilingly, insisting that he was quite himself again. To prove it he sat down and resumed the eating of his soup.

"You should have told me about your father's nervous spells, Ches," Hal said, all contrition. "I feel terribly sorry to have been the cause of another one. I shouldn't have brought up such a gruesome topic."

"As a matter of fact it was I that brought it up, not you," Chester protested as he sat down also.

"It's quite all right, boys," said Tallman Stark quietly. He kept his eyes on his plate and toyed with his soup spoon a moment, then: "Perhaps I would have felt just as ill if you had suddenly brought up the topic of the weather. Anything . . ."

"Nerves just on the ragged edge, sir, eh?" Jerard Mathieu asked sympathetically.

"I guess that's about it, Jerard—that's about it."

"But you're feeling quite better, aren't you, Father?" Phoebe asked with low-voiced concern.

"Quite," Tallman Stark smiled at his daughter.

"You're certain, Father?" Della queried suddenly. Her usually harsh voice sounded surprisingly tender.

"Very certain, Della."

Hal felt drawn to the man from that moment for he knew that the rich lumberman was lying heroically. A mental pain still held him in its grip; that much was evident by the unspeakable anguish in his eyes. What connection all this had with the skeleton in the chest, Hal was at a loss to know. He

could be certain however, that some deep, tragic thing underlay the painful episode.

“Let’s change the subject with the soup,” Chester said gaily, indicating the entree steaming on a vast tray which the stolid Rose was bearing in from the kitchen.

Hal noticed in that moment that Jacques Bonner was nowhere to be seen. His exit from the room had been noiseless and unnoticed apparently, for neither the Stark family nor Mathieu seemed to have been aware of it.

Tallman had barely touched his soup; he sat staring at the entree. At length, he said, wearily, “The soup has gone, Chester, but the subject remains. We can’t change it so easily. After all, one must face facts, no matter how gruesome, how painful . . . A murder—twenty years ago, Jacques said,” he added almost in a whisper. “The police . . . they must be notified tomorrow!”

“M’sieu Tallman, you would like maybe to come with me Sainte Beuve and tell police, no?”

Jacques Bonner’s guttural voice from the kitchen door again startled them. Even as he spoke he was waddling toward the table with the noiseless agility of a cat. He had divested himself of his furs and, to Hal, looked more ludicrous than ever in his dark, home-spun suit. It was ill-fitting and the trousers bagged ridiculously on his short, stump-like legs but he was blissfully unaware of his mirth-inspiring qualities. Indeed, he acted quite at ease as he stopped at his employer’s elbow and bowed smilingly; his disheveled, dark hair tumbling over his narrow forehead did not disconcert him in the least.

Mr. Stark visibly shrank against the back of his seat as he faced the man. He looked white and sick now and seemed not to have the energy to conceal it. Hal could not account for it but he had a sudden impulse to choke Bonner’s smile out of existence and he clutched the sides of his chair for moral support.

“You come with me then, no?” Jacques Bonner repeated insinuatingly.

Chester banged his fist on the table and leaned toward the man, menacingly.

“What’s the matter with you, Jacques—why are you standing there questioning my father like that when you see he’s feeling too sick to talk? Anybody with half an eye can see it! Anything else you have to say on this subject you say to me—*privately!* Comprenez vous?”

“Oui, M’sieu Chester,” Jacques answered, bowing obsequiously. “I talk tonight no more, yes?”

He bowed himself out of the room, reserving, before the door shut him out, a smile for his stricken-looking employer. But Hal was not deceived by

it—not at all. Bonner had no intention of giving up the discussion for the night, for a certain grimness about his enormous jaw belied any such promise.

Dinner was finished in silence.

CHAPTER VIII

WHAT PRICE PRIDE?

Tallman Stark seemed brighter by the time coffee was served. His son and daughters reacted to his better spirits immediately and consequently seemed the more disappointed when he later asked to be excused. He was going to shut himself up in his library—a matter of pressing business, he explained. He declined all offers for help and parted from his guests and family at the door to the left of the stairway.

Hal followed the others to another room on the same side of the hall—the sitting room. A bright fire was burning in the fireplace and the room looked inviting with its long divans and many comfortable chairs. He found himself sprawling in one of the chairs, watching the two sisters fluttering about the room in preparation for a game of bridge. Della's manner was feverish, tense, while Phoebe covered up a certain fearful expectancy with an occasional low, hysterical laugh. Chester stood thoughtfully before a snow-covered window and only Jerard seemed thoroughly at ease as he sauntered across the room and stopped before the American guest.

"I say, Keen, you must find it rather dull here, eh?" he asked in a low, pleasant voice.

Hal smiled and shook his head and offered Mathieu a cigarette. Blue smoke curled over their heads before he answered: "On the contrary, I find Stark House too interesting to be dull."

"Oh, you refer to that chap, Bonner, eh? Well, his behavior is rather odd—in most families servants don't hold the whip hand. But Mr. Stark must know what he's doing. It does seem to upset the girls, though."

Hal glanced at his bland face and wondered if the fellow really was not aware of the insidiousness of Jacques Bonner's presence in the Stark household. He looked not so obtuse as all that, this mild-mannered Canadian; his light blue eyes had a sharp expression at times and though his rather short, slim figure boasted no physical strength, there was something arresting about the dominant poise of his small, blond head.

"You have known the Stark family long?" Hal inquired politely.

Jerard leaned over to an ash-tray and flipped his cigarette above it. He smiled as he answered. "This is my third visit since last summer. I met Phoebe in Quebec—she went to school there, you know."

"She doesn't go now?"

“Not since the Christmas holidays. Mr. Stark said he wanted to have her around because of that terrible melancholy he has; he likes the company of his children, I guess. He’d like to have Chester home too, but that’s impossible when the chap is so nearly finished in college.” He dug his hands deep into his trousers pockets. “It’s easy to understand why Mr. Stark would get lonesome here, what? Particularly when Phoebe isn’t home—she’s a ripping bright fixture in Stark House.”

Hal nodded, for even then he had one eye fixed on the petite Phoebe. Her small hands and feet were continuously in action and she had a nervous habit of shaking her head in a manner that threw her short blonde hair becomingly about her fair cheeks. She had the gray eyes of her father and brother and just now they were very much like the elder Stark’s, having that haunting look of fear in their depths.

“You engaged to Phoebe?” Hal asked suddenly.

“My word, no!” Jerard answered, reddening. “Not but what I’d be deucedly proud if I were. But she’s too young, her father says—she’s only eighteen, you know.”

“Mm. You’ve asked Mr. Stark about it, huh?”

“My word, no,” Jerard repeated with a chuckle. “Phoebe’s corking, of course, but I wouldn’t dream of asking her father such a thing while she’s so young. And why think of the future when the present is so pleasant? I’m deucedly fond of the Starks—they interest me. The place is so remote for people of—er—well, it’s unusual to have all one wants in worldly goods and then sink oneself for a lifetime out in this wilderness.”

“Yes, it is odd,” Hal admitted. “But then it’s their business entirely. We all have our reasons for doing things.”

“Yes, yes—indeed, yes! But it’s deuced odd how news travels, what? Before I met Phoebe I heard of Tallman Stark. Eccentric chap, I had heard. But that’s how much one can believe in gossip, eh? He’s anything but eccentric. A ripping sort of man, I say. They call him eccentric because it’s whispered he keeps enormous sums of money about.”

“That’s not eccentric—that’s dangerous,” Hal said. “But then this is Canada, not America,” he added with a chuckle. “A fellow can keep his own money about if he wants to, huh? And if it’s stolen, there’s the good old Mounted to run down the thief. It’s true that they always get their man, isn’t it?”

“Not if their man knows it,” Jerard chuckled. “But he must be a clever sort of chap. I guess there are a few in Canada.” Their conversation was soon cut short by a pretty plea from Phoebe that Hal make a fourth at bridge. Chester had disappeared somewhere upstairs, saying he wasn’t in a mood to concentrate. So Hal sat down with Della as his partner and it wasn’t long

before he sensed that the young woman seemed to resent his presence at Stark House.

His first intimation of this astonishing fact was when she said, "Chester wrote us that you're descended from a sleuthing family." Before Hal could make any reply, she added abruptly, "One inherits such proclivities and I haven't failed to observe that you've already shown such a disposition here. I was sorry to see it and I hope you'll conquer any further tendency while you're staying at Stark House. My father's mental health is bad enough—he couldn't stand the added strain of a stranger's interference in household affairs."

Her hoarse voice had been reduced almost to a whisper, so that Phoebe and Jerard, indulging in some preliminary small talk before they sat down, did not hear. She was looking down at her cards and Hal, trying to recover from his surprise and embarrassment, caught the flood of color in her olive cheeks and he was convinced of one thing—it hadn't been easy for her to speak like that.

"Miss Della," he said at length. "I'm sorry if I've shown any such disposition as you say I have. Granting that I might have inherited the tendency, I'd hate myself for letting it pop out at the cost of your father's peace of mind. So far I can't recall any word or act of interference on my part tonight."

"I didn't say that, Mr. Keen," she said raising her dark eyes appealingly; "I said you had shown a disposition to, that's all. You said something about being on the edge of things and loving the danger of it. Unconsciously, you caused my father some distress. He's been on the edge of things tonight and you can't deny that you saw it."

"No, I can't deny it," Hal said sympathetically, "and I'm darn sorry. But what I said had nothing to do with—it was merely a figure of speech, Miss Della."

"A figure of speech colored by what Chester has told you of Jacques' peculiar behavior with my father," she said with a suddenness that gave Hal a start. "Oh, I knew that Chester couldn't refrain from telling you something of our Bonner complex. Not that I'm angry with him for doing so. On the contrary, I can understand what would move him to ask your help in solving this many years old mystery between Jacques and my father. It was just a human impulse for him to want his best friend to ferret out and destroy that awful something which has prevented peace and perfect understanding between my father and his family ever since we can remember. And from what Ches has told me of your canny sense of detection I know you would be successful."

"Then why ask me not to do it?" asked Hal, nonplussed.

“Because there’s too much at stake, Mr. Keen,” she whispered. “First, my father’s mental state has to be taken into consideration. Then, there’s a lot of family pride involved—I’m twenty-four and old enough to feel that keenly, particularly since I know that Sainte Beauvans have long criticized my father for letting Jacques dominate him. They have whispered all sorts of things and predicted trouble about it some day. Well, I wouldn’t give them the satisfaction of seeing those predictions fulfilled. We Starks will settle this Bonner matter some day in our own way, and it will be a peaceable way too. Your interference, no matter how well meant, would not work out peaceably, Mr. Keen, and now as ever, we must have peace at any price.”

“At *any* price?” Hal asked, not a little shocked.

“*At any price!*” she answered gravely, and let her gaze drop to her cards.

Hal was convinced that all the family pride in the world wasn’t worth such a declaration as she had made. Certainly it wasn’t worth *any* price, particularly the dreadful price which the loathesome Jacques Bonner’s domination entailed.

Poor Della, he thought, how she had contrived to divert his mind from the real truth of the matter. Her reasons for non-interference by an outsider such as himself were logical and truthful enough, but she had omitted to give the most important reason. That reason, he felt certain, she feared to admit even to herself. And no wonder.

Della Stark was too prideful to open up the closet and let the family skeleton escape.

CHAPTER IX

A LISTENER

They stopped in the library to say goodnight to Mr. Stark and found him with his white head bent over a pile of papers. He looked up, smiling bravely, and made an arresting picture with the glow of the fireplace behind him. Hal sat on one edge of his highly polished desk and Chester lounged on the other edge where they chatted on general topics for some quarter of an hour.

Finally, the lumberman said, "Chester, son, I want you to go to Sainte Beuve the first thing in the morning and report that matter of the chest, will you?"

"Why, of course, Father," Chester answered solicitously. "I intended to ask you about it, anyway. It's much better for me to be spokesman in a matter of this kind than to let that confounded Jacques blabber about it. He gets everything twisted."

"Yes, of course," said his father wearily. "If you want to get an early start, you'd better turn in now, don't you think so?" He glanced up at Hal and smiled. "That isn't to hurry you off, Hal. I'd be glad to have your company here until midnight, but I suppose you're tired too after the day's journey."

"I'll say I am, Mr. Stark," Hal grinned. "Just the same, I wouldn't mind staying up with you, but I think I'd like going to Sainte Beuve with Ches. I've heard so much about the little town."

"It's not hospitable to urge you to do that when the going doesn't promise to be so easy."

"Oh, I say, Father," Chester retorted, "Hal's about the toughest being you ever knew. He can stand a terrific lot and he knows how to ski. It'll do him good to get some exercise to Sainte Beuve. And, as a matter of fact, I'd like him to come along."

"Thanks for the compliment, Ches. I'd like being with you, too."

Mr. Stark drummed lightly on the desk top with his fountain pen. "You may require Jacques' guidance if the storm continues until morning," he said hesitantly. He looked at Hal suddenly, and smiled. "You see, Chet isn't a true Stark in the woodsman's sense. He has an abominably poor sense of direction, particularly when the entire face of the landscape is buried in a snowstorm like this. It seems odd that his native instinct isn't strong enough to guide him, but it isn't and that's all there is to it."

“I can’t count the times I’ve flopped around lost in storms ever since I’ve been a kid,” Chester laughed. “There are certain landmarks I can spot out like Dirk’s Pass and the Devil’s Bowl country and that place where we were this afternoon near Black Swamp. A place has to be pretty definite like that though, for me to remember.”

“You weren’t such a youngster when we almost despaired of you in Black Swamp that time, Chet,” said his father reacting to the pleasant talk.

“That’s so, Father.” Chester turned to Hal. “We had a period of snowstorms like this one tonight. I got restless one Christmas vacation time and set out for Sainte Beuve just to break the monotony.”

“And that’s one way of breaking it, huh?” Hal teased.

“Rather. I started out one morning and I didn’t see Father’s dear face in this house until two days later. What I went through is past describing. Suffice it to say, Jacques found me half dead—I had stumbled into that confounded maze I promised to tell you about.”

“It doesn’t confound Jacques though, huh?” Hal asked, unable to suppress the sarcasm he felt.

Mr. Stark passed a hand over his forehead and sighed. “Jacques Bonner knows the Black Swamp country winter and summer. I dare say a blizzard would have to be terrific to vex him.”

Hal wondered if there was anything that could vex Jacques Bonner but he did not say so. He was too moved by the shadows on his host’s face to add any more distraction to a mind already steeped in some secret misery.

“Well, Ches?” he queried. “We’ve got sleep to think about and your father seems to have plenty of work to do.”

Mr. Stark looked up with evident relief and said, “Yes, I’ve plenty to think over and work out before I go to bed, so you boys might just as well turn in now. I’ll see you at breakfast, Chet, my son, and we’ll talk things over.” They said goodnight and left the room, only to find when they reached the hall that Jacques Bonner was waddling swiftly away from them, headed for the kitchen door at the far end of the big house. He did not reveal by one gesture that he was aware of the young men standing at the foot of the stairway and watching his hurried exit with not a little suspicion. When the swinging door closed after him, Hal nudged Chester significantly and they started up the stairs.

“He was eavesdropping, I’m afraid,” Chester murmured when they reached the upper hall.

“I’m not afraid of it, Ches; I’m certain of it. He walked away with too guilty an air.”

Chester nodded, and his long, thin face looked worried. He said nothing, however, but took Hal’s arm and led him along the thickly carpeted hall to a

room just opposite the servants' stairway.

"My room's the other side of the bath," he said as he switched on the light and pointed to the shining tiled bathroom. "Just a step through there if you should want me for anything during the night. I don't have to tell you that I wouldn't hear you if you tried calling me from here."

"I hope to tell you, you needn't tell me that," Hal grinned. "You haven't been my roommate for a year without me learning that you sleep like the Rock of Ages."

Hal strolled over to the wide, canopied bed and flung himself over the turned-down covers, luxuriously. He kicked off his shoes and pulled his tie loose from his collar, then propped himself comfortably on one elbow. Chester walked across the room and sat down in the chair beside the night table.

"You might want to read yourself to sleep," he said, reaching over and pulling the chain on the lamp. As the red glow of the light flashed on, he indicated some books on the shelf. "Phoebe picked out a few she thought you might be interested in."

Hal smiled delightedly and sat up. "So Phoebe picked them out for me, huh? Gol darn it, Ches, that's nice of her. I'm as sleepy as all get-out, but if Phoebe picked out some books for me to glance over, boy, I'll glance them over! I didn't think she knew I was anywhere around—she didn't act so."

"Phoebe wouldn't. But show me any attractive girl of eighteen who wouldn't know you were around. A six-foot, broad-shouldered he-American! I'll say she knew you were here! She told me she liked you immensely—you have so much verve and pep. She liked the way you glowered at Jacques when he was pestering the governor that time."

"Did I glower at Jacques?"

"No end."

"It must have been instinctive, then, Ches. And notwithstanding the warning that your sister Della gave me, I'm all a ga-ga to get that fellow's scalp."

"What warning did Dell give you?"

Hal told him.

"Hmph, she told you a whole lot more than she's ever admitted to Phoebe or me." Chester got out a cigarette and lighted it, then: "She fears what I fear—that there's a terrible flame smouldering between Jacques and my father. All it needs is a spark to set it off just right."

"I don't like to frighten you, Ches, but I have the feeling that that spark isn't in the future. It's right here in the very real present. When it goes off it'll be a question of who's going to be burned by it—Jacques or your father? It seems to me the safest thing to do is to find out what's at the

bottom of all this. Family pride is all right and no one can blame your family for not wanting to be the butt of 'I told you so' people. But what will all that get you if you allow this kind of thing to go on and it takes your father's life? And that's what it's going to do, Ches. I've never seen your father before in my life, but that doesn't prevent me from knowing right away that he's a pretty sick man, mentally. What good will physical health do him when his mind is gone?"

"I know, Hal, I know," Chester answered despairingly. He buried his face in his hands a moment, then looked up. "But what do you think can be done? Father laughed me down when I once asked him what there was between Jacques and himself. He said I was dreaming things, that he thought Jacques an excellent fellow and he warned me severely never to mention such a thing again."

"Queer," Hal murmured. "Even a stranger like myself can see at first glance that your father despises him, and is afraid of him."

"And there you are, Hal." Chester sounded hopeless. "What can be done in such a case?"

"Listen, Ches," Hal answered. Grim determination showed in his set jaw. "For once I refuse to do as a lady has asked me to do. I'm not going to make any trouble for you people—I'll see to that. But I am going to make trouble for that sneak, Jacques Bonner. I know before I start that your father is an innocent victim and that Jacques exercises some terrible power over him. And Ches, I'm going to find out what that is before this vacation of ours is over! I *will!*"

Chester put out his hand gratefully.

"If you can do that without hurting my father and the girls, I say go to it, Hal. And luck be yours—no, *ours*, because I'm going to help you all I can."

Hal took the proffered hand and clasped it, motioning the while for silence. Suddenly he got to his feet and in a few noiseless strides, reached the door. Without a sound he put his hand on the knob and swung it open.

A young man almost fell headlong into the room.

He was as quick as any feline on his feet, however, and instantly regained his poise. His dark, curling head straightened up under Hal's chin and he raised his evilly handsome face to the big American, smiling.

"M'sieu Keen, I was just going to knock," he purred. "Rose, she making chocolate—say maybe you want some. So I come ask."

"No, thank you, Rene," Hal said sharply.

The fellow looked up, not able to conceal his surprise this time, for he asked, "You know me, eh?"

"Yes, I told him about you, Rene," Chester interposed with ill-concealed anger. Then with biting sarcasm, he added: "As long as there's a Jacques

Bonner at Stark House, one could hardly forget he has a son, Rene.”

“No, of course not, M’sieu Chester,” Rene smiled, unabashed. “I do not want you should forget—*not ever!*” The words seemed to flash from between his fine white teeth, then he turned on his heel and was gone, walking toward the servants’ stairway noiselessly.

“Well,” said Hal. “I’ll be darned!”

“You *will* be darned,” said Chester Stark gravely. “So will I. The ice is broken, Hal. Rene Bonner heard every word we said; I could tell it by his face. And what he said to me was a challenge.”

“So be it, by gosh!” Hal exclaimed. “Let him and his father do their worst . . . let them . . .”

CHAPTER X

A MIDNIGHT DECISION

As a tribute to Phoebe, Hal glanced over the books she had selected for him. His eyes were too heavy to do any serious reading; consequently, he did a lot of thinking about the Stark family, particularly its fair younger daughter. Thoughts of her soon colored the slumber which had stolen over him.

The night lamp still burned on the table by his side and he was in a not too comfortable, half-reclining position. Perhaps that is why he awakened so easily when the sound of a man's angry voice suddenly penetrated the depths of his slumber and caused him to sit up in the bed, startled.

