A BACKWOODS PRINCESS

HULBERT FOOTNER

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By HULBERT FOOTNER

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A Backwoods Princess
Madame Storey
Antennae
The Shanty Sled
The Under Dogs
The Wild Bird
Officer!
Ramshackle House
The Deaves Affair
The Owl Taxi
The Substitute Millionaire
Thieves' Wit
New Rivers of the North

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By

HULBERT FOOTNER

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A BACKWOODS PRINCESS

CHAPTER I

CATASTROPHE

SPRING was in full tide at Blackburn's Post, but Laurentia Blackburn and the four Marys were confined to the Women's House by rain. There sat the girlish Princess surrounded by her handmaidens in the midst of a rude magnificence which best sets off a beautiful woman. Her feet were hidden in a superb polar bearskin which had come down from the Arctic in trade; and the chair in which she sat was completely covered by the frosted pelt of a grizzly, his huge head hanging down over the back. She was a black-haired Princess with something untamed about her like the creatures whose pelts decorated her chamber. Around her neck hung an astonishing necklace of great pearls strung alternately with water-worn nuggets of gold. Her black dress was worked at the neck and wrists with an Indian design in brightly dyed porcupine quills.

The four Marys were Indian girls, small and comely, with glistening copper faces, and raven hair drawn smoothly back from their brows. They were clad alike in black cotton dresses, with doeskin moccasins upon their feet; and a stranger would have been hard put to it to tell them apart. However, he would presently have perceived that one of them stood in quite a different relation to her mistress from the others. This was Mary-Lou who was of the Beaver tribe, whereas the others were only Slavis. She was the Princess' foster sister. She could speak English. All four girls looked at their mistress with fear and respect; but only Mary-Lou's face was capable of softening with love. She was reading aloud from "The Lady of the Lake."

The others were Mary-Belle; Mary-Rose and Mary-Ann. The first-named crouched in front of the small fire which had been lighted to mitigate the dampness out-of-doors. It was her task to see that it neither went out, nor became hot enough to scorch the Princess' face. The other two sat on a bearskin engaged in embroidering velvet-soft moccasins with gayly colored silks. None of them could understand a word of what Mary-Lou was reading from the book; and the gentle, droning voice was fatally conducive to sleep.

The Princess watched them lazily through the lowered fringe of her black lashes; and, when a head was seen to nod, she exploded like a fire cracker.

“Sit up straight! Your head is going down between your shoulders! Before you are twenty-five you will be the shape of a sack of hay! Your husband if you ever get one at all will look for another wife!”

It especially terrified the girls to be scolded in the English they could not understand. This particular rebuke was addressed to Mary-Belle but all three of the Slavis cringed, and their dark eyes turned helplessly this way and that like a frightened deer’s. Mary-Lou looked apprehensive, too, expecting her turn to come next.

“Well, go on with the book,” said Loseis crossly. The name Laurentia, being unmanageable on the tongue of the Indians, they had given her this one, which means “little wild duck.”

The tremulous voice resumed.

“Oh, shut the book!” Loseis cried immediately afterwards. “It is a foolish book! It tires my ears!”

“Shall I get another book?” faltered Mary-Lou.

“What’s the use? We have read them all. They are no better than this book. All foolish, goody-goody books!”

All four red girls sat scared and silent.

Loseis jumped up as if she had strong springs in her legs. “Can’t you say something, any of you? Are you all struck dumb? You can chatter fast enough among yourselves when I am not there!” She amplified her remarks in the Slavi tongue.

They were struck dumb indeed, then. They looked at each other helplessly, each one mutely begging her neighbor to speak.

“Oh, leave me! leave me! you foolish pudding faces!” cried Loseis, waving her hands. “Or I shall have to beat you!”

They faded into the kitchen with alacrity. Only Mary-Lou looked back.

“Mary-Lou, you stay here,” commanded Loseis. “I’ve got to have somebody to talk to!”

Mary-Lou leaned shyly against the door frame; pleased at being called back, yet terrified, too. Loseis paced up and down the room like a slim black panther, her eyes shooting greenish sparks.

It was a broad, low room with but two tiny windows, glass being such a difficult article to bring in seven hundred miles by pack train. There was a capacious fireplace, cunningly built out of rounded stones from the creek bed. The log walls had been plastered with clay, hardened now almost to the consistency of brick; and overhead was spread a canvas ceiling cloth to keep in the warmth. Walls and ceiling had been washed with a warm terra cotta color, which made a rich background for the beautiful furs. Over the carved bedstead in the corner was flung a robe made of hundreds of raccoons' tails, the black stripes worked into an elaborate geometrical design. There were other robes made of otters' skins, of lynx paws, of silver foxes. On the walls hung many beautiful examples of Indian handicraft.

Glancing at the drooping head of the red girl, Loseis cried: "Mary-Lou, you've got as much spirit as a lump of pemmican! When you sit by the fire I wonder that you do not melt and run down in grease!"

Mary-Lou's head went lower still, and her eyes filled.

Seeing this, Loseis became angrier still. "There you go! Of course you're *good*! That's what makes me mad! Because I'm not good at all! I've got the temper of a fiend! Well, do you suppose I enjoy losing it? . . . I know I ought to say I'm sorry now, but it sticks in my throat!"

"I not want that," murmured Mary-Lou. "I am lovin' you anyway."

"Well . . . I love you, too," grumbled Loseis, shamefaced as a boy. "But I wish you weren't so humble. It's bad for me. This is Blackburn's Post on Blackburn's River; all this is Blackburn's country, and I'm Blackburn's daughter. There is nobody to stand up to me. I am too young to be the mistress. I don't know anything. . . . That white man laughed at me as one laughs at a child!"

Loseis had stopped her pacing. Her head hung down. "I ought to have a white woman to tell me things," she said wistfully. "In all my life I have seen but one woman of my own kind. That was the governess my father brought in for me. I used to mock her. But now I wish I had her back. She had nice manners. . . . He laughed at me. . . ."

She strayed to the second little crooked window, which was at the end of the room furthest from the fireplace. It overlooked a natural meadow below, where the tepees of the Slavis were built upon both sides of a creek which emptied into the main stream just beyond. In front of the Post the main river described a great convex bend, so that Loseis could look both up-stream and down. This bend was formed by a bold promontory of a hill which forced

the river to go around its base. The point of this hill had been sliced off by the water, leaving a precipitous yellow cut-bank facing the Post. On the summit, startlingly conspicuous against a group of dark pine trees, was a fence of white palings enclosing a tiny plot with a cross rising out of it. By day and by night too, that grave dominated the Post.

"Ah! if only my mother had lived!" sighed Loseis.

"Let me read the book again," suggested Mary-Lou, to divert her mind.

Loseis shook her head impatiently. She came away from the window. "I am not in the humor for it. I guess it is too fine for me. . . ." She resumed her uneven pacing. "Mary-Lou," she suddenly cried in a voice full of pain, "when a man and a woman love I am sure they do not think such elegant thoughts as are in that book. Ah! the heart burns a hole in your breast! It is impossible to think at all!"

The red girl's eyes followed her, full of compassion.

Observing that look, Loseis said sharply: "You must not think I am in love with that white man, Conacher. Oh, no! I was just imagining. I am far from loving him. I hate him!"

"You are not hating Conacher," murmured Mary-Lou sadly. "Why say that to me?"

Loseis stamped her foot. "I tell you I hate him!" she cried. "That is enough for you! . . . What right had he to treat me like a child? I am Blackburn's daughter. My father is the master of this country. And who is this white man? A poor man in a canoe with only two servants! Nobody ever heard of him before. My father was angry at his coming, and I was angry. We do not want white men coming here to spoil the fur trade!"

Mary-Lou's silence suggested that she was far from being convinced.

"A poor man with no outfit at all!" Loseis repeated louder. "Yet he held his head as if he was as good as my father! He must be a fool. He talked to me as if I was anybody at all, and his eyes laughed when I became angry . . . !" In the midst of her tirade Loseis suddenly broke down. "Oh, I wish I could forget him!" she cried, with the angry tears springing to her eyes.

This sign of weakness gave Mary-Lou the courage to glide to her mistress, and wreathe her arms about her. "I think Conacher was a good man," she whispered. "His eyes were true."

These words were very sweet to Loseis; but she would not openly confess it. However, she gave Mary-Lou a little squeeze, before

withdrawing herself from her arms. “No,” she said; “I shall stand by my father. My father is the finest man living. Conacher is gone. I shall never see him again. I shall quickly forget him.

“It was only because he took me by surprise,” she went on with an eagerness in which there was something pathetically childlike. “When he came paddling down our river with the two Beaver Indians I was like one struck on the head. It was like a white man falling from the skies. No white man ever came down our river before; and he so young and strong and full of laughter! He wore no hat; and the sunlight was snared in his yellow hair. I never saw hair like that. . . .”

“He like you, too, ver’ moch,” ventured Mary-Lou. “I was there when he landed. I saw it burn up like fire in his blue eyes.”

“Yes, I saw that, too,” murmured Loseis, averting her face. “But why did he change right away?”

“Because you treat him like poor, dirty Slavi,” said Mary-Lou. “No white man take that.”

“That is because I was so confused,” whispered poor Loseis. She suddenly covered her face with her hands. “Oh, what will he be thinking of me!” she groaned.

Mary-Lou’s eyes were all sympathy; but she could think of nothing to say.

Loseis drifted back to the window, where she stood with her back to Mary-Lou. After awhile, without turning around, she said in an offhand, experimental sort of voice: “I have a good mind to see him again.”

Mary-Lou merely gasped.

“Oh, not meaning anything in particular,” Loseis said quickly. “There never could be anything between us. But just to show him that I am not a redskin, and then leave him.”

“How could you see him?” faltered Mary-Lou.

“He is camped with his outfit alongside the Limestone Rapids, one hundred miles down,” Loseis went on in that offhand voice. “He has to break the rocks with a hammer, and study them where they split. It is what they call a geologist. . . .” Her assumed indifference suddenly collapsed. “Let us go to see him, Mary-Lou,” she blurted out breathlessly. “We could make it in a long day’s paddling with the current; three days to come back if

we worked hard. We wouldn't let him know we had come to see him. We would say we were hunting. . . ."

"Oh! . . . Oh! . . ." gasped Mary-Lou. "Girls do not hunt."

"He doesn't know what *I* do!" cried Loseis. "I *must* see him! It kills me to have him thinking that I am a common, ignorant sort of girl! Let us start at daybreak to-morrow!"

"Oh, no! no!" whispered Mary-Lou, paralyzed by the very thought. "Blackburn . . . Blackburn . . . !"

"He couldn't say anything until we'd been and come," said Loseis coolly. "Anyhow, I'm not afraid of my father. My spirit is as strong as his. He can't shout *me* down!"

"No! No!" reiterated the red girl. "If you go after him like that, he think little of you."

In her heart Loseis recognized the truth of this, and she fell into a sullen silence. After awhile she said: "Then I will make him come back here. I will send a message. . . . Oh, not a letter, you foolish girl!" she added in response to Mary-Lou's startled look.

"What kind of message?"

"I will make a little raft and send it floating down on the current," said Loseis dreamily. "I will set up a little stick on the raft, with a ribbon tied to it, a piece of my hair. I think that will bring him back . . ."

"Maybe it float past his camp in the nighttime," said Mary-Lou, in her soft, sad voice. "How you know?"

"Then I will send down two," said Loseis. "One in the day and one in the night. He will see one of them."

Mary-Lou was astonished by the cleverness of this idea.

"And then when he comes back," said Loseis quite coolly. "I will say that I did not send it. I will say that it is a custom of the red girls to make offerings to the Spirit of the River. I think that will make him feel pretty small. But I shall not laugh at him. Oh, no! I shall be very polite; polite and proud as Blackburn's daughter ought to be. And I shall send him away again."

Mary-Lou looked somewhat dubious as to the feasibility of this program; but held her tongue.

“I shall send him away again,” repeated Loseis with great firmness, “and after that I shall think of no man but my father. Before Conacher came my father was enough for me; and after he has gone my father will be enough. I am lucky to have such a father; so handsome and brave and strong-willed. . . .” Loseis suddenly became dreamy again. “But Conacher was not afraid of my father. That young man was not afraid of my father. I have never seen that before. . . .”

Mary-Lou permitted herself to smile tenderly.

Seeing it, Loseis colored up hotly, and became very firm again. “Never mind that! There is nobody like my father! He is the finest man in the world! I shall be a better daughter to him after this. I will do everything he wants. Ah! my father is like a king . . . !”

Mary-Lou was suddenly drawn to the end window by some disquieting sounds from the Slavi village below. She cried out in surprise: “Jimmy Moosenose is running between the tepees.”

“What do I care?” said Loseis, annoyed by this interruption.

“He is running fast,” said Mary-Lou, her voice scaling up. “He speaks to the people; they throw up their hands; they run after him; they fall down. There is something the matter!”

Loseis, alarmed, ran to join her at the window. Together they watched the old Indian come laboring up the little hill to the grassy bench on which the buildings of the Post stood. Jimmy Moosenose was a Beaver Indian, and Blackburn’s right-hand man by reason of being the only man beside the trader himself, who could speak the English and the Slavi tongues. There were no white men at Blackburn’s Post.

When Jimmy passed beyond range of their vision the girls transferred themselves to the other window. The Indian struck across the grass straight for their door. A tatterdemalion crowd of natives and dogs streamed after him. Fear clutched at Loseis’ brave heart; and she became as pale as paper. An instant later Jimmy Moosenose burst in. The others dared not follow him through the door.

“What is the matter?” demanded Loseis haughtily.

At first the old man could only pant and groan, while his body rocked in despair. Loseis seized him as if she would shake out the news by main strength.

“Speak! Speak!” she cried.

“Blackburn . . . !” he gasped. “Blackburn . . . !”

“My father! Hurt! Take me to him!” said Loseis crisply. She made as if to force her way out through the crowd.

“They . . . are bringing him,” faltered the old man.

Loseis fell back against the door frame. “Bringing him?” she echoed faintly.

The old man’s chin was on his breast. “Blackburn dead!” he said.

Loseis’ arms dropped to her sides; her widened eyes were like tragic black stars. “Dead?” she repeated in quite an ordinary voice. “That is impossible!”

Speech came to the old man. “It was the black stallion,” he cried. “I tell Blackburn, many tam I tell him that horse kill him some day. He jus’ laugh. He say: ‘I lak master that horse.’ Wah! what good master when both are dead! . . . It was the high cut-bank at Swallow Bend. Blackburn, he spur that horse to edge of bank to mak’ him rear and wheel. Blackburn he is laugh lak a boy. The horse is crazy mad. He put his head down. He no stop. He jomp over. He jomp clear in the air. Wah! when I see that, my legs are lak water! When I look over the bank there is nothing but water. Both are gone. We get canoe. Down river I see Blackburn’s leg stickin’ out. We pull him out. His neck is broke. . . .”

The crowd gathered outside the house, broke with a common impulse into a weird, wordless chant of death, the women’s voices rising piercing shrill. There was no sound of human grief in it; and the open-mouthed copper-colored faces expressed nothing either; the bright, flat, black eyes were as soulless as glass. They pointed their chins up like howling dogs.

Loseis clapped her hands to her head. “Stop that ungodly noise!” she cried.

Even old Jimmy looked scandalized. “They sing for Blackburn,” he protested.

“Stop it! Stop it!” she cried. Forcing her way out, Loseis ran to meet the cortège that was crawling up the rise towards Blackburn’s house.

CHAPTER II

THE BURIAL OF BLACKBURN

HECTOR BLACKBURN'S own room revealed a beautiful austerity fitting to the chamber of death. It was plastered and ceiled like the room of Loseis, but the color was a cool stone gray. The few articles of furniture that it contained had all been constructed in the old style, carved and polished by the owner himself, who had a taste that way. The lustrous pelts were more sparingly used here.

The narrow bedstead with its four slender columns had been dragged into the center of the room. Upon it lay the body of Hector Blackburn clad in decent black clothes; his big hands crossed on his breast. Beside the bed knelt Loseis, her rapt gaze fixed on her father's face. Six feet two in height, and forty-eight inches around the chest, he made a splendid figure of death. There was not a white thread to be seen in his spreading black beard, nor in the plentiful wavy hair of his crown. To be sure, the high red color was strangely gone out of his transparent cheeks; and the passionate features were composed into a look of haughty peace. For sheer manhood, truly a father to be proud of.

Loseis thought of the feats of strength and daring that had made his name famous throughout the Northwest Territories; how he had strangled a full grown black bear with his naked hands; how he had leaped from his canoe at the very brink of the American Falls and had brought safely ashore an Indian who was clinging to a rock. He had been even more remarkable for his strength of will. The last of the great free traders, he had defied the power of the mighty Company, and had prospered exceedingly. He held his vast territory against all comers, by the power of his personality alone. Thinking of these things Loseis' mind was confused. There lay his still body before her eyes, but what had become of the wild energy which had lately animated it? Surely, surely that could not be blown out like a candle flame.

Dragging herself to her feet, she went into the adjoining kitchen. She had had no opportunity to change her dress, but in an impulse of grief had torn off the gay embroidery; and now she was all in black like the corpse. In the kitchen Mary-Lou sat huddled on the floor, with her arms wrapped around

her head. Jimmy Moosenose stood beside the open door, looking out, a withered, bent little figure, but still capable of activity. As Loseis entered he said in an expressionless voice:

“They have gone.”

“Who?” asked Loseis sharply.

“The people; all the people.”

She ran to the door. It was true; every tepee was gone from the meadow below. Except for certain litter abandoned in their haste there was no sign that a village had ever stood there. The Slavis had taken flight and vanished like a cloud of insects.

“Where have they gone?” demanded Loseis in astonishment. Though she had been born amongst them she did not understand this inscrutable, timid, savage race. It was impossible for any white man to know what went on inside their cramped skulls, Blackburn used to say. He had ruled them without making any attempt at understanding.

“Gone up river,” muttered Jimmy.

“For why?”

“They moch scare’.”

“But they are familiar with death. Death comes to all alike.”

Jimmy Moosenose cast an uneasy look towards the room where the dead man lay. He was near enough akin to the Slavis to share in their fears. “They think ver’ powerful strong spirit live in Blackburn’s body,” he muttered. “Now that spirit free they not know what it do to them.”

“Oh, what nonsense!” cried Loseis helplessly.

“What we do now?” asked Jimmy fearfully.

Loseis looked him over. “Are you man enough to ride all night?” she asked brusquely. “The trail is good.”

“What trail?” asked Jimmy with a terrified face.

“To Fort Good Hope to fetch the parson,” said Loseis in surprise.

“It is ondred-feefty mile,” faltered Jimmy.

“What of it? Two days to go and two to come. You can drive three spare horses before you. I don’t care if you kill them all.”

“I not man enough for that,” said Jimmy shaking his head.

“Well six days to go and come then. I’d go myself, but I know you two wouldn’t stay here alone.”

Jimmy’s and Mary-Lou’s frightened faces testified eloquently to that. Jimmy shook his head. “No good! No good!” he said. “It is summer time now. He no keep six days.”

Loseis groaned aloud. In her desperate helplessness she looked like a little girl. “How can I bury him without a parson!” she cried.

“You have the parson’s little book,” said Jimmy. “You can say the prayers from that. It is just as good.”

Loseis turned her back on them, that they might not see her childish, twisted face. “Very well,” she said in a strangled voice; “I will be the parson.”

“What I do now?” asked Jimmy Moosenose.

“First you must make a coffin.”

“There is no planks.”

“Oh, tear down the counter in the store!” cried Loseis with a burst of irritation. “Must I think of everything?”

“You tell me how big?” asked Jimmy, with another glance of sullen terror towards the inner room.

“Yes, I will measure,” said Loseis. “And the coffin must be covered all over with good black cloth from the store. Mary-Lou will put it on with tacks. And lined with white cloth. While you are making it I will go across the river, and dig the grave. We will bury him to-morrow.”

“That is well,” said Jimmy with a look of relief. “Then the people come back.”

“Ah, the people!” cried Loseis with a flash of angry scorn. “They are well-named Slaves!”

At the end of May in the latitude of Blackburn’s Post it does not become dark until nearly ten; and it was fully that hour before Loseis, having completed her task, returned dog-weary, across the river. During the balance of the night she sat wide-eyed and dry-eyed beside her dead, her hands in her lap, planning in her childlike and passionate way how best to conduct everything next day with dignity and honor.

At sun-up Jimmy Moosenose was despatched to the river shore to construct a raft, the light bark canoes that they possessed not being sufficient to ferry the coffin across. No flowers were available so early in the season, and Mary-Lou was set to work to twist a handsome wreath of the crisp green leaves of the high-bush cranberry. Neither Jimmy nor Mary-Lou could be induced to enter Blackburn's room, so Loseis herself dragged the completed coffin in beside the bed; and she unaided, managed somehow to lift the body into it. In life Hector Blackburn had weighed more than two hundred pounds. It was Loseis, too, who nailed the lid on the coffin with an aim no better than any other woman's. Those crookedly driven nails distressed her sorely.

When Jimmy came up from the river, they slipped short lengths of pole under the coffin, and rolled it to the door. Outside the house, since there was nothing in the nature of wheels at Blackburn's Post, they hitched an old horse directly to the coffin, and dragged it at a slow pace over the grass down hill to the river. Jimmy led the horse, while Loseis and Mary-Lou walked behind, steadying the coffin with ropes affixed to each side. During this part of the journey Loseis was all child. Every time the coffin [word missing in original] over an unevenness her heart was in her mouth. "Oh! Oh! Oh!" she cried involuntarily; and her agonized eyes seemed to add: "My darling! did that hurt you?"

At the river edge they worked the coffin onto the raft with rollers and short lengths of plank; and Loseis draped the Post flag upon it, and placed the green wreath. Jimmy and Mary-Lou propelled the raft across with long poles, while the slender, black-clad figure of Loseis stood looking down at the coffin like a symbolical figure of Bereavement. In her grief-drowned eyes there was a look of piteous pride, too; for the black coffin with its flag and green wreath looked beautiful.

The smooth brown river moved down in silky eddies; the freshly budded greens of poplar and willow made the shores lovely, backed by the grave, unchanging tones of the evergreens. Behind them the low, solid buildings of the Post crouched on the bench above the river with a sort of human dignity; before them rose the steep grassy promontory with the waiting grave on top. Over their heads smiled the Northern summer sky of an enchanting tenderness of blue that is not revealed to lower latitudes.

Landing upon the further shore they caught another horse—there was no lack of horses at Blackburn's Post. In order to drag the coffin up the rough, steep hill it was necessary to construct a travois of poles to lift the front end clear of the ground. The horse was fastened between the poles as between

shafts. At the top of the hill Loseis had removed the palings; and the new grave yawned beside the old one. She had dug the shallow hole with sloping ends, that the horse might walk right through, leaving his burden in its place.

The animal was then liberated; and Loseis stood on one side, prayer-book in hand, with Jimmy Moosenose and Mary-Lou facing her on the other. It was a meagerly attended burial for the great lord of that country. Loseis read the noble prayers in a grave voice charged with emotion. The sound of it caused the tears to run silently down the smooth cheeks of Mary-Lou; but Jimmy merely looked uncomfortable. The feelings of white people were strange to him. He had given his master a doglike devotion while he lived; but he was dead now, and that was an end to it.

"Man that is born of woman hath but a short time to live and is full of misery," read the brave young voice. "He cometh up and is cut down like a flower; he fleeth as it were a shadow, and never continueth in one stay. In the midst of life we are in death; of whom may we seek for succour but of Thee, O Lord, who for our sins art justly displeased?"

When she came to the end of the service, Loseis dropped the book and involuntarily broke into an extempore prayer, standing with straight back and lifted face like an Indian, her arms at her sides. Her words were hardly couched in the same humble strain as those of the book; but the passionate sincerity of the speaker redeemed them from irreverence.

"O God, this is my father. He was a strong man, God, and you must make allowances for him. You gave him a proud heart and a terrible anger when he was crossed, and it would not be fair to judge him like common men. He could have done anything he wanted here, because he was the master, but he was always square. Every season he paid the Indians half as much again for their fur as the Company would pay, and that is why the Company traders spoke evil of him. He was hard and stern to the Indians, but that was the only thing they could understand. How else could you deal with a tribe of slaves? Be merciful to my father, O God! for he would never ask mercy for himself; and let him see my mother again, for that was all he wanted. Amen."

Jimmy Moosenose picked up the spade with a businesslike air, and threw a clod on the coffin. At the dreadful sound that it gave forth, a sharp cry broke from Loseis. She wrapped her arms about her head and fled away down the hill.

CHAPTER III

THE SLAVES WITHOUT A MASTER

WHEN the three mourners landed again on their own side of the river, Jimmy and Mary-Lou looked at Loseis at a loss. What to do next?

Rousing herself, Loseis said wearily: "Jimmy, you must fix up the counter in the store. Fix it with split poles until we can make some plank. Mary-Lou, fetch a hatchet and come with me."

On the river shore some hundred yards downstream, hidden by a clump of willows in case Jimmy Moosenose should be inclined to spy on what they were doing, Mary-Lou under Loseis' instructions built a tiny raft out of dead branches. To the raft Loseis fixed a little pole to the top of which she tied a streamer of black. She launched the raft on the current, and with big, childish eyes watched it float around the bend.

"I am not sending for Conacher to come to me," she said haughtily to Mary-Lou. "But when a white man dies it is customary to let men know. . . . To-night I will push off another one. One or the other he will see."

Within an hour the Slavis returned as mysteriously as they had departed. They must have had an outlook posted to report upon the burial of Blackburn. To Loseis their actions seemed perfectly senseless; for Jimmy had said it was the spirit of Blackburn that they dreaded, yet as soon as his body was hidden underground their fears departed. They set up the tepees in their former places, and went about their usual occupations as if nothing had happened. Loseis' breast burned with anger; and she wanted to go down and give them a piece of her mind. However, Jimmy dissuaded her.

"No good! No good!" he said. "It is over now. They not understand white man's ways."

There was a sharp ring of anxiety in his voice that caused Loseis to stare in haughty surprise. She thoroughly despised the Slavis. However, she said nothing. She and Mary-Lou went off to their house to sleep.

Down on the flat it was the women who were erecting the tepee poles, and drawing the covers over them. They no longer used skins for this

purpose, Blackburn having persuaded them of the superior advantages of the canvas that he sold. In the same way the whole tribe had learned to wear white men's clothes out of the store. While the women worked, the men sat in groups smoking and talking in that queer clicking tongue that few white men have ever mastered. Their talk was light and punctuated with laughter; but it was clear from their uneasy glances towards the white man's buildings that they were not speaking their hearts. As a matter of fact the Indians are quite as adept in insincere small talk as their white brethren.

From time immemorial the Slavis have been known as a small, weak people; and this particular branch, cut off from their fellows on the distant shores of Blackburn's River had further degenerated as a result of too close inter-marriage. They were a weedy lot, and like all weak peoples, shifty-eyed. As is always the case, the men showed up worse; hollow chests and spindle shanks were the rule; the whole tribe could not produce one stalwart, handsome youth. But they were not poverty-stricken. They all wore good clothes, and lived in new, weather-proof tepees. They hunted the best fur country in all the North, and for twenty years Blackburn had jealously guarded it for them.

From where they sat Jimmy Moosenose could be seen splitting poles in front of the store, and carrying them in. Without appearing to, the men were all watching him. The groups of talkers fell silent. They could not meet each other's eyes. A curious look of dread flickered in their faces; that which had directed the whole course of their lives for so many years had been suddenly removed, and they were all at a stand.

By twos and threes they began to drift up the grassy rise, their vacant eyes drifting this way and that. There was something peculiarly ominous about their purposelessness, their lack of direction. They squatted down on their hunkers, making a rough semi-circle about Jimmy. They no longer spoke among themselves, nor did any volunteer to help Jimmy; they simply squatted and stared at him with their unwinking animal-like eyes. Jimmy affected to take no notice of them; but his forehead became moist with a sudden fear. He was reminded that he was of alien blood to these people, and that they were thirty to his one. And there were five times that number more in their summer camp at Blackburn's Lake.

At length the silence, the unwinking stares became more than Jimmy could bear. "Where is Etzooah?" he asked, affecting indifference.

Etzooah was one whom Jimmy suspected of being a trouble maker. He was a bigger man than the others; and was said to have Cree blood. More

than once in the past his sharpness had displeased Blackburn, who, however, tolerated him because he was the best hunter in the tribe.

“Etzooah gone to the lake to see a girl,” said one.

From the way the others grinned it was clear this was a lie. Jimmy was much troubled that they grinned openly in his face. Had Blackburn been in the store behind him they would never have done that. Jimmy glanced desirously in the direction of the Women’s House, and his watchers marked that glance.