He listened and was soon aware that the sound came from downstairs. A muffled shout broke the stillness of the sleeping house and Hal, unable to restrain his curiosity further, put his feet into his slippers and shuffled softly to the door.

He opened the door soundlessly, one inch, two inches, and finally had it sufficiently opened so that he could get his head out to listen. No one but himself seemed aware of the disturbance; the other bedrooms along the hall were all silent and dark with their doors tightly closed. The servants, he surmised, inclining his head toward the rear stair as he listened, were probably snugly tucked in their beds down at the Bonner cottage, for all was silent in that quarter and no light gleamed up from the butler's pantry.

Hal stole farther and farther out into the hall until he found himself standing at the head of the main stairway. He saw the soft, shadowy gleam of a night light in the lower hall and as he leaned over the wide bannister, he saw that a light still burned in Tallman Stark's library. Suddenly he heard the lumberman's voice.

"Get out of here, I tell you!" he was shouting. "Not for one moment will I listen to such a proposition! *Never!* You can't . . . I'll tell all I . . ."



“GET OUT OF HERE——” HE WAS SHOUTING

A low, murmuring voice interrupted at that juncture, and though Hal could not hear what was being said, he recognized that answering voice to be that of Jacques Bonner.

When Tallman Stark spoke again it was not so rasping, but every word he uttered was freighted with hatred.

“Jacques, *you sneaking vile wretch*,” he said in sob-like tones, “the day of your domination over me is past—do you hear? Heretofore, I’ve done it for my family’s sake and that abominable Stark pride that’s stifled my will power all these years. Now I’m going to be free—*free*, do you hear? You’re not going to get another red cent from me—not one! I’m going to bring this thing out into the light of day if it costs me my life and if you do anything to prevent me—why, by heaven, *I’ll kill you!*”

Hal had thrown precaution to the four winds and had crept almost to the bottom of the stair in his excitement. Now he was doubly interested in this strange affair for Jacques Bonner again spoke and he was able to hear the man’s low, guttural tones quite plainly.

“You not keel me, M’sieu Tallman,” he was saying. “I not let you, neither would my Rene let you! Besides, it bad for you if you keel me—eet give you two bad names instead of one, no? M’m’selles would be unhappy to hear le pere is twice a . . .”

“Jacques, if you speak that word again, I’ll take my two hands and choke it back into your lying throat until you are dead! *Dead—do you hear?*” Tallman Stark’s voice sounded thoroughly broken then.

“Ah, pardonnez, M’sieu Tallman,” Jacques murmured, seeming not to be at all disconcerted by the threat. “I will say nothing to you, to nobody, if you but promise . . .”

“Jacques, I’ve told you, you get nothing again from me—not ever! Now get out of this room—out of this house before . . . before . . .” His voice rose to a shriek.

Hal heard the sound of running feet, heard the knob of the library door turn, but he did not wait. He fairly flew up the stairs and into his room, ran to the night table and turned off the light, then hurried back to the door which he opened on a crack.

After a moment, he heard a door slam somewhere in the direction of the kitchen. A deep silence pervaded the house then, and Hal stood at his door shivering with the cold and listening to the howling storm beating against the frosted windows.

Suddenly, dragging footsteps sounded on the stair and then up in the hall. Hal peered out and saw the white of Tallman Stark’s majestic head pass by. A door opened a little farther on and before it closed a low moan escaped the man, a moan fraught with anguish and despair.

The small echo of it seemed to linger in Hal’s mind for the rest of that night.

CHAPTER XI

MORNING PLANS

Hal awakened to a leaden-colored world at seven o'clock next morning. Chester was standing at his bedside looking freshly tubbed, but grave.

"Well, old thing," he was saying, "how do you feel about this long journey to Sainte Beuve on such a morning?" He pointed to the windows where the moaning wind still beat the snow against them in a sort of perpetual tattoo.

Hal rubbed his heavy eyes and got out of bed. He slipped into dressing gown and slippers and yawned lazily.

"So the weather's still cutting capers, huh!" he said, stumbling toward the windows. He rubbed a good-sized oval on one of the frosted panes and blinked his eyes at the landscape which loomed up before him. "Goodnight, it's dismal looking."

"Rather," Chester smiled in spite of himself. "It's pretty bad, but I found a note under my door this morning. It was from Father—he must have slipped in there last night before he turned in. He told me to take the trip if it was at all possible—said that the tragedy has been too long buried as it is, and as loyal Canadians we should not lose any time in getting the police on the track of the truth."

"Truth?"

"The truth of the tragedy, I suppose—who the poor chap was and how it happened, and so forth. The governor said he felt terribly tired last night and wanted to sleep as long as possible this morning. So, the note. We won't have to disturb him—I'm glad he feels like resting. All we have to do is breakfast and pack some furs on—that's if you feel like going."

"I feel like it! Ches, I hope to tell you I do. Gosh, I wouldn't miss it for the world. What do you suppose I came to Canada for, huh? I don't want to miss anything."

Chester shook his head and smiled. "You won't miss anything, Hal. Not when you feel that way about it."

Hal motioned him to come to the window. He was still looking intently through the oval and over the roofs of the Stark outbuildings. Beyond them in the vague morning light he saw a small, square building which stood directly on the dark river bank.

"What's that?" he asked.

“A storehouse. We keep explosives and other things there for various purposes. Jacques has charge of them—he knows explosives.”

“Yes,” said Hal, sarcastically, “I should think that fellow would know explosives! He’s one himself.” He glanced at Chester quickly, determined to tell him what he had heard the night before, but the haggard, worried look in the other’s face deterred him.

“Maybe it’s just as well that you feel as you do about him—you can treat him as he deserves to be treated without fear of consequences.”

“Consequences?”

“Yes. I promised Father long ago that I would hold my tongue with Jacques, no matter how angry I ever got. He said it would only hurt him to have Jacques hostile to us. But with you . . .”

“Leave it to me, Ches,” Hal said, swinging his lithe body across the room. “I’ve got the feeling that Fate’s steered me up here for some good reason. Wouldn’t it be nice if she’s intended me to make up to you all the grudges that you’ve had against Jacques all these years. Just a nice punch in the nose to begin with . . .”

“You nut . . . come on! Get in under that shower and jump into your clothes. I’ll see you down in the dining room in fifteen minutes. Time enough?”

“You’ll see me before that, Ches. I’m good and hungry already.”

He was as good as his word for he had joined Chester and was halfway through a steaming hot breakfast before the fifteen minutes were over. Jacques Bonner appeared, waddling through the kitchen doorway, fur clad and contented looking.

“We take shoes Sainte Beuve,” he announced to Chester. “Ski not good today.”

“I was thinking that, Jacques,” Chester said thoughtfully. “It looks as if the snow’s pretty wet in places—the shoes are better. Well, we’ll get started as soon as Hal here can tear himself away from the food.” He laughed, assuming, from old habit, an air of gaiety in Bonner’s presence.

But Hal could not assume anything. Indeed, he had that feeling of contempt that normal, wholesome people have for anyone who is malevolent and treacherous. He could not conceal his dislike for the man and he did not want to, particularly with the memory of last night so vivid in his mind. He looked up at Bonner, his deep blue eyes as cold as ice.

“A full stomach makes a clear head in my case,” he said, with the hint of a sneer in his deep, bass voice. “I do pretty well even when I’m hungry, but I can do wonders on a full stomach. I see people just as they are, believe me.”

A frown was visible on Bonner’s forehead as he answered, “You fortune teller, eh?”

“No,” Hal answered, bolting the last half of his cup of coffee. “You flatter me there. But at that, I can do almost as well as some of those fakes. I guess what a fellow is, and then instead of stopping there, I plug right ahead until I get at the bottom of things and find out why I guessed it. I’ve never failed—I keep on until I succeed. For instance, you look quite calm this morning, but I am guessing you’re hopping mad inside of you. You’re sort of turning things over in your head, planning ways and means . . .”

There was a glitter of real intelligence in Bonner’s eyes for a moment, a gleam of unconscious admiration for the young American who had risen from the table and was smiling a challenge. It was only for a moment, however, for he started toward the door, frowning.

“You right—I plan, M’sieu Keen,” he was murmuring. “You no can guess what I plan?” He smiled enigmatically.

“No,” Hal answered sharply, “I told you I wasn’t a fortune teller.”

“It ees well, M’sieu Keen—it ees well for you you no can tell.” Then: “I wait for you get furs on—I get lunch Rose make for us.” Hal watched the swinging door shut behind him, then turned to Chester and said: “What do you suppose he meant by saying it was well for me I couldn’t tell?”

“Just talk. He knows you despise him and he wanted to let you know that he knows it.”

“A darn queer way of letting me know it,” Hal said, running his hand through his red, curling hair. “And mighty funny talk—mighty funny . . .”

“That’s Jacques’ way, Hal. Forget it. Come now, time’s going. I’ve got our wraps near the heat so they’ll be warm when we jump into them. Come, they’re in the hall.”

Hal followed only half willingly. He did not know whether it was the effect of Jacques Bonner’s queer talk, but he would have given much in that moment if the journey to Sainte Beauve could have been called off. A strange sense of foreboding caused him to look forward to the prospect with dread.

Ten minutes later he followed Chester outdoors to face the storm.

CHAPTER XII

WAITING

Their journey seemed ill-favored from the start. The wind and driving snow were so intense as they started climbing up out of the valley that they were forced to turn back a full mile and retrace their steps directly along the river. There was little or no chance for conversation and before three full hours had passed, Hal's ardor for Canadian adventure was somewhat dampened.

To begin with, he heartily wished that Jacques Bonner had never laid eyes on the chest so that a journey to Sainte Beuve could have been made in better weather and under more pleasing conditions. Also, he was inclined to be not a little irritated at the thought of Jerard Mathieu having slept well, and leisurely breakfasting about that time in the comforting warmth of Stark House. But Hal was too genial a fellow to let such thoughts linger; he was soon whistling contentedly and thinking that there was a possibility of earning Phoebe's favor because of the journey. She couldn't help contrasting Mathieu's languid indoor attitude with his own virile self—he was certain of it. That flattering thought alone was enough to set him up for the rest of the hazardous trip.

"Where do we eat the lunch that your Rosie did up for us," Hal called. "In the shade of the old snow bank?"

"I don't see any place else," Chester answered, as he trudged on ahead. "Getting hungry?"

"And how! Where's the food and what is it?"

Chester laughed outright and lowered his head against a blast of icy wind. He motioned toward Jacques who was leading the way and waddling laboriously in his snow shoes.

"He has the blessed food—luscious beefsteak sandwiches and two thermos bottles of coffee. I guess he'll have us stop about noon. We ought to be down in the Black Swamp country by that time."

"We ought to be somewhere. Gosh, I never used my legs so much before without seeming to get anywhere at all."

"You don't call those legs, Hal, do you?" Chester teased. "They're stilts—human stilts, absolutely."

Such banter was heartening and seemed to make the noon-hour come around as if by magic. Also, they had reached the Black Swamp country and Chester was cheerfully predicting an early arrival at Sainte Beuve.

“Here’s where Jacques comes in handy,” he confided to Hal, as they started a descent into another vast, white valley. “It’s a part of the country he never forgets and one which I’ll never learn to remember, especially in a storm like this—which way leads to the Swamp itself and which way goes directly to Sainte Beauve. With such a problem on our hands you can’t deny that Jacques is a corking help.”

“No,” Hal admitted grudgingly, “I won’t deny it. But it’s about the only thing I can see that he’s useful in.”

They had long since lost sight of the river and were approaching the forest which Chester had said determined their course either to the forbidding swamp itself or to Sainte Beauve. A cross-trail was the deciding factor and all trails were buried under fifteen feet and more of snow and a maze of drifts which had been accumulating for more than twenty-four hours.

“But that won’t bother Jacques,” Chester insisted. “He’d know which trail to take if he was blind, I guess.”

“You guess?” Hal asked, looking skeptically into the miles of forest and drifting snow.

“He’s never made a mistake about it yet, and he’s been taking the journey ever since he was able to walk.”

“Well, that’s something. But most people make a mistake once in a lifetime anyway. Still, he ought to know after all these years.”

“Of course. I’ve perfect faith in him about that—I wish I could say as much about him in other ways.”

Hal nodded and soon forgot his fears concerning Jacques’ judgment for they were in the depths of the forest and out of the worst of the wind. He felt considerably warmer and was grateful for the protection of the great trees. Also, the traveling was much easier underfoot and it gave his tired legs a little rest.

Contrary to Chester’s prediction, Jacques made no offer to stop at noontime. He did not bother to make explanations, but indicated by a shrug of his shoulders that they had not reached a suitable place to lunch. Hal was almost famished when the man suddenly signaled them to stop and pointed to a thick clump of balsams under which little of the snow and storm seemed to be penetrating.

“That ees nice place to eat,” he said almost pleasantly. He took out of his pockets one of the thermos bottles and a bulging packet of sandwiches and placed them down in the snow. Then he nodded his enormous head. “While you start eating, I go on five hundred feet maybe, see we on right way, no?”

“By all means,” Chester answered, dropping gratefully on a soft bed of snow-covered boughs. “You must be hungry, though.”

“I not so hungry—I wait ten, fifteen minutes fine,” Jacques grunted. Suddenly he looked at Hal and an almost beatific smile played over his ugly features. “You enjoy sandwich and coffee while I go, no? You maybe tell that I think so, eh?”

“How many times do I have to tell you I’m not a mind-reader, huh?” Hal retorted not a little impatiently. Then, repenting of his harshness, he added: “Oh, well, that’s neither here nor there—I’ll enjoy something to eat no matter how you feel about it.”

“That ees good,” Jacques smiled, and bowed himself away from their presence.

Chester busied himself by opening the packet of sandwiches, but Hal, notwithstanding his hunger, watched Bonner until the snow and the trees hid him from view. Even after that, he continued to stare in the direction which the man had taken, unable to shake off a certain curious feeling of frustration that had welled up within him. Unconsciously, he pushed back his gauntlet and looked at his watch.

“Well?” Chester’s voice broke in upon his musings. “I thought you were the chap who was hungry.”

Hal turned around with a grin and took a savory-smelling sandwich that Chester was offering him.

“A guy can be so hungry that he forgets it, Ches.”

“Well, that’s a new one to me,” said Chester pouring a steaming draught of coffee for his friend. “Here drink this and you’ll remember how hungry you are.”

“I’m beginning to remember it now, all right,” Hal said with a grin. He sniffed at the coffee gratefully. “Gosh, everything smells so good.” Then, after a moment: “It just gave me a queer jolt to see Bonner walking away from us. I sort of thought maybe he wouldn’t find his way back to us. Crazy notion, huh?”

“Ridiculous! If he can find his way back and forth for a distance of thirty-five miles and more, he certainly can go five hundred feet away from here without getting lost.”

“Sure thing,” Hal agreed, and soon forgot his misgivings in the complete enjoyment of the lunch.

They spent a few minutes in small talk, then sat in silence, eating and listening to the loud voice of the storm. It was almost pleasant sitting there in the protection of the balsams. The biting wind could not reach them and the snow that drifted in did so only in small quantities.

The sandwiches were gone and the thermos bottle had not another drop of coffee in it. Chester held it bottom up over the snow-covered ground to prove it.

“I could stand some more coffee, Hal, couldn’t you?”

“I hope to tell you. Another sandwich wouldn’t go bad, either.”

“That’s right. I could stand that, too. Guess Jacques kept the other package and that other bottle to make sure he’d get something to eat when he got back. He’s a canny egg.”

“I’ve thought that since I laid eyes on him. Nobody else’ll get what’s coming to *him* while he’s conscious.”

“Well, you warned him what an appetite you had. You can’t blame him for being careful. There’s cake and biscuits in that package he’s got. Rose told me she put them in.”

“Oh boy, wait till he gets here. How I love cake and biscuits! Listen, I think I hear . . .”

They heard the sharp sound of crackling twigs not far distant, then the sound of a ponderous body moving between the closely grown trees. Hal got up and peered through the dim light and saw a full grown moose crashing through the dry, dead underbrush not fifty yards distant. The animal was gone into the dark depths of the forest before Chester could get to his feet.

“I thought sure that was Jacques coming,” Hal murmured, disappointed.

Chester laughed outright and said, “That’s corking—comparing Jacques to a moose!”

“Well, I’m blamed if I haven’t heard Bonner making as much noise as that moose did just now. He waddles so, the ground shakes.”

“When he sees fit to let you hear him, he does. I’ve seen him waddle, as you call it, without making a sound.”

“Mm. Don’t you think we better call him?”

“He’ll be along any minute, Hal. He’s only been gone a few minutes.”

Hal pushed back the fur gauntlet glove and looked at the watch on his wrist. “Twenty-five minutes exactly.”

“Oh, I say! All that time?” Chester whistled softly, then he called: “Oh, Jacques!”

In the wake of the echo they heard the distant cry of a bird but no human answering voice sounded from the wilderness. They listened intently, then Hal called, his deep, bass voice ringing back and forth melodiously.

“Let’s sit down as we were,” Chester suggested when no answer came. “He may have had to go a little farther than he expected. A storm like this is enough to make any woodsman extra cautious.”

“But why doesn’t he answer us?” Hal asked worriedly. “Good Lord, this voice of mine must sound at least a mile away.”

“Not in this wind, boy.”

“That’s so. I forgot about that.”

Chester sat down and Hal was finally persuaded to join him. Neither one of them spoke for a long time—fifteen dragging minutes during which Hal kept his deep blue eyes upon his wrist watch and watched the seconds tick away with growing apprehension. Now and then they were startled into a half-hopeful state by some distant sound made by the wind, or the movements of the prowling denizens of the forest.

With ill-concealed chagrin, Chester heard Hal announce that just an hour had passed since Jacques had left. He said nothing but rose to his feet and walked away from their shelter a distance of fifty feet. Suddenly he called insistently, “Jacques—Jacques!”

Hal, glad to be active, followed him and added his lung power with a bellowing, “Jacques! Where are you?”

There was something mocking in the eerie voice of the wind. It screamed and whistled and moaned and seemed to swallow up their shouts in a twinkling. The two looked at each other questioningly.

“What do you think about it, Ches?”

“I don’t know what to think.”

“My own common sense tells me he wouldn’t be wasting an hour trying to find out whether or not he was on the right trail. I tell you he wouldn’t do it when time is so precious and the daylight hours so short on a stormy day like this! He’d have come back and eaten and then started off again with us.”

“It’s logical. Deuce take it, I can’t believe Jacques could lose his way.”

“Neither can I, Ches.”

There was a thoughtful gleam in Hal’s eyes and he paced back and forth restlessly “We’ll give him a little while longer. If he’s had the bad luck to lose his bearings, then he ought to have the good luck to get back here finally if he’s as good as you say he is.”

“I’ve never known Jacques to fail,” said Chester. “Why, he found me that time and he didn’t even know what direction I’d got lost in.”

“Well, if he’s as wonderful as all that, then he ought to be able to find his way back here to us. We’ll give him a reasonable time to get back. If he doesn’t show up, why . . .”

“What then?”

Their eyes met, then hastily they turned away from each other. Neither one seemed to have the power of mind to think out what the answer to that question might be.

CHAPTER XIII

SUSPICION

The boys sat and paced alternately through two interminable hours. Question after question had they asked each other, leaving them for the most part, unanswered. For some reason they seemed always to come back to Hal's first question: would Jacques Bonner be so foolish in that storm as to go farther than he had intended? Chester always answered that he did not know what to think—Jacques had never failed.

"It looks as if he's failed now," Hal said, unable to repress the discouragement he felt. "Four o'clock—whew! Why, it's getting dark!"

Chester looked about apprehensively and said, "Where in heaven's name do you think he can be? In the forest it's pitch dark at four-thirty, even this time of year! Do you suppose it would do any good for us to take a look around—there have been cases where a pack of wolves . . ."

"But, Ches, we'd have heard something, even with this wind! Wolves don't do their stuff quietly."

"I know—it was stupid of me to say that." Chester suddenly brightened. "Another thing, Jacques always carries a gun—a Colt thirty-eight; he's an expert too."

"Then he could put up a pretty good front with the wolves. As for our going out to look around, Ches—that's out. For one thing, it's too dark to see very plainly and another thing, I have a feeling that nothing's happened to him—things don't happen to birds like Bonner. If it's so that he lost his bearings and can't get back, we won't help matters any by wandering away from here. Our cue is to stay put where he can find us if he comes back."

"That's using my head for me," Chester chuckled. "I need someone like you to tell me that. I'd go off on a wild goose chase and the first thing you know I'd be hopelessly lost myself. That's the way I've always done."