One said, affecting the stupid look of a crafty schoolboy: “Are you the trader now?”

“No,” said Jimmy, “Loseis is the mistress here.”

The ugly little men bared their blackened teeth; and a squall of laughter rocked them on their heels. There was no true merriment in the sound. It ended as suddenly as it began. It struck an icy fear into Jimmy’s breast. He was all alone; all alone.

“Go back to your lodges!” he said, drawing himself up, and imitating the voice of Blackburn.

They neither moved nor spoke; but squatted there staring at him.

He dared not repeat the order. Shouldering his poles, he started into the store. Of one accord the Slavis rose, and came pushing through the door after him. Flinging down his poles, Jimmy spread out his arms to bar their way.

“Get out!” he cried. “There is no trading to-day.”

Keeping their eyes fixed on his, they continued to push in. They walked right into Jimmy, forcing him back. What was he to do? His instinct told him that the moment he showed fight it would be all up with him. He picked up one of his poles and started to nail it into place, grumbling to himself, and making believe to ignore them.

They stood about the store watching him with affected sleepiness through half-closed eyes. One of them, keeping his eyes fixed on Jimmy, thrust a hand into an opened box and pulled it out full of dried apricots. All the instincts of thirty years of trading were outraged by this act, and Jimmy forgot his fears.

“Put it back!” he cried, brandishing the hammer. “Get out, you thieves! You half-men, you dirty slaves!”

None moved, nor changed a muscle of his face. The man with the apricots held them in his hand, waiting to see what Jimmy would *do*. What he said was nothing to them. He might as well have been storming at the wind. Finally, half beside himself with rage, Jimmy ran to the back of the store where the guns were kept.

Instantly the little men sprang into noiseless activity. One picked up a short length of pole, and darting after Jimmy on soft pads like a lynx, hit him over the head with it, before he could turn. In a flash they were all about him, their dark faces fixed in hideous grins, each trying to strike. They used tinned goods for weapons; one secured the hammer; one snatched up a heavy steel trap which he held poised aloft waiting for Jimmy's head to appear. The whole mass swayed from this side to that, toppling over the goods on either side. Jimmy went down, and they had to bend over to hit him. They were as voiceless as squirming insects. There was no sound but the sickening blows that fell.

When they finally drew back a shapeless huddle was revealed, lying in blood. Panic overtook the feather-headed Slavis, and they ran out of the store to look anxiously in the direction of the Women's House. Nothing stirred there. They returned inside the store. They did not consult together, but appeared to act as instinctively as animals. There was a window at the back of the store. They pried it out frame and all, and hastily shoved the broken body through the hole, careless of where it fell. The instant it was out of sight they forgot about it, nor did they trouble to put the window back.

Alone in the store, the Slavis betrayed a curious timidity. It seemed as if the ghost of Hector Blackburn restrained them still. They overran the place like ants, peering into everything, stroking the objects that they desired, but forbearing as yet to pick them up. At intervals panic seized them, and they swept in a cloud to the door to look over towards the Women's House. Some of the Slavi women and children had been attracted from the tepees. These never ventured through the doors, but hung about outside, expressing no concern one way or the other; merely waiting to see how it all turned out.

At length one man ventured to eat of the dried apricots; another split the top of a can of peaches with a hatchet; and instantly looting became general. Boxes were smashed, and bags ripped open, pouring their precious contents on the floor. Food in the North is not to be lightly wasted. Articles of clothing were the chief prizes; the only way to secure them was to put them on, one on top of another. Sometimes two pulled at the same garment, snarling at each other. But they never fought singly. They were dangerous only in the mass.

In the middle of this scene suddenly appeared Loseis, her black eyes blazing. A terrified Mary-Lou cringed at her heels. Every Indian in the store, dropping what he was about, instantly became as immobile and watchful as a surprised animal. Loseis glared about her speechless. She was as much aghast as she was angry, for such a scene was beyond anything she had ever conceived of. But she was not afraid. She turned to the door.

"Jimmy! Jimmy!" she called peremptorily.

She waited in vain for an answer.

"Where is Jimmy?" she demanded haughtily.

None answered her.

She dispatched Mary-Lou in search of him.

The situation was beyond words. Loseis' eyes darted silent lightnings at one man after another. The scattered Slavis slyly edged together. No single pair of eyes could meet hers, but she could not cow more than one man at a time; and the bright, inhuman eyes of the others remained fixed on her face.

Finally with a magnificent gesture Loseis pointed to the door. "Get out!" she said.

No man moved.

That was a terrible moment for the high-spirited girl. A look of astonishment appeared in her eyes. Suddenly her face crimsoned with rage; she flew at the nearest man, and started pommeling him with her little fists. The man ducked under her blows, and sought to evade her. He pulled another man in front of him; whereupon Loseis transferred her blows to this one. All the others looked on with faces like masks. And so it went. The mysterious prestige of the white blood sanctified her, and they dared not strike back; they resisted her with that senseless animal obstinacy that drives masters mad with rage. They were satisfied to let her pommel them, knowing that she must tire of it in the end. And what then? It was like fighting a cloud of flies. They would not be driven out of the store. When one was driven out, as soon as Loseis went for another, he returned.

She drew off at last. In that moment she knew the unspeakable agony of an imperious will that finds itself balked. She nearly died of her rage. But she faced it out. She admitted to herself that she was balked. The last two days had matured her. Fortunately for her, under all the passion and wilfulness of her nature there was a solid substratum of commonsense. Commonsense warned her that it would be fatal to make the least move in

the direction of the guns at the back of the store. She could not force the senseless savages to obey her; well, commonsense suggested that she use guile. Loseis had an inspiration.

Just inside the door of the store, behind a rough screen of wood, Blackburn had a little desk with a cover that lifted up. Loseis went to it, and took out a sizable book stoutly bound in gray linen and red leather. Every Slavi knew that book. It was Blackburn's ledger. Loseis appeared around the screen carrying the ledger; and up-ending a box beside the door, sat herself upon it with the book spread on her knees.

"You wish to trade?" she said to the men at large. "It is good. Take what you want. I will put it down in the book."

The eyes of the Slavis bolted; and they moved uneasily. The spell of their strangeness was broken. To their simple minds there was magic in those scratches by which white men's thoughts might be conveyed to any distance that they chose; or stored up in a book to be brought out years afterwards unchanged. In particular, Blackburn's ledger had always been held in superstitious awe as the source of his "strong medicine."

Loseis looked at the man nearest her, and thumbed the pages of the book. "Mahtsonza," she said; "a Stetson hat; two skins. A Mackinaw coat; five skins. Wah! you have two coats? Ten skins!"

Mahtsonza began to slide out of his stolen clothing.

Loseis turned to the next. "Ahchoogah; a bag of rice; one skin. The bag is spoiled, and you must pay for all. You can carry it away."

There was a sudden rush for the door; but Loseis, springing up, barred the way. "I have all your names," she cried. "Whatever is taken or spoiled will be written down, and all must pay a share!"

Then she stood aside and let them slink by, a ridiculously crestfallen crowd of little bravoes.

For the moment Loseis had won—but at no small cost. The instant they were out, the reaction set in. All the strength seemed to run out of her limbs; she sank down on the box covering her face with her hands. The fact of her appalling solitariness was made clear to her. She dared not look into the future.

Presently Mary-Lou came back. "No can find Jimmy," she said. "Nobody see him."

Proceeding to the rear of the store to survey the damage, the two girls came upon the wet, dark stain spreading over the floor. The instant she saw it, Loseis knew what had happened and went very still; but Mary-Lou cried out: “Look, the window is out!” and must needs stick her head through the hole to look.

A piercing shriek broke from the red girl; she fell back half witless with terror into Loseis’s arms.

CHAPTER IV

AT FORT GOOD HOPE

At Fort Good Hope on the big river, the free trader Andrew Gault and his financial backer David Ogilvie, stood by the flagpole concluding their business, while the steam-launch *Courier* waited in the stream below to carry Ogilvie down river.

Outside of the towns, Fort Good Hope was the most enterprising and progressive Post in that country. The original log buildings were now used as bunk-houses for the half-breed employees; while on one side rose the magnificent dwelling of the trader, built of clapboards in the "outside" style and having fancy porches with turned pillars; and on the other side the equally modern store with plate glass windows imported at God knows what expense and trouble; and a huge sign. This sign was the occasion of considerable humor throughout the country, since there was nobody who required to be told whose store it was.

This was by no means all of the improvements at Fort Good Hope. Gault had built and now operated a steamboat on the river, which connected with a line of wagons across the ninety-mile portage to Caribou Lake, and so kept him in touch with the world. By means of the steamboat he had imported an electric light plant, a sawmill and a steam process mill for grinding and bolting flour. The land along the river was rich, and Gault had established farmers there. They were only frozen out about one year in three; and that was their loss, not Gault's. His flour, raised and milled on the spot, he was able to sell to the Indians at an enormous profit.

In spite of all this, when Gault made up his accounts with Ogilvie, the financier pursed up his mouth in a grudging fashion, and Gault who was a bitter, proud man, ground his teeth with rage.

"Your improvements are fine, fine," said Ogilvie dryly; "the Post looks almost like a village on the railway. But my dear man, all this only returns a beggarly ten or fifteen per cent on the investment. I need not point out to you that our company is accustomed to receive two profits on every transaction. In other words we do not want the cash that you remit to us; we

want fur. And I'm sorry to see that your consignments of fur have been growing less every year."

The trader was silent out of anger; and Ogilvie went on: "The history of all the old posts is the same. With the advance of civilization the fur is always retreating. With your steamboats and your sawmills you are hastening the process, my dear Gault. At the other old posts as the fur recedes they reach after it with sub-posts and trading stations. Why don't you do something of the sort? You are in a better strategic position than any of them, because off to the northwest here you have a vast land that is still written down unexplored on the maps. Why don't you get that fur?"

"As you know," muttered Gault, "on the northwest I am blanketed by Hector Blackburn."

Ogilvie shrugged. "Why remain blanketed?" he asked.

"What do you propose?" asked Gault bitterly.

"Oh, the specific measures must be left to you," said Ogilvie hastily. "You are the man on the ground. But of course our company will back you up in anything you undertake. The old rough stuff has gone out of fashion, but the principle is the same. To put it bluntly, Gault: buy him out or drive him out."

"The entire resources of our company would not buy him out," said Gault. "The man is drunk with pride at having the name of the last free trader."

"Well then?" said Ogilvie meaningly.

"As to driving him out, I mean to do that; but I must await my opportunity. He's in an almost impregnable position."

"Why did you let him get in such a position?" murmured Ogilvie. "You were on the ground first."

"He had all the luck," said Gault bitterly.

"Why is his position so impregnable?"

"Well, for one thing he has a tribe of Indians completely under his thumb. Those are the Slavis, the most ignorant and primitive race of them all. Once they covered this whole country, but have gradually been pushed back by the Crees and other tribes. They have some other name, but I don't know what it is. All the other Indians call them Slavis. Well, Blackburn has got this people penned up in his own country, where no whites can

communicate with them. He deliberately trades on their ignorance and superstition. He has persuaded them that I am a devil and that black magic is worked at this Post, and no power under Heaven can persuade them to come within fifty miles of me."

Ogilvie laughed. "Not bad," he said. "Why don't you outbid him for fur? That might work a miracle."

"I have tried it," said Gault grimly. "He is willing to go higher than the company is willing to let me go."

"But surely a year or two of that, with his ruinously expensive transport would break him," said Ogilvie.

"Blackburn is as rich as Crœsus," said Gault bitterly; "and he'd risk every cent of it to beat me. What is more, he is entirely independent of transport. When they run out of food over there, he sends his cheaper furs to me for flour, and I have to take them, because I need the fur. Blackburn trades horses for fur. He has in the triangle between his river, the foothills and the Mud River, a vast natural range for horses. God knows how many thousands of head he has. The fame of them has spread all over the country. He can afford to sell them cheap since they cost him nothing. The Sikannis Indians bring their fur all the way from British Columbia to trade for horses. The Indians from Wabiscaw and eastward cross the river here right under my nose, carrying their fur to Blackburn for horses."

"You say you are awaiting your opportunity," said Ogilvie; "how will you know when that comes?"

"I have a spy at Blackburn's Post," said Gault. "It wasn't easy to find him, because nobody can speak their damned language but Blackburn. This man, Etzooah, is the son of a Cree father and a Slavi mother, and is able to mix with the Slavis as one of themselves."

"What good do you expect that to do you?"

"Etzooah talks to the Slavis in my interest. However, that is not what I am counting on." Gault smiled disagreeably. "Blackburn is a headstrong, passionate man, and a hard drinker. He treats the Slavis like dogs. He believes there is nobody to call him to account. Some day he will go too far. Then I'll have the law on him. He runs his whole show single-handed. Won't tolerate a white man near him. Consequently if he were removed, even for a while, the whole thing would fall into confusion. That will be my chance."

"I have heard there was a daughter," said Ogilvie idly.

“Yes, a black-haired she-devil in her father’s own image!” said Gault.

“Well, good-by until next Spring,” said Ogilvie. “I wish you every success. If Blackburn were out of the way this would be the greatest Post in the country.” He looked around him with assumed regret. “You have made so many improvements it would be a pity if we had to close you out. But of course we must have the fur. . . . Good-by. . . . Good-by. . . .”

Gault watched him go with rage and bitterness making his heart black. Damn all financiers and officials who fattened on the labors of better men than themselves! Gault had not told him the full history of his relations with Hector Blackburn; but no doubt Ogilvie knew anyhow, for it was common gossip throughout the fur country; how Gault and Blackburn had come to grips a dozen times during the past twenty years, and Gault had been invariably and humiliatingly worsted. He too, was a ruthless and determined man, and when he thought over these things it was almost more than he could bear.

Andrew Gault was a bachelor, living alone in his monstrosity of a yellow clapboarded house. A handsome, lean, grizzled man in his early fifties, with a cold and polished manner that one would hardly expect to find in a fur-trader. It was a point of pride with Gault never to allow himself to go slack. For all he was seven hundred miles from town, his house was well-furnished, his servants well-trained. These last were of the Cree tribe, a handsomer and more intelligent race than the miserable Slavis, but not so manageable.

Some days after the visit of Ogilvie, Gault, having finished his breakfast, remained sitting at the table, gloomily staring at the cloth, and abstractedly crumbling pellets of bread. His mind was forever traveling the same weary round without finding a way out. Thoughts of Hector Blackburn poisoned his very being. How to get back at him; how to ruin him. Ah! his enemy seemed to be intrenched at every point! Blackburn could laugh at him. Stronger measures must be taken now, for certain ruin stared Gault in the face. Somehow, Blackburn’s own weapons must be turned against him. Could not the ignorant Slavis be incited to rebellion? They must have their own medicine men or conjurers, and these fellows could generally be bought. He, Gault, must get hold of Etzooah before the next fur season set in.

Toma, Gault’s old house-servant entered the room. He was excited. “Wah! Man come from Blackburn’s Post,” he announced.

To Gault this had the effect of a miracle. He sprang to his feet. “What man?” he cried.

“Name Etzooah,” said Toma.

“Bring him to me! Bring him to me!” shouted Gault. “Let none else come in until I call.”

Toma shuffled out of the room, and Gault had time to compose himself. It was very bad policy of course, for a white man to betray his emotion before a native. The trader reseated himself.

Etzooah came sidling around the door, awe-struck at finding himself admitted to the great house, and exhibiting a witless grin. He was a small man with a bullet head set between muscular shoulders. His thick coarse hair was cut straight across his forehead in the Slavi style, and straight around at his neck behind. He wore good store clothes with a gay worsted sash about his middle. For business reasons the spy affected an air of good-natured, giggling imbecility, which would deceive nobody who knew the Indians. His little eyes were as quick and sharp as a weasel’s.

“What news?” asked Gault curtly.

“Blackburn is dead,” said Etzooah, laughing heartily and silently.

Gault caught his breath. For an instant he lost all self-control. The upper part of his body sprawled across the table; his eyes seemed to start from his head. “Dead?” he gasped; “dead? . . . You are sure?”

“I see him die,” said Etzooah, with silent pantomime of delight. “Him black horse jomp over high cut-bank. Him neck broke. Him drown afterwards. When him pull out of river him head loose lak a berry on the bush.” Etzooah illustrated.

A shock of joy does not kill. Gault stood up straight and arrogant; a warm color came into his pale cheeks, and his eyes shone like a boy’s again. “By God! this news is good to my ears!” he cried. “You shall never go hungry, Etzooah. . . . When did it happen?”

“Two days,” said Etzooah. “At noon spell. Right away I tak’ two horses; ride all night. Only stop for one little sleep yesterday.”

“Did anybody know you came?”

“No. I sneak away.”

“Hm!” said Gault stroking his chin. “Then they’ll know that you were my man all the time. . . . Oh, what does it matter now! Everything is in my

hands. . . . Had Blackburn sent his fur out yet?”

“No. Roundin’ up pack horses when him kill.”

“Then that is *my* fur now! . . . What will the Slavis do without their master?”

Etzooah shrugged expressively. “No can tell. Slavis lak crazy children. Not know what they do. Maybe they run wild now; kill the girl and steal the store goods. No can tell.”

Gault’s face darkened. “By God!” he cried. “If the Slavis get out of hand, it would bring in the police. I don’t want the police nosing into this. I will ride back to-day. Toma! Toma! . . . You, Etzooah, eat in my kitchen, and take a sleep. . . . Toma, you——————!”

The old man came shuffling in.

“Fetch Moale from the store. Bestir yourself! Afterwards get out my riding-suit, my saddlebags, my traveling blankets, and all things necessary for a journey!”

Joe Moale was the “bookkeeper” at Fort Good Hope, otherwise Gault’s second in command. Technically a white man, a flavor of the red race clung about him; he was probably a quarter breed. He was reputed to be a relative of Gault’s. An educated man, as able and intelligent as any white man in the company’s employ, he was as inscrutable as an Indian. He was a well-built man of middle height, not uncomely in his wooden fashion. It was impossible to guess his exact age, but he was much younger than the trader. He served Gault with absolute and unquestioning faithfulness, but there was no affection in the glance that he bent on his master. With true redskin patience he was waiting for Gault to die.

“Blackburn is dead!” cried Gault, striding up and down in his dark exultation.

“The news has already spread about the Post,” said Moale, unmoved.

“Can we both get away together?” asked Gault.

“Why not? The fur is all in. At this season Claggett can keep the store.”

“Then I want you to come with me. We must start within an hour. Round up the four smartest lads you can put your hands on, and a dozen of our best horses. We must make a good appearance, you understand. Six of us will be more than enough to handle the beggarly Slavis. . . . Blackburn is dead!” he

cried for the mere pleasure of repeating the words. “And his business is ours!”

“What will you do about the girl?” asked Moale stolidly.

“Oh, a miss of eighteen,” said Gault contemptuously. “She will give me no trouble . . . I’ll be her guardian, her trustee,” he added with a satanic smile.

“She’ll be rich,” said Moale.

“Not when I’m through with her.”

“I’m not referring to the Post, nor the horses,” said Moale. “Blackburn sends out near a hundred thousand dollars worth of fur per annum. He don’t import but a fraction of that in goods. The balance must be salted down somewhere.”

Gault stopped and stared. A new light of cupidity broke in his face. “Why, sure!” he said, a little bemused with the glittering picture that rose before his mind’s eye. “My mind must be wandering! Shouldn’t wonder if it amounted to a million! . . .” He went on muttering to himself: “It would be the best way anyhow. Nobody could question what I did then. And I shouldn’t be doing it for the company neither but for myself!” His voice suddenly rang out. “By God! I’ll marry the girl!”

Going to the sideboard, he examined his face anxiously in the mirror. “Joe,” he said, “if you didn’t know my age, how old would you call me?”

Whatever Moale’s thoughts might have been, he concealed them. “About thirty-eight,” he said.

“Hardly that,” said Gault confidently. “If it wasn’t for the gray in my hair I could pass for thirty-five easy. I wish to God I could lay my hands on some hair dye.”

“I can make a good black dye out of nutgalls,” said Moale.

“Well, go to it!” cried Gault. “Get a move on you now. We must sleep at Blackburn’s Post to-morrow night . . . Oh, my God! suppose we were to find that the Slavis had got out of hand and murdered the girl!”

CHAPTER V

YELLOW-HEAD

LOSEIS sat on a bench at the door of the store. The Princess was very pale, and her lips were pressed tight together. In her brave, proud eyes was to be seen the piteous, questioning look of a child: Why must I suffer so much? Just inside the door of the store Mary-Lou was squatting on the floor with her head buried in her arms. Loseis had to be brave for both.

The buildings at Blackburn's Post formed three sides of a grassy square, the fourth side being open to the river. The store faced the river, flanked by a warehouse on each side. On Loseis' right was the Women's House, and opposite it Blackburn's House and his stable. All the buildings were constructed of logs, and roofed with sods, now sprouting greenly. Nothing could have been rougher, nevertheless the buildings seemed to belong in that place; and there was a pleasing harmony in their arrangement. Out in the middle of the grassy square rose a tall flagpole.

Loseis and Mary-Lou had taken up their abode in the store. At this season of the year the stock of goods was much depleted, and Loseis was in no great concern about losing what was left; but knowing the Indian nature, she was well aware that if the Slavis were not prevented from helping themselves, they would soon get out of hand altogether.

In the store there was plenty of food to their hand; as for water, Loseis obtained it after dark by creeping down to the small stream where it wound around the flank of the little plateau. All night a little lamp burned in the window of the store. Night-attacks were not at all in the Slavis' line; but Loseis wished them to be reminded whenever they looked that way, that somebody was on guard. All day the door of the store was allowed to stand open; while the two girls permitted themselves to be seen passing unconcernedly in and out, and performing their household tasks out in front. Their only defense lay in this appearance of unconcern.

Three days and three nights of cruel anxiety had passed, and the fourth night was approaching. Loseis had not reflected much on her situation; it simply wouldn't bear thinking about. She had just gone ahead and done what came to her hand at the moment. During the first night the body of

Jimmy Moosenose had disappeared. The Slavis either buried it hastily in some out of the way spot, or threw it in the river. Like the children they were, they believed that if only the body were hidden the crime could never be brought home to them.

None of the Slavis had ever approached the store. Apparently they were pursuing their ordinary avocations as if nothing had happened; the dogs and the children fought; the women fished, cooked the meals, and made moccasins; the men loafed and smoked. As she looked down at them the sight of their inhuman indifference caused Loseis' heart to burn. Senseless animals! she ejaculated to herself a dozen times a day.

Mary-Lou came out of the store. The Indian girl was unable either to apply her hands to any work or to sit still. Her copper face had become grayish, and her eyes were distracted with terror. She looked down over the tepees, biting her lip.

"More have come," she said hoarsely.

"You imagine that," said Loseis. "I have seen nobody come."

"They not let you see them come," said Mary-Lou. "Sleep in their friends' tepees. But I see more canoes in the creek."

"Well, what of it?" said Loseis with a grand parade of indifference. "They're harmless."

"Like coyotes," said Mary-Lou. "They are sitting down to wait for us to die!"

Loseis sprang up nervously. Her face was working. "You are like a raven croaking all day!" she cried. "That does no good!"

Mary-Lou caught hold of Loseis imploringly. "Let us go from here!" she begged. "All night I listen! . . . My brain is turned to ice. I don't know what I am doing! . . . As soon as it is dark let us take horses and go. They not know until to-morrow that we are gone. Never catch us then. It is only ondred-feefty mile to Fort Good Hope. . . ."

Loseis detached the clinging hands. "It's no good going on this way," she said harshly. "I will not run from Slavis."

Mary-Lou fell on her knees, clutching Loseis' skirt, babbling incoherently in her terror. Loseis raised her face to the sky, clenching her teeth in despair. How much of this have I got to stand? she was thinking.

Then she saw the Slavis begin to run to the river bank. “Look! Look!” she cried. “Something is coming up the river!”

Mary-Lou scrambled to her feet. Whatever it was in the river, it was approaching close under the bank. They could see nothing. The Slavis were yelling and pointing.

“It is Conacher!” screamed Mary-Lou.

“NO! No! No!” cried Loseis in a voice as taut as an over-stretched violin string. “It is just a Slavi coming up river. Anything is enough to get them going.”

“It is Conacher!” screamed Mary-Lou. “If it was a Slavi they would run down to the water. They stop on the bank. They are a little afraid. See! they look at us. It is somebody for us. It is Conacher!”

Loseis felt that if she allowed herself to believe it and was then disappointed, it would kill her. “No! No!” she said faintly. “It is too soon!”

And then the yellow head rose above the bank.

Loseis collapsed suddenly on the bench and burst into tears. Her whole body was shaken. Mary-Lou fell on her knees with a scream of joy. “Conacher! . . . Conacher!”

Loseis struggled hard to regain her self-control. “Stop that noise!” she said angrily. “Go into the store. He mustn’t think that we want him so badly!”

Laughing and crying simultaneously, Mary-Lou went staggering into the store.

Loseis remained on the bench watching, with her hands in her lap. The tears were called in; and she furtively wiped away their traces. Conacher had his two Beaver Indians with him. These lingered to fraternize with the Slavis, while the white man came striding across the natural meadow to the foot of the rise. He was bare-headed as usual. A newcomer in the country, the fame of his curly, yellow pate had already spread far and wide. Alongside the Slavis he loomed like a young giant. Loseis had seen him take a Slavi man by the collar in each hand, and lift them clear of the ground. To the waiting girl he was like a god come in answer to her prayer.

She was very quiet when he reached her, her smile tremulous. The change in her from the arrogant little Princess who had used him so despitefully on his first visit was so striking, that at first Conacher could only stand and stare. They never thought to greet each other. Finally

Conacher exhibited the little black streamer, limp from being clutched in his warm hand.

"What does this mean?" he asked simply.

"My father is dead," said Loseis. "Four days ago."

"Oh, Heaven!" cried Conacher. "And you all alone here! What did you do?"

"I buried him," said Loseis, spreading out her hands.

"*Yourself!*"

"There was no other to do it."

"Oh, my God!"

Mary-Lou had crept out of the store again. "They kill Jimmy Moosenose," she said, nodding in the direction of the Slavis. "And break into the store."

"I put them out again," said Loseis, quickly and proudly.

"Oh, God! what awful things have been happening here!" cried Conacher aghast.

His sympathy caused Loseis to tremble dangerously again. "Oh, it will be all right now," she said swiftly. "One white man is enough to put fear into the heart of these dogs."

Conacher looked at that brave and piteous figure, and was caught up in a very hurricane of the emotions. He was mad to enfold her in his arms; to comfort the child, to love the woman, but a feeling of chivalry restrained him. It appeared unseemly to intrude his love in the moment of her grief; he turned away abruptly, searching distractedly in his mind for some expedient to tide him over the dangerous moment.

"I must go fetch my fellows before they are contaminated by the Slavis," he said in a strangled voice, and strode away down the slope again.

"Ah, he does not love me," murmured Loseis with extreme sadness.

"You are wrong," said Mary-Lou. "It was speaking in his eyes."

"No! No! No!" said Loseis violently. Nevertheless she was secretly comforted.

She went bustling into the store. "Come! we will close up the store now, and go to our own house. Conacher will be hungry. We must cook a big

meal. There is still some canned apples and canned butter in the store. Ahchoogah brought in a moose to-day. I will take a haunch of it for Conacher. I will take the biggest fish for Conacher, too. Be quick! Be quick! I will go down and get the other Marys to help you. . . .”

Later, Loseis and Conacher were sitting at the door of the Women’s House, while the appetizing odors came stealing out. A heavy constraint was upon them; they could not meet each other’s eyes. The man, looking down, marveled at the delicacy of Loseis’ shapely hands, lying loosely in her lap. What a rare, fine creature to find in these rude surroundings! Her beauty and her proud manner intimidated him. Who was he to aspire so high? The girl wondered sadly why the man did not speak. He had only to speak!

When he did speak it was not in the tone that she longed to hear. “What are you going to do?” he asked, matter-of-fact.

To Loseis the solution was simplicity itself. Conacher was to stay there, and everything go on as before. But it was not seemly for her to propose this. She shrugged. “I don’t know,” she said.

“But you must have thought something about what you would do,” he said surprised. “You can’t stay here.”

Loseis’ heart sunk. She said nothing.

“Fort Good Hope cannot be but a hundred miles or so across the height of land,” he went on.

“A hundred and fifty,” said Loseis.

“I have heard there’s a white woman at Fort Good Hope,” said Conacher. “She’s the parson’s sister.”

“What do I want with the parson’s sister?” demanded Loseis with a spice of resentment.

Conacher looked at her helplessly.

I would go to Fort Good Hope to the parson with Conacher if he asked me, thought Loseis, and a deep blush overspread her neck and face. She turned away her head to hide it.