"Well, the prospects of spending the night here aren't so pleasant, Ches, but it's better than staggering around lost in the storm. At least, we know where we are now—in the shelter of the balsams." Hal laughed a little bitterly. "It's getting a little colder—do you think there's any chance of a further drop?"

"It always does at night. Who can tell just how much it will drop tonight! We can only hope it won't—very much."

"That's something to hope for anyway." Hal was thoughtful for a moment, then: "Think there's any chance of scouting around and finding

some firewood dry enough to burn?"

"That's an idea. We'll try in there where the trees are so thick. There's not so much snow there and the wood will be drier. It'll be pretty cold work."

"We can warm up our hands after we get the fire going. I've got lots of matches."

"Good!"

They dug under the snow with bare hands and managed, before it was entirely dark, to gather together a small pile of firewood that they had found with difficulty. In their search, most of the wood they came across had been wet and soggy and they noticed in the several places where they dug, that a thin layer of ice underlay the snow.

"Deuced queer, that is," Chester remarked while Hal was busy trying to get a flame.

"What's queer?"

"To find that thin ice under the snow. I'd think nothing of it, if it was just in a few places. But it's everywhere that we dug."

"And that was in about skeenteen hundred places."

"Yes, that's just it. That would indicate swamp. Not only that but there's a bunch of bald cypress and tamarack in there and you know what that means—*swamp!*"

Hal, having produced a sizable flame, looked up and repeated, "Swamp? Ches, what are you thinking of?"

"I'm thinking that the country we go through to Sainte Beauve is as dry as a bone. From the looks of things around here . . ."

"You mean—you mean you're thinking it's the Black Swamp we're in?"

"I've been thinking just that, Hal. But I wouldn't say for certain until morning. We can soon tell then."

"But how, if Jacques is such an expert guide, how would he get us in the swamp? You could have done as well yourself if that's the case."

"I can't understand it, Hal, I can't," Chester said, dropping to his knees and spreading his cold hands before the growing flame. "But let's not think about this being the swamp until morning. It's a deucedly unpleasant thought."

"All right. We'll think about what we're going to have for dinner tonight instead, huh? A nicely browned wild fowl . . ."

"Or a laughing grouse?"

"Laughing?"

"Uh huh. They make a laughing noise—that is, until a chap decides he wants one for dinner and shoots it."

They laughed at that simply because there was nothing else to do but laugh, and they continued to exchange bits of banter despite the fact that a gnawing hunger put the thought of food uppermost in their minds. The wind had died down considerably, giving place to a still, bitter cold that made the little fire a poor sort of warmth for their shivering bodies.

They were soon hemmed in by the blackest of nights, with the feeble flame of the fire and the patch of snow surrounding their balsam shelter, comprising their world. Hal had the feeling that he would be in danger should he attempt to go beyond that lighted area of snow. Chester, too, must have had somewhat the same feeling for he kept watching the lighted circle with a sort of fascination.

At eight o'clock, Chester brought up the question of sleep, only to have Hal cry down the suggestion.

"Sleep? When the temperature is dropping like it is? Why, we'd freeze . . ."

"Not if we dig ourselves in under the snow. I'm woodsman enough to know that, Hal. We *will* freeze if we try sitting up here all night. This fire will be out in a half hour, then where will we be?"

"How about Jacques—what if he should try to find us and call and we don't hear?"

"I don't think that's likely to happen tonight."

Suddenly it came to Hal, a thought so vivid, so distressing that he felt a cold fear take possession of him. He grasped Chester by the shoulder, his eyes wide and questioning.

"Ches, you're certain that Rene Bonner heard me say I was going to make trouble for his father? You're certain that he heard both of us agree to find out what evil influence Jacques had over your father?"

"Why, of course," Chester answered, a little surprised. "I know Rene well enough for that. He's small enough in character that he wouldn't stop at a little thing like eavesdropping. I could tell by his face that he'd heard all we said and it's just as well he did. He didn't hear anything to be terribly proud of where his father's concerned. But then they stick together."

"That's just what I wondered. He must have told his father."

"Of course. Why?"

"Jacques would be pretty hopping mad to think we were bent on interfering in his affairs. The more he had at stake, the angrier he'd be at us—perhaps he'd have so much at stake that we would be a danger to him."

"What the deuce are you driving at?"

"Remember I gave him some pretty raw digs this morning about knowing people as they are? Remember he looked surprised when I told him he was hopping mad inside (I had in mind what Rene might have told him

and I guess I was right), and that I guessed he was planning ways and means . . .”

“That’s right, Hal. He told you you were right, that he *was* planning and he asked you if you could guess what it was.”

“That’s it. I told him I wasn’t a fortune teller and he said it was well for me that I couldn’t tell what he was planning. I asked you at the time what he meant when he said that and you told me it was just talk. *Talk*, Ches? I’m wondering that right now—I had a terrible thought about all this just before—I was wondering . . .”

“I remember something else too, Hal—Jacques asked you again if you could tell what he was thinking of. He asked you that just before he went off this afternoon and you were rather peeved. And for the second time today he said it was good that you didn’t know.”

“That settles it—I know it as well as I’m alive and cold right now! Going back over all those things he said convinces me. Ches—Jacques deliberately deserted us this afternoon. He meant not to come back and he was smiling at the thought of it when he bowed himself away. You think we’re in the Black Swamp? Well, I think so too, even if I don’t know anything about the place. And I think that fellow brought us here purposely, because he knew that in a storm like this we’d never find our way out!”

“Hal!” Chester cried, appalled. “I’m afraid it’s true!”

Suddenly, came the distant sound of a shrill bark. Before the echo died away, the air was filled with barking sounds and dismal howls. Hal looked at his friend, questioningly.

“*Wolves!*” said Chester.

CHAPTER XIV BLACK SWAMP

The wolves either had other prey or they did not catch the scent of the two young men. In any case, it was not many minutes before their cries were swallowed up by distance and the voices of the cold night.

Hal, lying at Chester's side under a mound of snow, tried to sleep but couldn't. One of his snowshoes acting as a prop to keep the air passage open was also a favorable means of communication with the snow-filled forest. He heard every four-legged prowler that came within range of their shelter and more than once he felt a tingle of suspense when some daring night stroller, catching their scent, came too close for comfort.

But the small hours of the morning came and passed without incident and out of sheer fatigue he fell into a doze. Chester had had few periods of restlessness during that long night, but slept with a soundness that was amazing, apparently not minding the fact that their bed was a layer of ice from which seemed to rise a chill, dank vapor.

Hal crawled out of this tunnel, as he called it, long before the light of day penetrated the forest depths. He ached in every limb and had to amble steadily about the shelter for an hour before his circulation seemed to be restored. Chester awoke to the sound of this vigorous exercise and crawled out into the dim light.

"My word!" he said, blinking his eyes. "It doesn't look as if you've slept."

"Darn little, Ches. A measly nap was all I got. I couldn't get used to that dampness under us. Maybe if my mind had been easier, I'd have slept like a top and never noticed it. But when I get fussed up over anything—boy, I might just as well not try to sleep. Even if I had a feather bed it wouldn't make any difference."

"You were fussed?" Chester said, his voice a trifle husky. "Not over Jacques?"

"Over Jacques and how!" Hal answered with a smile. "You sound as if you had a little cold, boy."

"Rather. It doesn't seem to be much, but just enough to make me feel drowsy. I sort of felt it last night. Guess that's why I slept so soundly. It was one of those deep sleeps that makes you feel all in, you know. I seemed to be dreaming all night that I was trying to wake up and was so exhausted that I couldn't exert myself that much. What a night!"

“You’re all upset too. But never mind, we’ll get to Sainte Beuve! We’ll fool that sneaking . . .”

“Maybe he’ll come back yet!”

“Ches, you know as well as I do that he won’t. There’s no use wasting time waiting here and hoping. That’s what he’s planned on—that we’d be afraid to move away from here for fear he’d come and by the same token we’d freeze to death. It’s terribly cold this morning. Jacques will get his wish if we don’t move on—keep going, that’s our cue. We’ll get somewhere if we keep going long enough. Might as well start right now.”

“You’re absolutely right. I *do* feel it in my heart that he’ll never come. And I’m really frantic to get out of this place and get moving as you say. I feel chilled to the bone standing around here, particularly when there’s no prospect of any breakfast.”

Hal smiled grimly and said, “That’s another phase of that man’s inhuman qualities. He could have left his gun with us if he had a drop of the milk of human kindness in him. But he meant to do a thorough job—if we didn’t freeze, then he’d see to it that we’d starve. Well, I’m just mean enough not to do either if I can possibly help it. Now, are we all set to beat it?”

Chester gave the laces on his snowshoes a reassuring tug and looked up with a nod. His eyes looked dull and feverish and he moved off at Hal’s side, shivering visibly. Notwithstanding this apparent indisposition, he chuckled gaily as they left the balsam shelter behind.

“Where to, Hal?”

Hal grinned and looked overhead through the slightly moving treetops. The sky was still sullen and gray, but the snow seemed to have stopped falling. There was no hope for that day, however, of seeing the bright face of the sun and the still, damp cold seemed to penetrate their heavy furs.

“Our best bet is to get out of this blamed forest,” he said at length. “At least, we’ll feel that we’re getting somewhere.”

“Splendid! What steps shall we take in that direction?”

“We’ll duck in wherever we think the trees are thinning out a bit. But first we’ll start in this direction,” Hal answered, motioning ahead. “That’s where I seemed to hear the wolves yelling last night. They keep clear of the timber as a rule, don’t they?”

“At this time of year they do, and particularly when we’ve had a long season of snow storms as this one has been. They’re driven to it by hunger. We’ll walk that way. I thought I heard them from that direction too.” And after they had fought their way through a little of the underbrush, Chester added, “I could do with a drink of water.”

“So could I!” Hal agreed vehemently. “It would be a help in crushing down Old Man Appetite for a while, huh?”

“Rather. For some reason I’m not so hungry this morning. This cold, I guess. But *water* . . .”

“We’ll find a spring somewhere.”

“I hope so. Black Swamp doesn’t boast any springs that I know of, though.”

“Mm. Then you *do* think we’re in the blamed swamp!”

“I’m certain of it. There’s too much tamarack growing around here to be anything else but the swamp. That balsam we found isn’t at all plentiful—it grows on the higher, dry places and there aren’t many of those places to be found in Black Swamp.”

“Then it settles the question of Jacques forever, huh? As long as you’re certain where we are, we know he brought us here on purpose. Boy, what a howling triumph if we should find our way out of here and go walking into Stark House by night!”

“And before the governor and the girls suspect that something has happened to us.”

“Exactly,” said Hal. He had enough masculine conceit to hope that Phoebe would be a little anxious about him. “There’s enough to worry them without having us added to the misery list as well.”

Chester was hoping that would be so; not only for his family’s sake, but for his own as well. He found himself thinking continually of his wide, warm bed at home and wished heartily that he could crawl into it and sleep for days. They had been tramping only three hours when he asked to sit down and rest.

By middle afternoon he begged to lie down and sleep—anywhere. They were still in the forest, without food or water, and with the appalling prospect of spending another long night in its dreary confines.

CHAPTER XV THE WILD FOWL

Hal got little sleep that night—he spent the greater part of it gathering firewood, a difficult task in swamp country. One advantage he had and that was that the timber was sparse just there, and through the treetops a full silver moon cast down its friendly light as it rode through the star-specked heavens.

He was hopeful because of this sparse timber; he was anxious to see the light of morning so that they could explore farther and discover whether or not it meant a way out of the swamp. *They?* He wondered if Chester would feel equal to it by the time morning came, for so far that night he had been restless and feverish, and within the past hour he had developed a harsh cough.

Hal had divested himself of a heavy sweater and given it to his companion in order to alleviate the pains which the intense cold seemed to give him. Also, he had given ceaseless attention to the struggling fire which kept only a part of their bodies warm at a time. Nevertheless, it was better than nothing and Chester dozed and shivered alternately, but never complained.

Just before the hour of dawn, he slept quite soundly and Hal took the occasion to warm his back at the fire. He stared into the dark, surrounding timber trying to plan and not getting anywhere. The moon had swept haughtily on toward the west. He jumped up, an overwhelming delight in his soul.

The west! At last he would be able to pick out the four points of the compass! At last they would know where they were going! Sainte Beauve? Beyond? In which direction were they? He looked at the dozing Chester and resolved to ask him that question as soon as he opened his eyes.

To be sure of himself, he walked on numbed legs over to the nearest tree, procured a penknife from one of his pockets and whittled a cross. The position of the moon in the west, he first marked down, then in succession dug out the rest and went back to the fire, patiently to wait for dawn and the fulfilment of his hopes.

The mournful hoot of the snowy owl sounded near by, but Hal could see nothing of it. Several times during the night he had heard the distant cries of the wolves and congratulated himself that they were in the distance. Now, however, in that deep, weird silence before the coming of dawn, their dismal

howls seemed to be coming perilously close. He could make out at intervals the sharp, commanding bark of the leader and then in a second, the air would seem to vibrate with the answering voices of the pack.

The snow-covered underbrush near by crackled for a moment under the feet of two fleeing deer, their bodies flashing like brown shadows just outside the range of the fire and then disappearing into the deep forest. In their wake, he saw the dark flash of a wolverine, its cunning, glittering eyes staring out of the darkness for a second, confused by the fire. Its enormous teeth gleamed and then the animal withdrew into the shadow and was gone.

Hal breathed a sigh of relief, but only for a second. Those fleeing animals did not augur that all was well; it meant that they were putting a comfortable distance between themselves and that roaring, hungry wolf pack!

He got up and piled some more wood on the fire. That would keep the beasts away for a time. For a time? He asked himself that because he did not know the way of the wolf pack and he wondered just what would happen if they surrounded Chester and himself, cutting off his only chance to replenish the fire so that he could keep them at bay.

After ten minutes, however, that contingency seemed unlikely, for the cries of the pack suddenly died away and Hal joyfully beheld the roseate light of dawn streaking the eastern sky. The wolves, he fervently hoped, would seek some cover and rest for the day. Did they travel by day? That was another question he had in store for Chester.

Hunger and thirst had become an ever present anxiety, thirst particularly. But they had found no sign of a spring. He forgot his own intense thirst when he saw that Chester's lips were parched and cracked. A deep flush was in his cheeks and he breathed laboriously. Yet he slept on.

At half-past seven he turned restlessly and partly opened his eyes. Hal leaned over him and was startled by the staring, feverish expression in his gray eyes; rather, it was the lack of expression.

"Ches, *Ches!* Kind of sleepy yet, huh? Listen, I watched the moon and I got our position—I whittled it on that tree over there. Good thing I did—there doesn't seem to be any sun this morning either. But we should worry now, huh, when I had the little old moon to tip me off! Besides, I'm almost sure we're near the end of this timber—the wolves howled so loud it sounded as if they were almost on top of us. Now, listen, Ches . . ."

"Mmmm," mumbled Chester, "Water! *Water!*"

Hal rocked back on his heels looking at him worriedly. Then he leaned over again and taking off his glove felt Chester's forehead. It was hot.

"Ches," he said, with a ring of real anxiety in his voice, "We'll get water as soon as we get out of here. *I'm sure of it!* But we *have* to get out of here

—do you understand? And we might as well go right—I mean toward home. What direction is it?”

Chester stared with feverish unconcern and said, “*Water!*”

“I know, Ches,” Hal said patiently. “Gosh, we’ll get water if it’s the last thing I do. But I’ve got to have your help! You must tell me which way it is to Beyond so we *can* get water.”

Chester closed his eyes and mumbled unintelligibly. He tried to moisten his lips with his tongue, but seemed incapable of the effort. In despair, Hal grabbed a handful of snow and rubbed it over his parched lips and face.

“Now, Ches, can you tell me the direction?” he appealed. “*Please!*”

“*Water!*” Chester insisted in a quivering, pained voice. Suddenly he raised himself on his elbow, seeming to stare straight past Hal’s anxious eyes. “Father, *Father!*” he cried thickly. “Tell me why Jacques has been treating you like this all these years! *Tell me!*”

“Ches!” Hal cried frantically. “I’m not your . . . oh, Ches! Try and snap out of it, huh? Just until I know which way! I’ll help you—gosh, I’ll *carry* you if you only tell me which way to go. I’ll do anything you . . .”

“Della’s been too proud—I’ve been too proud,” Chester interposed deliriously.

Hal leaned over and put his cool hands on the young man’s forehead. “Chester, it’s I—Hal!” he pleaded. “I . . .”

“Phoebe’s old enough too, to realize . . .” Chester muttered abstractedly.

“Oh, dear God!” Hal cried and buried his face in his hands.

Suddenly, a raucous cry startled him, a shrill, familiar cry that brought him to his feet, and caused his heavy heart to bound with hope.

He looked up through the tree tops and saw a great wild fowl circling above him and flapping its enormous gray wings in sheer delight. Somehow William Cullen Bryant’s beautiful lines “To a Waterfowl,” came to mind, rambling, disconnected, but yet inspiring. Particularly he thought of the verses:

Seek’st thou the plashy brink
Of weedy lake or marge of river wide,
Or where the rocking billows rise and sink
On the chafed ocean’s side?

There is a Power whose care
Teaches thy way along that pathless coast—
The desert and illimitable air—
Lone wandering, but not lost.

Hal’s mind teemed with those lines and the words he picked from them suddenly became pregnant, vital things. “Seek’st thou the merge of river

wide? There is a power whose care . . . Teaches thy way . . . illimitable air—
Lone wandering, but *not lost!*”

“That’s it!” he cried. “The fowl seeks the river . . . a power whose care teaches him the way along the air. Gosh! Alone and wandering, but *not lost!* The wild fowl is never lost—never! Oh, my—can I be sure which way . . .”

He strained his eyes toward the sullen sky and watched the fowl circling overhead and screaming triumphantly as it darted over the treetops. For a few breathless seconds it would disappear and the heavens would resound with its raucous cries. Then it would reappear, much to Hal’s relief, and he watched the antics of the great bird for some minutes.

Was this wild fowl the same bird they had seen only the day before, hovering over the dark waters of the Bete Noire? Could it be possible? His hopes ran high as he watched intently the flapping gray wings over the tree-tops. The screams were the same dismal, wailing sounds that had so startled him yesterday—screams that seemed to be freighted with the stark tragedy which the chest had revealed. He could detect not one bit of difference in these sounds which were issuing forth from the bird’s long, narrow throat.

Was it possible for him to follow the fowl’s winged flight and get out of the trackless swamp? He held his breath and watched it fly out of sight once more—watched with bright, burning eyes which direction those enormous wings took. Then he turned to Chester, hopefully.

“Ches, for heaven’s sake try and perk up out of this,” he cried. “We’ve got a chance—a long one, but I’m going to take it!” He saw that his enthusiasm was falling on deaf ears, but he seemed not to care now. He was like one reborn and he shouted aloud, “Remembering that poem did it—*that did it!* Remembering that the waterfowl wasn’t lost! It’s as if he was sent here to guide us out to the river! That must be where he goes every time he disappears—out to the river and back again. Ches, we *must* be near the river—do you hear me?”

He got to his knees and gathered Chester’s feverish body to him. The young man was a dead weight but, strangely enough, Hal seemed not to mind it at all. Hope had strengthened him and made it possible for him to carry his burden like a superman.

And as he started off, he looked up toward the circling bird, hopefully. It actually seemed to be moving onward with him! Yes, there wasn’t a doubt of it. He realized that after he had gone a little distance. The wild fowl, dark against the sullen sky, was leading the way. As if to keep time with it, Hal’s heart kept singing over and over again one memorable line:

“Lone wandering, but *not lost!*”

CHAPTER XVI STRATEGY

It has been truly said that most lost men have been lost within a stone's throw of civilization. This was not quite true of Chester and Hal—they did not find civilization, but they found an escape, for a half-hour's steady tramp brought them out of the timber almost on the bank of the river.

Hal laid his burden down on the snow, tenderly. He was too joyful to speak and heartily wished that his friend were in a condition to share his joy with him. However, he seemed not to be entirely alone, for the wild fowl was still screaming about overhead, as if loath to part company with these long-suffering humans.

A feeling of affection for the fowl had taken hold of Hal. He did not want to lose sight of the bird. But action was necessary, particularly the search for water. Chester's condition had not improved; he no longer spoke, but had sunk into an apathy which was alarming.

Hal whisked off his own fur cap and put it under Chester's head that he might have a softer pillow. He was used to going hatless himself and the wide, fur collar of his coat could be turned up high enough to protect his ears from the biting Canadian winds. The temperature continued to drop—a thin crust of ice had formed on the surface of the snow.