“You can’t stay here,” he said.

“I am not going to give up my father’s Post, and allow the Slavis to strip the store,” said Loseis with spirit. “Besides, the whole season’s catch of fur is stored in the warehouse, waiting to be shipped outside. It is worth many thousands of dollars.”

“How is it sent out?” asked Conacher.

“Every Spring when the grass is grown sufficiently to graze the horses, it is sent overland by pack-horse to a warehouse that my father has on the prairie near the crossing of the big river. That is three hundred miles. Jimmy Moosenose was always sent with the horses and men. Seventy horses and fifteen men beside the cook. In that warehouse they find the grub for next year and the store goods which are put there by John Gruber, my father’s outside man. They bring the grub back, and leave the fur in the warehouse, and John Gruber gets it afterwards. My father never allowed the Slavis to meet the Crees in John Gruber’s outfit. It is time for them to start now. John Gruber will be waiting many days at the Crossing.”

“But you’ve no one to send now,” said Conacher.

“Then I must go myself,” said Loseis.

“My God! not alone with a gang of redskins!” cried Conacher.

“They would not dare harm me,” said Loseis proudly.

“Maybe not,” cried Conacher violently. “But just the same I couldn’t stand for that!”

Loseis’ sad heart looked up a little. He did care a little what became of her.

And then he spoiled it by adding: “No white man could!”

“We must find somebody to go with you,” he presently went on; “and then you can continue on outside with your father’s agent.”

“There is all the grub and store goods waiting to come in,” objected Loseis.

“That will have to be sold,” said Conacher. “The Company will buy it.”

“There are all my father’s horses across the river,” said Loseis; “many thousands of head. During the summer hay must be cut for them around the shores of our lake; or next winter they will starve.”

“But my dear girl,” said Conacher, “you cannot go on doing business here now that he is gone!”

“Why not?” demanded Loseis.

“Why . . . why . . .” stammered Conacher. “A woman trader! Why such a thing was never heard of!”

“Well, it will be heard of now,” said Loseis.

Conacher ascribed this to mere bravado. What a spirited little thing she was! Like a plucky boy; but with all the sweetness of a woman. “We must send to Fort Good Hope for help,” he said.

“Do not speak to me again of Fort Good Hope!” said Loseis. “Gault, the trader there, was my father’s enemy.”

Conacher knew nothing of the feuds of the country. “Yes, yes,” he said soothingly; “but a tragedy like this wipes out old scores. Gault would not take advantage of your situation.”

“You are an outsider,” she said. “You do not know Gault.”

“No man would!” insisted Conacher.

“I will not hand over my father’s Post to Gault!” cried Loseis. “That would bring my father out of his grave!”

“Not hand it over to him,” protested Conacher. “But just let him advise you. He is the only one that can tell you what is best to do; who can arrange things. There is no other white man within hundreds of miles.”

Then it had to come out. “I already know what to do,” said Loseis, very low. “If you would help me, we could do it all together.”

Conacher groaned, and clutched his head. “Oh, God! you don’t understand!” he cried. “And what must you be thinking of me! What a chance to be offered to a man, and I can’t take it!” He tried desperately to explain to her. “You see, I am not free like the men of this country. I am a government employee, tied hand and foot to my work. My whole Summer’s work has been laid out for me. And my little piece is only a part of a great survey of this whole country. I am appointed to join with another party at Great Slave Lake on a certain date, and we in turn must proceed up the Liard River to another rendezvous on the Yukon. If I fail, the whole fails. Don’t you understand?”

She did not wholly understand. “I heard you tell it,” she said a little sullenly.

Conacher jumped up, and paced the grass in an agony of indecision. He was teetering on the brink. If Loseis had raised her eyes to his face, he would have fallen at her feet, and allowed the government to go to the devil. But she kept her eyes sullenly down. And then before either spoke again, with a smart thudding of hoofs and creaking of saddle leathers, a well-turned

out company of six men and several spare horses came down the trail behind the Post, and trotted out into the little plaza.

Gault had caught sight of Conacher's yellow head as soon as he came over the brow of the hill. He reined up sharply, his face going pinched and ugly. "A white man here!" he said furiously to Moale. "Who the devil can he be?"

Moale drew up at his side. "That will be Conacher," he said in his unconcerned way. "I have heard talk of his yellow head."

"A *young* man!" said Gault; and cursed him thickly and fervently.

"He's on a government survey down to Great Slave Lake and beyond," said Moale indifferently. "He won't be able to interfere with us."

But Gault rode down the hill with a black heart. The young man had got in his innings first; and now fifty-three must stand comparison with twenty-three, and the dyed black head be measured against the famous golden one.

By the time he rode around the buildings of the Post his face was perfectly composed and solicitous, of course. He sat his horse with conscious grace. Flinging himself off, he tossed the reins to one of the Crees, and came quickly to Loseis.

"Miss Blackburn," he said, "the moment I heard of your terrible loss I jumped on my horse to come to you. I cannot express to you how shocked and grieved I am. Your father and I were not good friends, but that is all past now. Believe me, I am most completely at your service."

The watching Conacher considered that this was very handsomely said. How much better than he could do it! he thought with a sigh. He had no reason to share in Loseis' suspicions of Gault. A load was lifted from the young man's heart. Gault's fine outfit inspired confidence. Loseis would be all right now, and he could go on about his work. But before he left he would ask her to wait for him. The idea that this old man might prove to be a rival, never entered Conacher's honest heart.

Loseis received Gault with a manner no less finished and proud than his own. "You are welcome," she said gravely. "My father's house"—she indicated the building opposite—"is at your disposal. If you wish to put up your horses the stable is behind it. Or you can turn them out anywhere. Dinner here in half an hour."

Gault bowing, expressed his thanks. He then turned inquiringly towards Conacher.

That young man said: “I am Paul Conacher of the geological survey.”

Gault thrust out his hand with the appearance of the greatest cordiality. “I am delighted to meet you,” he said. “It is a great satisfaction to find that Miss Blackburn is not alone here.” He gave Conacher a meaning glance that suggested as between man and man it would be well for them to discuss the situation together.

This was quite in line with Conacher’s ideas, and the two walked off together towards the house opposite. Loseis watched them go under stormy brows. She saw Gault place his hand affectionately on the young man’s shoulder, and her lip curled.

CHAPTER VI

THE DINNER PARTY

GAULT and Conacher returned to the Women's House for dinner. Gault had changed to a well-cut black suit with linen of the finest quality, and a little discreet but handsome jewelry. Poor Conacher, having no change, showed up at a disadvantage beside him. When they beheld Loseis both men caught their breath in astonishment. She was wearing one of the "outside" dresses which her father had been accustomed to import that he might have the pleasure of seeing her in them. This one was of black velvet cunningly and simply draped, and showing no touch of color. Around her neck hung a string of pearls that made Gault open his eyes; not the one with the gold nuggets; but a long plain string of beautifully matched stones. The innocent Conacher had no notion but that it was a string of pearl beads such as his sisters wore.

The table was laid for four in Loseis' own room. She seated Moale facing her; Conacher at her right; Gault at her left. The trader who was sensitive to these little things, bit his lip at this arrangement, but was obliged to put up with it. Conacher never noticed that he had been given the seat of honor. There was fine china and silver on the table; and the food was wonderful, including delicacies which Gault himself could not command at Fort Good Hope, such as currant jelly; the joint of moose meat cunningly larded with bacon, and served with cranberry sauce; an apple pie. The three comely Marys in black dresses and snowy aprons moved noiselessly about the table, while Mary-Lou oversaw all in the kitchen.

To Conacher, after weeks on the trail, it was like a taste of Heaven; and Gault was obliged to confess to himself that the establishment while rude, nevertheless had a better style than his own. Loseis with her hair done up on top of her head looked like a Princess indeed, and the trader gloated at the thought of seeing her enthroned at *his* table. He pictured a glorious future for Fort Good Hope. The thought of Conacher gave him little concern now. He had put down the young man to his own satisfaction as a fool.

The trader dominated the table. The lamplight was favorable to him, and he knew it. None would have thought of terming him an old man. His

manner was perfection. Open-browed, courteous, half-apologetic, he kept them entertained with stories of the country; and both of the young people were to a certain extent fascinated by his charm. During the meal business was not to be touched upon.

“Ah! what a privilege it is to have a lady at the table!” said Gault wrinkling up his eyes, and showing his big white teeth.

(Rather like the wolf in the fairy-tale; thought Loseis; but I suppose some would call him a fine-looking man.)

“Hear! Hear!” said Conacher. The young man felt like a hobbledehoy alongside the elegant Gault; but he harbored no malice. Poor Conacher’s heart was oppressed by the sight of Loseis in her bravery. Could this be the rude little spitfire that he had dared to laugh at upon their first meeting?

“That is what we miss in the North,” Gault went on; “the civilizing touch of lovely woman! It is terrible the way men go to seed in this country. It is a fact that when a man’s manners go, his morals are bound to go too. Ah! my dear Miss Blackburn, if we had more like you to grace our lonely posts we’d all be better men!”

(Why haven’t I the face to say such things? thought Conacher.)

Loseis smiled a little wanly. She was secretly confused by the trader’s glibness. She had never known a man like this.

Later they sat down in front of the small fire that had been lighted to drive away the evening chill; Loseis in her hammock-chair, the men on either hand sitting stiffly in the straight-up-and-down chairs that Blackburn had carved. What remained on the table was silently whisked into the kitchen.

“You may smoke if you wish,” said Loseis.

Gault produced, wonder of wonders! a full cigar case, and offered it to the younger man. The fragrance of the genuine Havana spread around.

“Well!” said Conacher; “I never expected to get anything like this north of Fifty-eight.”

“Oh, with my improved transport,” said Gault carelessly, “I can have in pretty much anything I want.”

It now became necessary to speak of business. Gault inquired if the season’s fur had been sent out.

“No,” said Loseis.

The trader might almost be said to have purred upon hearing that. Indeed, fearing himself that he might be betraying too much complacency about the mouth, he rubbed his upper lip, and gave a little cough. “I will charge myself with that,” he said comfortably. “Make your mind quite easy.”

Loseis looked unhappy, but said nothing.

“Of course,” Gault went on with the air of one who must be fair at whatever cost to himself, “being your father’s competitor, his rival as you might say, it is not proper that I should be your sole advisor.”

Loseis looked at him in surprise. Dared he to speak of that? Her confusion increased. This man was too much for her.

“I am mighty glad that Conacher is here,” said Gault.

“But I must return down the river to-night,” said Conacher. “I am already many days behind my schedule.”

Loseis’ eyes were close-hid now. “To-night?” she echoed softly. “But you paddled all last night to get here.”

Conacher affected to laugh, while his hungry eyes sought her averted face. Loseis could have read there that he didn’t want to go; but she wouldn’t look. “Oh, going downstream’s a cinch,” said Conacher. “Two of us can sleep at a time in the dug-out, while the third man keeps her in the middle of the current.”

Loseis was silent.

“To-night!” said Gault. “Ah, that’s too bad! . . . However, I can take my measures before you go . . . Does your father employ a man of business, a lawyer, outside?” he asked Loseis.

“None that I know of,” she said, “except John Gruber.”

“Ah, Gruber,” said Gault in his purring voice (Moale at the other end of the row, listened to all this with a face like a sardonic mask), “an excellent fellow, too. But too ignorant a man to serve you in this crisis. . . . I am sure your father must have had wide interests outside of the fur business,” he said insinuatingly.

“If he had, I know nothing about it,” said Loseis. “He got business letters every year when the outfit came in, but he did not show them to me. I know nothing of business.”

“Of course not,” said Gault soothingly. “Have you looked for those letters since his death?” he asked, betraying more eagerness than was

perhaps in the best of taste.

"No," said Loseis, shortly.

Gault was pulled up short. "Hm!" he said, stroking his chin. "Hm! . . ." Finally he got a fresh start. "Well, if Blackburn employed an attorney outside, Gruber will know his name. Gruber carried all his letters out, and brought the answers back. I will write to Gruber. And if Blackburn has no lawyer already, I will send for the best one obtainable, and will arrange special means of transport for him. We'll have him here in five or six weeks at the outside. Lastly I will send for a sergeant and detail of the police, so that the murder of Jimmy Moosenose can be investigated. Until they come, in order that the Slavis may not take fright, we will allow them to suppose that the murder has been forgotten."

Conacher nodded in agreement with this; Loseis felt that she was being crowded to one side.

"I'll start my letters off to Fort Good Hope at sun-up," Gault went on. "Unfortunately my steamboat has gone up to the head of navigation, and won't be back for a month; but by the time the messenger reaches the post, my launch will have returned from carrying Mr. Ogilvie down to the Chutes. The launch can make the Crossing in a week. Gruber will be waiting there."

It all sounded so businesslike and proper, Loseis could take no exception to it. The smooth voice, arranging everything, afflicted her with a sort of despair.

After some desultory talk, Gault arose, saying: "With your permission I will go and write my letters now, so that Conacher may see them before he goes."

Loseis bowed in acquiescence. She thought: I can talk to Conacher while he is away. But Gault looked sharply from one to another, and added in his polite way: "I'd be glad of your help in composing them, Conacher." Loseis' heart sunk. The two went out together arm in arm. Moale followed his master as a matter of course.

Loseis was left staring into the fire. Mary-Lou came to the door and looked at her full of loving solicitude; but Loseis made believe not to know that she was there. The simple Mary-Lou could be of no help to her in this situation. Loseis, whose nature it was to act instantaneously without thinking, was all at sea on this flood of words. Everything was mixed up in her mind. Maybe Gault is a true man, she thought; maybe he means what he

says. Conacher is satisfied. And if he is lying what can I do anyhow? I know nothing.

In due course they returned (without Moale) and the letters were laid before Loseis. It appeared that Gault packed a little typewriter in his outfit, and Loseis, though she looked at the letters indifferently, secretly marveled at the neat clear printing. How could one contend against a man like this! She scarcely read the letters. The lengthy sentences merely dizzied her.

It goes without saying that they were admirably expressed letters. There is no need of reproducing them here, since Gault had not the slightest intention of letting them reach their destinations. They were to be conveniently lost en route.

"I am satisfied if Conacher is," said Loseis.

"Mr. Gault has thought of everything," said Conacher.

Soon Conacher said, affecting to make light of his heavy heart: "Well, I've sent my men down to launch the dug-out. I must be getting aboard."

Gault said quickly in his hearty way: "I'll go down and see you off."

Conacher looked wistfully at Loseis, and hesitated.

Loseis rebelled at last. She did not feel able to dispute Gault in matters of business, but if he dared to interfere with her own private concerns, let him look out! She stood up very quickly, and her chin went up. "First I want to take Conacher to the store, and give him some grub to take," she said coolly. "You wait here, Mr. Gault." Her eyes sought his unafraid, and the trader's eyes trailed away.

"Why of course!" he said in his hearty way. But his affable smile had a sickly look now. As they went through the door he shot a baleful glance after them. That was a black half hour for him, obliged to sit there, grinding his big teeth and picturing the two young creatures together in the dark. Just when everything had seemed to be going his way, too!

Outside, the black sky was crowded with stars big and little, all focused on that pair of mortal lovers. The earth was so still one seemed to hear the whisper of starlight. Loseis drew a great breath of relief. Why that load was suddenly lifted from her breast she could not have told. She involuntarily slipped her hand under Conacher's arm, and he pressed it hard against his ribs. They walked, pressing close together, the blond head brooding low over the black one. There was no confession of love. They were still afraid

of that word. And anyhow this was confession enough. With happiness their hearts became as breathlessly still as the night.

"Let's not go to the store," whispered Conacher. "I don't need any grub."

"I just said that," whispered Loseis. "I wanted to be with you."

"Oh, you dear! . . . you dear! . . . you dear!" he murmured tremulously.

Loseis pressed his arm. "Let's go down on the flat," she whispered. "He might come to the door to watch us."

They went down the grassy slope. For a long time they did not speak. They walked at a snail's pace, arms linked, hands clasped, and heads leaning together. At last a little whimpering sound was heard from Loseis. That brave heart owned its weakness at last.

"Oh, Paul!" she faltered. "Oh Paul, *must* you go?"

"I must! I must!" he cried in pain. "But I will arrange things just as quick as I can, and come back."

"It will be so long!" she said sadly.

"But at least you are safe now."

"Oh, safe . . . maybe!"

"If you are afraid, come with me. I will take care of you."

"No," she said quickly. "That would not be acting right towards my father. . . . I am not afraid of any danger. But . . . but I cannot see what is before me! I do not like that man!"

"He seems to be on the square," said Conacher anxiously. "He has provided for everything better than I could."

"It is so terrible for me to have to be with somebody I do not like," said Loseis.

"You have your own house," said Conacher. "And your girls. You need only talk to him about business matters."

"He is so ugly!" said Loseis.

"You silly girl!" said Conacher fondly. "Gault's considered a very fine-looking man!"

"Not to me! . . . You are beautiful, my Paul. In the dark I can see your beauty!"

“Oh, Loseis! you must not say such things!” he said, genuinely distressed. “It is not fitting from you to me!”

“Why?” she asked wilfully.

“Because . . . because . . . by comparison with you I . . . Oh, Loseis, I ought to be kneeling at your feet!”

“What good would you be to my feet?” she asked, nestling against him. “I like it better this way.”

Conacher laughed suddenly and delightedly in his throat.

“Well . . . ?” said Loseis, leaving her interrogation in the air.

“What is it?” he asked anxiously.

“Oh, you make me *say* it!” she cried vexatiously. “Do you think I am beautiful?”

The question rendered him nearly speechless. He pressed her hand hard against his cheek. “Oh, Loseis!” he stammered. “I . . . I . . . you . . . I can’t tell you. I’m just a blundering fool when it comes to expressing my feelings. Why, you have made a new world for me. When I think of your face it drives me out of my senses. I can’t think of the words for it!”

She pillowed her cheek happily in the hollow inside his shoulder. “Then you must find words!” she said. “You must never stop telling me. My ears are greedy to hear it. Of all the world, I only care to be beautiful for you!”

In sight of the darkly flowing river they came to a stop. They could hear the murmuring voices of the two Beaver Indians at the water’s edge. They drew apart. For a long while they stood there not touching each other in dumb unhappiness and constraint. They were both new at this lovemaking business.

“Well,” said Conacher at last, like a schoolboy trying to carry it off flippantly, “I must make a break . . .”

“Oh!” she cried, hurt to the quick. “Is that all you care?”

He dropped his absurd pretense. “It is like death to leave you now,” he murmured, brokenly.

“Well, good-by,” she said suddenly in an unnaturally high-pitched voice. And turned as if to run forthwith.

He caught hold of her. “No! No!” he cried. “Not like this!”

She struggled in his arms. “Let me go! Let me go!” she whispered in a desperate voice. “I can’t stand these good-bys. I like a thing ended quickly. . . . Let me go!”

Holding her within one arm he tried to turn up her face to his. “Loseis . . . dearest . . . before I go,” he whispered imploringly. “*Please*, Loseis. . . . To remember all those lonely nights . . .”

She resisted with all her strength. “No! No! No! No! Not yet! If you kiss me I shall never be able to let you go! . . . Ah, let me go while I want to go!”

That naïve cry touched his heart. He released her. The instant she was released she lost all her desire to run. She stood there in front of him, very still.

“You had better go,” he said shakily.

“Put your hands behind your back!” she whispered breathlessly. “Stoop down a little.”

He obeyed.

Like lightning her arms went around his neck, and her lips were pressed hard against his. Then like a shadow she was gone. Through the dark her caressing whisper came back to him.

“Come back soon, dear!”

When Loseis got back to the Women’s House, Gault was sitting there by the fire, smoking a fresh cigar. He sprang up with a pleasant, fatherly sort of smile. His eyes dwelt lightly on Loseis’s face, but she had an impression just the same, that they were boring into her. Well, let them bore! At the business of hiding her heart she was fully his match. She showed him a smooth, untroubled face.

“Has he gone?” asked Gault.

“I expect so,” said Loseis. “I did not go down the hill with him.”

Gault rubbed his lip. He didn’t know whether or not to believe her.

He felt his way carefully. “Conacher seems like a fine young fellow,” he remarked. “Have you known him long?”

Loseis remained standing by the fire. “Oh, he stopped here for three days,” she said coolly. “But I scarcely saw him then.”

“How did he learn so soon of your father’s death?”

“I never thought to ask him,” said Loseis with a clear brow. “By moccasin telegraph, I suppose. The Slavis are continually traveling up and down the river.”

“It is too bad that he is in the government employ,” said Gault.

Loseis had no intention of discussing the man she loved with another man. She remained silent. She had a good capacity for holding her tongue. It was her only defense against Gault’s smooth talk; and it was a better defense than she realized.

Gault was obliged to go on and answer the question without its having been asked. “They never come to anything,” he said. “They are no more than clerks all their lives.”

“So I have heard,” said Loseis indifferently.

Gault was deceived by her coolness. He argued that she was too young to be able to hide her feelings so consummately. She did not care for the young geologist. Their meetings had been too few and brief for any serious damage to be worked. He began to feel better.

“How did you learn of my father’s death?” asked Loseis unexpectedly.

Gault determined to tell the truth, since it must become known anyway. “The Indian Etzooah brought me the news. Did you not send him?”

“No,” said Loseis.

“Well!” said Gault with an air of astonishment. “I suppose he must have started off blindly on his own account.”

“I didn’t know he could speak English,” said Loseis.

“He can’t. Only Cree.”

“Nobody here knew that he could speak Cree, either,” said Loseis.

Gault allowed the subject to drop. “While you were away I have been sitting here thinking over your affairs,” he said, enveloping Loseis with his smile.

Oh, Heaven! she thought; is he going to start talking again? How can I endure it without Conacher here to keep me in countenance! In desperation she feigned to hide a yawn behind her hand.

Gault had no recourse but to take the hint. “You are worn out!” he said solicitously. “And no wonder. I will retire now. And to-morrow we can talk.”

Loseis’ heart sunk. To-morrow!—and all the succeeding to-morrows! Should she never be able to escape his talk! “You are very kind,” she murmured politely.

“Good-night,” said Gault, offering her his hand.

Loseis either had to give him hers, or come to an open quarrel. With an inward shiver of repulsion, she laid her hand within his, keeping her eyes close hid. “Good-night,” she murmured.

Good God! how beautiful she is! thought Gault; with her mixture of haughty pride and shyness (for so he took it). I’d take her if she didn’t have a cent! A genuine desire was mingled with the calculation in his eyes; he bared his teeth in what he intended to be an ardent smile. In his youth Gault had been famous for his big white teeth, and he did not realize that their luster was somewhat diminished. For a moment he clung to the cool, limp hand.

“My dear, dear girl!” he murmured. “If you only knew how my heart goes out to you in this hour of affliction. My only desire is to serve you!”

Loseis gritted her teeth in a torment of repulsion. Grinning at her in that disgusting way, while his hard eyes sought to pry into her heart? She could *feel* his grin, though she kept her eyes down. Her hand trembled with the desire to snatch itself away, and smack his leering old face. But above all she was determined that Blackburn’s daughter should not be revealed to this fine gentleman as a savage uncultured girl, and she commanded her repulsion.

“Good-night . . . good-night,” repeated Gault with a touch of archness, that looked to the future. He hastened out with a debonair swing. Loseis’ fiery eyes bored holes in his back.

Crossing the grass, Gault exulted within himself. “A half-formed child,” he thought; “an experienced man can make whatever he chooses of her! And by God, what natural elegance! what pride! what beauty! I am in luck!”

While within the room he had just left, Loseis scowled at her offending hand, and rubbed it violently on her skirt.

CHAPTER VII

THE CLOVEN HOOF

NEXT morning before Loseis had breakfasted, Gault was back at the Women's House, knocking deprecatingly at the door.

"I'm sorry to disturb you so early," he said, "but I forgot something last night; and I'm holding my messenger now until I can get it from you."

"What is that?" asked Loseis.

"May I come in?" he said smiling.

Loseis led the way into her room.

Gault had several sheets of paper in his hand. "If, as I suspect," he began in the smooth voice which so exasperated Loseis without her knowing why, "Blackburn has sums of money lying in the bank outside, that belongs to you, of course; but you could not draw against it unless the bank was already in possession of your signature. Therefore, in order to save time, I propose to send out several specimens of your signature now. I will put them in the hands of your lawyer, who will in turn pass them on to the bank."

This sounded all right to Loseis, who proceeded to write her name on each of the four blank sheets that Gault passed her. Loseis had had small occasion to practice the art of handwriting, and it was but slowly that she formed the great round letters of her official name.

Laurentia Blackburn

"Laurentia!" murmured Gault in a fond voice. "What an odd name."

"I believe I was named after a chain of mountains," said Loseis dryly.

"But how dignified and melodious!" he said. "Laurentia . . . Laurentia . . . !"

She shot an irritated glance at him through her lashes. Had the man nothing better to do than to stand there mouthing her name in that ridiculous fashion! Loseis privately detested her name. Jane would have been more to her fancy.

Gault gathered up the sheets, and made as if to go. At the door he paused: “I say,” he said, like one speaking to a child, “isn’t there something at Fort Good Hope that you would like my messenger to bring back to you? I have a regular ‘outside’ store at Good Hope, you know.”

“Oh, no, thank you,” said Loseis quickly. “Nothing at all!”

“Just the same,” said Gault with that arch smile of his, “I will see if we cannot find something that will please you!”

As he went through the door Loseis involuntarily flung up her arms crying: “Oh, give me air! Give me air!”

Mary-Lou came running in to see what was the matter.

Loseis kicked a fur rug violently to one side, and banged open the little window. “Oh, that man is like a bearskin tied over one’s head; like a feather bed upon one!” she cried. Standing back from the window she angrily apostrophized the receding figure of Gault. “Yes, you! you! If I have to see you every day I shall suffocate!” Turning around and beholding the amazed figure of Mary-Lou, Loseis suddenly embraced her, and dropping her head on her shoulder, burst into tears.

“But what is the matter?” gasped Mary-Lou.

“I don’t know!” wailed Loseis. “I must be crazy! He speaks fair and honest; he is always polite and kind . . . but . . . but I *can’t stand* the man!”

Before the morning was out Gault was seen returning. Loseis, who had persuaded herself that she was a fool, schooled herself to receive him politely. He was accompanied this time by one of his Crees, who was carrying a neat leather-covered box by its handle. Gault never performed such menial tasks for himself. There was enough of the child in Loseis to be rendered intensely curious by the sight of that box.

The trader dismissed his servant at the door, and brought the box in himself. Upon being laid on the table and opened, a most fascinating and complicated little machine was revealed, all shining with nickel-plate and black lacquer. Loseis had not the remotest idea of what it was for.

“This is the typewriter; the writing-machine,” explained the trader. “I have another one at the Post which I have sent for. In the meantime I want to present this to you. I thought it might amuse you to practice on it; and it will certainly save you time. Now that you are a business woman, you will have many letters to write.”

Loseis' heart was touched by this seeming act of kindness. She felt remorseful. "That is very good of you," she said, blushing. "It is true, I am a miserable writer. But I shall never be able to learn this."

"On the contrary," said Gault. "It is very simple. Sit down at the table and I will show you now."

Loseis obeyed; and Gault drew up another chair close beside her. He explained to her how to put the paper in; how to shift the carriage back and forth; how to start a new line. For the rest all you had to do was to strike the proper letters. In ten minutes Loseis had mastered the idea of the thing. She was fascinated with this new toy (she had possessed so few toys in her life) but was made horribly uncomfortable by the enforced proximity of Gault's head to her own. He was chewing some sort of medicated candy that gave his breath a strong, pungent odor. Loseis hated strong smells of every kind.

"Now let me try it all by myself," she said.

"Go ahead! Go ahead!" he said, but did not withdraw himself at all. When he saw her at a loss, he would grab hold of her finger and guide it to the right key. Loseis shivered internally.

Finally her discomfort became more than she could bear. "I cannot do a thing if you hang over me like that," she said.

Gault leaned back in his chair with a great laugh. "So independent!" he said teasingly.

However, he held himself away from her, and Loseis proceeded with her slow punching of the keys. How strange and fascinating to see the words stand up upon the paper! She had never possessed so marvelous a toy as this. As soon as Gault was out of the way she would start a letter to Conacher. How astonished he would be!

In a minute or two Gault's head was as close as ever to hers. Loseis tried to ignore the fact, but it was impossible to do so. She was aware, through a subtle feminine sense, that he was not paying any attention to the typewriter now. He was too still. She felt as if something precious were being drawn from her that she had no intention of yielding to any man save one.

"I'll go on with this this afternoon," she said nervously. "I have to do something else now." At the same time she attempted to slide sideways out of her chair.