He saw to it that Chester was safely protected from the wind by placing him between two sturdy spruce trees. Then he hurried away, looking back now and then toward the spot where his sick friend was lying and neglecting, in his haste, to notice the tell-tale footprints that dotted the surface of the snow all the way to the timber line.

He had not gone very far when he heard an eerie howl from behind that made his blood run cold. Before he had time to turn around, the cry had been taken up by many savage throats and he wheeled about to see a hungry looking pack of dog-like animals emerging from the timber with stealthy tread.

He stood transfixed for a moment and watched until the last of them had stolen from under cover and was stalking at the heels of the leader. Their shaggy, gray coats clung to their bones and every movement of their bodies accentuated a knife-like projection of ribs which gave them an appalling, spectral-like appearance.

He knew in a moment where they were headed—in Chester's direction! They had completely turned their backs on him, had acted as if they hadn't

seen him. They were on the scent of a sick and helpless human being. Cowards that they were, he realized frantically that their prey was his defenseless friend and they were plunging on toward him with a courage born of starvation.

He shouted and ran after them impulsively, and at the first loud blast of his deep, bass voice, they stopped. One huge gaunt wolf, evidently the leader, swung about, circled the entire pack and came back a few feet. Ears erect and pawing the ground, he looked across the snow and growled savagely as he beheld his human adversary.

And an adversary Hal had determined to be!

Notwithstanding the great number of the pack, he felt he had brains enough to outwit them all. The thing to do was to use those God-given brains and use them well. He must think of a means to divert their attention from Chester and think of it at once! Time was a paramount factor—the beasts were thinking with their bellies, not their heads. Even then they were growling impatiently and casting greedy, glittering eyes toward Chester's unconscious form.

Hal's mind flashed and he walked nearer and nearer to them. He stopped a moment, kicked off his snowshoes and tried walking a few steps over the crusty surface of the snow without them. It held him up nicely.

Next he pulled the warm fur glove from his left hand, whipped his heavy jackknife from his coat pocket and with clenched teeth, proceeded to mutilate the flesh about his fingers and wrist, being careful, of course, to avoid touching an artery.

In his intense excitement, he seemed to feel no pain, but found that the cutting of his own flesh could be done calmly, deliberately. Meanwhile, he was keeping a watchful eye upon the growling, hungry pack and felt a little thrill of satisfaction at a sudden movement of interest on the part of the leader.



HE SLASHED HIS FLESH DELIBERATELY, KEEPING A WATCHFUL EYE
UPON THE GROWLING, HUNGRY PACK.

He kept going, slowly now, for he was almost within five hundred feet of them. His hand was bleeding profusely and he held it out deliberately so that every scarlet drop would reach the surface of the snow.

A hundred feet more he traversed and saw that the leader of the pack had taken a step or two toward him. The others were whining deep in their savage throats and more than a few nostrils dilated as their black noses sniffed the ground. Anxious that he should make a thorough job of it while he was at it, he slashed again at the flesh of his hand; it pained him that time and he choked back the cry that welled up within him.

Blood! Every savage nose in that pack was getting the scent of it! Hal stopped then—he was easily within three hundred feet of them and near enough—too near, as he soon realized. Their ears were erect; they no longer cringed backward. The scent of fresh human blood buoyed them up sufficiently to dare attack a man still on his feet.

Hal saw the movement and was ready for them—waiting. The leader, growling ominously, crouched on his front paws, then issued a howling challenge. Presently, the cry was taken up by the entire pack. That was Hal's signal to move.

His long, lanky legs had put three hundred feet more between himself and the pack, before they started to follow in pursuit. He did not once look behind, not from that moment on—their dismal cries were warning enough and every second was precious. He could think as he ran, despite the fact that he must also keep his mind on the matter of balancing himself on slippery ground.

His hand was bleeding dangerously and the pain was intense. But his soul was tumultuous with the thought that he had saved Chester from a horrible death at the jaws of the pack. Let them come after him—*let them!* He'd give them a chase, a chase for their lives! And who but he could do it—he who had broken all records at last season's track meet and who had walked off with the shouting acclaim of the crowd!

Now he had the chance to put those honors to the test, a test that would be acclaimed by no audience save that of the wild fowl, still circling and screaming overhead. He had forgotten about the great bird until then and the sudden knowledge that it was still about gave him a feeling of comfort. Afterward he realized the absurdity of the thought, but in that moment he actually felt that someone championed his cause, even if it was only a wild fowl.

His cheer leader! He laughed grimly at the thought and ran on. The pack was growing more courageous with every passing second. Their weird howls and savage growls betokened a determination to follow up this new scent of living human blood, a determination to track it down. Every sniff they took at the scarlet spots upon the white snow gave them additional courage.

Hal had the better of them there. Their love of scent, that instinct to stop at intervals and sniff the ground, gave him an advantage over them. He used those precious seconds to take breath here and there and regain his wind. Also, he began playing tricks upon them and followed a zigzag course in and out of the timber.

They were confused, of course, but always picked up the scent and followed the scarlet trail with added zest. Hal was not worried—it was as he meant it to be. He was determined that they should lose Chester's scent once and for all. To make sure, he turned away from the river, climbed a hill and descended into a snow-filled coulee where he stopped a moment to bandage his hand tightly and stop the flow of blood.

After that he ran up the coulee's slippery sides and off into the heavy timber. There he picked out a tree suitable for his purpose and climbed it. A limb some eight feet from the ground held his weight admirably. Perching himself upon it, he leaned back and rested his bare head against the cold trunk. Then he relaxed, content to wait and plan the next move.

The planning took but a second; it was a case of necessity, for the cries of the pack were near at hand.

CHAPTER XVII

A MOMENTARY TRIUMPH

Hal had time enough to suffer the effects of his self-inflicted wounds. His head reeled nauseatingly from the loss of blood and the pain of his mutilated hand was intense. But he was not yet ready to give up. Chester's position was still insecure and would be so until the savage beasts had enough in their bellies to stave off starvation for another day. And Hal knew that he must keep up at all costs until he had made this possible.

The gaunt, gray-whiskered leader appeared first. He came stalking through the timber, shaggy head to the ground, but ears erect. Hal's pale face was tense and drawn. The cold, and the fear that perhaps there might be a slip-up in his plan, made him shiver violently. After all, this was a hazardous feat which he was counting on and it is little wonder that at the last moment, his courage almost failed him.

Be that as it may, he retrieved his knife from his pocket while he waited and set about shaving clean a good space of the limb upon which he was seated. That took only a few seconds for the bark was brittle and came off easily, and he was finished and ready when the entire wolf pack came loping through the timber, growling and howling at the heels of their leader.

The tree upon which he was perched was not more than five hundred feet from the timber line. Consequently, it was a matter of mere seconds before the pack caught his scent, and were swarming about the tree trunk.

As always, they seemed to wait for their leader's first move and, with savage snorts, huddled backward until they were stumbling and snarling all over each other. One there was, perhaps emboldened by hope of future leadership, which had the temerity to come forward and snarl a challenge to Hal at the foot of the tree.

Hal laughed gleefully in answer and the wolf jumped and clawed at the bark of the tree with his heavy front paws. He was an enormous fellow and stood well over five feet on his hind legs.

For a few tense seconds, the audacious beast looked up out of the depths of his hunger-sunken eyes, snarling at Hal. Then he jumped down and pawed the ground, only to bound up and claw at the scaly trunk impatiently. There was a look of curiosity in his savage, dog-like face as if he were perplexed at the sudden disappearance of this human being's legs.

But Hal gave him little chance to be curious about anything, for in that flashing second he was aware that his golden opportunity had arrived. While

the animal was sniffing, he was acting, entwining his left arm about the clean shaven part of the branch and making certain that he could grasp its support without using his wounded hand. Next, he leaned as far forward as he dared, and with the heavy knife suspended in his right hand, he made a sweeping motion and brought it down just between the animal's eyes.

A second afterward the wolf was on its back, rolling over the snow-covered ground. Before the pack had realized what had happened, life was extinct.

CHAPTER XVIII

DESPAIR

Fortune favored Hal, for the leader of the pack, sensing that war had been declared, rushed forward with a mighty howl, and standing upon his great hind legs, clawed the trunk of the tree. The rest of the pack, however, stood back, snarling and sniffing at the small pool of blood in which their dead member lay.

Hal, heartened by this favorable sign, lost no time in meting out to the howling leader the same treatment which he had accorded his fellow-wolf. One sweep of the arm and a well-timed plunge brought the scarlet stained blade down between the big fellow's eyes.

A terrific yelp escaped him and he rolled over.

Hal relaxed after that and waited. The blade of his knife he had rubbed clean on the branch so certain was he that he had triumphed. And he wasn't mistaken. The pack, suddenly silenced by their leader's ignominious death, broke into a mighty growling chorus while some of the larger members stalked toward the two dead wolves.

They sniffed the ground, ears erect and pawing the snow about the silent forms. The others, emboldened by their movements, stole after them and one old female reared her gray-whiskered head high into the air and uttered a howl so mournful and shrill that Hal shivered.

He knew then that his intense efforts had been rewarded. The whole pack had taken up the dismal cry and had already ceased to notice his presence. Their entire attention was centered upon two pools of blood in which their dead fellows lay. They had the scent of it in their nostrils, the strong scent of warm wolf blood.

That it was blood like their own made not one bit of difference. Inherently rapacious and cowardly, they snarled, greedy-eyed, at the dead wolves rather than risk another charge at Hal. And that was what he had counted on.

In a few moments he saw the animals snarling viciously and fighting savagely with each other over the spoils. The old leader and his younger brother were now being torn apart, literally, amidst the howls of the entire pack. And Hal watching them, not a little horrified, was convinced that these beasts were savage to the core. Eating flesh of their flesh, blood of their blood . . . anything that the spectral hand of Starvation might be stayed. It gave him pause.

Would human beings give way to such beastly, primal instincts in the face of Famine and Starvation?

The wolves, rovers by nature, seemed to enjoy their meals en route also. It was but a little while before they had moved farther and farther into the tall, thick timber, fighting and devouring their prey. A few minutes more and Hal could no longer see them; his path to freedom was again beckoning.

He dropped to the ground and ran all the way to the edge of the timber. He had not the strength, however, to keep up the same pace going back that he had taken when he was being pursued. In point of fact, he had little energy to even walk fast for the ordeal he had been through had taken its toll from him.

There was no difficulty in retracing his path. He went through his whole heart-rending experience again with each step taken, for the snow was filled with footprints, his own in flight and the mingled marks of the pack as they had followed in pursuit. And here and there he saw dark stains on the virgin snow, stains that caused him to shudder and draw up to his breast the wounded hand that had left them there.

He found his way down into the coulee and out again on the other side. He was about to turn his steps from there out toward the river, when he heard a familiar sound. The air was still; he could no longer hear the wolves—even the wild fowl had disappeared and it was possible almost at once to place the sound.

He hurried over to a pile of rock the smooth glistening sides of which had not held the snow. One look under it and his heart bounded joyfully in his breast. A spring—*water!*

He did not wait to take a mouthful of it but rushed off with renewed strength. Chester must be told the news! Chester must be carried up to it immediately—poor, sick Chester! Hal's pale face was bright once again with hope. He was thinking that God had been kind to them after all—the wolves had been outwitted and now he and Chester were to drink water!

He hurried along, but somehow he seemed not to make much headway. Had it not been that he was still retracing his steps he might have thought that he was lost. It took him a little while to realize that he had covered a great deal of ground in his flight. Time, too, had flown in the interim—his encounter with the wolves had swallowed up more than two hours already.

He espied his discarded snowshoes lying in the snow where he had kicked them off and he picked them up and hurried on. He had left Chester only a quarter of a mile farther on—he remembered that only too well. That spot, he thought grimly, was memorable. It was there he had first seen the wolves.

He hurried on, a little anxious now that he was almost back at the boy's side. It had been a long time to leave a sick young man alone. And he had looked and acted so very sick! Hal looked ahead hopefully; the two sturdy spruce trees loomed up just ahead.

He ran the rest of the distance and reached the trees, breathless. Snow flumes were circling about in the sky and the wind whistling down from the north. No sound stirred the depths of the white silence, nothing.

Chester was nowhere to be seen.

CHAPTER XIX SELF-PRESERVATION

Hal ran around the trees as if expecting that Chester had come out of his delirium and was playing hide-and-seek. But he saw no one! Chester had disappeared as completely as if he had never been lying there unconscious. It was difficult to believe—he wouldn't believe it!

But Chester wasn't there—*where was he?*

He looked about him, frantically. Chester *had* been there—there wasn't any doubt of that. The depression that his unconscious body had made in the snow was still visible. But his snowshoes and he himself were gone!

Hal rubbed his hand over his head and bethought himself of his hat that he had placed so solicitously under Chester's weary head. That too was gone, he observed, tramping about and staring almost panic-stricken in every direction. Footsteps were plentiful, but he could tell nothing by that. He had probably made a hundred or more of them himself both before he had left Chester's side and now.

"Chester!" he shouted. "Chester, where in Heaven's name are you?"

But though he prayed for Chester's answering voice, no sound stirred all that silent, white wilderness.

One can become numbed and inactive by a sudden shock. Hal seemed to be affected by it just that way. He felt for a long time that he couldn't move, but stood stark still in one spot, listening, and twisting his head about in a gesture of despair.

"It's crazy," he shouted aloud, "simply crazy! I wasn't dreaming—I left Ches here, sick—*unconscious!* He couldn't get up and walk off—*he just couldn't!* But he's gone—*where?*"

He sank to the ground, onto the very spot where he had placed Chester so carefully a few hours before. The thought of its being *hours* gave him pause and he stared down at his wrist watch. It was two hours and twenty minutes since he had left his friend to search for water!

What had happened in the interim?

Suddenly the thought of wolves entered his mind, but he was inclined to reject it almost immediately. Little as he knew about the wilderness, he was certain that there hadn't been another pack around during his absence. Besides, he saw no footsteps to indicate such a dreadful possibility.

The whole thing was so baffling as to be maddening. It wasn't something that could be thought out rationally for it was irrational to start

with. Chester had been too sick to get up and start off by himself. Why, he hadn't had the energy even the day before and had pleaded to lie down.

Suddenly Hal bethought himself of Chester's delirium. He had heard of people getting up and wandering off when they were in the throes of it. Couldn't that have happened to Chester? If it was so, then his problem was even more difficult, for the swamp loomed up before him again, as dark and forbidding as the long, dreary hours that they had wandered through it, lost.

The snow was falling thickly again and was already forming a soft covering over the ice crust. Footsteps were quickly obliterated in that wilderness and Hal was urged by this reminder to get up and search through the timber for a little distance to see if his apprehension had any foundation. But unless his eyes deceived him there was no cause to worry about Chester's having wandered back into the swamp.

He followed the tracks carefully and found none but his own coming out of the swamp, all deep impressions made deeper because of the additional burden of Chester's limp body lying in his arms as he plunged ahead on his snow-shoes.

Satisfied on that point, he emerged from the timber again, shouting and looking all about. But the same deep silence prevailed. He could not believe that any living thing except the wolves and himself had been in that vicinity for the past thousand years. Chester's sickness, Chester's disappearance—it all seemed like some terrible dream, a nightmare from which he must presently awake to find his friend well and smiling by his side.

He rubbed his face, his eyes, as if to clear away these delirious thoughts. He felt weak and sick at intervals and now as he walked a mistiness rose before his eyes and gave him the feeling that he was reeling. But he fought against it valiantly, for the will to live, to keep going was a worthy adversary of Exposure and Hunger and Thirst.

It was a terrible fight, however. He found himself hundreds of times thinking almost mournfully about the last hot meal he had had at Stark House. Then there was the hot coffee and sandwiches they had eaten—*when?* The long, dismal, cold nights intervening made it seem like a week, though in reality it was only three days. A long enough period, he told himself, in that zero temperature. One needed hot food and water to keep out that soul-freezing atmosphere.

The thought of water brought him into action. Water he must have right away! He could not be of any use to Chester nor to himself without something in his stomach. He needed it to be able to think and plan what he would do. Also, there was the question of his aching, wounded hand. Water, no matter how cold, would assuage the fever and pain that tormented him now.

He got into his snowshoes again and was off toward the spring. The wind shrieking down from the north now seemed to creep over the edges of his high, upturned collar and nipped painfully at his ears. In order to remedy this he pulled off his thick, woolen scarf and tied it about his head as best he could considering the awkwardness of doing it with one hand.

It seemed an eternity before he reached the spring, despite the fact that he had lost all fear now of again losing his way. The stormy, gray landscape no longer looked hostile and unfamiliar. He had the conviction that instinctively he would get to Beyond if his strength would hold out. That name Beyond now sounded comforting; it suggested everything that he craved, craved with an intensity that amounted to pain. A bed, hot food . . . fire and warmth! Sainte Beuve did not appeal to him now—it sounded too friendless, too forlorn.

The water was icy, too cold to drink out of his cupped hand. He was forced to lie down on the frozen ground and hold his head under the rock to catch the trickling drops before they froze in the rocky basin beneath. It chilled him to the bone at first, but he became used to it gradually as that dry parched feeling of his lips and his tongue gave way to a soothing moistness.

Satisfied at last, he unwrapped the handkerchief bandage from his wounded hand and bit hard at his full under lip while he let the chilling water wash over his mangled flesh. That accomplished, he dashed some of the water over his face and slapped it dry with his right hand.

The whole thing set him up for a time, but he had Hunger still to reckon with. The water had refreshed him, could still refresh him, he thought, as he sat huddled up against the rocks. But somehow it did not seem to help him think about Chester as he had anticipated. He could not think where to look for him—the vast stretch of snow-covered plain and hill and timber was perplexing to a mind dulled by lost blood, exposure and Hunger.

After a time he ceased even to think about trying to search. Maddening little voices in his head screamed for hot food and fire and warmth. Also, he had ceased to shiver and shake with the terrific cold. Snow was piling about him and he felt a delicious warmth stealing about his body. Instinctively, he got up, alarmed in a vague way for he knew only too well that deceiving warmth that precedes freezing.

No, he must go on, some subconscious voice urged. It did not matter where; he got up and started over the snow like an automaton and without realizing it directed his footsteps northward. The warmth left him then and he was again shivering but he rather welcomed it—his head seemed not to feel so misty.

Just when it was, he was not aware, but the scream of the wild fowl penetrated his numbed senses. He looked up in a sort of daze and saw the

great bird's dark figure floating against the sullen skies. Its vast wings flapped continuously and it seemed to be moving slowly along with him. This time it did not seem to surprise him. In point of fact, he did not feel any particular emotion about it. Rather, he regarded it as part of this strange, dream-like sensation which held his mind in its grip.

He slogged along over the fresh falling snow, looking neither to the right nor left but always straight ahead. He was dimly aware of the bird, and was afterward conscious that this was his only incentive at the time—his only hope!

After a time he was conscious of a sudden, roaring noise and, as a matter of course, he told himself that that must be the falls at Dirk's Pass. Chester had told him about that noise the other day, told him the name. The thought seemed to clear away the mists for a while and he looked about, vaguely aware that he was approaching the very spot where the plane had landed them that day.

There was the Bete Noire, ice-choked and dark, and above screamed the wild fowl just as if no time, no sickness or suffering had come between that hour and now. It all looked the same to him, all except the fact that Chester was not with him . . . Chester!

He was too cold to stop and think about it. Besides, he felt instinctively that to stop would be dangerous for he would be tempted to lie down and sleep on into eternity. But the fowl seemed to be on the alert and guarding him against any such contingency. He would scream this human companion of his out of this danger as long as he was able.

Hal came to love the sound of that shrill voice. He strained his ears to catch every raucous note, to make certain that the big bird was still with him and leading him on, on . . .

The wild fowl was still soaring along overhead when his misty eyes caught the tracks of a sleigh's runners, coming down from the north and cutting off from where he was walking, down toward the river. Something clicked in his head at the sight of it and brought to his mind the fact that this was the place where Jacques Bonner had discovered the skeleton in the chest.

He rubbed his eyes and looked about. There wasn't a sign of dogs' tracks. Whoever had passed had come on snowshoes and had pulled the sleigh themselves. It hadn't been long since they had pulled the sleigh up from the river bank and returned the way they came.

He followed the tracks down to the river bank. This new interest was reviving him, bringing back everything in a rush. He even looked for the chest with some show of eagerness as he leaned over the bank. Then a frown clouded his face.

The chest was no longer there.

He could see the depression that it had made; he could see the tracks of another's snowshoes around it. It had not been long gone from there. The fresh falling snow had not even had a chance to deposit a light film over the place.

He started back, feeling the old dizziness overtake him as it had done before when he had exerted himself with too much thought. After all, it was pleasant not to want to think about anything, but just to let oneself be guided by that soft sense of locomotion from within. Consequently, he sloshed back over the sleigh tracks dreamily, and listened for one sound only; that of the wild fowl.

It kept him company for a few miles farther, then with a shrill scream, floated out of sight. Hal felt a sense of loss, but the growing thought that he must get to Beyond crowded out every other emotion. His body cried out with fatigue and the gnawing hunger in his stomach was unbearable. And as if to torment him still more his wounded hand had set up a throbbing that seemed to pound way up to his temples. Too, it seemed to be swelling and the pain grew worse with every second.

Middle afternoon had come and gone and he was still struggling on. Something kept driving him forcibly, that love of life, perhaps. But it weakened perceptibly, did that driving force, and the early twilight saw the beginning of its disappearance.

It was because his muscles were giving out. Sore and strained in every limb, he could no longer keep up the pace that he had been going when he started out. Now it was an effort for him to put out one leg and bring up the other. Moreover, the pain from his hand seemed to be having a paralytic effect on the whole left side of his body.

The wind lashed his face mercilessly and made his eyes feel aflame. Smarting particles of ice and snow flecked his cheeks and more than once he thought of his hat with its protecting brim. But Chester had it . . . why did Chester have it? He groaned because he was no longer able to put his thoughts together constructively.

For long periods his mind was a complete blank. Exhaustion was gradually wearing him down and in intervals of lucidity when his strength made feeble attempts to assert itself, he would stop and strive to connect his thoughts. Before he was able to do so, however, his mind would be plunged into that dark chaos of bewilderment.

Manifestly, this condition could not continue much longer. Indeed, he had reason afterward to believe that it continued as long as it did simply because of his fine constitution and the determination to reach his destination.

In this confused state he remembered coming out on a hill and descending into a snowy valley. He stumbled and fell, but slid downhill most of the way, then took to crawling over the freezing snow, using his right hand to propel himself.

After a time of that means of locomotion he stopped and lay back with a deep sigh of pain. It was cold at first, then less so, and soon he felt a decided sense of comfort. The warning voice within, that told him not to be lulled by the deceptive warmth before freezing, was a very small one this time. Indeed, it was too small and ineffectual for him to heed.

He couldn't be bothered. Lights blinked in his eyes, strong glaring lights, but he thought that he was dreaming of them. His mind still grasped the fact that it was dark night and snowing hard and so he must be dreaming about the lights! In any case he didn't care—he needn't go on, not ever!

The dark depths of unconsciousness hemmed him in then, and though the screaming voice of the elements beat around his head, he did not hear it.

CHAPTER XX AWAKENING

“Hal! *Hal!*” cried a sweet, anxious voice. “*Oh, my!*”

Hal had the sensation of trying to pull his head out of deep water all the time he was hearing that voice. He seemed gradually to be floating toward the surface of a pool, a pool of deliciously warm water, and suddenly inhaling as one does upon coming up into the air. His eyes felt terribly heavy and it was an effort to open them. Nevertheless, he did open them.

Phoebe’s fair face was what he saw first and even in his wonderment he thrilled at the anxiety which her low voice revealed. Della, standing just beside him, looked anxious too as she glanced over her shoulder at her father.

“Well?” Tallman Stark’s pleasant voice revealed a deep concern. “How do you feel?”

Hal stirred, suddenly conscious that he was undressed and in contact with clean sheets and warm bedclothes. He wriggled his toes beneath them and smiled wanly, then became aware that his left hand was resting in a sling.

“How . . .” he began weakly.

“Now don’t excite yourself, Mr. Keen,” Della said with a maternal smile. “You’ve been very sick. Just answer Father’s question. How do you feel?”

“Kind of shot,” Hal admitted, feeling that his head throbbed terribly when he tried to raise it. He smiled, then suddenly his face darkened: “Ches—I don’t know. Where is he—I left him to get water—”

“Yes, we know that, Mr. Hal,” Phoebe interposed, her big gray eyes filling with tears.

“You—”

“You told us much of the story in your delirium last night,” Della said, her eyes misty too.

“Delirium?” Hal queried, puzzled. “*I delirious?*”

Tallman Stark nodded and answered, “The girls and myself took turns watching you through the night. Loss of blood laid you open to more than you bargained for. You were on the road to pneumonia when we picked you up—the girls were sitting up in Phoebe’s room looking out of the window. They’d been on the watch ever since—well, ever since we knew you hadn’t reached Sainte Beuve. The main thing, they saw a shadow way out beyond

the gate and Phoebe had a strong hunch it was a man. It was—it was you, Hal.”

“So I fell just outside the gate?” Hal said softly. “Gosh! The lights—now I remember—I thought I just dreamed them being there.”

And then, slowly, as the full recollection of those terrible hours in the snowy wilderness forced itself into his mind, he told the whole tragic story, much of which the distressed father and daughters had already pieced together from his fevered words during the previous night.

“We guessed a good deal from the things you said last night,” Phoebe said between her sobs. “What you must have risked for Chester!”

“Yes,” said her father, sadly. “And don’t feel there was anything more you could have done, my boy. It would have been madness to go back into that swamp and, as you say, there were no tracks to indicate that he had gone in. God knows where he did go—I—we can only pray he’ll be guided to safety somehow—and not suffer!—I’m afraid he had pneumonia too.” The big man added brokenly, and suddenly he put his hands to his head and groaned. “What punishment you both have undergone for me—for my years of cowardly silence! Oh, my boy! My Chester—it’s my fault, really my fault!”

Hal looked from Phoebe to Della and saw that they both had put their fingers to their lips for silence. Their father moved wearily across the room to the window and, leaning his head against the cold pane, stared out into the darkness.

“Is it still night?” Hal murmured.

“*Another* night,” Della answered softly. “It was last night that you fell outside the gates. You’ve been sleeping on small doses of morphine that we happened to have in the house—you needed it. And your hand—”

“We wanted to get a doctor for you, Mr. Hal,” Phoebe began apologetically, “but—” she paused in evident embarrassment.

“But for the weather and the distance,” Hal came to her rescue. “It’s quite all right. I’m doing fine with your kind help.”

“Oh, no,” Della protested. “We’ve done nothing, really. There wasn’t much we could do. But it wasn’t the weather either—I mean—you mustn’t think it was our fault about not getting the doctor today. We—well, you see—Jacques—”

“*Jacques?*” Hal raised himself slightly, then fell back upon his pillow from sheer weakness. “Jacques here?” he murmured.

“He—he came back that day—that day you started out for Sainte Beauve,” Phoebe blurted out in a nervous whisper.

“He said Chet and you left him to reconnoitre a bit after you had all eaten lunch,” Della whispered, bending down to him. “He said you didn’t

come back and he thought you had got lost, so he looked around for a while and then turned back because of the storm.”

“But he lied!” Tallman Stark roared, turning back from the window. “I knew by the lying grin on his face—I knew he had deliberately left you boys there to *die!*”

“He had a reason to want to get rid of me,” Hal said. “But poor Ches—*he* had nothing to do with it. He did nothing to deserve . . .”

Mr. Stark groaned aloud, and Phoebe and Della looked at each other in consternation.

CHAPTER XXI

PHOEBE

Della was noncommittal. She fed him hot broth with tender solicitude and murmured prayerfully concerning Chester's whereabouts. She couldn't believe, she said, that her brother was dead. There was always hope until . . .

Hal did not hear what came after *until*. Della seemed not to know herself and after she had fed her patient, she straightened his pillows and sat back thoughtfully. For a while she was silent, then leaned forward and spoke in that whispering voice that was beginning to puzzle Hal.

"Not a month ago you saved Chet on a runaway horse," she said as if by rote. "He wrote us that you risked your own life. Then the other day you carried him while he was unconscious and risked your life again so that you'd divert the attention of those beasts. Oh, I can't believe that all those sacrifices you've made for Chet have been in vain—I can't!"

"I can't either, Miss Della. I *won't* believe it!"

Phoebe came into the room just then to relieve her sister. Taking a seat, she smiled cheerfully and waved Della out of the room to her dinner.

"You're awfully kind, Phoeb—Miss Phoebe," Hal stammered.

"*Phoebe's* better from you, Hal," she said, stressing his name with a companionable smile. "After the things you've done for our Chet, *Miss* and *Mr.* are absurd—you're in the bosom of our family! Not that it's much of a family nowadays," she added poignantly.

"It's a darn fine family!" Hal exclaimed indignantly. Then: "I feel contemptible when you talk about what I've done for Ches—it makes me realize that it would have been far better for me never to have come back than to come back without him the way I did! I'd never have done it if I'd been in full possession of my senses. I was sick and half crazy and I guess I only half knew what I was doing. You know it?"

"Sh! You've been splendid. No regrets now. Chet would say so too, I'm sure. No more of that talk now—use what little energy you have to pray that he's still alive somewhere."

"I do, Phoebe," Hal moaned. "God knows I do."

"We all do." She settled her slim, small body in the chair and looked at him frankly. "Tell me, how did you get such an idea?"

"Idea? What idea?"

"Outwitting those wolves as you did. It was corking."

"Did I babble as much as all that last night?"

“Yes, you did. We all sat around and heard it. Della, Father, Jerard and myself. By the way, Jerard’s coming up as soon as he’s had coffee. Now tell me; it won’t tire you, will it?”

“Not if it won’t tire *you*. I feel pretty fit since your sister fed me. Even my hand feels better.”

“Splendid! We were afraid of infection—I kept bathing it in antiseptic and Della did the dressing. And now before we ramble again tell me what you thought when you saw those wolves making for poor Chet?”

“To save him from them at all costs, naturally,” Hal said modestly. “First, I had an idea that by running I could get them to chase me. Then I got the bright idea—I once read something like it, that wolves on the brink of starvation will attack a man if they get the scent of his blood. So I tried it.”

“Courageous young man!” Phoebe said, without a hint of flattery.

“Something had to be done,” Hal said, a little abashed. “My right hand was precious—I needed my legs if I had to run. The only thing that I could dispense with was my left hand. So I just went ahead.”

“And you could mangle your own precious hand without a shudder? I never heard of anything so marvelous!”

“I didn’t do it without a shudder, believe me. I shook from head to foot with the pain. But to get on . . . Oh, you know the rest. They chased me all right. I thought as I ran—something else I once read about. That starving wolves will fall on one of themselves that’s dead or wounded. I decided to try it and see . . . it worked! Swinging at them from the tree I thought of on the fly, too. Anyway, they backed into the deep timber quarreling over the spoils and forgetting me entirely.”

“It took a mind to think up such a stunt,” said Phoebe admiringly. Suddenly her face clouded and she looked at him appealingly, then: “Hal, we need such a mind as yours to help us out of the terrible difficulties we’re in right now. It’s a situation that is beyond your wildest fancy. Oh, I know you’re aware of what’s existed in this house for so many years. Something new has developed since the other day—since Jacques came back here and said he had lost you.”

Jerard Mathieu opened the door at that moment and came into the room, smiling sympathetically.

“Oh, I say, old chap, you’re looking quite fit,” he said pleasantly; then turned to Phoebe. “Your father’s sent word for you to come down and keep him company. He thinks I’m enough of a bore for Keen to have at one time and he said the patient must get to sleep in a few minutes. Della’s gone to her room.”

“All right,” Phoebe smiled sadly. “I’m sure Hal doesn’t agree with Father even if he is sleepy.”

“Not at all,” Hal said, some of his old spirits returning. “I could sleep with all of you around.”

Phoebe smiled good-naturedly and give his wounded hand a slight tap before she left.

“Before you fall asleep, tell yourself over and over that you won’t roll over on that poor hand,” she said solicitously. “It helps a lot, that subconscious mind of ours—it never sleeps. You’d have a terrific time for a few minutes if your weight pressed on that hand. Besides, there’s a chance of inflammation, so be careful!”

“And how, Phoebe!”

“Glad to see you so cheerful about it,” the girl said sweetly. “Slumber tight—and goodnight!”

“A peach of a girl, huh, Mathieu,” Hal said after she had gone. “You know, straight from the shoulder kind. Gosh, give me that kind every time. Why, she sat here and talked a regular man-to-man conversation.”

“Yes, yes, Phoebe’s ripping!” Mathieu agreed, looking about the room absently. “A bully pal for any nice chap.”

Hal noticed that he was very pale and nervous. He sat down, then got up right away and, lighting a cigarette, started to circle the room.

“What’s on your mind, Jerry?” he asked whimsically. “Don’t mind the *Jerry*, do you?”

“Absolutely not, old chap,” Jerard answered absently, flecking his ashes on the oriental rug. “It’s rather cheering, you know. Can’t be too much of it after the gloom we’ve had here the past few days.”

“Phoebe started to tell me something about that when you came in,” Hal interrupted. “She said conditions had changed considerably.”

“*Considerably* is a mild word for it, Keen. It’s positively astounding—incredible, I say! Yet, it’s true.”

“I’m all in the dark, Mathieu—what’s it all about?”

“Why, the other day—well, you know about Jacques coming back here, I understand?”

“Yes. The girls and Mr. Stark told me.”

“Then you know what excuse he gave about you and Chet. He didn’t try very hard to make it a good lie—we all could see that at once.” Mathieu stopped, crushed his cigarette out in an ash tray and sat down beside the bed. “My word, what a day! Jacques went into Mr. Stark’s library just before dinner and they had a terrific quarrel. Neither the girls nor myself heard what was said, but Jacques came out and passed us in the hall with that rather awful grin on his face. After him came Mr. Stark looking terribly down.”

“Yes?” Hal asked interested.

“He said that we’d have to regard ourselves as prisoners in the house unless . . .”

“Unless what?”

“That’s what I haven’t been able to find out very well, old chap. Della immediately took her father’s arm and led him back into the library. When she came out, it was to tell us that she was no end sorry but that none of us must leave the house until a certain matter had been settled.”

“What the dickens do you—say, it’s Jacques! Why, of course, it’s he!”

“Don’t I know it, old top! He’s got Mr. Stark under his thumb and, poor man, he’d like to get out, but Della’s afraid of the Joneses down in Sainte Beauve getting wind of some scandal up here.”

“I know that too, Jerry. But it’s preposterous—Della isn’t encouraging her father to let Jacques get away with such a thing as that!”

“She certainly is, Keen. What Jacques’ motive is, I don’t know, but he holds the whip hand, old fellow. Della wants to settle the matter amicably. But it hasn’t been settled yet. And until it is, we’re prisoners all at Stark House. Jacques Bonner has so decreed. Isn’t that ripping for a servant?”

“And how!” Hal agreed. “But you don’t actually believe he’d try and stop anyone from getting beyond those gates?”

“My dear chap,” said Mathieu, “you just try it and see what happens!”

CHAPTER XXII

PRISONERS

“You mean . . .”

“I mean that those Siamese twin cousins of his, Ed and Lon, are even in league with the scoundrel. They watch at the back and about either side of the house. Rene and Jacques take care of who tries to get out the front gate.”

“I’ll be darned! How do you know?”

“We found out last night when the girls saw you fall outside the gate,” Mathieu answered, lighting another cigarette. “They came downstairs and told Mr. Stark and me, and we ran out. Jacques and Rene popped out at us from behind those bushes down there. They both were armed!”

“And how did . . .” Hal began, raising his head.

“Lie back and rest, old chap. They went out and got you; wouldn’t let either Mr. Stark or me go. And I’ll tell you what—Jacques Bonner didn’t look awfully pleased that it was you, either.”

“You’re not surprising me by telling me that, Jerry. I can imagine it, believe me! It’s a wonder he didn’t let me lie there. Perhaps there’s a little of the milk of human kindness left in him, after all.”

“You seem to know him, Keen.”

“What I don’t know, I can guess.”

“Look here,” Mathieu said in a lower tone. “Neither Chet nor the girls seem to know what it’s all about. But between you and me it looks like blackmail!”

“Just what I’ve thought, exactly!”

“An astounding situation, what? We’re to be prisoners at Stark House for how long? Until Mr. Stark pays over to this Jacques Bonner a certain sum—for what?”

“Jerry, I’m a guy who doesn’t like to talk without being sure. And I’m not sure what this blackmail is for. But I do guess that it’s to keep hushed up an old family scandal that the Stark pride prefers to see remain buried in its own dust. What else could a skunk like Bonner get blackmail for? And confidentially, Jerry, Mr. Stark is getting sick and tired of it. I heard him assert himself the other night—he told Jacques he wouldn’t give him another red cent.”

“But Della doesn’t see it that way, eh?”

“Della’s going to make the mistake her father’s made all these years. It’s her blamed pride. Boy, she’s material for any blackmailer. It’s too bad—

she's darn nice."

"Yes, but she's rather straining things a bit, what? Too much of that. It's rather nerve-wracking to contemplate that one can be forcibly detained by a chap like Bonner."

"Well, it doesn't make me nervous. I'm feeling better and I'll be around in a few days as fit as a fiddle. We'll see then how forcibly Jacques Bonner and that skulking son of his can detain us. He thought he'd got rid of Ches and me, didn't he! Well, poor Ches isn't accounted for yet, but, God willing, he will be. And I came back, I'll tell the world! Jacques Bonner won't get the chance to give me the slip again. I'm going to do what he doesn't want any of us to do—go to Sainte Beauve and tell the police. It'll upset his little blackmail party and I'll tell you why, Jerry . . ."

"Sh!" said Jerard, rising and walking on tiptoe toward the door. "I think I hear someone outside."

"You probably do," Hal whispered complacently. "Open the door and you'll find that it's Rene."

It was.

CHAPTER XXIII

MOONLIGHT

Mr. Stark and Phoebe were coming up the stairs at that moment, ready to retire. Consequently, Rene got off with a clumsy excuse and no reprimand for that inherent weakness of his of listening at keyholes. Hal lay in bed and listened to it all, smarting under the restrictions that his weakened condition imposed. Never in his life had he so wanted, he thought to himself, to punch someone "right in the jaw."

"Boy, if I only get the chance!" he murmured to himself, while Mathieu and Mr. Stark were conferring about his care during the night.

"I'll sleep in Chet's room, Mr. Stark," Jerard insisted. "If Keen wants anything during the night that I can't manage I can call Della."

"Excellent, Jerard. You're awfully kind."

"I won't bother him much, Mr. Stark," Hal said. "Believe me, I feel as if I could sleep soundly for twenty hours."

"Splendid!" said Tallman Stark, looking into the room and trying hard to smile. "Now don't bother him any more tonight, Jerard—don't let him talk. There's time enough in the morning."

"Righto," Mathieu answered and after a pleasant goodnight he shut the door and started across to Chester's room. He smiled blandly at Hal before he crossed through the bathroom between. "I'm keeping your prescription filled, old chap. And as my mater's Chinese cook says when he's moody—no can talkee!"

"Suits me, Jerry. I'm sleepy as the dickens. We'll take things up where we left off in the morning."

"Righto—goodnight!"

"Goodnight."

Hal started to turn over on his left side, then thought of his hand. It made him think of Phoebe and her gentle suggestion of training the subconscious mind. In point of fact, he thought of everything she had said and how she had said it, and notwithstanding the fact that he had said the same thing about a hundred other girls, he assured himself that he had never before met a girl like her.

His mind dwelt on many things for a while. Mathieu, for one thing. The fellow was a bundle of strange contradictions. He seemed a willing sort, ready to give a helping hand, and yet Hal remembered that Chester had told him Jerard was one of the idling blue-bloods of Quebec. No profession, no

business of any kind and seeming not to want one. And he was twenty-five years old.

Chester had said the Mathieu family had not much money. It was odd then, Hal thought, that Jerard could idle away his time as he was doing. Well, it was his business, but he seemed not a bad sort. Talked right along with a fellow.

He thought of their conversation then, particularly about the fact that Jacques was keeping them all prisoners at Stark House! It was shameful! Seven men, including himself, were in the confines of the Stark gates and yet not one was out that night to search and spread the alarm about Chester!

He writhed in his warm bed at the thought of it! What was wrong with men like that? Wasn't Tallman Stark man enough to better Jacques Bonner in a man's fight? And Mathieu too! Couldn't he possibly find some way to outwit their captors and get to Sainte Beuve?

There, Hal thought, was the exact place to put his finger on Jerard Mathieu's puzzling personality. He was not a man, but an idler and he loved comfort and ease too much to get mixed up in any vulgar scuffle with the Bonner clan.

Meanwhile, Chester was—*where?*

It was disquieting, that thought, for in a second Hal could conjure the terrible things that might happen to the unfortunate Chester. And after his own experiences, it was no wonder. He already realized, why the natives had called the swamp Bete Noire. It fully deserved the name, and he couldn't bear to think of Chester wandering alone in that deadly place, sick, and with not one friend to search for him!