Gault caught her hand. "Ah, don't stop," he said a little thickly. "You look like such a cunning little student, bending over your work. Where did

you get that wonderful black hair of yours . . . ?”

Loseis was up like a wild thing then, and backing off to the far end of the room. “How dare you! How dare you!” she said breathlessly. “Take yourself out of here, and your machine too! Or I’ll fling it after you! Did you bring it here only as an excuse to insult me!”

Gault rose also. “Well!” he cried, laughing heartily. But there was an ugly look in his eyes.

His laughter immediately brought about a reaction in Loseis. She realized that she was making far too much of a trifle. This was not the way for a well-born girl to act. She told herself that it was only because she had come to love another man that she found this one detestable. She lowered her head, and a hot blush flowed over her cheeks.

“I am sorry,” she muttered unwillingly. “I am out of sorts this morning. I did not mean what I said.” In the very act of saying this Loseis’ heart accused her of cowardice. She felt hopelessly confused. Oh, how difficult it was to be well-bred and ladylike.

“Why, that’s all right!” cried Gault heartily. “It is perfectly natural at such a time. I’m sorry I displeased you. I assure you I feel nothing for you, but the deepest respect and sympathy! . . . I’ll leave you now. Do amuse yourself with the typewriter.”

As he walked away from the house he murmured to himself: “A skittish filly! I must proceed more slowly. Gad! it’s difficult though!” Thus he deceived himself, as middle-aged gentlemen bent on gallantry are so apt to do. He felt delightfully ardent. At the same time though, a nasty little anxiety continued to plague the back of his mind.

Meanwhile Loseis paced up and down her room, wondering for the hundredth time within the past twenty-four hours, what was the matter with her, that she felt so hopelessly divided. This was a new feeling for her. However the shining little typewriter *was* fascinating. She presently sat down to compose a letter to Conacher; and forgot her troubles. Another little raft carried her letter downstream.

Every afternoon Loseis opened the store. It was a point of pride with her to comport herself in all respects towards the Slavis as if nothing had happened. She often visited their village, interesting herself in all their concerns, as she considered fitting in a prudent mistress towards her childish and feather-brained servants. They were shy with her, and none came to

trade at the store. Loseis, shrugging, was content to bide her time. Hunger would tell in the end. For twenty years now, the Slavis had been accustomed to the white man's flour, tea and sugar, and the present generation could not do without them.

Loseis and Mary-Lou sat on the bench outside the store. Mary-Lou had been reading aloud, but her mistress had silenced her, because she wished to think. Loseis was unpracticed in the exercise of thinking things over, and she found it both difficult and painful. This was the question on which she split: was Gault a scoundrel? All his acts and words seemed to be above reproach; but Loseis' heart stubbornly misgave her. Could she trust her heart? She reflected that her father had never betrayed any hesitation in calling Gault a scoundrel; but Loseis had had plenty of examples of her father's wrong-headedness. She adored him, but had no great opinion of his judgment. It was by his strength and energy that Blackburn had forged ahead, not by wisdom. And so the weary round continued. To one of Loseis' downright nature it was torture to remain in a state of indecision.

At the door of Blackburn's House fifty yards distant from where they sat, the Indian Etzooah was to be seen ostentatiously cleaning a pair of Gault's boots. It suggested itself to Loseis as rather curious that Gault should choose the ignorant Slavi for a body-servant, when he had the more civilized Crees. She recollected that on various occasions during the past few days she had seen Etzooah hanging about looking self-conscious. The thought popped into her head that perhaps Gault had set him as a spy on her movements. Well, supposing that to be so, here was a chance to turn the tables on the trader. Through Etzooah she might be able to learn if Gault had lied to her.

She called to Etzooah in her ordinary manner of offhand assurance. When he came to her cringing and grinning in his imbecile fashion (you could read nothing in that grin of the Slavis) she said coolly:

"I need a man. There are some goods in the store to be moved."

Leading him inside, she had him shift some bags of flour from one place to another. This done, she presented him with a plug of tobacco, and let him know that he had done all she required. They returned outside, and Loseis bade Mary-Lou go on with the reading.

Etzooah, as Loseis expected, did not leave them, but, making his face perfectly vacant, squatted down in the grass at the other side of the door, and proceeded to shave a pipeful of tobacco from the plug, careful not to spill a

crumb. Loseis allowed Mary-Lou to read for awhile, then she started slightly as if a thought had just occurred to her, and motioned to the girl to stop.

"Etzooah," she said (speaking in the Slavi tongue of course) "it comes to me that I have not thanked you for fetching Gault from Fort Good Hope. That was well done."

Etzooah grinned. "Gault is a good man," he said.

"You speak truth," said Loseis gravely. "How did it come that you set off without telling me?"

"Wah!" said Etzooah, "you were attending upon the body of Blackburn. It was not right for me to go to you at such a time. I just caught some horses and went."

"It was well thought of," said Loseis. "How did you make yourself understood to the white men?"

"I speak the Cree," said Etzooah.

"Wah!" said Loseis politely. "That was not known to me."

"My father was a Cree," said Etzooah. "It is well known."

"I had forgotten," said Loseis.

Without changing a muscle of her face, or raising her voice at all, Loseis shifted to English. "Etzooah," she said, "the Slavis are saying to each other that you were false to your own people. They are angry because you brought Gault here. . . . Do not move suddenly or you are a dead man. Mahtsonza is hiding behind the corner of the store with a gun in his hands waiting to shoot you!"

Etzooah's copper face changed to a livid ash-color. Suddenly with a single movement he bounded to his feet, and inside the door of the store. Loseis stood up with a scornful laugh.

"Go back to your master," she said, pointing. "I only wished to find out if you could speak English. You are a spy!"

Etzooah slunk away. Still only half convinced that he had been tricked, he kept glancing fearfully over his shoulder.

Loseis was filled with a fierce exultation. Now she *knew*! No more indecision. To be sure, when she reflected, her solitary and desperate situation might well appall the stoutest heart; but at the moment she was only aware of the relief of getting rid of that suffocating sense of futility.

Now she would know what to do! Her father was right about Gault; and her own heart had not played her false.

She closed the store, and took Mary-Lou back to their house.

Loseis' nature knew no half measures. Having recognized Gault as her enemy, she was prepared to fight. She did not blink the danger of her position. She no longer had any illusions about the fate of those letters which the trader had so impressively despatched outside. She realized that Gault himself stood between her and any possible succor, and that he intended to keep her cut off from her kind until he should have obtained what he wanted. Well, she quickly resolved upon a course of action. Her only hope lay in bringing her wits into play. Gault must not be allowed to suspect that she saw through his schemes. Etzooah, she knew, would never dare confess to his master that he had betrayed himself. There was a fatuous side to Gault's character; and she must play on that. Perhaps through his own folly she might defeat him in the end.

Suddenly Loseis clapped her hands to her head with a cry of dismay. She had suddenly recollected that all her father's papers were in his desk in the room where Gault was sleeping, and the desk was not even locked! While he was alive of course, nobody would have dared venture into Blackburn's room uninvited, much less touch his papers. Loseis beat her fists against her head, and groaned in bitterness. What an ignorant childish fool she had been to neglect a thing so important!

She ran to the window to look across at the men's house. She could not tell whether Gault was within or not. On the spur of the moment she sent Mary-Lou across to invite Gault and Moale to supper with her. Mary-Lou returned to say that the two men had ridden up to the lake (ten miles distant) to have a look at the Slavi village there. Loseis then ventured across herself.

Etzooah was in the kitchen of the house. He received her with his customary witless grin, and edged in front of the door to the inner room as if to keep her out. Loseis caught her breath in astonishment, and her eyes fairly blazed on the man.

"Stand aside, dog of a redskin!" she cried. "This is my father's house, and Gault is only a guest here at my pleasure!"

To the terrified Indian it seemed as if the little figure had grown a foot. He slunk aside, and Loseis went into her father's room, closing the door after her.

Upon her first glance at the desk it was apparent to her that Gault had stolen a march on her; though she did not immediately understand the significance of what he had done. The desk was a handsome piece after the Colonial style made by Blackburn himself. It had four drawers below, and a flap which lifted down to form the writing table. The drawers and the flap alike were fastened shut by strips of papers, caught down by clots of sealing wax. Going closer Loseis saw that the wax had been impressed with Gault's ring.

Loseis smiled bitterly. Her first impulse was to tear open these flimsy seals; but she held her hand. No; the damage was already done; if anything had been abstracted, how was she to know? Better to keep Gault in ignorance of the fact that she had been there. She did not believe that Etzooah would tell him, unless it occurred to Gault to question him. A Slavi never volunteers any information to a white man. The upshot was that Loseis turned around, and went home.

The invitation to supper was repeated later. When Gault came over it was a changed Loseis who greeted him. Her uncertainty was gone. Danger stimulated her; all her faculties were sharpened. She had put on one of her prettiest dresses; her dark eyes sparkled with topaz lights; and she gave Gault smile for smile. The trader was charmed. She is coming 'round, he thought; I knew she would.

Moale saw deeper. His inscrutable eyes followed Loseis with a new respect. Moale served his master very faithfully, but he was like the Slavis in one respect; he never volunteered any information.

Supper was quite a jolly occasion. Loseis listened attentively to Gault's stories; and was prompt with her applause. The trader visibly expanded; and Moale's expression as he watched him became even more sardonic than usual. During the course of the meal, Loseis said with an innocent air:

"Mr. Gault, all my father's papers are in that desk in your room. Will you go over everything with me to-morrow, and explain it."

He wagged a protesting hand in her direction. "No, no, no," he said; "nothing must be touched until the lawyer comes."

"That cannot be for weeks yet," said Loseis, "and in the meantime I am curious to . . ."

"I have sealed the desk," said Gault.

"Sealed my father's desk?" said Loseis, opening her eyes wide.

“My dear girl, consider my position,” he said. “I am an interested party in these matters—or at least I will be so considered; and I have to lean over backwards in the effort to avoid anything which would look like taking an unfair advantage. Imagine my feelings upon retiring that first night, when I found myself alone in the room with all the private papers of my late rival in business! I was shocked; shocked. If the desk had been locked, and the key in your possession it would have been all right; but upon trying it—for my own protection, I found that it was open. Fortunately Moale was in the kitchen. I instantly called him in, and sealed up the desk in his presence.”

“Why didn’t you let me know?” asked Loseis.

“It was late. You had retired.”

“Why didn’t you speak of it next day?”

“I never thought of it. It is customary when a man dies to seal up his papers until his attorney can take charge. I did it as a matter of course.”

“Perhaps his papers are not there after all,” said Loseis.

“Perhaps not,” said Gault, with a seeming open look. “I only moved the cover with my thumb for about a quarter of an inch to find out if it was locked. I know no more than the man in the moon what the desk contains.”

Loseis lowered her eyes. What a fool he must think me! she thought—well, it is just as well that he should think me a fool.

“Did Blackburn possess a safe?” asked Gault.

“No,” said Loseis. “Nobody ever stole anything from my father.”

“I wish I could say the same,” said Gault ruefully. He went on to tell the story of the Scotch half-breed who had brought a black fox skin to his post to trade, and had then replaced it with a clumsy imitation, almost under the trader’s nose. It appeared that he had worked the trick in turn at every post on the big river; but was apprehended at Fort McMaster on his way out. Loseis, smiling at the story, permitted Gault to suppose that it had caused her to forget the sealed desk.

After the meal, Gault sent Moale away on a manifestly trumped-up errand. Loseis was not sorry to see him go. She was a little afraid of his unchanging, watchful gaze. He never spoke unless he were addressed. As for Gault, it was curious that now she knew he was her enemy, she no longer dreaded to be left alone with him.

She drew up the hammock-chair to the fire. “You must take this chair to-night,” she said. “And light one of your delicious cigars. . . . There,” she said presently, “that is just like the happy nights when my father came to sit with me.”

Gault’s smile became a little bleak. He didn’t want to be regarded as a father. He stole a look at Loseis to see if this could be an intentional dig; but her face expressed only an innocent pleasure in seeing him comfortable.

She perched herself on one of the straight-backed chairs beside him, with her heels cocked up on the rungs. “Have you ever been married, Mr. Gault?” she asked.

“No,” said the trader, a little uncertain as to what was coming next.

“Why not?” asked Loseis.

“Well,” said he, looking noble, “I could not bear to expose the kind of woman that I wished to marry to my rude life in the wilderness.”

“How lonely you must have been!” murmured Loseis.

Gault felt reassured. This was the sort of talk a man had the right to expect from a white woman. He settled himself for a comfortable heart to heart talk by the fire. “Ah, yes,” he said with a far-away look; “I have had my bitter times! People call me a hard man; they do not know! They do not know!”

The corners of Loseis’ mouth twitched demurely. “Tell me all about yourself,” she murmured.

CHAPTER VIII

HEAVENLY MUSIC

AT noon of the fourth day after his setting-out, Gault's messenger returned from Fort Good Hope driving several laden pack-horses before him. The horses were unpacked at the door of Blackburn's House, and the goods carried in. From their windows opposite, Loseis and the four Marys full of curiosity, watched and speculated on the contents of the various packages. The natural consequence of Blackburn's having forbidden all traffic across the height of land was that Fort Good Hope loomed in the imagination of his people as a sort of fabulous place. Anything might come from there.

By and by Gault was seen coming across the grass accompanied by a breed with a canvas duffle bag over his shoulder.

"More presents for you!" cried Mary-Lou clasping her hands.

Loseis permitted all the girls to be present while the bag was unpacked. Gault disregarded them. Thrusting his arm into the bag, he produced the various articles with a tender and proprietary smile upon Loseis. The Princess at such a moment was like any other young thing; breathless with anticipation, all her difficulties and dangers forgotten. First came several packages of novels, and an exclamation of pleasure escaped her. Novels had been forbidden her; and she had had no more than tantalizing tastes of their contents in the installments appearing in the magazines which drifted to Blackburn's Post from time to time. Next came boxes of chocolates and other candies specially packed in tin. Next bottles of perfumes of various sorts, and boxes of strongly-scented soaps. As soon as Gault was out of the way, Loseis distributed these amongst her hand-maids. Next a box of elegant writing paper; pink, with gold edges.

"For you to write to me upon when I am gone," said Gault with his fond smile.

(May that be soon! thought Loseis.) Aloud she said: "How pretty!"

The most astonishing present came, as was most fitting, from the bottom of the bag. From a little card-board box Gault took a shining nickel cube,

having a sort of cup at one end, covered with glass. When you pressed a spring in the cube, light most miraculously appeared behind the glass. Loseis took it gingerly in her hands, gazing at it with wide and wondering eyes. The four red girls drew back, a little afraid.

“Of course you can’t get the full effect of it until dark,” said Gault.

“This is the electric light of which I have read,” said Loseis in a hushed voice. “How strange and beautiful!”

“There’s a box of extra batteries when it gives out,” said the trader.

Batteries meant nothing to Loseis. The gleaming torch had laid a spell upon her imagination. She switched it on and off. How strange, how strange this little light that she summoned and dismissed with a touch of her finger, like a fairy servant!

“If you went through the Slavi village some night with that in your hand it would create a sensation,” said Gault laughing.

His laughter jarred on Loseis. “No use frightening them for nothing,” she said. “I might need it some time.”

In the beginning it would have irked Loseis very much to receive these presents from Gault, but now she felt no qualms. He is counting on getting it back many times over, she thought.

During the course of the afternoon, Loseis and her girls were astonished to see Gault’s men climbing to the roof of Blackburn’s House. Alongside the chimney they affixed a tall pole. When it was up, wires were strung from it to the top of the flagpole in the middle of the little plaza. Loseis’ curiosity could no longer contain itself. She went across to ask what they were doing.

“Wait until to-night,” said Gault, smiling. “You are dining with me to-night. Afterwards there is to be a surprise.”

That dinner was full of new things for Loseis. A crowning touch was supplied by a potted geranium in the center of the table, bearing three scarlet blossoms. Never before had that flower bloomed at Blackburn’s Post. A cry of admiration broke from Loseis.

“The parson’s sister sent it to you with her compliments,” said the trader. “She has them blooming all winter in her parlor.”

Loseis’ heart suddenly went out to this unknown sister of her own color. “What is she like?” she asked shyly.

“Oh, just what you’d expect a parson’s sister to be,” he said indifferently.

The food was strange to Loseis; but for the most part highly agreeable. First there was a queer, spicy soup. Mulligatawney, Gault called it, and Loseis laughed at the ridiculous-sounding word. It must have come out of a can, she reflected. This was followed by a great roast of beef which is extraordinarily esteemed as an article of food up North, simply because it is so hard to come by. ("A steer was slaughtered at Fort Good Hope expressly for you," said Gault to Loseis with a bow.) With the roast beef were served potatoes and stewed tomatoes, both novel dishes at Blackburn's Post. For dessert came on a plum pudding, likewise out of a can; and this Loseis considered the best thing she had ever tasted. There were, besides, small dishes containing olives which the guest did not like; and salted almonds which she did.

Pride forbade Loseis to betray any further curiosity concerning the "surprise" but with every mouthful she took, she was thrillingly conscious of an oblong box that rested on a small table at the side of the room, covered by a cloth. That must be the surprise of course. It had a most exciting shape.

After the table had been cleared, Gault sought to tease her, by lighting up his cigar in leisurely fashion, while he talked of indifferent matters. But he didn't get any change out of Loseis, who sat quietly with her hands in her lap, looking at the fire.

Finally he said: "Wouldn't you like to know what is under that cloth?"

"Whenever you are ready," said Loseis politely.

Gault laughed, and jerked the cloth away. Loseis beheld a beautiful box of a polished red wood, having in the front of it several curious black knobs with indicators and dials above them. The whole apparatus was suggestive of magic. Gault began to turn the knobs, and Loseis, holding her breath, prepared herself for anything to happen; red and green flames perhaps, with a Jinn springing up in the middle.

When it came, it let her down suddenly from that awful suspense. It was not startling at all, but sweet. Music mysteriously filled the room, coming, not from that box, but from an unknown source. It melted the heart with its sweetness. It resembled the music of a violin with which Loseis was familiar, but infinitely fuller and richer, with strange, deep undertones that caused delicious shivers to run up the girl's spine.

"Oh, what is it? What is it?" she murmured.

"Music from Heaven," said Gault grinning.

For a moment she believed him. Closing her eyes, she gave herself up to the entrancing sounds. It was too beautiful, too beautiful to be of this earth. Yet it was not strange; it seemed like something she had always been waiting for; it satisfied a longing. It caused her to think of her father and of her lover. The thoughts of death and of love became intermingled in her mind, intolerably sweet and bitter. The tears swelled under her eyelids.

Then Gault destroyed the spell that he himself had evoked. “It’s coming through fine, to-night,” he remarked to Moale. “No interference.”

Loseis dropped down to earth. A recollection came to her. “It is the radio,” she said quietly. “I have read of that, too.”

It was a music of many voices, now loud, now soft; one voice then another spoke above them all; then all were raised together. Shrill, merry voices running up and down like laughter; voices as plaintive as the laughter of loons at dusk; deep, sonorous voices that suggested courage and endurance. Loseis tried in vain to pick out the tune. It had a meaning; but one could not grasp it. It was like listening to the whole world.

“What makes such music?” she whispered.

“Orchestra,” he said.

Loseis had met with this word in books; but she did not know the meaning. She would not ask.

“A whole crowd of instruments together,” said Gault. “Little fiddles, medium size fiddles, and big fiddles; wooden horns and brass horns of every size and shape; and a row of drums.”

“Where is it coming from?” she asked.

“From the station in Calgary.”

Loseis was lifted up on the wings of wonder again. From Calgary! A thousand miles away! She visualized the long ten miles ride to the Lake; and tried to imagine a hundred times ten miles. It was too much; the mind could not take it in. She thought of the night outside, and suddenly it became clear to her why the silence of Northern nights was so profoundly disturbing. It was not a silence at all; the night was full of these voices from all over the world, winging through the sky, and the heart was sensible to them, though the ears were deaf.

“How do you do it? How do you do it?” murmured Loseis.

“Oh, it would take old Marconi to explain that,” said the trader laughing.

Ah! will Paul and I ever listen to such music together? thought Loseis.

The music came to an end. After a pause a man began to speak. This affected Loseis even more strangely than the music. A man speaking to them in a quiet, friendly voice, as if he was there beside them! And he was not there. A spirit was amongst them without its body. Awe gripped Loseis. She shivered, and looked over her shoulder. Gault watching her, chuckled, and she shrank sharply into herself again.

The man was giving a humorous account of how he went with his wife to buy a hat. He spoke of the crowds of people in the streets, and the gayly decorated shop windows. Loseis was too much filled with wonder of the voice to pay heed to the story. He said: "I met her at the Palliser Hotel this afternoon." Yet he was a thousand miles away! He said: "I took her into the restaurant, and when she said she wasn't hungry, I prepared myself for the worst." Gault and Moale laughed, and Loseis looked at them in surprise. A thousand miles! A thousand miles.

It was a jolly, friendly voice that reassured the child's heart of Loseis. And it was clear that he was speaking to others whom he knew to be as honest and kind as himself. Loseis had a sudden vision of the populous, kindly world lying outside, and her breast yearned over it. The friendly voice seemed to bring her so close, to admit her to that world. But a realization of her loneliness swept over her. There was that thousand miles of prairie, muskeg and forest lying between. Alone! Alone! worse than alone, for she was hedged about with false and lying men who wished her ill. Ah! If she could only communicate with the honest people, they would not let her come to harm. Drawn quite out of herself, Loseis rose to her feet, stretching out her arms.

"Oh, if I could only speak to him!" she murmured.

Gault laughed heartily. "That would require a whole transmitting station," he said. "Quite a different matter from getting it."

Loseis dropped back in her chair. She glanced at the trader with involuntary dislike. What a coarse animal under his fine manners! she thought.

When the concert came to an end, Gault said: "To-morrow night, we'll get the Slavis into the kitchen, and spring it on them," he said laughing. "Lordy! what a scatteration there will be!"

Loseis got up to go. "You will do what you like, of course," she said coldly. "But do not expect me to come."

“But why?” asked the surprised Gault.

“It’s a beautiful, wonderful thing,” said Loseis, looking wistfully at the red box. “I should not care to see it made a mock of.”

“Oh, well, in that case,” said Gault quickly, “no Slavis! I brought this over solely to give you pleasure, Princess!”

CHAPTER IX

AN UPSET

GAULT and Moale were breakfasting in the men's house.

"How about the fur here?" asked Moale.

"All in good time," said his master.

"Have you got the key to the warehouse?"

"Yes. But of course I have to make out that it's sealed up in the desk."

"I don't see what you expect to gain by that bit of flummery," said Moale.

"No?" said Gault sarcastically. "I am keeping the girl out of her father's papers, am I not? . . . I know what I am doing. Suppose some one should come in here? Everything would be found in order; Blackburn's will, his accounts, his letters. I have taken nothing, because there was nothing I wanted; it was sufficient for me to read it all."

"What was in his will?" said Moale curiously.

"Oh, he left everything to the girl, of course. That doesn't signify anything, because if there was no will, the courts would award it to her anyway."

"Well, I'd like fine to have a look at that fur," said Moale with glittering eyes. Fur was his passion. If he had other passions, he kept them hid.

"You are to keep away from the warehouse for the present," said Gault peremptorily.

"I have read the inventory," said Moale. "There are ten black fox skins of the first quality. I have never seen so many at one time. Those alone will bring from a thousand to fifteen hundred each. Besides the silver and the cross foxes; the mink, otter and fisher. The whole lot is worth well above a hundred thousand at present prices."

"Quite that," said Gault. "But I'm playing for a bigger stake, and I don't intend to jeopardize it by making any premature move."

“How much is the girl worth?” asked Moale slyly.

“I don’t know,” said the other coolly.

Moale lowered his eyes; he knew very well that Gault was lying; but did not care to let him see that he knew. Presently he said: “The news of Blackburn’s death will be all over by now. That fool Etzooah let it out at our post before I could stop his mouth. And Conacher carried the news north with him.”

“I had no thought of keeping it secret,” said Gault.

“How about Gruber, then? If you keep him waiting too long at the Crossing, he’s likely to come down here to see what’s up.”

“I’ve written to Gruber telling him that if he will wait a few weeks, I’ll send him the fur as soon as I can arrange matters.”

“Maybe that letter won’t satisfy him.”

“Well, if he comes he shall have the fur. It will be a good way of getting him away from here again.”

“I should hate to see that fur get out of our hands,” said Moale. “That’s real; that’s the goods! Whereas the other thing . . .” He shrugged.

“You’re a fool,” said Gault contemptuously. “The girl is all but ready to drop into my arms. All I need is a little time.”

Moale looked down at his plate again.

In spite of the confidence that Gault had expressed, this conversation brought forward the little worrying anxiety that lingered in the back of his mind. Here were the days passing one after another, and could it be honestly said that he was making progress with Loseis? Sometimes he was sure he was—sometimes not so sure. She was such a baffling creature; at one moment as open and easily moved as a child and the next moment revealing a maturity of mind and an originality that startled him. At other times she was as provoking and secretive as an Indian. To be sure of late she had been generally friendly, even sympathetic; but try as he would, he could not get their relations on the man and woman plane, the plane of courtship. Loseis eluded him like a sprite.

In his heart Gault cursed the time that must be wasted in wooing a civilized miss. They managed such things better in a simpler state of society, when the girl would have been hit over the head, and dragged off without more ado. Women have never really become civilized, he thought; they need

to be beaten still. Well, having an eye to the outside world, he could not actually do this, but should he not apply the principle? Perhaps he had been too gentle, too considerate a wooer. That only set her up in her own opinion. It was ridiculous to suppose that a mere slip of a girl who didn't know her own mind could resist a mature and strong-willed man like himself. The time had come for him to overbear her by the mere force of his personality. She would thank him for it in the end. A Loseis, humbled and loving; Ah! what a seductive picture!

Gault had his horse brought, and mounting, rode across to the Women's House, well aware that he appeared to the best advantage on a horse. He knocked at the door without dismounting, and when Loseis appeared, she was obliged to look up at him, proudly holding his seat, and making believe to soothe his horse, while secretly fretting him with his off heel. But no light of admiration appeared in Loseis' clear eyes. She took horsemanship as a matter of course.

"Will you ride up to the lake with me?" asked Gault. "I have grub for two. I think you ought to show yourselves to the Slavis just to remind them that you are the mistress here."

Loseis cocked an eye at the sky. It was like an inverted bowl of palest turquoise. "Surely!" she cried. "I'm longing for a ride. Give me five minutes to change my skirt."

Mary-Rose was sent running to fetch Loseis' horse.

Loseis and her horse appeared simultaneously. This was the first time that Gault had beheld the girl's riding costume. It comprised Strathcona boots; breeches; a blue flannel shirt; and a flat-brimmed man's hat set crookedly on one side of her head. The shirt was open at the neck, and under the collar she had knotted a gay red and yellow kerchief. She turned up her face to the sky, all open, drinking in the light with joy; and Gault, observing her hair, softer and blacker than anything else in Nature, the tender brilliance of her eyes, and her flower-petal lips, felt a pain like a needle go through his breast, and lost his sense of mastery.

He thought: The devil is in it, that she is able to hurt me so! She must never be allowed to suspect her power.

Loseis vaulted on her horse. They trotted down the rise, and passing between the tepees, splashed through the small stream. Clawing their way up the further bank, their horses broke into a gallop in the clean grass.

Summer had pronounced her benediction on the North, and the world was like a freshly painted picture. Loseis, who was ahead, sang out:

"Oh, what a day for a ride!" To herself she added: "If that was Conacher pounding along behind, I should be the happiest girl alive!"

Their way led more or less close to the river. There were but two horse trails leaving Blackburn's Post; that to Fort Good Hope, and this one which, after circling the easterly shore of Blackburn's Lake, struck south to the distant rendezvous near the Crossing. Rich bottom lands alternated with occasional gravelly ridges to be crossed. Conversation was impossible; for horses trained to the trail will not travel abreast; however Gault, knowing that they would be out all day, was content to bide his time.

Descending into a lush meadow, already fetlock deep in grass, Loseis clapped heels to her horse, and set off, yelling like an Indian. Her sorrel mare laid her ears back and went like the wind. She would have yelled too if she could. The sight brought that needle-pain back to Gault's breast, by reminding him that his day for yelling and running was forever past.

In another meadow they came upon a herd of horses quietly feeding, and Loseis paused to look them over. These were the broken horses kept on this side, while the wild horses ranged across the river. Blackburn on the day he was killed, had been engaged in rounding up these horses to take out the fur.

When they rode up on top of the ridge which formed the cut-bank known as Swallow Bend, all Loseis' gayety was quenched. She slipped out of her saddle, and without speaking, handed her rein to Gault to hold. Creeping to the edge of the bank, she looked over. In the gravelly stuff below she could easily follow the marks where the horses had first struck, and then rolled down into the water. A wild regret filled her heart, and her tears ran fast.

They were still falling when she returned to Gault, and silently received her rein. Her grief was as natural and spontaneous as her gayety had been an hour before. The ageing man bit his lip and cursed her in his heart for being so beautiful.

Just below the lake they forded the main stream through a brawling shallow rapid, the Slavi village being on the other side. Scores of tepees rose here, as well as several log shacks built in imitation of the white man for winter use. Their coming was beheld from afar, and a tremendous commotion arose in the village; the news was shrieked from tepee to tepee. Upon their entrance a dead silence fell; and the Slavis, like school children

all adopted a look of vacant stupidity as a cover for their embarrassment. Loseis did not dismount; but rode up and down, speaking to this one and that.

Tatateecha, the head man of all the Slavis came to her stirrup. He was a round little man, distinguished amongst all the tribe by his fleshiness. The responsibilities of headship had given him more steadiness of character too, but not much more. Loseis did not hold him accountable for the excesses at the Post. Tatateecha made a flowery speech of welcome to Loseis; and another to Gault.

"You are wasting your breath," remarked Loseis. "He does not understand your tongue."

"Is he the trader now?" asked Tatateecha slyly.

"No!" said Loseis with a flash of her eyes. "He is my guest. . . . Do you wish to trade with him?" she added.

"No! No!" said Tatateecha earnestly. "He has the name of a hard trader. They tell me that the people at Fort Good Hope are always poor."

"Very well, then," said Loseis. "Serve me, and I will deal with you justly and fairly as my father did. You never knew want when he was alive."

Tatateecha's eyes twinkled. To be talking in this manner under the very nose of the proud Gault appealed to the Slavi sense of humor.

"This man wishes me ill," Loseis went on. "He would take my post from me. I look to you and your people to be my friends, and help me to keep what is my own."

Tatateecha in his redskin style swore fealty. Unfortunately he was not to be trusted far.

"I have another thing to say," Loseis went on. "The man who fetched this man into our country—I do not name him because this man would hear me; you know the man I mean. That false person is this person's spy, so beware how you open your hearts to him. I have finished."

Loseis and Gault rode on. They left Tatateecha looking rather scared, but Loseis told herself that at least her speaking to him would do no harm.

"What were you talking about?" asked Gault.

"Oh, he was apologizing for the way his people behaved in the store, and I was telling him it had better not happen again," said Loseis carelessly.

Beyond the village the land rose to a low bluff which commanded a prospect of the lake. Here they turned out their horses, and sat down in the grass to eat. After the pleasant, diversified country they had ridden through, an astonishing panorama met their eyes. The whole earth suddenly flattened out. They were upon the only bit of high ground that approached the lake. In front of them a sea of water and a sea of grass stretched to the horizon; and it was impossible to say where the one ended and the other began. On either hand in the far distance ran the bordering hills. The only thing there was in sight to break that tremendous flatness was a flock of wild swans a mile or more away, fluttering their wings in the sun.

When they had satisfied their hunger, Gault bethought himself that it was time to take a firm tone with Loseis. He said bluntly:

"Do you know, you're a damn pretty girl."

He prepared himself for an explosion; but Loseis surprised him again.

"Of course I know it," she said coolly; looking at him with a slanting smile.

"How do you know it? You've never seen any white girls."

"Oh, one knows such things anyhow," she said shrugging.

"Has any man ever told you?" demanded Gault.

"No," said Loseis, clear-eyed as the sky; but thinking of Conacher nevertheless.

"Well, I'm telling you," said Gault.

"Thanks," said Loseis with a quick smile.

The smile annoyed the trader. It seemed to express something other than gratitude. "Do you know what they sometimes call me?" he asked.

Loseis shook her head.

"Kid-Glove Gault. An allusion to my manner, of course. Everybody knows that it conceals an iron hand. I have been through a hard school, and I have come out hard. I choose to be courteous because I despise those who surround me. I have taught myself to stand alone."

Loseis became very uncomfortable. Why does he tell me all this? she thought.

"Look at me!" he said peremptorily.

She shook her head, pressing her lips together. If I did, I should burst out laughing in his face, she thought.

Gault was not ill-pleased by her refusal. It seemed to testify to his power. “There is another side to my nature,” he went on, “which I have never revealed to a living soul. All the softer feelings which other men scatter in a hundred directions I have saved up for one!”

Mercy! ejaculated Loseis to herself.

“But it is not to be given lightly,” said Gault. “I am a proud, jealous, and violent man. I may be led by one whom I trust, but never driven. I shall never let down my guard until I am assured that the one I have chosen is worthy . . .”

This sort of talk put Loseis on pins and needles—she could not have told why. Her body twitched, and her face was all drawn up in a knot of comical distaste. She kept her head averted from Gault. Oh, if he would *only* stop! she was saying to herself.

“. . . of my confidence,” he went on; “such is my character. I am not trying to excuse it. I have long been indifferent to both praise and blame. The woman who places her hand in mine must . . .”

Loseis could stand no more. Springing to her feet, she ran back towards the place where the horses were grazing.

“Excuse me a moment,” she called over her shoulder. “I must water my horse.”

Gault with a black face had sprung up to follow her. But he checked himself. That would be *too* ludicrous for one of his years and dignity. Besides, she could probably run faster than he. He ground his teeth with rage. “A coquette!” he muttered. “By God! I’ll tame her!”

All the way home he glowered at her back, but Loseis could not see that.

After supper she went across to hear the radio concert in some trepidation; but Gault received her with his usual smooth and well-controlled face; and she felt relieved. He treated her with the most exquisite courtesy. This high manner may have concealed terrible fires within; but Loseis was not worrying about that. She gave herself up to the music.

After it was over, Gault walked home with her. That rare day had been succeeded by a still rarer night. Low in the southerly sky hung a great round moon. Measured by the standards of southerly latitudes, the moon behaves very eccentrically up there. After describing a short arc across the southern

sky, she would go down in an hour or so not far from where she had risen. In the meantime she held the world in a breathless spell of beauty. In that magical light the rude buildings of the Post created a picture of old romance. There was a silvery bloom upon the grass; and the velvety black shadows suggested unutterable meanings that caught at the heart. The shadow of Gault's house reached almost to Loseis' door.

They paused there; and Loseis looked around her with a tight breast. (Is he somewhere under this moon thinking of me?) "This is the night of the whole year!" she said.

"Well, we are free, white, and twenty-one," said Gault. "Why go to bed? . . . The best place to see moonlight is on the river. Come out in a canoe with me for an hour."

Loseis' intuition warned her not to go—but one does not always listen to one's intuitions. She was tempted. He can't do any more than talk, she thought; I guess I can stand it. I shall be looking at the moonlight, and thinking of the other one. "Very well," she said.

"Go in and get a coat," he said. "I'll come back for you in two minutes."

He hastened back to his own kitchen. One of his Crees was sent down to the creek mouth to find a canoe. Of the others, one played a banjo and all could sing the old-fashioned songs that are still current in the far North. These were stationed on a bench outside the kitchen door with orders to sing, *not loud*. After all there was something magnificent about Gault. In his dark way he had imagination. But he was fifty-three years old!

When they got down to the water's edge the Cree was holding the canoe for them to step into. By Gault's orders he had chosen not one of the usual bark canoes of the Slavis which are little more than paper boats, but a dug-out of which there were several lying in the creek. These heavier and roomier craft are however, no more stable than the others. Loseis perceived that a nest of blankets and pillows had been arranged for her in the bottom.

"Oh, I like to paddle," she said.

"Give me the pleasure of looking at you in the moonlight," murmured Gault.

Again Loseis felt strong compunctions; but it seemed too ridiculous to back out then; especially with the Indian looking on. She got in; and Gault, taking his place in the stern, paddled out into the main stream.

Heading the canoe down river, he allowed it to drift. That brought Loseis reclining under his eyes in the full shine of the moon; while he, sitting up on the thwart, was blackly silhouetted against the light. Presumably it was very lovely on the river—Loseis observed how the face of the water seemed to be powdered with moon-dust; and at any other time her heart would have been melted by the distant strumming of the banjo, and the muted voices; but now it was all spoiled for her by that silhouette. How could she think of Conacher while the other man's eyes were boring into her. She was sorry she had come. She became sorrier when Gault began to speak.

"You are beautiful!" he said in a masterful voice. "I want you!"

At first Loseis was only conscious of astonishment.

"Want me?" she echoed blankly.

"To-morrow I shall send over to my Post for the parson," he went on, coolly. "He may bring his sister with him to attend upon you. We shall be married in your house. It will be more fitting."

Loseis was literally struck dumb. She sat up straight, trying to peer into the shadowy face that was almost invisible to her, her mouth hanging open like a child's.

Gault laughed fondly. "Do not look so frightened," he murmured. "I will take good care of you . . . little sweetheart."

A little strained note of laughter was surprised out of the girl. The last word sounded so funny, shaped by those stiff old lips.

Gault ascribed it to nerves. It did not put him off at all. "As soon as we are married," he went on. "Let us take advantage of the Summer season to make a trip outside. A handsome spirited girl like you will enjoy seeing the cities. You shall have everything that your heart desires. And we will be able to attend to the business of your father's estate. I don't mean places like Edmonton or Calgary. What would you say to New York . . . London?"

As he talked on a chill of terror struck to Loseis' breast. He seemed so very sure of himself! The fond, elderly voice made her feel like a little girl again. "Do I *have to* marry him?" she asked herself, trembling.

The river was very high. The muddy borders which would show themselves later, were now completely covered. The overhanging willows trailed their branches in deep water. Without noticing it, they had drifted close to the easterly shore.

Gault's ardor increased. He dropped forward in the bottom of the dug-out, and crept closer to Loseis. Putting a hand down on either side of her for support and balance, he strained towards her. Loseis got a hateful whiff of the scented breath again.

"Seal it with a kiss, sweetheart," he murmured.

Loseis' blood rebelled, and all uncertainty left her. She was no longer the child, but an aroused woman. She wriggled her body further forward in the dug-out, out of his reach.

"Easy! Easy!" he cried sharply; "or you'll have us over!"

"Marry you!" cried Loseis with a burst of clear laughter that flayed him raw. "You ugly old man! The husband I have chosen is not like you!"

Gault drew in his breath with a moan of rage; and, careless of the danger, began to creep towards her. At that instant a willow branch brushed against the girl's hair. Springing up, Loseis embraced a whole mass of the leaves within her arms, and swung herself out. Under the violent propulsion of her body, the narrow craft rolled over in a twinkling, and Gault was precipitated into the water.

Loseis sank into the icy water up to her neck, and hung there, dangling from her branches. For a moment there was silence; then Gault's head emerged from the river, and the night was shattered by a roar for help. Loseis saw him seize the canoe, and knew that he was in no danger of drowning. He was no more than twenty feet from her, but drifting away on the current.

Loseis worked her way along her slender branches, to thicker branches, and finally gained a footing on firm ground. Gault, drifting downstream continued to roar for help. Making her way across the flat below the Post, Loseis met Moale, and the Crees running in response to their master's cries. The Slavi village was in an uproar.

"Gault is in the river," said Loseis coolly. "He's in no danger. Get canoes and go after him."

Reaching her own house Loseis found the terror-stricken girls huddled in a group. At the sight of her drenched clothing, Mary-Lou clasped her hands tragically.

"What has happened?" she gasped.

Loseis did not answer her immediately, but only leaned back against the door with widening eyes. For suddenly she had realized what *had* happened,

and was appalled by the certain consequences. She alone there with that pack of terrified girls!

“Bar the door,” she said. “Shutter the windows. We’ll have to stand a siege now! . . . No, wait!” she cried as they moved to obey her. “We must have weapons. The men won’t be back for half an hour. I’ll fetch guns from the store!”

CHAPTER X

CONTRABAND

ALL night long Loseis and her girls listened in trepidation, but none approached their house. In the morning, Loseis, disdaining to remain under cover any longer, sallied out of the house to find Gault, and have it out with him. Anything was better than uncertainty.

The trader was at breakfast in the kitchen of the men's house. Seeing Loseis at the door, he rose quickly, showing a smooth, composed face, but with eyes as hard as agate. "Good morning," he said with extreme politeness; "I trust that you received no hurt from your ducking last night. I was coming over directly to inquire. How inexcusably careless of me! I shall never forgive myself!"

Loseis waved all this aside. "I should like a few words with you," she said as politely as he.

"Please come in," said Gault. He indicated the inner room.

"I would be glad if you would step outside," said Loseis.

"Certainly!"

They walked away from the door, followed by the sharp, secret glances of the Crees. Gault rubbed his upper lip. Under the mask he wore, an uneasiness made itself felt. Certainly he had not expected Loseis to look him up, nor could he guess what was coming.

She wasted no words in coming to the point. "When you heard of my father's death you hastened over here to help me, you said. If your intentions were good, I thank you."

"Do you doubt it?" asked Gault sharply.

She spread out her hands. "What difference does that make now? Whether you wished to help me or not it would be impossible under the present circumstances." She paused for a moment. It required a strong nerve to say this to Andrew Gault. "I must therefore ask you to leave the Post as soon as possible."

There was a silence. Gault stared at her incredulously. In spite of his iron self-control a blackish flush spread under his skin. Infernal passions were raging under his mask. But he fought them down. He said nothing. He fell back a step, that Loseis could not see his face without turning squarely around.

“Well?” she said sharply. “Have you nothing to say?”

“What is there to say?” he murmured.

“You could refuse to go,” said Loseis proudly. “If you refused to go, of course I could not make you.”

“I could not refuse,” said Gault with a sort of hollow reverberation of his usual full and courteous tones. “You put me in an extraordinarily difficult position. I do not think you should be left alone here; but of course I cannot stay.”

“I shall manage very well,” said Loseis.

“I am sorry you think so badly of me,” said Gault.

“Oh, I shall not think badly of you, if you will only leave me alone,” said Loseis quickly. “I shall always be grateful to you!”

Silence again. Gault literally ground his teeth. After awhile he was able to say: “You are mixing up two things together.”

“You are mistaken,” said Loseis. “The two things are quite separate in my mind. I have had all night to think them over.”

“Do you wish me to leave Mr. Moale here to assist you?” he asked.

“No, thank you,” said Loseis firmly. “Furthermore, I should be greatly obliged if you would carry Etzooah back with you.”

For the fraction of a second the flames broke through Gault’s mask. “Suppose you needed a messenger!” he cried.

“I should not choose Etzooah to be my messenger,” said Loseis quietly.

He quickly controlled himself. “Very well,” he said; “we will be off as soon as we can get our traps together. Say to-morrow morning.”

“Oh, suit your convenience, of course,” said Loseis politely.

Gault’s expression changed. His hard eyes turned askance on the girl. “Upon consideration,” he said, more smoothly than before, “I am sure we

will be able to get away late this afternoon. We can make our first camp up on the prairie, where we will at least be out of your sight."

Loseis bowed; and they parted out in the middle of the little square.

When Gault re-entered the kitchen of the men's house, he did not speak. The expression on his face was frightful to see. One by one the Crees, making believe to have noticed nothing amiss, slipped outside. Even Moale did not care to face that look. He sauntered out after the others. Gault sat down as if to finish his meal; but he touched no food. He merely sat there with his hands on the edge of the table and his head lowered, thinking; thinking.

Finally he rose; and going into Blackburn's room, coolly produced a key, with which he opened a wall cupboard. From it he took an earthenware jug, one of several on the shelves; and locking up the cupboard, carried the jug back to the kitchen table. Removing the cork, he smelled of the contents, but did not taste. It was a known thing in the country that Gault was not a drinking man. He called out to have Etzooah sent to him.

When the grinning Indian stood before him, Gault said curtly: "This afternoon, just before supper time, I shall be starting away from here. You are to come with me."

Etzooah nodded.

"Etzooah," the trader continued, fixing his burning glance on the man, "do the Slavis know the taste of whisky?"

"Wah!" said the Indian, showing his blackened teeth; "Tatateecha know it. And some of the old men. Twenty-five years ago there was a party of Klondikers went down this river. They had whisky. They hand it round. Blackburn had whisky too, but he did not give the people any."

"Can you teach the younger men to drink it?" asked Gault with an ugly smile.

"Wah!" said Etzooah, with his silent laugh. "No need teach! All know what whisky is. The story of the white man's stomach-warming medicine is often told over the fire."

"Good!" said Gault. "When we leave here to-day, you may take them that jug of Blackburn's whisky. Let it be carried out of the house with the other things when we are packing up. Just before we start, you may go down behind the house, that the white women may not see you, and give it to Mahtsonza for all. Do not tell them that I sent it. Say that you found it in

Blackburn's room, and I never missed it, because I am not a whisky-drinker." Gault leaned across the table, and lowered his voice. "And tell them as if not meaning anything by it, that there are four more jugs in the little cupboard on the wall of Blackburn's room."

"All right," said Etzooah, grinning still. "What if there is trouble after?"

"I'll take care of that," said Gault coolly. He had recovered his self-control.

"All right. All right," said Etzooah.

During the course of the day, Loseis cast many an anxious glance across the way. Certain obvious preparations for departure were immediately set under way; the pole on the roof was taken down, and the wire rolled up on spools; the pack-horses which had been turned out in the meadow across the creek, were rounded up, and driven into the corral attached to Blackburn's stable. So much done, Gault could have left within an hour had he chosen, but a long time passed before any further move was made.

Finally, towards the end of the afternoon, the Crees began to carry their bedding rolls out of the kitchen. The horses were led out and saddled, their packs adjusted, and the hitches thrown. By five o'clock all was ready for the start. After another wait, Gault came marching over to the Women's House. Loseis met him at the door.

Exhibiting his finest manner, he smiled politely. "I know this must be disagreeable to you," he said, "but I thought it better to keep up appearances before my servants and yours. I have come to say good-by."

"I was expecting you," said Loseis. "I wish to return the various gifts which you . . ."

"Oh, no!" said Gault sharply. "Do not put that slight upon me before these redskins. Surely you have done enough. . . ."

"Oh," said Loseis, "if you feel that way about it, it does not matter, of course."

He immediately recovered himself. "Let us appear to take a friendly good-by of each other."

"Surely," said Loseis. "Perhaps you will take a letter out for me? I understand that the mail is carried from Fort Good Hope every month."

"Charmed!" said Gault.

She gave him the letter which had been written during the afternoon. It was addressed to Gruber at the Crossing. She realized that if the first letters had not been sent out, this one would hardly be allowed to go; still, it was a chance that must not be neglected.

Gault, standing hat in hand, said with his polite smile: “I shall give myself the pleasure of sending over from time to time, until assistance reaches you from the outside. Though you repudiate it, I still feel responsible for you.”

Loseis smiled back—a little quizzically. Is it worth it? her smile said.

“Good-by,” said Gault, putting out his hand.

“Good-by,” said Loseis, letting hers lie within it.

He strode back to his waiting party, and swung himself into the saddle. The Crees cried to the pack-horses, and all set off briskly out of the inclosure, disappearing behind the store. Presently they were to be seen on the trail above, trotting up the incline; smart, well-found, arrogant, modeled upon the style of the old Company. Loseis breathed more freely. To be sure, they were not gone yet, for Gault had said they would camp for the night on the edge of the prairie. She was not in the least deceived by his politeness. There would be another night of anxiety to face, but not so keen as the previous night; for the violence of his rage must have abated somewhat. Loseis realized that she had not so much to fear from violence now, as from the man’s cold craft.

She went into her house. The supper was waiting. The thoughtless red girls, thinking only that Gault was gone, were all smiles. Loseis had Mary-Lou to sit down with her at table, in the effort to keep at bay that ghastly feeling of solitude that crept over her like the coming of night. Alone! Alone! Alone! And so long before she could hope for succor! She gave the girls a highly comic account of Gault’s proposal the night before, laughing loudly herself. Anything to keep the bogies at bay!

It was about an hour afterwards when they first began to realize that something was amiss in the Slavi village. There was an ungodly sound of singing going on. The Slavis frequently made the twilight hours hideous with their wordless chanting. Loseis was accustomed to it. To-night it was different; it had an insane ring; they were burlesquing their own performance, and screaming with laughter. It was significant too, that the voices of the women were not to be heard. Loseis scarcely knew what drunkenness meant, or she would have understood sooner.

She went to the little window at the end of the room which overlooked the river flat. Though it was eight o'clock the sun had not yet dropped out of sight. All the Slavi men were gathered in a rough circle around a fire on the creek bank. There was no order in the company; some lay about; some danced with extravagant gestures. The ordinary dance of the Slavis was a decorous shuffle. The women were nowhere to be seen. Every moment the scene became more confused, and the yelling louder.

Leaving the window, Loseis said: "I am going down to see what is the matter."

Mary-Lou flung herself upon her mistress: "No! No! No!" she cried in despair.

Loseis was very pale. She firmly detached the clinging hands. "There is nothing else to be done," she said simply. "If I do not notice this, my influence over them is gone!"

Loseis went sedately down the grassy rise, neither hurrying, nor hanging back. Her back was straight; her face composed. Her look of proud scorn lent a strange poignancy to her childishness. Her heart might have been fluttering like a frightened child's, but nobody could have guessed it. Mary-Lou, seeing her face, wept aloud, without knowing what it was that had moved her so.

As Loseis came near, the Slavis around the fire fell quiet and still. Only one of them jumped up, and ran away, carrying something. Loseis recognized the figure of Mahtsonza. He ran across the stepping-stones of the creek, and climbed up the further bank. The rest of them were orderly enough now: but their drunken, swimming eyes and hanging mouths told a tale.

Loseis stepped into the middle of the circle. "What means this howling that beats against my ears?" she demanded. "Are your brains full of ice? (The Slavi phrase for insanity.) Is this a pack of coyotes or men?"

None answered her. They merely looked stupid.

Mahtsonza, a furlong off by this time, and feeling himself safe, turned around exhibiting the earthenware jug. He insolently turned it up to his lips.

Loseis recognized the style of the jug. Her heart sank at the young man's act of open defiance; but no muscle of her face changed. "Now I understand," she said coldly. "Blackburn's whisky has been stolen."

"No steal," muttered the man called Ahchoogah. "It was a gift."

“Who gave it?” demanded Loseis.

There was no answer.

Loseis stepped to the nearest tepee, and stuck her head through the opening. Within, a crowd of dejected women and children, crouched around a tiny fire on the ground.

“Where did they get it?” demanded Loseis.

A voice answered: “Etzooah brought it.”

All was clear to Loseis. She sickened with disgust that a man big and powerful as Gault could stoop to so cowardly a trick.

Returning to the men she said in a voice of scorn: “Call Mahtsonza back. Drink what is left. Drink until you lie like rotten logs! When you return to yourselves you shall be punished!”

By this she meant that a fine would be entered against each man’s name on the books. Letting her eyes sweep around the circle as if to fix each face in her memory, she stepped out of the circle, and returned to her house without looking back.

The moment the door closed after her, the yelling broke out again, now with a clear note of defiance and derision. They wished her to understand that though they could not face out her strong glance, behind her back they spat at her. Looking out of the end window she could see them capering about, indulging like children in an outrageous pantomime of derision directed towards her house. Loseis quickly turned away. It was a bitter, bitter dose for her pride to swallow. “They should be whipped! They should be whipped!” she said, with the tears of anger springing to her eyes.

However, she felt a little better when she reflected that there was only one gallon of whisky between about forty men. It was only because they were totally unused to the stuff that it had affected them as quickly and so violently. The effect could not last long.

As on a former occasion at the suggestion of danger, Loseis found that the three Slavi girls had quietly vanished. “Let them go!” she said shrugging. “They would only be in our way.”

Loseis determined that she and Mary-Lou should sleep in the store. As long as she could keep them out of the store, she held the whip hand. When the two of them appeared outside the house, carrying their beds across the square, jeers and yells greeted them from below. Mary-Lou’s coppery cheeks turned grayish with fear; but Loseis’ chin went higher.

“Cowardly dogs!” she said. “If I went down there, their voices would dry up in their throats.”

As soon as it began to grow dark, she set the lighted lamp in the window of the store, to remind the Slavis that she was on guard.

Shortly afterwards the whole gang swept up into the little square within the buildings. They all carried branches and sticks; one or two had lighted brands from the fire below. Yelling and capering like demons, they piled their fuel in the center of the space, and set fire to it. In a few seconds the flames were leaping high, illuminating every corner of the square, and throwing the fantastic leaping shadows of the savages against the house fronts. Through the little window of the store, Loseis watched them with a stony face. To bring their orgy within the very confines of the Post! A hideous chill struck into her breast. If they dared so far, what might they not dare!

Soon, like the savages they were, they lost interest in their bonfire. The noise quieted down somewhat. Loseis ventured to hope that the effect of the spirit might be beginning to wear off. The jug was not visible. Presently she noticed that their attention was concentrated on her father’s house. Some of them were nosing around it like animals; others stood senselessly trying to peer through the dark panes; near the door a man was haranguing his fellows, waving his hand towards the house, Loseis could not hear his words.

The crowd around the door increased. Finally one ventured to put his hand on the latch. The door was not locked. It swung inward, and all the Slavis fell backward in affright. The same man who had opened the door, crept back on all fours, and sticking his head inside, uttered a senseless yell. The others shrieked with laughter. Still, they dared not venture in. They gathered together in a close body outside the door, and the sound of their jabbering reached Loseis faintly. Suddenly those at the back began to push, and the first ones were thrust inside. Instantly they all swept in. With a sickness of the heart, Loseis saw one run back to the fire, and snatch up a pine branch with a burning end.

The girl groaned. It affected her like an act of sacrilege. Blackburn was indeed dead when these miserable savages feared not to overrun his house. She expected to see his private papers scattered out of the door; she waited for the house to burst into flames.

However, destruction was not their present aim. They reappeared almost immediately, yelling in triumph. He who came first held another jug aloft;

and others followed; Loseis counted: two . . . three . . . four! Her chin went down on her breast. Well . . . this is the end, she thought.

Mary-Lou had seen, too. “Quick! we must go!” she gasped. “They will kill now! Quick! through the little window at the back!”

Loseis slowly shook her head. “No! You can go. I stay. As long as I am here they will not dare to enter the store.”

“Look! Look!” cried Mary-Lou. “What they care now? They will kill you!”

“Maybe,” said Loseis somberly; “but I will not run from Slavis. You go.”

Mary-Lou dropped to her knees, and hid her face in Loseis’ skirt. “No! No!” she whispered. “I never leave you.”

Pandemonium had broken loose outside. Some had rifled Blackburn’s wood pile; and armful after armful of fresh fuel was thrown on the fire. The Slavis took leave of what little humanity they had. The jugs were snatched from hand to hand; tipped up to thirsty mouths; and snatched away again. But even in their drunkenness they did not fight amongst themselves. The fighting instinct was absent in this degenerate people. It was an ugly thing to see the miserable little creatures, born under the shadow of fear, and obliged to cringe to all men, now released of their fears by whisky. They expressed their freedom by throwing their heads back and howling like dogs; and by dancing around the fire with legs and arms all abroad like jumping-jacks. The great, round moon, rising a little higher to-night, looked down on this scene with her accustomed serenity.

Finally they began to turn their attention to the store. At first they did not dare to approach; but one or another would hide behind his fellows and squall derisively in the direction of Loseis. The others would laugh in the childish way of savages. These were merely animal cries, without words. Later Loseis began to hear the word Burn! cried from one to another. She shivered internally. Meanwhile the jugs were still circulating, rousing them to a pitch of frenzy.

At last a man snatched up a stick with a burning end. Instantly a dozen others followed his example. Loseis knocked out a pane of glass with her elbow; and put the barrel of her gun through the hole.

But the Slavis never reached the store. Something caused them to freeze where they stood. The whole mad, shifting scene suddenly became fixed like a picture. Then they dropped their torches and fled; vanishing in the

silent manner peculiar to themselves. You could scarcely see how it happened; you looked again, and they were not there. A moment or two after the sound had reached their ears it came to Loseis within the house. It was the distant pounding of many hoofs on the trail.

When Gault and his men rode into the little square, Loseis was standing at the open door of the store. She still had the gun over her arm. Gault flung himself off his horse.

“Good God! what has happened?” he cried. “I heard the racket clear to my camp, and jumped on my horse. Are you hurt?”

Loseis slowly shook her head.

“Is any damage done?”

Loseis indicated the empty jugs lying scattered about. “None; except that my father’s whisky has been drunk up,” she said dryly.

“My God!” cried Gault. “The brutes! I hated to leave you this afternoon, but I didn’t expect to see my fears materialize this way. Now you see, don’t you, that I was right. You cannot be left here alone.”