After thoughts like that it was no wonder that he had a difficult time getting to sleep. And when he did sleep, his dreams were filled with terrible figures. He seemed to be thus held in sleep for hours but, as a matter of fact, midnight had not yet come when he suddenly awakened.

He almost laughed aloud when he realized what it was that had wakened him. His subconscious mind! He had awakened in the act of turning over on his left side. Phoebe's caution was excellent!

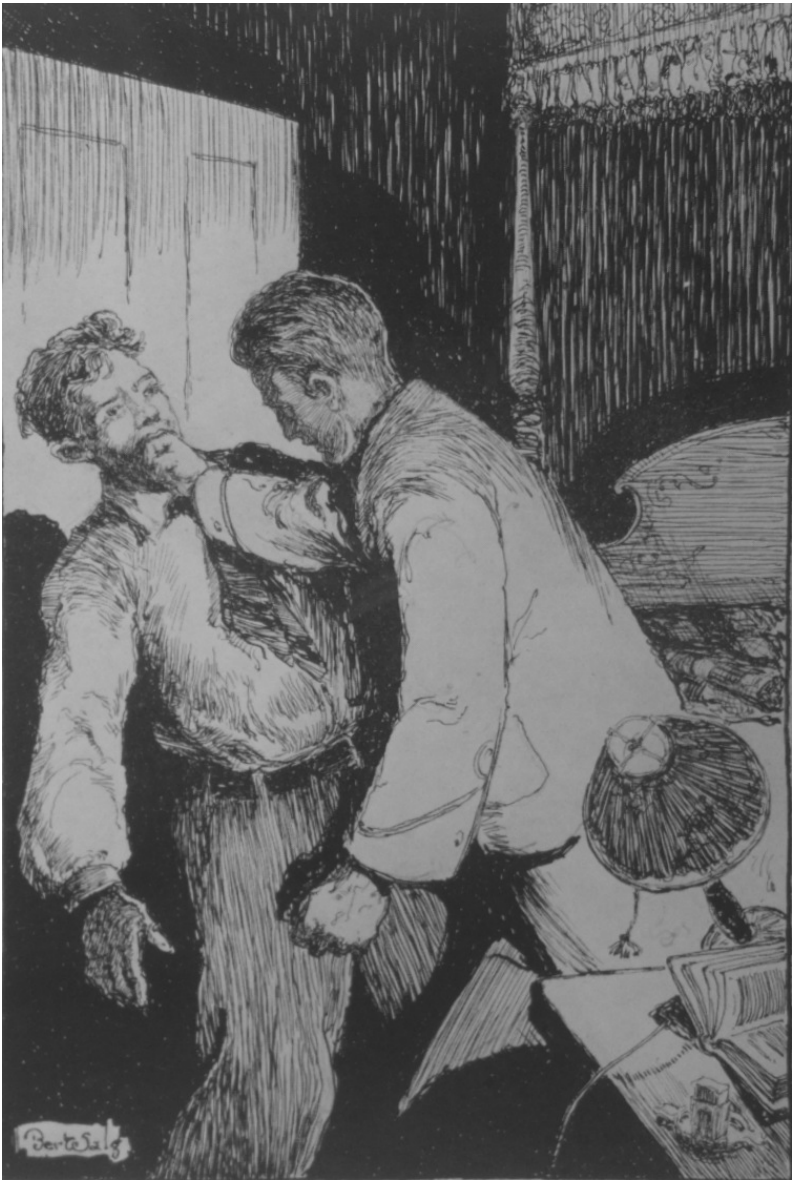
He snuggled down under the warm covers and turned on his right side. His night lamp was out, but there was a full moon and it cast a friendly radiance through the windows. He watched it and was suddenly aware of a door closing very softly somewhere below.

After a moment he heard the sound of footsteps on the servants' stair and he propped his head up on the pillow so that he might hear them more clearly. They were coming slowly—he could almost count them, and though the tread was very soft, he knew that it was a man.

The hall was traversed in a few steps and then the footfalls ceased at his door. He did not move, but watched with growing interest as the door opened very slowly, very softly. He could hear no sound except his own regular breathing.

Then the door was closed and the broad shoulders of a man flashed against the moonlit area before the windows and came toward him. He saw even then that the fellow was carrying a revolver.

But still he waited . . .



RENE STAGGERED BACK TO THE DOOR UNDER THE FORCE OF THE BLOW.

CHAPTER XXIV

PUNCH

The man moved toward the bed with the grace of a panther, slowly but with an air of assurance. Hal had not even then seen his face but he guessed it to be Rene Bonner and no one else. Somehow he had almost expected something like this.

“Well?” he asked calmly. “What do you want now, Rene?”

The young man was startled, evidently, for he backed away a few steps and the pistol was not held in as steady a hand as before. But he at last found his voice.

“I come tell you somethin’—you listen good, no?” he asked in a hoarse whisper.

Hal listened for a moment to a whistling sort of snore that Mathieu was enjoying in Chester’s comfortable bed and he smiled.

“I always listen well, Rene,” he answered at length. “You don’t know me very well or you wouldn’t ask me a question like that. Go on—let’s hear the sad story you have to tell at this witching hour of twelve!”

“I got more peety for you dan mon pere—I see how seeck you are wit’ dat ’and. So I tell you, you not do what you say that you make trouble for mon pere an’ me. You weel not try an’ go to Sainte Beauve when you get better—not unless M’sieu Tallman geev mon pere lot money he want—see? If he does, den mon pere take his fam’ly way out an’ we are reech for rest o’ life, yes? Then you do what you like, M’sieu Keen. But now poleese must not come—see? Mon pere say if you do any-t’ing he will keel you.”

“Oh yes?” Hal asked smiling. “Your father, I suppose you mean, huh?”

“Mon pere—yes. He say he keel . . .”

“You went all over that before, Rene. What’s the matter, is your father afraid of me?”

“He not like you, M’sieu Keen. He say you trouble-maker for him an’ maybe get M’sieu Tallman to change his mind about dat money.”

“Well, this is interesting! And a compliment besides! I’m glad your father considers me a worthy opponent—the sneaking skunk that he is! Well, tell him for me . . .”

“I no tell ’eem I come here—I come ’cause I peety you!” Rene protested softly.

Hal saw the lie in his flashing black eyes, but did not betray himself by any word or movement. He answered Rene quickly.

“You can get it over to him that I intend to go right on making trouble for him! Why shouldn’t I? Somebody’s got to even up the score with him about Chester Stark and I’m glad to be that somebody—understand? And if I’m able to do it, not one cent of Stark money will pass into his hands! That’s something else I’ll score for Chester. Now that’s all I have to say. I’m darn sleepy.”

A faint smile played about the corners of Rene’s full lips. He stood for a moment, regarding Hal with an ill-concealed look of hatred. Suddenly he sprang forward.

But Hal was ready for him. Before Rene had a chance to properly aim his gun and fire, he had thrust one long leg out from under the warm covers and kicked the weapon clear out of the fellow’s hand. A second more and he was leaning far over the edge of the bed, retrieving the pistol. Another second and it was safely in his pajama pocket.

And in order to make Rene’s punishment fit the crime, Hal took the opportunity of bounding to his feet and giving the fellow a resounding punch exactly on the jawbone.

“There, I promised myself that!” he shouted, as Rene staggered back to the door under the force of the blow. “I’m not really in condition either, but opportunity doesn’t always knock like this. Now beat it!”

Rene had taken this advice with muttered threats and imprecations and was making an ignominious retreat down the servants’ stair when Mathieu and the rest of the household came rushing into the room in every state of dishabile imaginable.

Hal gave an explanation with careful attention to detail, despite the fact that Della and Phoebe and Mr. Stark were helping him back into bed and scolding him during the process. Nevertheless, he enjoyed it and decided when he lay back on his pillow, rather weak and spent, that it had been worth the exertion.

Mr. Stark was distressed by the episode and strode about the room, hands plunged into his dressing-gown pocket and shaking his majestic white head.

“Della,” he was saying, “this is positively the last outrage I’ll tolerate at the hands of those people! Positively the last! We *must* get some word to the police—get it there somehow!”

“And it can be done!” Hal exclaimed brightly. He took out the gun from his pajama pocket and examined it. “Fully loaded. Who says we’re all prisoners at Stark House?”

“You know?” Della exclaimed, drawing herself up instinctively.

“Certainly, I know,” Hal answered. “Jerard told me. And if he hadn’t done the honors, I’d have heard it anyhow. So don’t worry, Miss Della.

Rene's threats were quite significant. He told me that if a certain amount of money wasn't paid to his father, there'd be trouble."

Della looked despairingly at her father, but he paid no heed and kept circling the room, gloomily. Phoebe, charming in a flowing negligee, sank down into the nearest chair.

"If no one else wants to do it," she said, looking disdainfully from her father to Jerard, "I'll take that gun and fight my way past that gate! I'll get to Sainte Beauve!" Then suddenly, when she had caught the poignant expression of her father's eyes, she sobbed, "Oh, Father—I'm terribly sorry!"

"I know, child," said Tallman Stark sadly. "You just don't understand."

Della pulled her robe tightly about her and glanced at her sister, coldly.

"Phoebe, haven't you forgotten that you're a Stark?" she questioned with a suggestion of hauteur.

"A Stark, and doomed if this keeps up!" Phoebe answered tearfully and swept out of the room.

Della, ever mistress of herself, took her father's arm and said, "Come, we must settle this at once! We can't have a guest insulted and outraged again!"

Tallman Stark stared at her. "Della," he said, "you are madder than I've ever been! Do you realize what it means to have them coming in here and threatening . . ."

"Father," the young woman interposed coldly, "suppose we discuss this in private!"

"Oh, all right!" Tallman Stark groaned. "But I tell you . . ."

Della looked apologetically at Hal and said, "You know I'm sorry. Try and get some sleep now. You'll not have any further disturbance—I'll see to it that it doesn't happen again!" They were gone and Hal turned to Mathieu, who stood looking at the closing door, his mouth agape.

"Now she's what I call a hard nut to crack, huh, Jerry?"

"Oh, I say, I can't make her out!"

"She'd actually pay Jacques Bonner what he wants so he won't bring the Starks to disgrace, huh?" Hal yawned. "You'd wonder how family pride could mean so much to a young woman like her."

"Born in her, old chap," said Jerry stretching his arms lazily. "She's no end furious that you and I know so much about it, what? Moreover, she's made up her mind that we'll know no more."

"I think so too." Hal shut his eyes wearily. "Boy, what a house! Where, oh where, do we find peace, huh? Mr. Stark looks as if he's meaning to hold out. I'll think he's a peach if he does—I don't know why Della can't look at

it modernly. Who cares about family pride any more? Whew! I'm all in, Jerry."

"It's the excitement that's fagged you, eh?" Mathieu chuckled. "Wish I could have seen it, Keen."

"I wish you could have too," Hal grinned. "I'll always remember that punch."

"A knockout, eh?"

"Nope," said Hal, "just the beginning."

CHAPTER XXV

A SILENT GUEST

Hal had been more shaken by the excitement than he realized, for he was still too weak to get up on the third day. Meanwhile, things went on about the same at Stark House. No one attempted to leave for Sainte Beuve, and from what he could learn, no word had yet been received from Chester.

The girls, solicitous to the extreme, had kept him entertained by reading and talking to him, but sometimes lapsed into the gloomy silence which seemed to be spreading through the house. Tallman Stark, too, looked more haggard every time Hal saw him and on the evening of the third day when he felt well enough to go down to dinner, he was shocked by the rich lumberman's sunken cheeks.

Phoebe and Della tried to keep up a semblance of dinner spirit, but it proved to be a flat failure. Their father broke down in the middle of it at the sudden mention of Chester's name and, leaving the table, shut himself up in his library for the rest of the evening. Hal was glad to have Jerard's help upstairs again; he still felt too weak and nervous to withstand the oppressive atmosphere of the gloomy downstairs rooms.

Stretched out on his bed, he regarded Mathieu critically. "Do you realize things are pretty tense here tonight?" he asked.

Mathieu wheeled about as if someone had struck him. His face was pale and Hal noticed that his fingers shook as he lighted a cigarette.

"Sort of gets on one's nerves, what?" he retorted. "I'm at a pitch, one might say."

"Then why in heaven's name haven't you taken this gun I've got and fought your way out of here?" Hal asked, impatiently.

"One against four, old chap? Not Jerard Mathieu! If you've that much interest in the Starks, I haven't. I rather like the idea of getting back to Quebec alive."

"But you wouldn't be taking as long a chance as all that . . . oh, well, what's the use! You are as you are, that's all. But it's another day and Chester not heard from, nor searched for! It's criminal! Well, I'll be feeling all right by tomorrow perhaps. Then we'll see!"

"I'll be jolly thankful to see the last of this place, Keen! But I want to make certain it's the last I *do* see of it! I'm not going to be brought back in here wounded."

“I know, Jerry,” Hal said sarcastically. “I’m not counting on any help from you. I know better.” He laughed bitterly. “I’ll call you when everything’s safe.”

But Mathieu had already become too blunted by fear to care. It was better to be safe than sorry, and he said so. Life was terribly sweet to him and it grew more so as the dismal hours at Stark house wore on. The Canadian seemed not to be able to think or to talk of anything else.

Hal insulted him in an effort to goad him into action through pride. But it made not one bit of difference. He even laughed when Hal told him that he was the kind of man who would crowd women and babies out of lifeboats in order to get a seat for himself.

Hal gave it up as a bad job after a while. He told Mathieu so. “I’d have told anybody he was crazy if he’d said I could like a fellow of your type. But I do, Jerry. You’d be a darn nice fellow if you could pull yourself together and be a man.”

Jerard was smiling blandly and ready to give one of his fatuous retorts when a sudden scream from downstairs broke in upon them.

“*Della!*” he cried, jumping up. “That was *Della!*”

Hal was on his feet when Phoebe’s low voice sounded hysterically, calling, “Hal! Hal Keen!”

The sisters were standing at the foot of the stairway just outside the opened door of the library. Their father, too, was standing a little to one side, but all three were staring into the room, horrified and unable to speak.

Phoebe simply pointed as Hal came hurrying down the stairs and reached their side. And he did not wonder at her speechless silence, for just beyond Tallman Stark’s desk and under the window, a familiar looking chest had been deposited.

The top had been opened wide, and propped upright in a sitting posture inside, was the skeleton.

CHAPTER XXVI

CONFESSION

“Rose had told Father that we wanted him and he came to us in the sitting-room,” Phoebe gasped out after a time. “It was a lie, of course, but we were glad to have him to talk to and we kept him with us for a little while. When he came back here, we heard him groan as he opened the door!”

“We came running out,” Della sobbed. She nodded toward the chest, then shuddered. “That’s what we saw him staring at!”

Tallman Stark said nothing and, despite the protests of his daughters, he staggered into the room, pushed the gruesome-looking skeleton down into the chest and closed the top over it. Then he sank down into his desk chair and covered his face with his hands.

“This,” he moaned, after a few dry sobs had escaped him, “this is my punishment indeed!”

“Father, Father!” cried Della. “What . . . She looked back at Hal and Jerard and her cheeks went a dead white. This, too, seemed her crowning punishment, that strangers should look on at this humiliation.

Phoebe, sensing it, put her arms about her sister and said, “Della, forget you’re a Stark! Hal and Jerard might as well hear it—*they’ve seen it!* She caught in her under lip, bravely. “And we’ve seen it with them!”

Mr. Stark looked up, dry-eyed. A look of resolve had taken the place of that terrible haunting fear in his gray eyes. He straightened up in his chair and motioned for Hal and Jerard to come in with his daughters, and close the door behind them.

“I’ll tell the story from the beginning,” he said wearily. “And I might as well do it slowly, for you’re the only ones in Canada who will hear it and believe it. Canadian justice is severe—they turn a deaf ear to stories like mine. They don’t believe them!”

Hal found himself squeezed into a chair with Jerard, and Della and Phoebe sat opposite them, looking at the old man with white, tear-stained faces.

“There were two wills,” Tallman Stark said in low tones. “One that my father made out when my brother Harrington was turned out and another that he made just before he died in a moment of senile contrition.” He looked up at Hal and nodded. “Chester told you about my brother Harrington?”

“Yes,” Hal answered.

“Then you know he was a despicable son to my father and a torment of a brother to me. Wastrel that he was, he would never have come back here only that he heard my father had remembered him in his last will. My father had done that, too generously, unwisely. Not meaning to, he wrote it in such a way that should my brother come back, every Stark acre and every Stark penny would go to him. I had helped my father in the business, worked—Harrington never raised his hand to help anybody.”

Mathieu coughed affectedly.

“The first will written by my father when he was a hale, well-thinking man, our lawyer had in Sainte Beauve. The second one, though having been recorded, I had in my possession, and the lawyer, fortunately or unfortunately, I don’t know which, seemed to have forgotten about that—or maybe he never knew about it. At any rate, it was the first one which was read and which gave me and my family all the Stark inheritance.”

“Then?” Phoebe asked, her full lips parted.

“Then I burned the second will. I was fully determined to abide by my father’s *intention*, as I knew it—that I should remain at Beyond until Harrington returned so that I could share the home with him. Well, I have stayed here all these years, despite the fact that my brother returned a week after my father was dead. He came in the night—no one saw him come in but Jacques Bonner. And Jacques Bonner didn’t see him go out—not *ever*! That is why I have bowed and knuckled to the man all these years—*that is why*! He could prove nothing—yet—”

“He suspected what had happened?” Hal asked fearfully.

Tallman Stark leaned back against the headrest of his chair and answered, “Yes. That is what he’s held me to, the fact that he never saw Harrington come out of the house, never heard of him again. He would ask for money with a smile and talk in a guileless way about how the Mounted would jump at the chance to find out what had become of Harrington. I never admitted anything, but I paid him just the same.”

“You must be frightfully poor by now, then,” Jerard said, tactlessly.

“No,” Tallman Stark answered, not seeming to notice it, “I could satisfy him with small sums because he didn’t actually know, but now—”

“Father, *please!*” Della pleaded tearfully. “Hurry and tell us what did happen to Uncle Harrington.”

“He came in threatening. I was here in this very room. The servants were in bed—no one heard him, notwithstanding that he talked pretty loud. He said Father had written him and told him about the last will and what it contained. He became abusive and picked up a gun I had lying in this opened desk drawer. He was always a braggart, and he held the gun up

toward me with his finger on the trigger. But it jammed. He turned it about with the muzzle toward himself so he could look into it. He must have pressed his finger on the trigger again—I saw him drop at my feet!”

“Dead?” gasped Della.

“*Dead,*” answered her father. “And no one knew better than I what a thin case I would have. Unthinking, I had leaned over and grasped the gun from his clutched fingers. There would be my finger marks! And also there would be the record on file of the second will and the will would be missing. Oh, I knew I was as good as hanged if I were to give myself up. And I couldn’t do it—I couldn’t bear to see my name, the name of Stark, under murder headlines! Della, too, was another reason. She was just a small child then and her mother and I were very happy in her.”

“And you put him in that, eh?” Jerard Mathieu asked, pointing with a shaking finger toward the chest.

“I did, I did! I used to keep that chest in this room, right where that fiend Jacques has put it tonight. It was the only thing I had around and I had to think quickly. As it was, I sat despairing half of that awful night before I was roused to do something. Then I got up courage and before daylight, I had thrown the gun in the river and had the chest buried twenty feet and more down alongside of the bank.”

A long, deep silence followed, broken only by Della’s sobs and Phoebe’s soft weeping. No sound issued from the kitchen—the servants all had gone down to the cottage for the night. Hal got up and walked about the room quietly.

“I suppose Jacques loosened it from its hiding place when he set off the dynamite to clear the ice, huh?” he asked hesitantly. “It went floating down the river until we saw it that day? . . . Gosh!”

Tallman Stark nodded and looked from one to the other of them.

“That’s why when I heard Jacques had discovered it, I wanted to make a clean breast of it to the police! I knew Jacques would have something real to hound me about if I didn’t. But he didn’t want me to do it—he was afraid, I guess, that they might believe me after all.” He looked at Hal. “That’s why I wanted so to have you and Chet get to Sainte Beauve as quickly as possible.”

“Jacques saw to it that they didn’t,” Phoebe sobbed. “Oh, Father, what are we going to do now?”

“*Do?* I’d give my life to know,” the man answered brokenly. “Della will tell me that Canadian law knows no time and that I’ll still be banged like a common murderer. She’ll tell me that it would be better to give Jacques the twenty-five thousand he demands and let the man go out of our lives so that we can live in peace.”

“Twenty-five thousand!” Mathieu echoed, astonished. “Twenty-five thou . . .”