Loseis did not speak. She looked at him steadily, her lips curving in a slow smile of scorn. She was thinking: Let him babble! It only makes him out a fool. I shall not tell him all I know. To keep silence gives me a power over him.

CHAPTER XI

A MEETING

ALONGSIDE a vast inland sea whose further shores were lost under the horizon, a tall young white man was cooking his supper in the open. The meal was going to be better than usual, for, having been camped in the same spot for a week, he had been able to secure game. On a spit before an ingeniously constructed fireplace of stones, a wild goose was roasting. The young man turned the spit, and basted his fowl. He kept the wooden spit from catching fire by the simple expedient of basting that also. At a little distance two Indians looked on with covert scorn at their master's elaborate arrangements. What a lot of trouble to take to eat! They had been content to impale their goose for awhile on a stick inclined over the fire; whence they snatched it scorched on one side and raw on the other.

The young man, while taking an innocent pleasure in his own ingenuity, was thinking how unsatisfactory it was to cook your own dinner. When it first began to sizzle you became weak with hunger; but the continued spectacle took the fine edge off your appetite long before the meat was done.

A dug-out nosed its slender length around a near point, and a shrill hail electrified them all.

"Conacher, thank God!" cried the young man.

The two Indians ran down to the water's edge; but their master would not leave his goose which was browning beautifully.

From the dug-out landed an exactly similar outfit; that is to say a tall young white man and two Indians. The two white men clasped hands, and their eyes beamed on each other. However, they were shy of betraying emotion before the reds, and their greeting was distinctly casual.

"Hello, old bean! Where the hell you been? The boss has gone down the lake, leaving me to fetch you. Do you know that you've held up the whole blooming survey?"

"It's a long story," said Conacher. "Oh boy! is that a roast goose I see? Let me get my teeth into it, and then I'll tell you."

When they had thoroughly discussed the goose, they lighted their pipes; and Alec Jordan invited Conacher to fire away. Jordan was about three years older than Conacher; and they were tried friends. The Indians around their own fire, were out of earshot.

“What delayed you?” said Jordan. “It was downstream work all the way.”

“Gad! it’s good to have a white man to talk to!” said Conacher. “I’m damn thankful it’s you, old scout. I couldn’t have told the others.”

“But why this emotion?” asked Jordan humorously.

“Well, it concerns a woman,” said Conacher, looking away.

His friend’s face hardened. “An Indian?” he asked.

“No, damn you!” cried Conacher indignantly. “What do you think I am?”

Jordan opened his eyes. “But between here and the Rocky Mountains,” he said, “around Blackburn’s Lake, and down Blackburn’s River, what else is there?”

“There is Blackburn’s daughter?” murmured Conacher.

“Oho!” cried Jordan. “I forgot about her. . . . Indeed, I thought she was still a little girl.”

“Don’t josh it!” muttered Conacher. “This is the real thing.”

“I’m sorry, old man,” said Jordan, touching his shoulder.

“Blackburn is dead,” said Conacher.

“I knew it,” said Jordan. “The boss knew it, too. But it never occurred to us to connect your delay with his death. We figured you would have been past his Post before the date of his death.”

“I was,” said Conacher. “But I went back.”

He went on to tell the whole story; how he had first come to Blackburn’s Post, of the trader’s ungracious reception and the daughter’s scornful one; how he had gone on down the river; how the little raft had come floating by his camp with the pathetic black streamer; and how, yielding to an impulse that he had scarcely understood, he had hastened up-stream. He ended his story with the coming of Andrew Gault to Blackburn’s Post.

“I could leave her then with an easier mind,” he said. “Gault knew everything to do.”

“Sure,” said Jordan; but in so uncertain a tone, that Conacher asked him sharply:

“What’s the matter?”

Jordan looked at him queerly; and the lover’s anxious heart was filled with alarm.

“What are you keeping back?” he demanded.

“I don’t know as I ought to tell you,” said Jordan slowly.

“Why not?”

“It’s just gossip. We’ve got our work to do.”

“Do you put me or our work first?” demanded Conacher.

“Well, since you put it that way, you!” said Jordan.

“Then tell me.”

“But what can you do, now?”

“Never mind. You tell me, and I’ll make up my mind what I can do. I’m a grown man.”

“Well,” said Jordan, “when you told me that Gault had come to the aid of Blackburn’s daughter I couldn’t help but think it was like the wolf coming to save the lamb.”

“Yes, I know,” said Conacher impatiently, “something of that sort occurred to me, but hang it all! no white man could be blackguard enough to take advantage of a young girl in that situation!”

Jordan smiled affectionately at his friend. “You’re young, my son,” he murmured. “I don’t know as I would put it by Gault. . . . I suppose you’ve never heard the full story of Blackburn and Gault?”

“No, how should I?” said Conacher. “Coming from the mountains.”

“True, this is your first season. I’ve been in the country three summers, and I’ve picked up all the gossip. It’s one of the stock stories of the country how Blackburn and Gault have been fighting each other for twenty years, and Blackburn has beaten out Gault at every turn. Gault had to obtain financial assistance outside. But here’s a new piece of information that came to me pretty straight. Nothing can be hidden in this country. It seems that

Ogilvie, Gault's backer, told Gault on his last visit to Fort Good Hope that the Company would fire him if he didn't succeed in putting Blackburn out of business."

Conacher's face darkened with anxiety. "I wish I had known that!" he muttered. "How did you hear of Blackburn's death?"

"Yesterday, before the boss pulled out, we got mail from Good Hope by the half-breed Modest Capeau. When he left the fort the news of Blackburn's death had come; and Gault had gone over there. . . ." Jordan hesitated, with an embarrassed glance at his friend.

"Well, out with it!" said Conacher sharply.

Jordan shrugged. "According to the gossip at Fort Good Hope, Gault said that he was going to marry the girl."

Conacher jumped up. "Oh, my God!" he cried agitatedly. "That old man! What the devil will I do!"

Jordan followed him. "How about the girl?" he asked.

"She loves me, Alec," said Conacher simply.

Jordan gripped his shoulder. "Old fellow . . . you deserve to be happy!" he said warmly.

"Happy!" cried Conacher bitterly. "I never should have left her!"

"But you had to leave her."

"Oh hell, what does the government matter in a case like this. . . . Wait a minute. I must try to think this out. How far can you trust this gossip?"

"Well I'm bound to say this is more than common gossip," admitted Jordan. "It was Joe Moale, the man closest to Gault, who told the fellows he had heard Gault swear that he would marry the girl. . . . But she won't have him, of course. No doubt everything will be all right."

"Oh, God! don't try to smooth things down!" cried Conacher. "She is completely in his power. The only Indian who could speak English was murdered . . . Of course she'll reject him! And then what? Then what? Oh, my God! think of the girl being left in the power of the man she had turned down! . . . I never should have left her. But how could I stay with all you waiting for me? . . . Well, it's different now. I've done the bit of work that was entrusted to me. I can put all the data in your hands. After this they can get along without me if they have to. . . ."

“My God! Paul, what are you talking about?”

“I’m going back,” said Conacher quietly.

“You *can’t* go back! Think of the row that would be kicked up!”

“I’ll have to face it.”

“You’ll lose your job. Where will you get another?”

“It’s true, nobody wants a geologist but the government. But I’m young; I’ll make out somehow.”

“Oh, my God! this is terrible!” cried Jordan. “We’re so shorthanded already!”

“Do you blame me?” demanded Conacher.

Jordan’s expression changed. “No, I don’t blame you, really,” he said. “Go on back, and God bless you! . . . But it’s me that’s got to face the boss. You know what he is. At the first mention of a girl he will think the worst. He’s depending on your Indians, too.”

“Take them,” said Conacher. “Your dug-out is big enough to carry all five. I couldn’t pay them anyhow. All I want of the government is enough grub to see me through.”

“It’s foolhardy to travel alone!” cried Jordan.

“That’s all right,” said Conacher. “I’m not going to break a leg this trip. I can’t afford to. The only thing that bothers me is, it’s all up-stream work. I can’t make but twenty miles a day.”

“I wish it was me,” said Jordan enviously.

CHAPTER XII

FUR

QUITE early in the morning, Loseis, issuing out of her house, was greatly astonished to see the door of the little fur warehouse standing open, and the bales of fur being carried out by Gault's Crees. This warehouse flanked the store on the left hand side as you faced the river; on the other side there was a similar building for the storage of flour. Loseis' breast grew hot at the sight; and without more ado, she marched across. Gault was not in sight; Moale was directing the Crees.

"What does this mean?" demanded Loseis.

Moale turned his flat, inscrutable black eyes to the girl's face. The dash of Indian blood lent a touch of mystery to Moale's olive face. It was a comely face; but so expressionless it was impossible to tell the man's age. "I beg your pardon?" he said in his pleasant voice.

"You heard me!" said Loseis in a passion. "By what authority have you broken into my warehouse, and helped yourself to my fur?"

It was quite true that Moale had opened one of the bales for no reason except the pleasure of seeing and stroking the marvelous pelts of the black foxes. He was a connoisseur. He said smoothly: "Mr. Gault's orders, Miss. I thought you knew."

"I did not know," said Loseis, "and I will trouble you to have the fur carried back again, and the door locked."

Moale scratched his head. "I'd be glad if you'd talk it over with Mr. Gault," he said.

Loseis imperiously beckoned to the nearest Cree. "Man!" she said, "tell Gault that I would be glad to have a few words with him."

While they waited for Gault, Moale busied himself with tying up the opened bale. He did not speak; but he looked at Loseis curiously and wistfully, when she was not aware of it.

Gault was presently to be seen approaching from the men's house. He did not hurry himself. "Good morning," he said, raising his hat. His manner

had changed. He was still polite, but it was an insolent politeness. His eyes were as hard as glass.

Loseis welcomed the change. It permitted her to come out into the open. “Why did you give orders to get out my fur?” she asked.

“It must be sent outside without further delay,” said Gault coolly.

“Am I not to be consulted?” asked Loseis, running up her eye-brows.

“It did not seem worth while to do so,” said Gault. “You have set yourself in opposition to me at every point. Just the same I have a responsibility towards you that I am obliged to fulfill.”

“I am the mistress here,” said Loseis in a rage.

“You are not of age,” said Gault coolly.

“Well, you are not my guardian!”

“No. But whoever may take your affairs in charge, will look to me as the only man on the spot, for an accounting. If the fur is not sent out at once you would lose the market for an entire season.”

Loseis turned away biting her lip. Whenever he began to talk in this vein with glib use of legal and business terms, she was helpless. Her instinct told her that he was merely cloaking his evil intentions in smooth words, but she had not experience enough to be able to strike through to the truth.

“Besides,” Gault went on, “if we do not get the fur to the Crossing, Gruber will get tired of waiting for it.”

Loseis caught at this. “So,” she said, “you are sending it to Gruber, then?”

“I expect to,” said Gault cautiously, “but I must reserve myself full freedom of action. He has got to satisfy me that he can dispose of it to the best advantage of your interests.”

“When does it go?” asked Loseis.

“To-morrow morning.”

“By the usual route?”

“No. I am sending it to Fort Good Hope; and thence by my launch to the Crossing.”

Loseis felt that here was a point she could stick on. “I would rather have it go by pack train as usual, direct to the Crossing over the prairie,” she said.

“That would take two weeks longer.”

“Just the same, I request you to send it in that manner.”

“I must decline.”

The red flags flew in Loseis’ cheeks. “You have said that it was my fur,” she said. “Very well, I order you to send it out as I desire.”

Gault, cool and hard; frankly enjoying the spectacle of her anger, said: “And I decline to do so.”

Loseis observing that she was furnishing him with enjoyment, contrived by a miracle to control herself. “Thank you very much,” she said coolly. “I was just trying to find out where I stood. Shall you accompany the consignment?”

“No,” said Gault darkly, “I remain here to look after you.”

Loseis bowed, and marched back to her own house. Gault looked after her, rubbing his lip. His thin mouth was twisted with anger and bitterness. By God! there was a spirit in the girl! Never had she seemed so desirable to him as at that moment. Moale too, looked after her with a deep wistfulness in his mysterious eyes. The tang of red blood cut him off from any hopes in that direction.

Loseis put her feet down like a little princess; but her eyes were stinging with tears. She conducted an orderly retreat, while her heart was bursting with mortification. It was intolerable to be so proud and so helpless. Helpless! Helpless! Her sex, her loneliness, her ignorance delivered her three times over into the power of this man. She was certain now that he intended to rob her, and she could do nothing!

During the whole day the preparations went on. The pack-saddles were got out; and the fur was divided into lots of a suitable size for a horse load. Gault sent Moale to the Women’s House with a polite message requesting Loseis to come to the store to issue the necessary grub. She proudly handed over the key, telling them to take what they required, and leave a memorandum of it.

In the afternoon the horses were rounded up. As many were put into the corral as it would hold, and the rest picketed in the square. Upwards of seventy horses were required for the entire outfit. To make any sort of progress between twelve and fifteen men would be needed to pack and unpack the horses twice a day. Moale and two of the Crees were going, while the other two remained to wait upon Gault. Loseis observed that

Ahchoogah, Mittahgah and others of the Slavis who had accompanied the fur train on other years, were working willingly enough with the horses. This started a train of thought in her mind.

Gault is too strong for me, she told herself; why shouldn't I trick him if I can?

With the passing of danger, the three Slavi girls had come sidling back into the kitchen of the Women's House, and Loseis indifferently took them in, partly because she was accustomed to having them wait on her; and partly because they furnished a useful link with the Slavi village below. She now called Mary-Belle to her.

"Can it be true," she asked, "that Ahchoogah, Mittahgah, and other men are going to Fort Good Hope? That place is dangerous for Slavi men."

"Wah! they would not go to that place!" said Mary-Belle with a look of terror. "There is bad medicine in that place! Gault has said if they will drive the horses as far as the red spring, the water of which makes men and horses sick and well again, he will give each man a Stetson hat and a mouth-organ. Blackburn never had mouth-organs in his store. The red spring is half way between the two rivers. Gault says for the Slavis to leave the horses there and come home. Musqua (one of the Crees) is riding fast to bring the Crees from Fort Good Hope. Moale and Watusk (the other Cree) will watch the horses and the fur at the red spring until they come. So there is no harm."

Loseis let the subject drop.

After supper, choosing a moment when she believed that Gault and Moale were still at the table, she went over to the store. Fastening the door behind her, she climbed through the back window, and making her way down to the creek shore, followed it down to the Slavi village. Of course if Gault happened to look out of the end window of his house, he could see her amongst the Slavis; but then it would be too late to interfere with her purpose.

The air was still full of a pleasant warmth, and the Slavis having just eaten, were squatting in groups outside the tepees, laughing and chatting in their ceremonious way. It is only in the presence of a white man that the Indian is taciturn. By this time the men had thrown off the alcoholic poison which had made them sick for days, and a general feeling of well-being was in the air. Fathers fondled their little sons, and abused their womenfolk; and the latter accepted it with equanimity.

At the approach of Loseis a dread silence fell upon them, and they drew a walled look over their dark faces. It was the first time she had visited them since that terrible night, and they expected the worst. But Loseis was bent on playing a part to-night. Her face was as smooth as their own, and much blander. Allowing them to suppose that she had forgotten what had happened, she addressed this one and that by name with grave politeness; promised a mother medicine for her sick child, and handed out peppermint lozenges to the little boys who were the idols of the tribe. Nobody would have thought of giving the little girls candy.

Loseis sat down on an overturned dug-out, with the manner of one who is prepared to hold agreeable discourse. The Slavis began to gather round, but always with that absurd pretense of not letting their left hands know what their right hands were doing. Loseis was very wonderful to them, too wonderful to inspire affection; awe was nearer the word.

At first she talked of the stage of water in the river; the promise of a full crop of berries; the scarcity of rabbit; all subjects of first-rate importance to the Slavis. Ahchoogah, the oldest man present, in order to prove how bold he was, undertook to answer her politely to her face. When Loseis perceived that she had gathered the audience she wanted, she went on casually:

“The wind is from the setting sun. There will be no rain. It is well. The men who are going to-morrow will see Fort Good Hope in five sleeps.”

A tremor of uneasiness passed through her listeners. “No, no!” said Ahchoogah. “We are not going to Fort Good Hope. At the red spring we will turn back.”

“That is Gault’s talk,” said Loseis courteously. “All know that Gault’s talk hides a snare. When you get to the red spring you will not want to turn back. Gault’s medicine will draw you on. It is very strong medicine. It’s name is electricity. I know it, because Gault brought me a little piece of it when he came here. The girls at my house have told you that. It opens its eye in the dark.”

Loseis paused to allow this to sink in. She fancied that she perceived fear behind the blank masks of the Slavis; but could not be sure. None spoke.

“I have heard of many strange things at Fort Good Hope,” she went on with an air of indifference that the Slavis could not outdo. “Men say that Gault is Old Man’s partner. Old Man say to Gault; I lend you my strong medicine, but when you die you must be a dog to my sledge. Gault thinks he

will cheat Old Man, by going away to the white man's country to die. Maybe so. I do not know such things. I hear them told."

She paused again. The men looked down their noses. A woman crept to Loseis' feet, and twitched her skirt.

"Loseis, tell my son not to go," she said tremulously.

"If he wants to go, what is that to me?" said Loseis with an air of surprise. "He will see strange things. When Gault claps his hands—Wah! there is light. Gault catches the voices of the air on his wires and brings them into his room. He did that in my father's house and I made him stop, because I did not want the Powerful Ones to fix their eyes on me! Etzooah has told you these things. At Fort Good Hope Gault keeps great beasts fastened to the earth. They have fire in their bellies and they do his bidding. When they open their mouths you can see the fire, and steam hisses through their nostrils as from many kettles in one. When they are hungry they scream so that a man falls flat on the ground to hear it. These fiery beasts eat men too, and Gault is always worried because he has no men to spare. So he is glad when strangers come to Fort Good Hope."

Loseis rose, feeling that she could hardly better this conclusion. She held out her hand in turn to Ahchoogah, to Mittahgah, to Mahtsonza and the others there that she knew were going next day. "Good-by. . . . Good-by. You are good hunters. You bring me plenty of fur. I am sorry that you go."

She returned home. It was impossible to tell how the Slavis would react next day; but she had done her best.

Early next morning Loseis was at her window. Nothing was changed. The horses were still picketed in the square; and the Crees were lounging about the doorway of the men's house. The lordly Crees had no notion of bestirring themselves while there were Slavis to do the hard work. By and by Gault appeared in the doorway, and with vigorous pantomime of anger evidently demanded to know why nothing had been started. He was told; whereupon Etzooah was dispatched down to the Slavi village in a hurry.

From the other window Loseis watched Etzooah haranguing the Slavis, and expostulating with them. It was all in vain. He was finally obliged to return cringing to Gault, shrugging, spreading out his hands in significant by-play. Gault's face turned black, and he aimed a furious kick at Etzooah, that the wily redskin dodged. Gault went inside; while Etzooah slipped around the house. Gault reappeared carrying an ugly quirt. Summoning his

Crees with a jerk of the head, he set off down the rise. The tall redskins followed with cruel grins of anticipation.

Back at the end window, Loseis saw the miserable little Slavis driven like sheep by the five tall men. But sheep were never used so brutally. The sneaking Etzooah, reappearing from the creek-bed, pointed out the wanted ones, who were driven up the rise with incontinent kicks and cuffs, and the furious lashing of the whip. Squeezing their bodies together to offer as small a mark as possible, the diminutive savages darted this way and that, to find that they could only escape punishment by running straight ahead. The Crees yelled with laughter. The Slavis, cowering, made haste to start packing the horses, and Loseis made up her mind that she had lost.

Oscillating between the two windows, she presently saw that the Slavis below were striking their tepees, and piling everything pell-mell into the canoes, and she took heart again. She knew the Slavis better than Gault did. Either Gault did not notice what the people were about, or he disdained them. There was no interference with them. They presently set off in a cloud up-river, paddling as if the devil were behind them. So precipitate was their departure that a small boy who had gone down amongst the willows to set muskrat snares, returned to find his village wiped off the flat. After prowling around to see if by chance any scraps of food had been overlooked, the child set off composedly up-river by the horse-track.

Soon afterwards Loseis perceived that Gault was having trouble with his gang. In the process of saddling the pack-horses, some of the Slavis had disappeared. The four Crees were sent off in different directions to round them up. This was a fatal move, because Gault and Moale could not possibly watch all the others, and Etzooah would always play double. The Slavis, on their part, have an uncanny faculty of choosing the moment when no eye is upon them to fade away silently: to slip behind a building, to roll down the creek bank, to lose themselves in the bush of the hillside. In spite of Gault's whip, and his terrible voice, his crew literally melted away before his eyes. After making long detours, they would rejoin their people somewhere above. Even weakness is not without its resources.

When the Crees returned empty-handed, the Slavis were reduced to five. These were all but surrounded; nevertheless, it was presently discovered that there were but four, without anybody being able to say what had become of the fifth. In any case it would have been impossible for such a small number of men to pack and unpack seventy horses twice a day. Gault gave up. The remaining Slavis were dismissed with kicks, and the trader, doubtless in a hellish rage, strode back to his house. Near the door, the grinning Etzooah

spoke to him. For an instant Gault showed a murderous face in Loseis' direction; then went inside. Loseis experienced a feeling of the sweetest triumph.

However, within an hour, two of the Crees with their bedding and grub set off on the easterly trail, and her heart sunk again. In four or five days they would be back with a swarm of Crees from Fort Good Hope. What good would four days do her? She had only succeeded in prolonging the agony.

Seeing the last of their people disappear, the Slavi girls exhibited the frantic, unreasoning fear of half-broken horses deserted by the herd. Loseis scornfully let them go. They slipped around behind the Women's House, and were not seen again.

The pack-horses had been turned out again; and the fur carried back into the little warehouse. The lock of the warehouse had been forced out of respect to Gault's pretense that the key was sealed up in Blackburn's desk, and no other lock was put on. The door was held shut by a propped pole.

Meanwhile Gault had not returned the key to the store; and after waiting a few hours, Loseis sent Mary-Lou across the square with a polite request for it. The girl returned without it, and bearing a message equally polite, to the effect that henceforward Gault would relieve Miss Blackburn of the trouble of attending upon the store. Until her duly constituted representative arrived, he would administer it together with the rest of her property.

Loseis was never the one to take this lying down. She instantly marched over to the store. The door was fastened with a padlock through staples. Loseis bethought herself that there were crow-bars somewhere about the post. However she found an easier way. Gault had overlooked the fact that the little back window was out. Loseis climbed through, and obtaining a file and a new lock from the store, returned to the front of the building and set to work. It was a long job in her inexperienced hands; but she was supported by the agreeable thought that Gault was watching her. By the end of the afternoon she found herself inside. Putting in the rear window, she fastened the new lock, and returned to her house to supper dangling the keys from thumb and forefinger.

After supper Moale came over. Loseis received him at the outer door. Whatever his private feelings may have been did not appear. He said in an impassive voice:

“Mr. Gault instructs me to say that you and your girl must prepare to go out to Fort Good Hope when the fur goes in four or five days’ time. He can no longer take the responsibility of keeping you here while the Slavis are in open rebellion.”

Loseis laughed scornfully. “He can always find respectable-sounding words, can’t he?” she said. “You’re a white man, aren’t you? I should think you would feel ashamed to be the carrier of such lying words.”

Moale’s face changed not a muscle. Some secret feeling made him proof against her scorn. He was not altogether white. He had not looked directly in her face.

Loseis’ temper got the better of her. “You tell Gault, I shan’t go!” she cried.

In his even voice Moale said: “I am instructed to say that Mr. Gault is prepared for that.”

Loseis shut the door.

During the hours that followed she walked up and down her room, half beside herself with balked rage. What possible answer was there to this latest threat of Gault’s. He had hinted at using force. He intended to lay hands on her. To Loseis’ flaming blood there were only two possible answers: to kill herself or to kill Gault. The first alternative she immediately rejected; that was the counsel of weakness. Nothing would please Gault better than for her to kill herself. She would kill Gault then, before he should lay hands on her. But ah! *dared* she take the life of a white man? She had had so vivid an experience of death taking a man in his strength.

Besides there were three other men. She could not hope to shoot them all before she was seized. She would be carried out anyhow. She visualized the horrors of a trial of which she knew so little; she imagined the cloud of lies that would beat her down. She had no one to speak for her but Mary-Lou; and Mary-Lou would never be allowed to speak. And if she were, the simple red girl would be struck dumb with terror. Disgraced! Disgraced! thought Loseis. Parted from Conacher without hope in this life. She buried her face in her hands. I must not kill him! she thought in terror. I must not let myself kill him. . . . But how can I help it if he lays hands on me!

If Gault had come over without warning to seize her, Loseis would have snatched up a gun, and shot him without thinking about it. But with devilish cunning he had sent to tell her of his intention. He was giving her four days in which to go mad with trying to find a way out when there was none.

Mary-Lou was terrified by the expression on her mistress' face. She held out her arms imploringly. "Please . . . please to go to bed," she whispered. "You will sleep. To-morrow you feel better."

"Sleep!" cried Loseis. "I shall never sleep again!"

"Please . . . please," persisted Mary-Lou. "Please stop walking."

"Go to bed, you," said Loseis angrily. "Let me be by myself. Close the door after you."

Mary-Lou went sadly out.

Loseis pressed her knuckles against her temples. I must be quiet! she told herself. I must think what I am doing! . . . Quiet! The only thing that would quiet me would be to go across and call him to the door and shoot him! Ah, then I could sleep! . . . I must not think such things! I must not! I must always be telling myself it would not end things to kill him; it would only begin worse things! . . . But what is the use? I know I shall suddenly kill him! If he lays hands on me! . . . If I were a man he would not dare! She flung her arms above her head. "O God! why didn't you make me a man! It is too hard to be a girl!"

It had been dark for some time. To-night the silence was even more complete, for no child whimpered in the tepees, and no Slavi dog barked. Loseis was pulled up all standing by hearing a gentle tapping on the glass of the window alongside the kitchen door. These nights the inside shutters were always closed. She instinctively flew to her gun which was standing in the corner; but put it down again, smiling scornfully at herself. It was not in this manner that an attack would be made.

Returning to the window, she said firmly: "Who is there?"

A whisper came winging back: "Conacher."

Loseis' heart failed her; her legs wavered under her; she struggled to get her breath. Then in a flash life and joy came crowding back until she felt as if she would burst. She clapped a hand over her mouth to hold in the rising scream of joy. Gault must not know! "Oh, Paul! . . . Oh, Paul!" she murmured, fumbling blindly for the latch of the door.

CHAPTER XIII

THE FUR GOES OUT

LOSEIS and Paul Conacher sat on the great white bear rug before the fire. Said Loseis, concluding her tale:

"He gave me to understand through Moale, that he would stop at nothing."

"The scoundrel!" muttered Conacher. "He was trying to terrorize you. In reality he cannot touch your rights here, unless you sign them away."

"Sign?" said Loseis sharply. "I have signed my name four times on blank sheets of paper for Gault. I had clean forgotten that." She described the circumstances.

"Obviously a trick," said Conacher. "If you had known anything about banking methods, you would have seen through it."

"I am so ignorant!" said Loseis humbly.

"How could you be expected to know!" said Conacher. He mused. "I wonder how in thunder he expects to use those signatures. . . . Were they at the top, in the middle or at the bottom of the sheets?"

"Towards the bottom," said Loseis. "He pointed his finger, and I wrote."

"Of course!" said Conacher. "Then he could fill in anything he wanted above your signature."

Loseis leaned towards him. "What does it matter?" she said dreamily. "We are together!"

"You darling!"

Loseis was too happy to remain sitting still. Springing up, she threw back the little shutter. Outside it was broad day. "The day of my happiness!" she murmured. Sticking her head through the kitchen door, she called out: "Mary-Lou! Quick with my breakfast. I must set off!"

"So soon?" said Conacher. "It's not four."

“Gault mustn’t see me start. If he tried to interfere, you would be drawn into it, and everything spoiled.”

“He’ll see you come back.”

“That doesn’t matter. I shall have settled everything with Tatateecha then.”

“Can we depend upon the Slavis?” asked Conacher anxiously.

“If it was to fight, never! But to play a secret trick at night, oh, yes! that’s just in their line.”

“And I?” asked Conacher.

“You must stay close to the house all day. This shall be your room now . . . Ah! the happy room! Do not go near the windows. . . . Where did you leave your dug-out last night?”

“Hidden under the willows about a furlong downstream. I thought I had better communicate with you before showing myself.”

“You did right! . . . If the Slavis were here your dug-out would be discovered within an hour, but Gault will never find it. . . . You must sleep all you can to-day.”

“You must sleep too.”

“Ah! happiness has made me over! I need no sleep! . . . However, I will be sensible. I will be back from the lake in three or four hours, and will sleep all day in the kitchen. Neither of us will get any sleep to-night.”

“I don’t altogether like your plan,” said Conacher frowning. “I should be the one to stay here.”

“You are wrong in that,” said Loseis earnestly. “There is nothing of any value here. All Gault cares about is the fur. The post of danger is with the fur, and you have that.”

“Why shouldn’t you and I take it out together?”

“No! If I left the Post, it would give Gault an excuse to say that I had given up my rights here.”

“But how can I leave you alone again?”

“Ah, nothing can harm me now!” cried Loseis. “I am guarded by happiness! I will do everything quite willingly that Gault forces me to do, and just be patient until you and Gruber come back. There is a sergeant of

police at the Crossing. Bring him back too. Oh, Gault will be quite different when he knows that help is on the way. He has to think of the law, then."

Conacher was silenced: but he did not look altogether convinced. They sat down to their breakfast.

"It is like being married!" said Loseis with a sigh of content. "Mary-Lou, have you cooked enough for a man's breakfast?"

Loseis' own horse and her saddle were in the stable behind the men's house; therefore unavailable. Having improvised a halter out of a piece of rope, she therefore set off on foot; and catching one of the broken horses in the meadow beyond the creek, she rode it in the Indian fashion, bareback.

At half-past eight she was back again. Turning the horse loose, she hid the halter in a bush, and returned across the stepping-stones. Gault was pacing up and down in front of his house. From this position he could not see her until she started to mount the rise. It was impossible for him to tell from what direction she had come. At sight of her, notwithstanding his self-command, his face sharpened with curiosity; and he changed his course in order to intercept her. Loseis was seized with a slight sense of panic. He must not read anything in my face! she told herself.

"Good morning," said Gault, politely.

"Good morning," returned Loseis. Alas! for all her care, she could feel the dimples pressing into her cheeks, and she knew that her eyes were shining. She kept her lids lowered, but that in itself was a giveaway, for she had been accustomed heretofore to look Gault straight in the eye.

By the brief silence which succeeded, she knew that his suspicions were aroused. "You are up early," he remarked in a carefully controlled voice.

"I just went down to see if the Slavis had left a canoe that I could use," she said carelessly.

"I did not see you go," said Gault.

"It must have been an hour ago," said Loseis. "I went for a walk, the morning was so pleasant." (I should not be explaining things like this, she thought. I ought to be proud and angry with him.)

"If you want a canoe my men will make one for you," said Gault.

"Oh, no, thank you," said Loseis quickly. "It was just a fancy. One must have something to do."

She had not stopped walking, and they came to her door. Loseis bowed.

“May I come in for a moment?” asked Gault.

“Sorry,” she said quickly. “We are not ready for visitors so early. But if you wish to speak to me here I am.”

“Oh, it will keep until later,” said Gault. He touched his hat, and watched her through the door.

Conacher was waiting for her in the inner room. Loseis flung herself in his arms.

“Ah, you are really here!” she murmured. “It was not a dream! . . . If Gault could see me now!” she added with a laugh, like a chime of little bells.

Conacher pressed the hair back from her forehead. He had been watching through the window, and his face was dark. “It makes me see red to have that man speak to you,” he muttered. “What was he after?”

“Wanted to know where I’d been?” said Loseis. “Of course I didn’t tell him. But I’m afraid I gave away a good deal in my face. I have him badly worried. I hope it won’t cause him to sit up to-night, or set a watch on us.”

“All is arranged then?”

“Yes. Tatateecha will land a hundred men in the second river meadow at ten o’clock. They will wait there until it becomes dark. We’ll only have about four hours of darkness, and the moon will be shining. It cannot be helped; we must put our trust in silence. Slavis are the quietest animals there are.”

A few hours later, Loseis, sleeping in the kitchen, was awakened by Mary-Lou who said that Gault was coming across.

“He must be allowed to come in,” said Loseis. “Say that I am sleeping. It will give me a moment to prepare.”

She hastened into the other room. Awakening Conacher, she said:

“Gault is coming. I must let him in here in order to put his suspicions to sleep. Get under the bed.”

Conacher, still bemused with sleep, obeyed her; and Loseis, with a rapid survey of the room, gathered up whatever was his, and thrust it after him. The robe of raccoons’ tails hung down over the edge of the bed concealing all. She went to the door.

“Come in,” she said, affecting to conceal a yawn.

“I am sorry to have disturbed you,” said Gault smoothly. His eyes swept around the room, taking everything in. It was not that he expected to find anyone there; he was merely trying to discover what secret source of support Loseis had found. He gave her a hard look as much as to say: What are you sleeping in the morning for?

Loseis, having had time to prepare, was fully mistress of herself. “Last night I was too angry to sleep,” she said coolly.

“Hum!” said Gault, rubbing his lip. “That is what I came to talk to you about.”

Loseis held herself in polite readiness to hear what he had to say.

“We mustn’t quarrel,” said Gault. He buttered his harsh voice; but his eyes were still boring into the girl.

“I don’t wish to quarrel,” said Loseis mildly. “But when you tell me you are going to banish me from my own home . . .”

“You refuse to co-operate with me,” said Gault, spreading out his hands.

“You don’t give me a chance,” said Loseis. Inwardly she was quaking dangerously with laughter. If he knew what was under the bed!

“You are so young!” said Gault deprecatingly.

“However young I am,” said Loseis, “what is mine, is mine!”

“Well, I may have been a little too hasty,” said Gault with the air of one who was making an immense concession. “Let us try to make a fresh start.”

Loseis reflected that if she allowed a reconciliation to take place she would never be able to get rid of him. “Perhaps I have been hasty, too,” she said, “but I can’t forgive you yet. Give me another twenty-four hours . . . Come to breakfast to-morrow, and I promise to meet you half way.”

“Done!” cried Gault, showing all the big teeth. I am wearing her down! he thought. Women do not mean all they say! “Expect me at eight,” he said, making for the door.

Conacher crawled out from under the bed with a very red face. “It’s good he went!” he growled. “I couldn’t have stood it much longer. . . . What did you want to ask him to breakfast for?”

Loseis was charmed to see Conacher betraying jealousy. “While I have him here no discovery is likely to be made,” she said. “Every hour’s start

that you can gain will help."

"Well, I hope he comes after me, that's all," said Conacher grimly.

At ten o'clock that night Loseis and Mary-Lou came out of their house arm in arm, and stood in front of the door linked together, gazing up at the serene moon. Behind them crouched Conacher. Across the way Gault's house was in the blackest shadow, and they could not tell but that the door might be standing open, and some one watching them from within. Making out to be lost in contemplation of the moon, the two girls, always taking care to present a double front to a possible watcher, edged to the corner of the house. Conacher then darted around behind. He was to make his way around the outside of the square and meet them beside the creek in half an hour.

Loseis went back to close the door of her house, and the girls continued their stroll. From the middle of the square they could make out that the door of Gault's house was closed. They descended to the bank of the main stream, and came back again. Having by this maneuver satisfied themselves that they were not being followed, they returned down the rise, picked up Conacher at the creek, and crossed the meadow beyond. Upon the gravelly ridge which bounded it on the other side, they came upon Tatateecha and his silent men, squatting on the earth with their backs to the moon like a patch of little bushes.

Conacher was presented to Tatateecha as the friend of Loseis who must be obeyed in all things. Conacher himself could only issue his orders by means of signs. Being a white man, and therefore not to be trusted where absolute silence was required, he was sent down into the second meadow to wait. The little Slavis deployed in the first meadow, and slowly closing up, urged the horses slowly back over the ridge. In the second meadow they could be packed without danger of arousing the sleepers at the post. For this operation the light of the moon would be invaluable.

Led by Loseis, the whole tribe then crept back in single file through the grass towards the Post. They crossed the creek, not by the stepping-stones, but higher up, immediately below the steep bank at the back of the men's house and the little warehouse. Leaving her men at the bottom of the bank, Loseis went up to make a reconnaissance. She crept up to the wall of the men's house, and rounding the front corner, edged, a foot at a time to the door. Laying her ear to the crack, she was rewarded by hearing heavy snores within. No watch was being kept. What had Gault to fear from two girls?

Returning to her men, Loseis gave the signal, and the business of the night began. Loseis herself removed the pole that propped the warehouse

door, and let it back softly against the wall. One of the Slavis was posted close to the men's house with instructions to croak like a bull-bat if there was any sound of movement from within. Inside the warehouse Loseis would have been thankful to use her electric torch, but was afraid of precipitating a panic amongst the Slavis. However the fur had all been divided into half loads for a horse, each half load being a load for a man. Silently the endless procession wound in and out. A long line of little men waited in the moonlight at the door. Nobody stumbled, or dropped his load. There were a hundred bundles of fur. Afterwards the pack-saddles, saddle-cloths, hitching-gear had to go. Loseis breathed a little prayer of thankfulness when at last she propped the pole against the closed door, exactly as it had been before.

There was still the grub to be got from the store; but as this was passed out through the rear window, and carried away behind the warehouse, the danger was not so great.

The easterly sky was full of cool light when the hitch was thrown over the last pack, and pulled home. The head of the train had already started. Tatateecha rode first to make the trail. Conacher lingered to say good-by to Loseis. His heart failed him.

"Ah, come too," he urged her. "Here are plenty of spare horses. Let me take care of you!"

"No, no, dearest!" she said. "Before we had gone twenty miles Gault would be up to us, and the Slavis would stampede. We'd have to wait for Gault's Crees after all. But if you can only get the Slavis fifty or sixty miles from home into a strange country, you couldn't drive them away from the grub-boxes. I am hoping that two days may pass before Gault discovers the loss of the fur."

"He will see that the horses are gone," objected Conacher.

"They are accustomed to wander from one meadow to another along the river."

The last Indian had passed out of sight. Conacher took the girl in his arms. "You are asking the hardest thing in the world of me," he groaned. "And that is to leave you!"

"Ah! don't make it harder for me," faltered Loseis. "It is the only way!"

"Damn the fur!" said Conacher. "It makes me out a mere fortune-hunter. I wish you had nothing!"

“I’m not worrying about what you are,” said Loseis. “My heart tells me. For myself, I care nothing about the fur. It was my father’s. I would feel that I had been false to him, if I let Gault fool me out of it. I could never respect myself. I am Blackburn’s daughter. I cannot allow the name of Blackburn to become a joke in the country.”

“I’m only a tail to the Blackburn kite,” grumbled Conacher.

Loseis laughed a little, and pressed him close. “I shall make it up to you,” she whispered. “You shall be my lord and master. Isn’t that enough?”

“That makes me feel worse,” he said. “I’m not worthy. . . .”

Loseis put a loving hand over his mouth. “Enough of that talk,” she said. “You love me, don’t you?”

“Until death,” he murmured.

“Me too, until death,” she whispered passionately. “That makes us equal. This talk of fortunes and worthiness is less than nothing. . . . Now you must go.”

“They ride so slowly,” pleaded Conacher.

“Get on your horse, dearest; I must not be seen returning to-day.”

Conacher obeyed with a heavy heart. He leaned out of the saddle for a final embrace. They clung together.

“Good-by,” whispered Loseis. “Good-by, my dearest love. Come back soon!”

Swiftly withdrawing herself from him, she gave his horse a smart slap; and it carried him away.

CHAPTER XIV

THE DISCOVERY

DAWN was rosy in the East when Loseis got home; but the moon had set, and the little square within the buildings was full of shadows. There was no stir of life about the men's house; the door was still closed. Loseis slipped thankfully within her own door. Mary-Lou, being of no help in packing the horses, had been sent home some hours before.

In her first feeling of relief, Loseis threw herself on her bed, and was instantly asleep. But at six her subconscious anxiety awoke her again; and the instant she awakened, she was at the window. The door of the men's house now stood open; and the two tall Crees were respectively splashing in a basin and brandishing a towel outside the door. They had learned this trick from the white man. Etzooah squatted on the ground near by, grinning derisively. The Slavis did not believe in washing. If they ever yielded to this weakness, it was in secrecy.

One of the Crees went off to the stable; and presently returned leading Gault's own horse, a rangy, half-bred chestnut from the "outside." Gault appeared from the house fully accoutered, and Loseis' heart seemed to drop into a hole in her breast. Suppose he rode along the river trail; any man not absolutely blind must perceive the marks of the passage of the fur train. However, to her relief, he trotted diagonally across the square, and started up the trail behind the store.

Freshening himself up to come courting again, thought Loseis with curving lips.

Her next anxiety was that Moale, actuated by his passion for fine furs, might visit the warehouse to look them over. But Moale did not appear outside the cabin. Loseis saw smoke rising from the chimney, and supposed that he must be acting as cook for the time being. So she left the window to prepare herself for the day.

In due course Gault returned from his ride. He went within to refurbish himself; and promptly on the stroke of eight was to be seen striding across the square, very stiff and handsome and black.

Quite a picture, thought Loseis in a detached way; but not for my album. She spoke through the door to Mary-Lou. “Let him wait in the kitchen for a moment. We must not appear to be too eager.”

When she opened the door, Gault was standing there, hand on hip, looking every inch the chief, and fully aware of it. He presented a smooth face to her, with a hard and wary eye. He did not know exactly what to expect. Loseis, making her own face expressionless, greeted him politely.

“Come in,” she said.

The table was ready spread in the inner room, and they sat down to it, outvying each other in cool politeness. Gault was thinking: She asked me here this morning. It’s up to her to show her hand. And Loseis was thinking: I have everything to gain by keeping him guessing. Let him make the first move. So it was:

“This fried rabbit is delicious, Miss Blackburn.”

“I’m glad you like it. I was sorry there was no other fresh meat. The Slavis say that a man may starve on rabbit.”

“The Slavis may say so: but it satisfies me. I can never get it cooked so well as this. It needs a woman.”

“But I have read that the most famous cooks are always men.”

“Oh, I was speaking of our country. I have had many a good man cook on the trail; but they seem to lose their cunning in a house.”

“My usual cook is the Slavi girl that I call Mary-Ann,” said Loseis. “But she has run off with the others.”

Gault shrugged in a commiserating fashion. This was getting on dangerous ground.

The trader was at a serious disadvantage in this fencing, because he wanted the girl, wanted her intolerably, whereas she was indifferent to him. Gault did not know the cause for it; but his senses were aware that Loseis was revealing a new beauty these past two days. Her dark eyes were fuller and more beaming; her very skin seemed to radiate a mysterious quality of light. All this made the man a little sick at heart; but he could not altogether give up hope, either. She asked me to breakfast, he told himself; what does that mean but that she is beginning to come round. Very often a woman is most scornful just at the moment when she is preparing to give in. I should hang off a little now.

Meanwhile Loseis was thinking: Five hours! They will be making their first spell. Fifteen miles. I told Tatateecha to cut it down to three hours on the first day. Then five hours on the trail, and camp for the night thirty miles from here. Gault's Crees cannot arrive before to-morrow night at the earliest. My people will then have sixty miles start.

Loseis' beauty teased Gault to such an extent that he was forced to make overtures to bring a little warmth into that composed face. "Shall I send to the lake village to fetch Mary-Ann back?" he asked.

"Oh, no!" said Loseis. "I prefer to ignore her. I shall be in a better position to deal with her when she comes crawling back of her own accord."

"I was merely thinking of your comfort," said Gault.

"You are very kind."

Gault could no longer keep it in. "Well, am I forgiven!" he asked in a jolly sort of way.

Loseis gave him no answering smile. "I am no longer angry with you," she said coolly. "I am just neutral. I am waiting to see what happens."

Gault was a good deal dashed. She is just playing with me! he thought angrily. But Oh God! that pure, pale skin, that proud averted glance! With an immense effort he controlled himself. "There is no need for you to leave this place," he said with a reasonable air.

Instead of showing the gratitude that he expected, she said in a slightly surprised voice: "Of course there isn't!"

"But if we are to remain here together," he said, nettled, "you must make it possible for me to work with you."

"It seems to me that you are putting the cart before the horse," said Loseis softly.

Gault ground his teeth together. This child to be taking such a tone to him! "My dear girl!" he said loftily, "I must be the one to decide what is best for us until some better qualified person appears."

Loseis thought: I must not make him too angry. I must lead him along. She said in a more amicable tone: "We are just talking in a circle."

Gault contrived to laugh again. "Of course we are!" he cried. "Well, what do you propose? You promised to meet me half way."

“I will do anything that you suggest,” said Loseis with an alluring mildness, “provided you explain the reasons for it.”

The blood rushed to Gault’s pale face. He had to restrain himself from reaching for her hand. “That is all I could ask!” he cried.

“Yes,” Loseis slyly went on, “I will even go out to Fort Good Hope when you send the fur, if it is necessary.”

A doubt occurred to the trader—this was such a violent face-about: but she looked so adorable when she said it, that he waved the doubt away. “Splendid!” he cried. “I now say to you that there is not the slightest necessity for your going to Fort Good Hope!”

Loseis smiled at him at last, a slow, oblique, curious smile, having infinitely more meaning than the trader suspected. It carried him clean off his feet. His hand shot out.

“Shake!” he cried.

Loseis could not control the impulse of her blood that forced her to rise suddenly (she had finished her breakfast) and to say with cool distaste: “Oh, please not. I hate to paw.”

And Gault’s blood was aware of the true significance of that recoil, but his vanity would not acknowledge it. He sat glowering at her half-hurt, half-angry, a pathetic sight at fifty-three. “Oh, sorry,” he said in a flat voice. “It is instinctive amongst men.”

“I know,” said Loseis, trying to smooth things over. “But I am not a man. . . . Do smoke one of your delicious cigars. I have missed them during the last few days.”

Gault allowed himself to be deceived. “My pet weakness!” he said, smiling at Loseis rather killingly.

They were tempted outside. Loseis’ gaze involuntarily swept the heavens. No cloud in sight; not the filmiest of vapors to dim the inverted bowl of blue. There would be no rain for days. It was well.

“What are you expecting?” asked Gault smiling.

“Oh, nothing!” she said with a shrug. “My father always looked at the sky when he came out of doors. I suppose I caught the habit from him. . . . Shall we walk down to the river? Things have been so mixed up lately, all my habits are broken up. I need exercise.”

“Delighted!” said Gault. “. . . There is not going to be any more quarreling, is there?” he added with his fond smile.

“I hope not,” said Loseis demurely.

They paused at the edge of the river bank. The view was filled in by the bold high point opposite, with the old grave and the new grave side by side on top within the extended palings. The sight of the grassy mound and the earthy mound aroused a poignant emotion in Loseis.

Do *they* know what I am going through? she wondered. Ah! I hope not! I should not want their peace to be disturbed!

Gault, watching the girl’s face, said with a heavy gravity: “I have not yet had the opportunity to visit Blackburn’s grave. I trust I may be permitted to pay that tribute. He was a great man!”

Loseis turned back from the river. She did not care to share her emotion with *him*. The hypocritical words sickened her slightly. “Of course!” she said coolly. “Why not?”

A hard nature! said Gault to himself.

However as they sauntered back through the grass, which was now bestarred with pale crocuses, Loseis exerted herself to charm him, and God knows that was not difficult. Matters went swimmingly again. Gault expanded. He could see himself bending elegantly and solicitously to the slim and lovely girl. It was a sensation one had never experienced in that rude country.

As they mounted the rise to the little plateau, Gault was saying: “I am expecting my men back to-morrow afternoon with some fresh supplies from Good Hope. I trust you will give me the pleasure of dining with me. The fare will not be as good as that you provide, but perhaps it will have an element of novelty. . . .”

And at that moment they perceived Moale running towards them like a madman.

Loseis’ heart sank. All her trouble to fool him was for nothing, then! Immediately afterwards she went hard all over. Now for it! Well, let it come!

“The fur is gone!” yelled Moale.

“*What!*” cried Gault, with an affronted air, that was almost comic.

“The warehouse is empty!” cried Moale waving his arms. “Gone! Gone! All gone!” Nothing else could so have aroused that wooden man.

Gault and Loseis now stood at the top of the rise. The trader turned to the girl with a towering look. “By God!” he said, softly at first, then louder: “By God! . . . You have hidden the fur!”

Loseis, holding herself very straight, looked away with a maddening air of unconcern, and held her tongue.

“She has sent it out!” cried Moale. “The saddles are gone; the horses are gone! I have sent Watusk along the trail to pick up their tracks.”

“Where is the fur?” demanded Gault of Loseis.

She reflected that the truth was bound to come out immediately. “I have sent it out,” she said coolly. “It was mine.”

The two men stared at her open-mouthed, bereft of speech. Finally Gault got his breath back, and his anger.

“You foolish girl!” he cried. “You have lost it then! The Slavis are useless without a leader.”

Loseis thought it just as well to let them know that they had more than the Slavis to deal with. “They have a leader,” she said with an offhand air. “My friend Mr. Conacher is in charge of the pack-train.” How sweet it was to flick that name so carelessly in Gault’s rage-distorted face.

Another silence. Gault’s face looked perfectly witless in its astonishment. Then it crimsoned, and the storm broke. In his passion the man’s coarse nature brazenly revealed itself.

“You lying hussy!” he cried. “All the time you’ve been showing me your demure face, you’ve been secretly receiving your lover! Lies! Lies! Lies! Nothing but lies behind that smooth face! All morning you have been lying to me to pave the way for his escape! . . .”

The girl faced him, surprised at first, then royal in her anger. “How dare you!” she cried. “You accuse me of lying, you! *you!* Why should I not lie to you? You, whose whole presence here has been a lie since you told me Etzooah could not speak English! You! with your mouth full of hypocritical talk, pretending to be my friend while you plotted to rob me! You unspeakable blackguard! It was lucky for me that I found a true friend!”

Gault’s face turned blackish; and his lips drew back over his teeth. He raised his clenched fists over his head as if to strike Loseis down. But the scared Moale touched his arm, and the blow never descended. A terrible shudder went through Gault’s frame. He turned and strode stiffly away. At the door of his house he curtly dismissed Moale, and went in alone.

Inside her own door, Loseis' knees weakened under her, and she was glad to sink into a chair. She covered her face in the effort to shut out that truly frightful picture of rage. After all she was only a girl. Ah! how thankful she would have been to have Conacher at her side then!

Her weakness was but momentary. She hastened to the window, standing far enough back to keep her face from showing at the pane. It was essential for her to know what Gault was going to do. Suppose he and his men rode after Conacher, she would have to follow, and let the Post look after itself. Impossible to remain inactive! Her horse was as good as the best. Should she not ride at once to warn Conacher? Her horse was in the stable with Gault's horses. But there were other horses she might catch. No! No! First she must see what Gault was going to do.

The Cree, Watusk, returned, and the four men were hanging around outside the door, at a loss what to do. Suddenly Moale went in as if summoned by a call. He immediately reappeared, spoke to the others, and they all went into the corral and stable. In due course they came out leading all of Gault's remaining horses, eight in number, ready saddled; some to be ridden, others to carry packs. They began to carry out their belongings from the house.

Now I must start! thought Loseis in a fever. But a more prudent voice restrained her. You mustn't let Gault see what you're going to do!

When the little train was ready, Gault came out of the house. To Loseis' astonishment he kept on across the square. He was coming to speak to her. She began to tremble all over. Just the same, she was glad that she had stayed. She went to the door, and waited for him in an unconcerned pose. He should never guess that her heart was pounding.

Gault had only partly succeeded in regaining his composure. He was lividly pale; his lips moved with a curious stiffness; and there was an ominous triangular furrow etched in his forehead. Without looking directly at Loseis, he said in a controlled voice:

"I have done my best to look after your affairs. You have rejected my efforts at every turn. Well, if you have found somebody else to advise you, there is nothing further for me to do here. I am returning to Fort Good Hope."

With that, he faced about, and went to his horse. Loseis had not said anything at all. The others were waiting in the saddle; and as soon as Gault mounted they set off, Gault staring stiffly ahead of him, the others looking

askance at the girl lounging in the doorway. Around the store, and up the side hill at the back.

The instant they were out of sight Loseis sprang into action. Without waiting for so much as coat or hat, she ran across to the stable, and flung saddle on her horse. It was perfectly evident to her that Gault was still lying. If he had, as he pretended, given up in disgust, he would have ridden away without a word. The fact that he felt it necessary to advertise his giving up was to her proof positive that he was not giving up at all.

Mary-Lou, seeing her mistress prepare to ride away, realized that she would be left the last living soul at Blackburn's Post. Panic seized her. Running across the square, she met Loseis leading her horse out of the stable.

"Take me! Take me!" she gasped.

Loseis was obliged to curb her headlong desire to be off. "Well . . . well . . ." she said impatiently. "The buckskin is in the stable. I will saddle him for you. Run back to the house. Fetch some grub. Shove my riding clothes in a saddlebag. I'll change on the trail."

As she tightened girths, Loseis reflected: Etzooah is familiar with the triangle of country between the two trails, from having trapped it in the winter. There is no cross trail, but it would be possible to lead their horses through the bush, and across the coulee. Take a little time, though. I shall be on the southerly trail ahead of them. . . . But suppose they steal back here first to spy on me . . . ?

A hard little smile wreathed Loseis' lips. Hastily tying the horses to the corral fence, she flew across the grass again. Meeting Mary-Lou coming out of the house, she ordered her to put down the things, and help her. In the house, Loseis tore the mattress off her bed, and dragging it into the kitchen ripped it open. It was stuffed with moss. Wetting the moss from the barrel of water which stood within the door, she arranged it in the fireplace in such a way that it would smolder a little at a time.

"That will last out the day," she said smiling. "Come on; let's go!"

CHAPTER XV

SHADOWING

LOSEIS and Mary-Lou rode hard through the river-meadows and over the gravelly ridges. There was no danger that anyone who followed would be able to pick out the prints of their horses' hoofs in the confusion of tracks left by the fur train. When they gained the shelter of the wooded country, some six miles from the Post, Loseis pulled up to a walk. It is impossible to think at a gallop. She wished to canvass all the possibilities of the situation again.

She thought: The further they went along the trail before striking across, the harder it would be to get over. Therefore if they intended to come this way they would turn off as soon as possible. They would now be behind me. . . . But I do not *know* that Gault intends to ride after the fur, though that is the likeliest thing for him to do. How foolish I would look if I dashed ahead to warn Conacher, and then Gault never came. Gault might be planning to steal back to the Post, and seize it. Or he might have some devilish trick in mind that would never occur to me. . . . I will not ride on until I make sure that he is on this trail.

It is impossible to hide with horses alongside a traveled trail. The horses are certain to betray you by whinnying at the approach of other horses. Therefore, Loseis was obliged to ride on four miles further to the Slavi village at the foot of the lake. Here she sent Mary-Lou across the river with instructions to turn the horses out, and to lose herself amongst the Slavis.

Loseis walked back along the wooded trail, looking for a suitable place of concealment. The river ran close alongside. On the river there was a fringe of berry bushes at the base of the trees; but the water sparkled through the interstices of the stems. No room to hide there. The other side was more open; a thick brown carpet of pine needles that smothered all undergrowth. Loseis began to run in feverish impatience. Suppose she was surprised before she could hide herself.

At last in a place where the sun broke through, she came upon a thick clump of the high-bush cranberry on the inshore side of the trail. She walked up and down the trail surveying it from every angle. It would serve! She

crept in, careful to leave no tell-tale marks of her passage. She constructed herself a little cave amongst the leaves, that would permit of a certain freedom of movement without betraying her by a rustle. Here she crouched within two yards of the trail.

It was very difficult to compose her impatient blood to wait. The swollen river moved down, whispering and sucking under the bank. Overhead a smooth, smoky-colored whisky-jack fluttered like a shadow from branch to branch, cocking a suspicious eye down at her. Would he betray her? thought Loseis anxiously. However he made up his mind after awhile that she was a fixture, and faded away. In the distance Loseis could hear the children and the dogs of the Slavi village. A dozen times within a quarter hour Loseis looked at her watch; and each time put it to her ear to make sure it had not stopped.

A whole hour passed, and another one on top of that. Loseis was beginning to ask herself if she were not on a fool's errand. What ought she to do? What ought she to do? Then she heard a sound that caused all uncertainty to vanish: hoof-beats on the hard-packed trail. It was then two o'clock. As the sound drew closer her brow knitted; only one horse; that was not what she had expected; why should they send one man in pursuit of Conacher?

A minute later Etzooah rode by in the trail. He was not hurrying himself at all; his horse was single-footing it gently; and the Indian rode with his near leg thrown over the saddle horn, his body all relaxed and shaking in the untidy native style. Etzooah, unaware of being observed, looked thoroughly well pleased with himself. He hummed a chant under his breath, and from force of habit his beady black eyes watched on every side of him. Sharp as they were they perceived nothing amiss in the clump of high-bush cranberry.