“Even that much money wouldn’t prevent a fellow like Jacques from coming back and demanding more and more. His kind don’t know the value of money—not even twenty-five thousand! They’ll spend it like drunken sailors. Listen, Mr. Stark,” Hal said suddenly, “we’re all witnesses. We all can prove Jacques’ and Rene’s perfidy and we can all testify to the story you’ve just told us. I’d be perfectly willing . . .”

“Jacques and Rene would be punished,” Della interposed more calmly now. “I know Canadian law better than you, Hal. And though it’s sweet of you to offer your help, I don’t think they would accept your support of Father—they’d not accept support from any of us. After all, we’re his family and you’re our friend. Naturally, we’d believe him. But be candid with yourself—can’t you agree with Father that his case would be terribly thin? The court would recognize that at once.”

Hal could not deny it. But anything seemed better than to give the miserable Jacques blackmail. Phoebe thought so too. Jerard, as was to be expected, was noncommittal and Della still sat on, weeping but adamant. She could not seem to realize that there was a very fine question of honesty involved in the matter.

“But something has to be done!” Phoebe insisted.

“And something will be done!” her father assured her. “Before I go to bed this night, I will decide whether I’m going to give Jacques the twenty-five thousand dollars I have wrapped up in my desk, or whether I shall go to Sainte Beuve tomorrow and finish this thing once and for all. I feel I owe it to Chester now, more than to myself even. He always gave me that ‘make a clean breast of it’ look. Well, maybe I shall—who knows?”

“And what about *that*,” Jerard asked, pointing again to the chest.

“Jacques knows that I couldn’t and I wouldn’t destroy it in here!” Tallman Stark answered hopelessly. “You would soon find that should I attempt such a thing, they’d be at the door with threatening guns. But with even that danger removed I couldn’t touch it—I don’t want to touch it! It’s caused me too much misery all these years.”

Hal could well understand that. In point of fact, he believed implicitly everything the man had told them and his heart went out to him. Like Della, he was weak and cowardly, with an exaggerated sense of family pride that bordered on absurdity. But there was that something about the man . . .

He deserved pity, not condemnation.

CHAPTER XXVII

A SHOT

Hal went up with Jerard, put the gun beside the night lamp and proceeded to undress. They did not say much—each was too occupied with his own thoughts. Jerard seemed badly shaken by the whole affair and wandered around the room, smoking continuously and staring into space.

“Aren’t you going to turn in?” Hal asked.

“Eh? Oh yes—turn in. Why, of course.” He turned toward the bathroom aimlessly and looked back over his narrow shoulder. “You know, Keen,” he said in nervous, staccato tones, “I don’t think I shall sleep at all tonight! I’m deucedly upset by all this.”

“You seem to be. But who isn’t! None of us have had a particularly enjoyable evening. It’s been terrible—terrible!”

“By Jove, then how can you sleep, feeling that way too, eh?” Mathieu asked.

“By forgetting it, that’s all. It looks as if affairs around here tomorrow would need a clear mind.” Hal looked at the Canadian quizzically. “Well, that’s me, all right. A sound sleep produces a clear mind. Me, for the bed!” he added.

“If you hear me about in the night, don’t be worried,” Jerard said, still lingering. “I’ve an idea I shall want to do no end of tramping and I may use your room to do it in. That room of Chet’s isn’t as warm as this.”

“Tramp in here as much as you like, Jerry,” Hal said pleasantly. He crawled into bed and pulled out the light. “I’ve made up my mind to sleep and I won’t hear you. Good luck!”

“Righto.”

Jerard kept his promise. He had started his tramping even before Hal was quite asleep, for he could hear the soft thud of the man’s footfalls as he walked back and forth over the thick rug. But it did not annoy him in the least. Rather it had a soothing effect and he found himself keeping up a humming sort of rhythm in his head.

His sleep wasn’t as sound as he would have liked it to be, however. He was vaguely conscious of Mathieu’s tramping, and then when the fellow ceased his nocturnal, indoor stroll for a time and all seemed quiet, he was beset with dreams.

The interval did not seem very long before he heard footsteps again. This time it sounded like someone running, running up the stairs or down

the stairs, he didn't know which. Be that as it might, he heard Mathieu's voice alongside of his bed, speaking excitedly and then he felt a shake at his right shoulder.

"I say, Keen!" Jerard was saying. "There's been some kind of a commotion downstairs. Jacques . . . listen . . ."

"Get out!" Tallman Stark's voice was shouting. "Get out and stay out!" The library door slammed shut.

There was a silence, prolonged. Five minutes passed and Hal let himself fall back under the warm covers. All was still downstairs.

"I've heard Mr. Stark talk like that to Jacques before, Jerry. Go on back to bed. I guess everything's all right now."

"But they were quarreling terribly."

"I suppose so. Go on back to bed."

"I'm not sleepy even now, old chap. I could stay awake the rest of the night."

"Pleasure's all yours. Happy landing!" He had a recollection of Jerard's moving away from his bed, then he fell asleep again. But there seemed not to be any unbroken rest in store for him. It was not long before he felt Mathieu calling him again and tugging at his shoulder.

Hal saw that his light was on and that Jerard, looking ghostly pale, was bending over him anxiously.

"You gol darn pest!" Hal sputtered sitting up again. "What the heck's the matter now, huh?"

"Oh, I say—I say," Mathieu stammered. "There—there was some noise again down there. And then—then . . ."

"What? What then?"

"I heard a shot!"

"*A shot?*"

Jerard nodded. He couldn't speak, his teeth were chattering so.

Hal jumped out of bed, threw on his robe and grabbed the revolver from the night table. Mathieu followed him in silence, and together they went out into the hall where they stopped a moment to listen.

The house was as silent as a tomb. "Evidently the girls didn't hear it," Hal whispered, as they descended the stairs.

One of the steps creaked slightly and Jerard leaned forward in stark fright and grabbed his shoulder. Hal chuckled under his breath and kept on going until they got to the bottom and stood before the library door.

Not a sound came from within but the light, still burning brightly, gleamed out from under the door sill. Hal tapped lightly on the highly polished wood and, receiving no answer, rapped smartly with his knuckles.

And when the same lonely silence prevailed after those efforts, he turned the knob of the door and opened it.

“Must be somebody in here,” he murmured.

Tallman Stark was there, sunken eyes, wild and staring, and his mouth agape in speechless horror, they found him slumped across his desk, dead.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A MATTER OF TWENTY YEARS

Hal was so shocked that he couldn't move. A little cry had escaped Mathieu and he had fled away from the ghastly sight and up the stairs. Evidently he had gone to his room and had not disturbed the girls. That was going to be the hardest part of the whole tragic business—telling them.

Hal walked around the desk and soon discovered all that he needed to know. A drawer stood open at the dead man's elbow and all its contents had been tumbled about on the floor. Had that twenty-five thousand dollars been taken that Tallman Stark had told them of only a few hours before. From all indications it was gone.

Hal glanced over toward the window and shuddered. The chest was still there and in it the grinning skeleton of Harrington Stark. Twenty years before, he had taken his own life in that very room and now on this cold, winter midnight his brother, Tallman Stark, had been murdered. Murdered, by whom?

Hal did not want to think about that then. His immediate concern was for Della and Phoebe and he debated whether or not he should rouse them now or wait until morning. But no, he could almost visualize Della's look if he put it off any longer than was absolutely necessary.

He realized that he could not look to Jerard to do it. That terror-stricken youth would not help him at all. He must do it himself and do it immediately.

His feet felt like lead as he climbed the stairs on his sorry errand and when he reached the upper hallway he stopped and listened. No sound came from either of the girls' rooms. Only Mathieu was pacing about in Chester's room and from the gusts of blue smoke that came from under the door sill, Hal knew that he must be smoking furiously to settle his ragged nerves.

He set his teeth and reluctantly approached Phoebe's door. Softly, yet insistently, he knocked, then moved to the next door and summoned Della. The two girls called out inquiries almost simultaneously and Hal answered without revealing the tragic errand he was come upon.

"Phoebe? Della? Will you both please dress quickly and come down to the sitting room?" He endeavored to keep his voice as calm as possible.

"What's wrong?" they cried.

But Hal had gone from their doors before he was forced to answer that question. He had already turned into his own room and Mathieu, hearing

him, came through to meet him.

He was paler than ever and seemed to be still shaking. Hal felt a contempt for him and showed it plainly.

“For heaven’s sake, Jerry, pull yourself together and act like a man!”

“But—but . . .” Mathieu stammered.

“But *nothing!*” Hal almost sneered. “Isn’t this thing tragic enough without my having to look after you? Now, come on—cut out your smoking and come down with me. The girls are coming down to the sitting room as soon as they can dress.”

“I can’t go over it all again with them—I *can’t!*” Jerard cried. “I—I tell you, Keen, I’m jolly sick of it! All this mystery and murder . . .” he shuddered visibly. “I’m off for Quebec as soon as it’s daylight for we’ll be able to get out of here now that Jacques has settled things his way.”

“Don’t be too sure, Jerry,” Hal said sarcastically. “You’ll get to Quebec—sometime. But I’m afraid it won’t be tomorrow. Now, come on down!”

Mathieu followed, muttering constantly and keeping close at Hal’s heels. When they passed the library, he hugged closer than ever and almost ran the distance to the sitting room, where he sat down on the divan, breathless and white.

Phoebe and Della came straight down and burst into the room, anxious-eyed and pale.

“It’s—it’s Father?” Della asked looking about.

“He’s not . . .” Phoebe began.

“Dead—*shot!*” Hal answered, hoping he wasn’t too brusque, yet relieved to have it out.

Phoebe gasped and dropped her head on her arm. Della’s face became convulsed with pain and she kept looking straight ahead to keep her poise.

“Jacques?” she asked in a whisper. “Jacques could do even *that?*”

“Either he or Rene,” Jerard spoke up in a trembling voice. “I heard them quarreling. Someone was rushing around down here. By Jove, it was awful!” He buried his face in his hands.

“What sadness this house has brought to our guests!” Della said plaintively. She was the true Stark in that moment, and ever the perfect hostess. “I’m so terribly sorry—I’d give anything . . .”

“Hush!” Hal said gently. “Sit down now I and try to compose yourself. I’ve got a little reconnoitering to do outside. Don’t attempt to call me—I’m not anxious to be seen first.”

“Oh please, Hal,” Phoebe pleaded. “Please be careful! We don’t want any more . . .”

“I’ve got a gun,” Hal reassured her. “And I’ll be *darn careful!*” he added.

He found a hat and a jacket in the hall and I slipped them on. Next, he looked at his watch and saw that it was exactly twelve forty-five o'clock. Then he unlocked the side door leading under the porté-cochere, opened it very slowly and closed it after him without a sound.

It was dark but starlight and he was able, after his eyes got used to the change, to distinguish things about the place. He saw no one, but he did not take any chances and stuck ever so close to the shadow as he listened.

A light gleamed from the Bonner cottage and he could see the snow-white trail leading away from the gate. A rabbit hopped across the surface of the snow and in the distance he could hear varied noises of the forest night prowlers and always, echoing above the rest, the dreaded cry of the starving wolf pack.

But all was quiet at Beyond—intensely so. He had heard nothing, but still he moved with caution down the steps and around the side of the fortress-like house. As he turned the corner, he heard a footstep crunch in the snow and like a cat he pulled up so close to the building that his back was flattened against it.

A light gleamed out on the snow on that side and he realized that it was coming from the library. He had left it on, left everything, in fact, just as he had found it. So there was nothing to fear on that score.

He had barely realized that when he heard another footstep and was aware of low, whispering voices somewhere very near.

He stepped softly along, two, three, four steps, then looked out cautiously. Two men stood on tiptoe and were looking in at the library window, whispering excitedly and gesticulating wildly. One of them Hal could never mistake, never in the wide world. The other bore a projection on his jaw which had a look so familiar as to be thrilling.

Jacques Bonner and his son, Rene Bonner—there they were, unaware that their doom was just a step behind!

CHAPTER XXIX

REGRET

“Drop your guns!” Hal called suddenly.

Jacques and his son jumped backward with surprise, but the soft thud of their falling guns was indication enough that self-preservation was their first thought. Rene muttered something under his breath, then both he and his father peered into the darkness at their approaching captor with mask-like faces.

“Come on!” Hal commanded them impatiently. “Walk past me and walk fast! Keep going till you get into the sitting-room in the house. And don’t waste a minute looking back, either!”

They carried out his orders to the letter and it is doubtful if they had any thought of trying to do otherwise. There was something suddenly dominant about this six-foot, broad shouldered young American. His fine head was thrown back and his deep, blue eyes were deadly serious as he leveled the gun at the backs of his captives. Grim purpose marked his every stride.

“You’ll not try to cry out or signal Ed and Lon!” he whispered suddenly bethinking himself of that possibility. “Keep going—heads and hands down—understand? *If you don’t . . .*”

He did not need to finish the threat. Both Jacques and Rene understood perfectly and they marched up the stone steps under the porté-cochere with soldier-like precision. Hal looked back toward the outbuildings and the river before he entered the house but he saw no sign of the Bonner cousins, and he was satisfied that they were still keeping guard under the shadow of the kitchen entrance, unaware what was happening in front.

Jacques waddled through the hall and every movement bespoke a sullen rage within his grotesque body. Rene, however, strutted defiantly and though Hal could not see his dark, handsome face, he could sense the sneer upon the too full lips.

When they reached the sitting-room, both father and son had resumed their mask-like expressions and they betrayed no emotion during the entire proceedings that followed.

They would not accept the chairs that were offered them but stood, watchful and listening.

Jerard Mathieu seemed more calm now, though he paced the length of the room restlessly, his hands dug deep into his pockets. Hal looked at him and smiled faintly.

“Want to work off that excess energy, Jerry?”

Jerard nodded eagerly.

“In the snow outside the library windows you’ll find two guns. Go hunt for them. If Ed or Lon happen to come along say nothing about what’s going on in here or what has happened! Tell them you couldn’t sleep and came out for a little air and just lost—well, think up something to tell them. I’ll attend to them later. Come back as quick as you can. And be careful how you pick them up!” Mathieu didn’t have to be coaxed to go on that errand. He bounded out of the big room, seeming only too glad to escape from that gloomy, tragic house for a few minutes. When the door shut behind him Hal got down to business immediately. He glanced from Jacques to Rene, not forgetting for an instant the necessity of keeping his gun well aimed in their direction.

“You seemed to be having quite a conference about poor Mr. Stark,” Hal said looking hard at them.

“We see ’em look dead!” Rene mumbled.

“We talk eet over!” Jacques added sullenly.

“Yes, I noticed that,” Hal observed calmly. “You are Canadians so I suppose you know what murder means to the murderer in this country, huh? Even *attempted* murder!”

“You thenk *we* murder M’sieu Tallman?” Jacques asked in his guttural voice. He looked at Phoebe and Della sitting silently, tragically, side by side, dependent on each other for moral support in this dark hour. He blinked his opaque eyes and looked back at Hal.

“I don’t suppose it took two of you to aim the gun. One was deadly enough. Whoever that gun belonged to, whoever aimed it, we’ll know before very long. I’m not here to catechize anybody—I brought you two here to tell you that you’re going to be imprisoned somewhere in this house until the police get here. They can fire away at you all they want.”

“You no see us fire gun at M’sieu Tallman, eh?” Rene asked defiantly.

“Naturally, not.”

“Then you no can keep us preesoner, yes?”

“That’s just what I can do and what I don’t intend doing anything else but!” Hal retorted. “I may not be able to hold you on a murder charge, but I can and will hold you on many other charges—blackmail, attempts to kill and as far as we know, Jacques, you’re directly responsible for poor Chester’s probable death, and surely, there’s some punishment for people who, by threats of violence and death, have kept the members and guests of Stark House virtual prisoners! Now just try and yelp, you two, about being falsely accused of anything! Even if you didn’t have murder added to your list of sins, hanging would be too good for you! Particularly *you*, Jacques!

Rene's got a little pity coming to him in a way—he's learned what he knows from you!"

Rene glanced at his father frowningly, but the other remained as sullen and silent as ever, and stood looking straight ahead as if he neither heard nor saw anything around him. If he was angry and resentful that a just Fate had caught up to him, he did not reveal it. Jerard entered the room at this juncture looking more like his old self. He had found what he was sent for and held the guns out with a gesture of triumph.

"I say, take a look at them, Keen!" he said excitedly. "By Jove, that's incriminating enough, eh? I picked them up by the muzzle."

Hal handed his pistol to Jerard and said, "Watch these little birdies, Jerry. They're in just the mood to fly away." Then he hurriedly inspected the Bonner weapons, wrapping his handkerchief about each one before he examined the chamber. One he found with all bullets intact; the other had one bullet missing.

He frowned as he slipped the guns into his pocket. Then he looked thoughtfully in Della's direction. "What room in this house has little or no means of escape through its windows?" he asked.

"The bathroom between Chet's room and yours," Della replied after a moment. "It has only one very small window, if you've noticed. Certainly it isn't large enough for one to do more than get his head out."

"That's fine," Hal said quickly. "How about the doors—do they lock from inside or from the bedrooms?"

"The bedrooms each have their own separate locks and there are also locks on the bathroom side of both the doors," Della answered wearily.

"Fine," said Hal briskly, then turned to Jacques and Rene. "Turn about and be on your way. I'll be right behind you." And to Mathieu he said, "You go on up through Chet's room and lock the bathroom door on that side. We'll enter through my room. Bring the key back to me, huh? Then we'll come down and decide what to do next."

Jerard nodded and hurried on ahead and Hal followed after his prisoners. They passed by the library door, tense and silent, and unconsciously walked on tiptoe all the way up the stair. Rene snapped on the light switch when they got to Hal's room and looked back, sneeringly.

They put up no fight, however, but walked on into the bathroom. Hal shoved two chairs in after them, closed the door and locked it securely.

"I'm sorry the room isn't large enough for a couch," he called sarcastically. "If you find the chairs aren't comfortable enough, you'll have to take turns sleeping in the bathtub. In any case, you needn't attempt to batter down the doors. I'm barricading them. The rough stuff won't get either of you anywhere—understand?"

There was no answer, but Hal was satisfied that they had heard every word. With that over, he proceeded to swing the heavy bed around so that the head of it fitted tightly up against the door.

At that moment Mathieu came in, the key in his hand and looking fatigued. "My word, but I'm glad that's over!" he exclaimed, sitting down in a chair near the door. "Jove, but you have those chaps in there snugly."

"Yes, but it's a case of getting on to what's coming next."

"Next?"

"The police. At least one of us will have to make that trip to Sainte Beauve. It'll be a case of just who can be spared while we have those two locked up in there. But we can't discuss it here—come on, the girls will be getting worried."

But the girls hadn't been doing anything of the kind. They had already adjusted themselves to the terribly tragic death of their father and were calmly discussing what method was best to hasten the long arm of the law over the snowy wastes and bring the murderer to justice. In point of fact, they had reached a decision when Hal and Jerard entered the room and Della spoke immediately.

"At daylight I'm going to Sainte Beauve," she said in that peremptory way of hers.

"You—*alone*?" Hal asked, astonished. "Why . . ."

"Not alone," she interposed, "I'm going to take Ed and Lon with me—I'll really need them, Hal, for I intend going down the river. The ice is broken up enough and it's a much quicker way. Ed and Lon can help a lot by paddling. You see, I want to save time by riding the falls—oh, it's not as dangerous as you think, Hal," she added hastily. "With the help of two men there's not any risk."

"Della can handle any canoe, Hal," Phoebe spoke up. "Really she can! She's splendid with them."

"Well—" Hal said skeptically, "if you're certain . . . but then, why not Jerard or myself?"

"Oh, I say, old chap!" Mathieu protested. "I don't know how to ride falls in a canoe—I know but deuced little about canoes anyway!"

"We'll take your word for it, Jerard," said Phoebe with biting sarcasm. "Too, we'd be worried that you might take cold—such a delicate constitution as you have!"

Hal could not help feeling a little thrill. So Phoebe didn't admire the hot-house species which Jerard seemed to represent! Her pretty mouth was curled in scorn, he noticed, every time she looked Mathieu's way.

"I say, Phoebe, I'm not used to your confounded icy winds out here," Jerard protested, a little abashed. "Besides . . ."

“Hush, Jerard!” Della said icily. “This is no time to argue—with my father lying dead.” She sobbed softly, then threw back her dark head. “Phoebe and myself have settled this and I’m going. Lon and Ed are trustworthy as far as that goes . . .”

“I was going to ask you about that,” Hal interposed. “How about them being mixed up with Jacques in this business?”

“I don’t believe they would countenance such a thing—I know they wouldn’t!” Della said stoutly. “They have always been ruled by Jacques and under his thumb, but they would have nothing to do with murder. Oh, I know what you’re thinking—but they’ve kept guard about here simply because they’re afraid of Jacques and Rene. Once they know that those awful men are safe under lock and key, they’d go to any lengths for my family, I’m sure.”

“Well, you ought to know, Miss Della,” Hal said.

“Della’s right about them, Hal!” Phoebe assured him sweetly. “Ed and Lon, poor chaps, have been the tools of Jacques and Rene. I dare say they’ll be greatly relieved to hear that you’ve locked them up safely.”

Hal was satisfied on that score, but he couldn’t help feeling a little nervous about Della. She looked so grief-stricken, so utterly tired, and there was a droop about her proud shoulders that bespoke surrender. In her fine dark eyes there was a look of pain.

“Miss Della,” he pleaded, “I’ve handled a canoe in one of the trickiest places in Brazilian waters and the poor Indian kid that was with me drowned. But I made it—I could do it now! You look so kind of tired and all . . . Jerry could manage it fine here until I got back!”

“Hal,” Della said, holding out her hand and smiling wanly, “I’ve been so mistaken about you that I could cry with regret. I thought you were just a busybody, but I’ve learned to be humiliated at my own folly—you’re the truest friend the Starks ever had. You came to help me—help us—and I practically told you to mind your own affairs! Oh, what would I give to take that back!” She covered her eyes with her hand for a moment.

“Oh, Miss Della—please! I didn’t think anything of it—I understood. You were just darn proud, that’s all. Who can blame you for that?”

“Everybody!” Della said humbly. “And they should! What right did I have to risk my father’s life for the sake of the name of Stark! Oh, I couldn’t bear to see our name in the papers . . . and I stood by and watched that evil Jacques make every day, every moment, a thing of torture for my father! And now—I’m to blame for my poor, miserable father’s death—I’m to blame for everything! No, let me talk . . . I’m going to Sainte Beuve as the crowning humiliation—I’m going to ride this hated pride of mine in the dust and tell them it was I—I . . .” She hurried from the room in tears.

“Poor Della!” Phoebe sobbed. “You don’t know what it’s costing her to talk like that! She did what she thought best.”

“Of course,” said Hal, upset by the scene. “Don’t we all! It’s made me feel terrible, though. And I’m worried about her going.”

“*Please*, don’t,” Phoebe said smiling. “It’s better for her to go in any case. She’s going to get a plane to bring them all back. Contact with those people will set her up a bit. Poor sister, she’s been stifled in pride and loneliness too long.”

“It looks like it,” Hal said earnestly. “And I say it’s a darn shame too! Gosh, I’m a fool not to have realized before that Della’s one swell girl!”

And though he did not say it, he thought that Phoebe was particularly nice too.

CHAPTER XXX

REFLECTIONS

None of them got very much sleep during the rest of the dark hours—Hal less than any of the others. Though he hadn't any fear of the supernatural, he couldn't sleep with the thought of Tallman Stark, dead—murdered in his library and, keeping him ghostly company, the skeleton of his long dead brother still lying in the chest where they had left it.

Why hadn't Mr. Stark moved the gruesome chest out of the room, out of his sight? Hal asked the question, and answered it the next moment, for he decided that the lumberman hadn't touched it for the same reason that the rest of them hadn't touched it—it was too ghastly.

He had given orders that nothing in the library must be disturbed until after the police came, and the girls decided that they would not look upon the tragic face of their father amidst such sad and horrifying conditions.

They had gone to bed, Mathieu was snoring soundly on Hal's bed, and in the bathroom could be heard the regular breathing of Jacques Bonner and his son, Rene.

Hal sat in a chair near the window, smoking. Jerard's coat was flung over the end of the bed just as he had thrown it down. Usually a meticulous young man, this was one occasion when he had seemed to disregard everything in the world save his own comfort. He was dog-tired, he said, and *had* to sleep.

Hal looked at him now in the light from the night lamp. His smooth-shaven face had little color in it and his sleep was not sound. He tossed and moaned and groaned continually and Hal wondered if the tragic events at Stark House were not revealing Jerard Mathieu's real character. A coward, a weakling, mentally and physically, it took but little to strip from him the thin veneer that made him seem the man he was not.

His close inspection of the young man brought something else to Hal's notice. It was a strip of white paper lying on the floor just under the bed where Jerard had flung his coat.

"Something he's dropped out of his coat when he took it off," Hal mused as he walked across the room to pick it up.

He dropped down on one knee and saw that it was a hastily written note addressed simply: "Matliieu . . . I still have your I O U for ten thou . . . get it to me before April or I'll show it to your mother. Perhaps she won't like to know that the Mathieu exchequer has been depleted by her rotten, card-

playing son, eh? Think it over and bring the ten thou! Remember . . . Hastings.”

Hal dropped the note hastily. Let Jerard pick it up himself! Rotter that he was, he deserved the contempt of any wholesome, decent fellow! It would be a relief to see the last of him when they were all free to go their separate ways.

While he was still on his knee he heard the door of Della’s room open. Dawn? Of course it was, he realized, hurrying over to the window and looking at the faint flush of roseate light spreading over Stark House.

Daylight would soon be a reality.

CHAPTER XXXI

A SAD RETURN

Hal and Phoebe spent most of the day together. They chatted rather constrainedly and wandered aimlessly about the house, occasionally stepping out of doors and snatching some exercise by taking a brisk walk about the stately, snow-covered park surrounding Stark House. Jerard Mathieu spent most of the day in Hal's bed, saying that he felt sick and quite shaken up by the tragedy.

It had been a lovely day—gleaming sun and azure blue sky, and the comfortable sound of thawing in all directions. Phoebe insisted that there was even a hint of spring in the air, but Hal maintained that he failed to find it when the temperature still forced them to hide themselves under an armor of furs.

Toward mid-afternoon they were glad to get back into the house and out of the silent cold that the fleeting sun had left behind. Jerard was still in Hal's room, on guard and comfortably ensconced on the bed, smoking furiously. Jacques and Rene had been model prisoners indeed.

"Well, I'm here to relieve you again," Hal said. "I just left Phoebe at her room. She's going to rest a little—goodness knows she needs it. Anyway, it's pepped her up a little to get out and walk around. Hid me good too." Then: "For Heaven's sake, why don't you crawl out of that smoke of yours and get some fresh air into your lungs? You look like a ghost."

"I feel like one, Keen!"

"Then why don't you get out of this room and outside a bit?"

"That door downstairs, old top," Mathieu said in a quivering voice. "I say, Keen, I can't really pass it, you know. It's too awful and I can't stand it! I'll be stopping up here till after the police come and settle things and take him and that beastly chest away!"

Hal shook his head and said, "You'd be a nice fellow, Jerry, if you were only a man! How do you suppose little Phoebe's taking it? Her father murdered in cold blood and robbed! Think of it—yet she could walk around and talk with me as if—well, not as if nothing had happened, but—well, like a thoroughbred! Tears kept coming into her eyes, but by gosh, she fought them back like a major every time. Said she'd never forget what I'd done. You could have helped a little yourself if you had the backbone." Secretly, Hal was thankful, in that moment at least, that Mathieu had not such an asset.

“Oh, I say, you rub it in, Keen! If I thought you were serious . . . I’m sorry about Phoebe, but I’ll never again in my life see her without thinking of all this. By Jove, I’d rather *not* see her!”

Hal was too disgusted to argue, but he freshened himself up a little with a clean collar and a different tie. The afternoon was wearing on and he was getting a little apprehensive. Della had said that if they made the time on the river that they should, they would get to Sainte Beauve and reach Beyond with a plane by middle afternoon at the latest.

“But there’s many a slip . . .” he thought in the act of putting on his tie. Suddenly he took it off and the collar too, and turned away from the dresser. “I think I’ll slip in a nap while I’m waiting for them,” he said aloud.

“For Della, you mean, and the pol . . .”

“Of course—*who else!*” Hal snapped. “Clear off that bed and see if you can’t smoke less while I’m sleeping! Just as a little act of courtesy, you know. And keep your ear on our friends!”

He was tired out but he hadn’t realized it until he was being awakened and shaken by Mathieu. He could hear his name being shouted, but it was only with supreme effort that he shook off the drowsiness that would have claimed him for many hours more. Slowly, he sat up.

“By Jove, I thought maybe you were dead too!” Jerard was screaming at him hysterically. “I’ve called and called but I couldn’t rouse you.”

“What’s the matter, huh?” Hal said, bewildered.

“*Matter?*” repeated Jerard with a deep groan. “Oh, what isn’t the matter in this . . . Lon and Ed came back . . . came back . . .”

“Yes?” Hal asked, suddenly aroused by the other’s horrified expression.

“I heard them telling Phoebe down in the hall . . . they told her . . .”

“*What?*”

“They said Della . . . the boat . . . the boat got swamped at the falls . . . she . . . *Della’s drowned!* They’ve been all this time trying to find her body, but they didn’t . . . they didn’t!”

Hal felt numbed yet he heard himself asking, “What did Phoebe do when they told her about it?”

“I . . . she fell over, you know. I heard it, old chap.”

“And what did you do when you saw her fall?” Hal asked, rising from the bed.

“I say, Keen, I couldn’t stand it! I had to run in here . . . I had to tell you and . . .” Hal flung out his long arm and swept Mathieu aside with such force that he knocked him down. But he didn’t care—he was out of the room and down the stairs in a bound.

CHAPTER XXXII

SAINTE BEAUVE

By six o'clock that evening, Hal and Phoebe were bundled into the big sleigh and driven out through the gates by Ed Bonner, headed for Sainte Beauve. They had had a light lunch and were hopeful of reaching that much talked of little town in good time, for the thaw had been heavy that day and now with nightfall it had frozen enough to make the ground fairly level.

They were silent for a good part of the way, for even Hal with his strong nerves had not escaped the terrific shock of this additional Stark tragedy. Phoebe had all but broken under the strain and now seemed more bewildered by it all than grief-stricken. She huddled under the warm robes, her tear-stained cheeks upturned to the starlit heavens and after a time, out of sheer exhaustion, she fell asleep.

Hal felt that he would never be able to sleep again. His mind was in a whirl and had been ever since he had gone down to the sitting-room and found Ed and Lon and their wives doing their utmost to bring Phoebe out of her faint. She had come around all right and after he had comforted her as best he could he had decided that the best thing to do was to get her away from Stark House as quickly as he could.

So that had been arranged, but not without a little scene with Jerard who cried in horror at being left alone in the big house. Lon, of course, was keeping him company and helping to guard the now impatient prisoners. Hal felt that he could trust this other silent little cousin of Jacques; also he had warned him that the law might easily include the entire Bonner clan if he tried to release his cousins.

In the early hours of the morning, Hal gently shook Phoebe out of her sound sleep. There were lights ahead and the welcome sight of railroad ties and a station. By the time she was fully awake, the horses were wearily dragging them down the main street of the quaint town of Sainte Beauve.

"This MacDonough fellow, Phoebe?" Hal queried. "Does Ed know where he lives?" Phoebe nodded and rubbed her eyes with two ridiculously small hands. Hal was all contrition.

"You're half awake, you poor kid!" he said soothingly. "I'm terribly sorry, Phoebe, but I think it's best for you. Now just wake up long enough for me to talk to this MacDonough and then we'll see about you."

"You're so kind, Hal, but I can't talk about it . . . do you mind?"

“Listen, Phoebe, don’t talk about it ever! I know how you feel—gosh! But here we are, I guess. You sit here while I go in and try waking him.”

Ed brought the horses to a standstill and nodded wearily toward the darkened house. Hal jumped out from under the warm robes onto the snow-covered walk and a second later he was rapping briskly on the stout door of Harman MacDonough of His Majesty’s Royal Northwest Mounted Police.

A light appeared in the cozy looking place and then Hal could hear a man’s heavy footstep coming down the stairs. A woman’s voice, soft and sweet, called out to him questioningly and his heart was gladdened. Here, he felt certain, was a good refuge for Phoebe.

A middle-aged man with iron-gray hair and of stocky build swung open the door and stood framed against the soft light in the hallway. He looked out at Hal, eyes blinking and a question on his lips.

“Mr. MacDonough?” Hal asked.

“That’s who I am, young man,” came the answer. “Well?”

Hal hesitated a moment, but with a glance at Phoebe’s sad, sweet face out in the sleigh, he plunged ahead.

“First, I want to ask you, Mr. MacDonough, if you could give Miss Phoebe Stark shelter for the rest of the night?”

“Stark? Phoebe Stark—the little one?” Harman MacDonough looked out at the sleigh and watched the object of his question rise and come toward him. “Well!”

“Why, certainly we can take Phoebe Stark in for as long as she wants to stay!” cried a motherly voice from upstairs. “Harman, tell her to come up, poor child. And close the door—I can feel the draught up here.”

Ed was off with the sleigh in search of a stable a block away. Harman MacDonough had closed the door, gaping at Phoebe and staring at Hal. But Hal didn’t mind—he was already halfway through his recital of the Stark House tragedies.

When he had finished they were in MacDonough’s living room and the big man was heaping logs into the fireplace until the glowing embers ignited them. Then he sank down into a chair and shook his head.

“So all this has been going on while we were within reach of Tallman Stark, eh?” he said musingly. “A confounded shame, I say! Poor man, poor girl . . .” Suddenly he leaned over to Hal. “You say you’ve got Jacques Bonner and his son, Rene, locked up there, eh?”

“Since one o’clock yesterday morning, sir,” Hal answered.

“Which one,” asked MacDonough, “do you think killed poor old Tallman? Jacques or the son?”

“Neither,” Hal answered steadily. “I believe the murderer of Tallman Stark is Jerard Mathieu, a guest at Stark House.”

Harman MacDonough brought down his fist on the table and Phoebe screamed.

CHAPTER XXXIII

A PROMISE

“How am I so certain? I’ve watched him, that’s how. To begin with, he was restless that night as soon as he heard that Mr. Stark had all that money in his desk to give to Jacques if Della decided so. It seemed to impress Jerry—you know, impress him unwholesomely. He did nothing but talk about it—somehow I think he always had it in the back of his head without being aware of it, for he told me that he’d heard about Tallman Stark keeping large sums of money in the house even before he knew Phoebe.”

“And you say he woke you?”

“Yes—twice. The first time I heard Mr. Stark’s voice ordering somebody to get out. I guess it was Jacques. Anyway, I noticed even then that Jerry was nervous. But I didn’t think anything of it and when next he woke me, I was startled out of my wits! He looked like—well, like somebody that’s seen the very depths of things. Anyway, he told me he thought he heard a shot. So I took my gun and we went down.”

“Did he want to go?”

“Oh no, he kicked like a steer. He ran upstairs as soon as he could. When I awakened the girls I went in and I noticed something. I don’t know what made me do it but I looked in that gun when he wasn’t looking and I found that one of the shells had been exploded.”

“Sure there hadn’t been any before?”

“Nope. I could swear to it. Then to strengthen my conviction, he brought in those guns of the Bonners’ that I sent him out for. When I examined them there was one bullet missing in the one gun—missing, mind you; not exploded! And later, when Jerry was sleeping and I happened to see a piece of paper that had slipped out of his coat pocket—well, after I read it and learned he was a sort of card sharp and in debt for ten thou . . . I saw a little round object on the floor. I picked it up—it was a bullet. And it didn’t fit my gun—it fit the one that Jacques said belonged to him.”

“Some clever piece of detective work, young man. And now, though I’d like to hear some more of it in detail, there isn’t time. I’ll call the barracks and get the men out. We’ll have a plane warmed up and out to Beyond before you can say Jack Robinson. Those Bonners might just as well have committed the crime almost, for they’ll get life on all the counts you say you’ve got against them.”

“And what would you call the charge about poor Ches?”

“Chester Stark?” Harman MacDonough wheeled about suddenly. “Bless my soul, Keen! I didn’t have the chance to tell you, you were talking so fast out there in the hall. But Chester Stark is safe, thanks to Johnny Finch. He’s a prospector that built himself a cabin way up on the outskirts of the swamp.”

“Did he find Chet?” Phoebe cried, tears streaming down her pale cheeks.

“He sure did, Miss Phoebe. He’d been out doing a little ice fishing that day and as he went back down the river he saw your brother stagger out toward the bank. He drew in his boat, did Johnny, and he could see in a flash that he was sick and delirious, so he took him in and it wasn’t two minutes before he was unconscious in the bottom of Johnny’s boat.”

“I suppose he took him right back to his cabin, huh?” Hal asked happily.

“He said he waited around for almost an hour thinking there might be somebody else about, but when no one showed up he took the boy home with him and this morning he made a flying trip into town to tell us. He said Chester’s getting along fine—he’s a little too weak to move about much, but another week will see him walking home. Johnny didn’t know much about Beyond—he figured it would be easier coming here and telling us. And now I must phone the barracks.”

“I can’t believe it, Hal,” Phoebe cried when they were alone. “I’m not all alone after all. I’ve got Chet—my brother! And you, Hal—I can’t tell you the gratitude—”

“Yes, you can tell me, Phoebe,” Hal interrupted, with a faint smile on his handsome face.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“You can tell me all about it when you’re not so darn tired. Go on up to Mrs. MacDonough now and get a good rest. I’ll see you sometime before another night rolls around.”

CHAPTER XXXIV THE DOOM OF STARK HOUSE

The sun was glorious when they zoomed over the river and came coasting across a fairly level stretch of ground outside of the Stark gate. The sky was cloudless and blue and it was hard to believe that anything so perfect could hover over a house so tragedy-ridden as Stark House was that morning.

The pilot brought the plane to a full stop and Hal and Harman MacDonough were crawling out of the cabin while the propeller was still whirling crazily. Behind them came two of MacDonough's best men, bronzed, clean-shaven young giants who seemed to breathe the very spirit of the northwest.

Just before they reached the gate, Lon and all the women of the Bonner menage came running excitedly toward them. Lon, particularly, was waving his arms and calling.

"You come to arrest M'sieu Mathieu?" he was asking.

Harman MacDonough nodded and before they were aware of what it was all about, Lon was waving frantically toward the house. Hal grabbed him by the shoulder.

"What's the idea, huh? Who're you waving to?"

"M'sieu Mathieu, M'sieu Keen. He tell me if you say you come to arrest 'eem, then I should wave back so he know. He chase us all from house and dis morning he go back and forth from ice-house—crazy like, he act." Suddenly he stopped, thoughtfully, then delved down into his pocket and pulled out a hastily scribbled envelope. "Letter in that for you, M'sieu Keen. It from M'sieu Mathieu and he say I not geev it to you unless you say you come arrest 'eem. He pay me money for it."

Hal tore it open and saw a nervous, hasty scrawl, without address, but opening merely with: "A clever chap you are Keen—I couldn't put it over on you, eh? I felt you knew all the time—and after you left me here and went off with Phoebe I was sure of it. Well I was desperate—up to my ears in debt—didn't mean to kill the old man—really meant to ask him to lend it to me—but I lost my nerve and when I heard him fighting with Jacques down there that time I thought it would be a good alibi—I took your gun and did it—I'm scared crazy when I think about it now—I've suffered for it already, believe me, but I won't hang—never. I couldn't get away from this damned place so I've helped myself to explosives from the ice-house—"

enough to make sure of it. Jacques and Rene might as well go with me—they don't know it—I'll never know it either. It's the easiest way out—I'll light the fuse the minute Lon waves to me . . . you see, I had a little hope you might not have found me out. But if he waves to me then I'll know it was too good to hope for. Goodbye, old chap! Lon has the money in an envelope—he doesn't know what it's for."

Hal had barely finished that last startling line when there was a terrific rumbling sound. Instinctively, they ran back as far beyond the gates as they could get and none too soon, for it seemed as if the very snow-covered ground beneath their feet shook steadily. The next second there was an ear-splitting explosion, then a roar, and Stark House split and fell away, consumed in red, roaring flames.

No one spoke—no one seemed to dare speak for many breathless seconds. Then it was Harman MacDonough who broke the silence, and broke it loudly with his deep, hoarse voice.

"I've seen strange things in my time, Mr. Keen," he said solemnly. "I've seen misfortune trail families gradually, but never come in a bunch like this. Seems like from what you tell me that ever since the skeleton of Harrington Stark was found in that chest, it's spelled doom for anybody who stayed here. Might thank your lucky stars *you* didn't stay, eh?"

Hal was thankful, but not for himself alone. He was doubly thankful that those two dear friends of his, Phoebe and Chester Stark, had been spared the added grief of witnessing this final doom of Stark House.

THE END

[The end of *The Doom of Stark House* by Percy Keese Fitzhugh [as Hugh Lloyd]]