When he had passed, Loseis after making sure that there were no more coming, issued out of her hiding place, and started back for her horse, considering. Her first impulse was to ride after Etzooah, but she dismissed it with a shake of the head. No! No personal danger threatened Conacher from Etzooah's coming. This was just part of some tricky game that Gault was playing. Etzooah might safely be left to Conacher to handle. She must find out what Gault was about. There lay the real danger.

Obtaining her horse, and bidding Mary-Lou to remain where she was, Loseis rode back towards the post. Having ridden about two miles, an intuition warned her to dismount and lead her horse, that she might not give undue warning of her passage. Shortly afterwards the mare suddenly threw

up her head and whickered. A moment later Loseis heard more hoof-beats; several horses this time, pounding in a measured way that suggested they were being ridden by men.

Turning her horse, Loseis mounted and rode back a hundred yards or so to a small stream that fell into the river. Dismounting in the water, she cut her mare sharply across the withers, sending her galloping on in the direction of the Indian village. Wading up the little stream, she presently climbed the bank, and making a detour among the pines, pressed herself close in to the stem of a young tree, with branches growing down to the ground. It was not a perfect hiding-place; she was further from the trail.

The riders approached. They were walking their horses now. Gault, Moale and one of the Crees; the other, Watusk, was missing. They had left their pack-horses behind them. So they are not going far! thought Loseis. Gault's face, when he was alone with his men, wore an expression that he had never permitted Loseis to see; a look of naked brutality that made the girl shiver. It is the natural expression of that face, she thought.

Even before she could see their faces, Loseis heard Gault and Moale talking back and forth. The first words she heard distinctly were spoken by Gault. He said:

"It must have been somewhere along here. I heard a horse run off along the trail. I had not heard it before that. Sounded like some one might have been waiting here."

"A loose horse startled away by our coming," suggested Moale. "There are plenty of them along the river."

"They don't often run alone," Gault pointed out.

"A Slavi, then. I suspect they prowl up and down this trail."

"We don't want them prowling around us," growled the trader.

"Let Musqua cry like the Weh-ti-go," said Moale.

The Cree, grinning, threw back his head and uttered the long-drawn, wailing screech that is supposed to be the cry of that dreadful spirit.

"They will say that it is Blackburn," said Moale chuckling.

There was a silence.

"We mustn't go too far," said Gault. "Or we'll be on top of the Slavi village."

“What are you looking for?” asked Moale.

“A dead tree alongside the trail that we can pull over.”

For some reason these words struck a cold fear into Loseis’ breast. The riders passed out of earshot.

The trail wound in and out among the trunks as woodland trails do, and you could never see more than twenty-five yards or so ahead or behind. As soon as the men had gone, Loseis issued from her hiding-place, and started to follow on foot. She could still hear the murmur of their voices but not what they said. The leisureliness of their progress puzzled her. They were not going much further. What could they be up to? And the remaining Cree; what had become of him?

She heard them pass through the little stream that crossed the trail. A short distance beyond they stopped, apparently for the purpose of holding a consultation. Loseis approached as close as she dared, but could not make out their words. After awhile they left the trail. From the sounds that reached her, Loseis understood that they were leading their horses away amongst the trees. She went forward as far as the stream, and ascended the bed of it, thus keeping roughly parallel with the course they were taking.

For a couple of hundred yards back from the river, the forest was perfectly flat, and for the most part clear of undergrowth. The ground then rose steeply, and on the hillside young trees and bushes crowded up. The little stream came down through a ravine full of bowlders. Loseis, concentrating on the faculty of hearing, gathered that men and horses had made their way back to the foot of the rise, where they had gone into camp for a spell.

She climbed up the side of the ravine to a point well above their heads, and then edged cautiously around the hill until she was directly over the voices. Thereupon she began to let herself down softly, softly, an inch at a time, choosing every foothold with circumspection, snaking her body through the bushes with care not to create the slightest rustling. Loseis as a child had not played with the Slavi children for nothing.

She discovered at last that they had established themselves at the base of a gigantic bowlder embedded in the side of the hill. The smoke of their little fire was rising over the top. Loseis, descending from above, worked her body by slow degrees out on top of the bowlder, where she lay perfectly hidden, about fifteen feet above their heads. It would have been too risky to

attempt to peep over the edge of the stone, but whether she could see them was immaterial to her, so she could hear.

Her cautious progress around the hillside had consumed a good bit of time, and when she arrived above the camp it was still. For a long time she could hear nothing but the uneasy nosing of the horses, that had no forage in that spot. They must have been tied, for they did not move about. Loseis knew the men were still below her, for she detected a faint aroma of tobacco, apart from the fumes of burning pine. At last, startlingly, Gault's quiet voice resolved itself out of the stillness. He might have been speaking to herself.

"No, don't put any more on. If any of the Slavis happen to be traveling up on the bench, the smoke would attract them. Just keep it going until we're ready to eat."

Moale asked: "When will you eat?"

Gault replied: "We can only eat once. Put it off until evening."

Then silence again. Loseis feared that that which she so desired to hear must already have been talked out between them.

By and by she heard a horse single-footing it rapidly in the trail.

"Here comes Watusk," said Moale.

From the sounds which succeeded Loseis made out that Musqua had been stationed alongside the trail to intercept Watusk. They could presently be heard approaching with the horse, through the trees below. As soon as they were within speaking distance Gault said sharply:

"Well?"

A voice, presumably Watusk's, replied: "Blackburn's daughter, and the Beaver girl are at the post."

The listening Loseis smiled to herself.

"Did you see them?" asked Gault.

"N'moya. They were in the house. How could I look in the house without showing myself? There was smoke coming out of the chimney. For an hour I watched it from the branches of a pine tree where the trail goes over the hill."

"Maybe Blackburn's daughter had left the Indian behind."

"N'moya."

“Watusk is right,” put in Moale’s voice. “After everybody else was gone, no Indian would stay there alone; not with that new-made grave in sight!”

“It is well,” grumbled Gault.

There was more talk about eating. Gault indifferently told the breeds they could take theirs if they wanted, but they would get no more until morning.

More time passed. As is always the case with men waiting an event, they found but little to say to each other. Sometimes the Crees discussed their own concerns in low tones. Sometimes they all fell silent for so long that Loseis supposed they had fallen asleep. Then suddenly Gault and Moale took up the thread of a conversation as if it had been dropped but a moment before.

“Couldn’t we hang a noose in the trail?” asked Moale.

“No way of keeping a noose spread,” returned Gault. “It’s better to stretch the tracking line across the trail from tree to tree at such a height that it will catch him under the chin. I hope it breaks his damn neck. Most likely though, it will only yank him off his horse.”

Loseis’ blood slowly congealed as she listened. There could be no doubt who the “him” was that they referred to.

“Then we’ll jump on him,” Gault went on; “and tie him up, and lay him in the trail, and pull the tree over. I’ve got it all figured out. The branches of that tree will stick out over the edge of the bank, consequently the trunk will lie flat on the ground and break his back.”

“It may not kill him outright,” suggested Moale.

Loseis heard a horrible chuckle. Gault said: “Oh, I’ll stick around until he dies. I don’t care if he lingers a bit. I hope he’ll have sense enough to take in what I’ve got to tell him. If he lingers too long I’ll stop his breath. You fellows can ride on. I’ve got the best horse. I’ll overtake you. We’ll all have to ride like hell to get to Fort Good Hope in time to establish a proper alibi.”

There was a brief silence, then:

“But there won’t be any trouble. Unless he’s found to-morrow, the coyotes and the wolverines will have picked him clean. And in any case the fallen tree, the broken back will tell their own tale. I’ll recover the letter, of course, before I leave him.”

“Hadn’t we better keep a watch alongside the trail?” Moale asked uneasily.

“Why?”

“He might come along before dark?”

“Impossible. I told Etzooah after he had located the camp, not to show himself until the position of the sun showed eight o’clock. You can trust a Slavi to keep cover. If Conacher jumped on his horse that minute and ran him the whole way he couldn’t get back here till near midnight.”

At last they had named their intended victim!

“My only fear is that it may be daylight before he gets here,” said Gault. “But of course we’ll get him anyhow.”

“He may suspect a trick, and not come at all.”

“Oh, sure!” said Gault unconcernedly. “But we had a damn persuasive argument to use. If he don’t come by daylight we’ll go after him.”

“And afterwards,” said Moale, “what you going to do afterwards?”

Again the chuckle! “By and by I’ll ride back to Blackburn’s Post to resume my courtship.”

“She’ll be mourning for the other one then.”

“What of it? It wouldn’t be the first time that a woman consoled herself with the next best thing. It’s a very good time to tackle a woman. She’s tender then.”

Loseis had heard enough. She commenced to work herself backward off the rock. She inched her way up hill in the same manner that she had come down. She was doubly careful now, for another life beside her own depended on her success. When she had got high enough to be out of earshot, she turned in the other direction from that she had come, and making a wide detour, regained the trail a good furlong beyond Gault’s camp, and set off to recover her horse.

CHAPTER XVI

WITH CONACHER

CONACHER'S spirits rose somewhat with the sun. It was impossible for a healthy man to be altogether miserable under that tender, beaming sky. The lovely, changing prospects of the parklike country through which Blackburn's River flowed, made the heart swell. Conacher loved, and was loved in return. An apparition of the exquisite Loseis continually swam before his eyes. He was anxious; but he kept saying to himself as a civilized man will: Oh well, nothing serious can happen nowadays.

In the more open places, it was thrilling to see the long, laden train of horses stretching ahead; winding over a ridge; trotting down into the bottoms. The imagination was arrested by the thought of the riches stored in that endless succession of brown packs. It was like a picture to illustrate an old fairy tale. Thoughts of Aladdin and Sindbad flitted through the young man's mind. Riches!—not represented by a trifling row of figures in a book, but visibly spread before his eyes. Come to think of it, Aladdin married a princess, too. An insipid miss in bloomers according to the pictures; nothing like the darkly vivid Loseis!

Among other directions for the journey, Loseis had warned Conacher not to allow the Slavis to cross the river to loiter in their village. It occurred to the young man that he would not be able to prevent this while he brought up the tail of the procession, so he took advantage of one of the river meadows to urge his horse to the head of the line. By Tatateecha's crestfallen look at his approach, he judged that he had acted rightly. It was his first good look at the rotund, greasy little head man of the Slavis. Tatateecha was better favored than the run of the Slavis; but that was not saying much. He had a neat, Buster Brown hair-cut, and a red fillet bound around his brow.

Tatateecha edged his horse out of the line, and fell back to consult with the next man. They were like a pair of children conspiring together, with sharp, calculating glances at Conacher. The white man affected not to notice them. Presently Tatateecha came back to him all smiles. Conacher had had

no experiences of the Slavis, but he knew something about the Indian nature in general. He's going to try to put something over on me now, he thought.

Tatateecha by means of animated signs conveyed to Conacher that his village lay a short way ahead; and that it would be the best place to spell. Splendid grass for the horses.

"Not on your life!" said Conacher, with vigorous pantomime of denial. He indicated to Tatateecha that there would be no spell until the sun had traveled a space equal to two hours.

The Slavi broke into speech; but Conacher had him at a disadvantage there, by not understanding a word of it. The white man continued to point to the sun. Tatateecha became aggrieved; almost tearful in his protestations. Then, bringing his horse close to Conacher's he signified with a winning air, that he himself was perfectly willing to go further; but the rest of the men would refuse to go at all, unless they were permitted to say good-by to their families. Conacher replied by signs that if they refused to go and fetch the grub and ammunition, when the snow covered the ground there would be no grub, no meat, and the people would starve. This argument was unanswerable, and Tatateecha fell back sulking.

Shortly afterwards the village hove in sight across the river. The people lined up on the edge of the bank yelling; and Conacher's men yelled back. All knew that the white man could not understand their tongue; and Conacher guessed that they were making pretty free with him. It was a trying situation; but he preserved his imperturbable air.

The river issued out of the lake by means of a wide, shallow, brawling rapid. At the present high stage of water, there was but one possible place to ford, and this could not be managed even on horseback without danger of a wetting. At the point where the trail forked, Conacher backed his horse into the arm which ran down the bank, and held him there blocking the way. The Slavis jabbered angrily from one to another; the whole train was brought to a stand.

Tatateecha approached Conacher to expostulate. The white man pointed with his whip down the main trail. Tatateecha attempting to speak again, Conacher suddenly urged his horse forward, and cutting the Indian's horse smartly across the flank, sent him careering down the main trail, the only way that was open. The train got in motion again. The other Slavis, seeing that Conacher meant what he said, filed past him sullenly. The people across the river fell silent. Conacher fell in at the tail of the procession again. Ten

minutes later his feather-headed Slavis were singing and chaffing each other in the best temper imaginable.

But Conacher had to keep a sharp look-out for deserters. Time and again, one or another of the Slavis edged his horse in among the trees with the object of circling around and gaining the trail behind Conacher. The white man found that he could best defeat this maneuver by falling back a quarter of a mile. In that position he would come face to face with the astonished deserter, who thought he had already eluded him. Caught in the act, they made no attempt to resist his commanding voice. When they spelled at last, Conacher, without appearing to, anxiously counted his men. He had lost one. With dinner in prospect there was no danger of their making off. As soon as they had eaten he distributed plugs of tobacco.

Upon reaching the lake the trail turned sharp to the eastward for some miles. In order to provide a firm footing it had to encircle the edge of the wooded country, far back from the water. The vast lake meadows at this season were like a saturated sponge underfoot. For three sleeps, Tatateecha explained, they would be traveling alongside these meadows; and then, climbing through a pass in the hills, would come to the prairie, where they would find the buffalo grass which made horses fat. This bottom grass filled them up, but did not stick to their ribs. Tatateecha was very ingenious in the sign language. When they spelled he was perfectly good-humored again; attaching himself to Conacher like a friendly child.

For two full hours they allowed the horses to feed, before rounding them up again. Conacher would dearly have liked to sleep (as all the Slavis did) but dared not. However, because of the tobacco he had handed out, or because they were getting too far away from home, or for some other reason, the Slavis appeared to have reconciled themselves. There were no further attempts to desert. It was impossible to tell what was going on inside their skulls.

Then for five hours longer they continued on their way. The character of the route never changed. For mile after mile the brown ribbon of earth threaded in and out amongst the trunks of the pines, climbing the little unevenness of ground; crossing small water-courses. On their left hand the vast sea of grass was generally in sight through the trees, with a suggestion of water on the horizon; sometimes for considerable distances the trail followed the actual line between grass and timber.

At about six o’clock they halted for the night. It seemed a pity not to take advantage of the four remaining hours of daylight; but when Conacher

looked at the grass-fed horses, sweaty and drooping, he perceived the necessity for camping. The horses were turned out in the grass; the Slavis built their fire at the foot of the bank; while Conacher spread his bed on top in a grove of pines running out to a point, whence he could survey both horses and men.

He spent the early part of the evening fraternizing with his men amidst great laughter when, as frequently happened, the language of signs broke down. About eight o'clock he retired to his own little fire above, and rolled up in a blanket. The sun had not yet sunk out of sight; but it was planned to start at four next morning. As he lay there day-dreaming, he was greatly astonished to see a Slavi Indian quietly approaching between the trees at the back of the point.

He sat up. All the Slavis looked very much alike to him; but he instantly recognized that this was not one of those who had accompanied him all day. There was a suggestion of secrecy in his approach. A rather better physical specimen than the average Slavi, his face bore the childish, deceitful grin that was characteristic of them all. His teeth were blackened and broken; on the whole, an unpleasant-looking individual. He held out an envelope towards Conacher; and the young man leaped to his feet full of a vague alarm.

"Who are you?" he asked involuntarily.

The Indian, grinning, shook his head like a dog, and pointed to his ear; the usual sign for not understanding.

Conacher pointed to himself, and said "Conacher." He then pointed to the Indian.

"Saltahta," said the man.

Conacher took the envelope. It bore no superscription. Tearing it open, his heart was filled with warmth at the sight of Loseis' signature in big round characters. The letter had been written on the typewriter in the stammering style of the beginner. Conacher had had such a letter from Loseis down river. This one was brief.

"There is something wrong here. Gault is plotting mischief. I am afraid. The man who takes this to you is a good man. Let him go with the outfit, and you come back to me."

As he read, all Conacher's warmth was chilled. Suspicion leaped into his mind full-grown. There was a vagueness about the letter that was not like Loseis. Moreover he doubted if she would ever confess to being afraid, even

if she were afraid. And why should she sign her full name; Laurentia Blackburn. On the other letter it had been simply Laurentia. He remembered the sheets that Gault had made her sign for him, and smiled to himself. Really, the plot was too transparent. He, Conacher, was to be drawn off, and the fur diverted to Gault's uses under guidance of this Indian. Loseis had told him of a Slavi who was in Gault's pay.

Suddenly putting his finger on the man's breast, Conacher said: "Etzooah."

The Slavi looked at him with perfect, stupid blankness, and shook his head. "Saltahta," he repeated.

"Tatateecha!" called Conacher.

The little head man came climbing up the bank. Whatever his astonishment at the sight of the newcomer, nothing showed in his face.

"Who is this man?" demanded Conacher, putting his finger on the Slavi.

"Saltahta," said the newcomer quickly.

"Saltahta," repeated Tatateecha like a parrot.

Conacher bit his lip. With a jerk of his head he dismissed Tatateecha. The other man made as if to follow.

"You stay where you are!" cried Conacher.

Whether or not the man understood English, the gesture which accompanied the words was amply significant, and he stopped in his tracks. He began to whine pitifully in his own tongue, pointing to his lips and hugging his stomach.

"I don't give a damn how hungry you are," said Conacher. "I mean to keep you under my eye until I decide what to do."

The Indian sat down at the foot of a tree, and pathetically exhibited his empty pipe to the white man. Conacher tossed him the remainder of a plug of tobacco, which he began to shave with an air of philosophic indifference.

There was an agonizing struggle going on in Conacher's breast. Though he had every reason in the world to believe that letter a trick, he found that he *could not disregard it*. There was still one chance in a thousand that it was genuine, and it was a chance he could not take. He had been unwilling enough in the first place to leave Loseis; this little doubt tipped the scale. With that doubt of her safety in his mind he recognized that it would be simply impossible for him to go on day after day always putting a greater

distance between them. “Oh, to hell with the fur!” he said to himself; and in that moment his mind was made up.

But he had no notion of swallowing Gault’s bait (if such it was) whole. He lit a pipe to stimulate his mental processes, and puffed at it leaning against a tree, and gazing down at the innocent-eyed Indian speculatively. He thought: I shall take you back with me, my man. Tatateecha is a good way from home now, and he’s been over this route many times. He ought to be able to deliver the fur to Gruber. But in any case I’d sooner trust him than you. Whether you like it or not, you shall come back with me.

It seemed important to Conacher not to allow the newcomer to communicate with the other Slavis. Removing the handkerchief from about his neck, he therefore forced the astonished Indian to put his hands around the tree behind him, and firmly bound his wrists together. The captive loudly and plaintively protested; it was clear that things were not turning out in the way that he expected.

Conacher then went down the bank to consult with Tatateecha. None of the Slavis had rolled up for the night. Their faces were perfectly wooden; but the white man sensed a certain strain in the atmosphere. Evidently Tatateecha had told them of the newcomer’s arrival, and it had excited them. As well as he could, Conacher signified to the head man that he was going back to Blackburn’s Post; and that he wanted two of the least tired horses to be caught.

Pointing up to the top of the bank, Tatateecha asked an eager question.

“He goes with me,” said Conacher, illustrating with signs.

He thought he saw a look of relief appear in the Slavi faces. However they volunteered no information. Again he asked Tatateecha the man’s name, and received the same answer: “Saltahta.” Strange creatures! Apparently they knew of no way of dealing with the strong and terrifying white man except to hide as much as possible from them.

Men were sent away to catch the required horses, and Conacher took out pencil and note-book to write his letter to Gruber. He wished to do this in the sight of Tatateecha, knowing what a superstitious reverence all the remoter tribes have for the act of writing. And it was quite true that Tatateecha, out of the corners of his eyes, followed every move of the pencil with a look of uneasy awe. Conacher wrote:

> “Hector Blackburn was killed on June 3rd by falling over a cliff with his horse. Matthew Gault has come to Blackburn’s Post

where he is trying to take advantage of the helpless situation of Blackburn's daughter. She has written to you, but supposes that the letter has not been allowed to go through. We are sending you the fur in charge of Tatateecha because we have nobody else. If you get this letter send us help quickly. Send the police if possible; at any rate send white men. I have promised Tatateecha a credit of one hundred skins if he places this letter in your hands."

"Paul Conacher, Dominion Geological Survey."

Conacher inclosed this letter in the torn envelope, since he had no other, and offered it to Tatateecha. The Indian received it gingerly and wrapped it in a fold of the gay worsted sash he wore. Conacher explained whom it was for, and told Tatateecha he should receive goods to the value of a hundred skins when it was delivered. To convey the figure, the white man patiently broke up tiny twigs to the required number. Tatateecha's eyes widened in delighted cupidity. In that moment he could be depended on; the question was, could his feather-head hold to a resolution long enough to carry it through?

The two horses were driven up on top of the bank. The Slavis jeered and pointed at the predicament of the one who called himself Saltahta. If it had been Tatateecha or Conacher himself, they would have done just the same. By Conacher's orders, they offered to feed the captive, but he refused it. When his horse, which was found tied to a tree near by, was led in, it was discovered that he had plenty of bread and meat tied to his saddle.

Saddle and bridle were transferred to one of the fresher horses, and the man was bidden to mount. His hands were tied behind him; and his feet tied with a loose thong under the horse's belly. The Slavis yelled in derision, and slapped their thighs. Conacher would have given a good deal to have understood the epithets they bestowed on the prisoner. A leading rein was improvised out of a piece of tracking line. Tying blanket and food to his own saddle, Conacher mounted, and rode off leading the other horse.

For a long time he could hear the laughter of the Slavis. He wondered if they could make any more of the situation than he could, or if their laughter was as meaningless as it sounded. In the hands of these crack-brained savages, he bitterly reflected, rested not only the fate of that fortune in skins, but also the hope of Loseis and him receiving help from the outside world.

CHAPTER XVII

THE MEETING

THREE hours later the two horses were still jogging in the same manner along the forest trail. In the beginning the prisoner had sought to make as much trouble as possible by beating his heels against his horse's ribs, rendering the animal almost unmanageable. Conacher had then put him in front, telling him to beat away, whereupon the Slavi had become very quiet. The tiring horse hung back more and more, and in order to make any progress at all, Conacher had been obliged to take the lead, and pull the other after.

The moon was now high. Little moonlight penetrated through the trees, but the general brightness made traveling easier. A slow trot was the best that Conacher could get out of the horses. Even that pace was not without danger at night. Had not the trail been freshly cleaned up that day for the passage of the fur train, they could not have done it.

Conacher figured that he was within two or three miles of the Slavi village. In two hours more he would make Blackburn's Post. His heart leaped at the thought of rousing Loseis up in the middle of the night. How astonished she would be! He would hold her in his arms again! He urged his horse forward, and gave the leading rein a jerk.

Not but what he had certain doubts, too, of his reception. Loseis might blame him for returning; would want to send him away again perhaps. Conacher firmly shook his head in the darkness. No! whatever the truth of the situation, it was better for them to remain together. Nothing should persuade him to leave her again.

As Conacher, dreaming, jogged along between the half-seen pillars of the pines rising into obscurity, his wearied horse threw up his head and whinnied. The rider instinctively drew up to listen. A sound of fear broke from the man behind. Presently, out of the stillness of the forest came a faint, answering whinny from ahead. Clapping heels to his horse, Conacher rode to meet it.

The Slavi moaned in fear. “Stop!” he said. “It is not good. There is nobody here.”

“Ha!” said Conacher. “You have found your English, eh?” He continued to urge his horse forward.

They turned into a natural avenue through the trees where the moonlight came flooding down. At the end of this glade, seen first as a dim gray ghost, and gradually resolving itself into the lineaments of life, they perceived a motionless horse and rider blocking the trail. For a second, such a sight in that awful solitude caused even Conacher’s heart to fail; but he did not pull up. As for the Indian, a strangled squall of terror escaped him, and he fell to gibbering incoherently. He was perfectly helpless. Tied as he was, he could not throw himself off his horse without the certainty of being trampled.

Drawing closer, a wild, joyous suspicion sprang up in Conacher’s breast; then certainty. It was Loseis in her boy’s dress, sitting astride the sorrel mare. Flinging themselves off their horses, they flew to each other’s arms, careless of the on-looker.

“Loseis, my darling!” murmured Conacher. “What are you doing here?”

She was all woman then. “Oh, Paul . . . Oh, Paul . . . !” she faltered. “I came to warn you. Gault is waiting in the trail to kill you!”

“To kill me!” he echoed amazed.

A hasty, confused explanation took place. They lowered their voices that the Indian might not overhear.

“I did not send you that letter,” said Loseis.

“I know it.”

“Why did you come back then?”

“I *had* to come. . . . Do you blame me?”

“No! No! It is all right. If you had not come they would have ridden after you. I can best take care of you here.”

Conacher laughed half in delight, half sorely. “You take care of me! I like that! . . . How did you know they had sent me a letter?”

“I crept up to them in the woods. I listened.” She gave him the gist of what she had overheard.

“Good God!” cried Conacher in his simplicity. “Think of anybody wanting to kill *me*!” Catching hold of the leading line, he jerked the Indian

into the full moonlight. “Who is this man?” he said.

“Etzooah,” said Loseis with half a glance.

“I thought so,” said Conacher grimly. “According to the letter he was to have gone with the outfit; but I thought I had better bring him with me.”

“You did well,” said Loseis.

Tying the horses to trees, they walked away a little in the trail. For awhile they were completely filled with the joy of being together again. The difficulties ahead had to wait.

“Oh, my darling, when I realized that it was you, my heart nearly burst with joy. It was so unexpected, so lovely to find you waiting quietly in the moonlight!”

“Oh, Paul, it makes up for everything to have known you! I don’t care what happens now.”

“You must have been waiting here alone for hours. How could you dare to do it?”

“Why . . . I had to do it. I never thought twice about it.”

“You are the bravest girl in the world!”

“Oh, no! I’m just an ordinary girl who is in love with you.”

“I don’t deserve it!” he murmured.

“Well . . . neither do I!”

When they returned to earth, Conacher said simply: “What shall I do with this Indian now? Put a bullet through his head?”

“Oh, no! no!” said Loseis nervously. “There must be no killing.”

“They started it,” said Conacher.

“I wanted to kill Gault myself,” said Loseis quaintly; “but I struggled against it.”

Conacher laughed. “Little fire-eater!” he said, hugging her close.

“We must be serious now,” she said pushing him away.

“I’ll have to turn the man loose then,” said Conacher. “And let him find his way to his friends on foot.”

“That will be best,” said Loseis. “They are waiting about four miles from here. It will give us time to get out of the way.”

“The horses are so tired,” exclaimed Conacher. “And it must be eighteen miles to the fur-camp. They will die under us before we get there.”

“But we are not going there,” said Loseis. “If I had meant that, I would have ridden right through.”

“Where else can we go?” said Conacher, opening his eyes.

“Gault and his men would be up with us almost as soon as we broke camp in the morning. The Slavis would run away. How could we protect ourselves there in the open? Neither you nor I would ever be seen alive again. How easy for Gault to explain that there had been an accident. There would be no witnesses but his men.”

“What do you propose then?” said Conacher gravely.

“I have been thinking about it all these hours. We will go back to Blackburn’s Post. There we will be on our own ground. There are strong buildings to protect us, and plenty of grub and ammunition. It would be more difficult for Gault to make out that there had been an accident there.”

“Right!” said Conacher. “You have a head on you! Whatever happens we will never be parted again.”

“Never!” she said going to his arms.

“One of us will not be left!”

“I swear it!” she said kissing him.

Conacher felt the strength of ten men coursing through his veins. “Come on!” he said briskly. “How do you propose to get by the men waiting in the trail?”

“We will take a canoe at the Slavi village. Mary-Lou is waiting there. She will stick to us. She is not brave, but her heart is true.”

“Good!” said Conacher. “Now for this red-skinned blackguard. How about taking him with us to the Post? Gault would then ride after the fur at daybreak and we’d gain a day.”

“What good would that do us?” said Loseis. “He would be back at the Post by night. And in the meantime the Slavis would be scattered. Tatateecha is our best hope of getting help from the outside.”

“All right,” said Conacher. “But it goes against the grain to turn the scoundrel loose.”

Taking out his knife, he proceeded to cut the cringing Indian's bonds. "You filthy wretch!" he cried; "you mangy, verminous coyote! If you got your deserts I would be sticking this knife between your ribs! Go back to your master and tell him . . ."

"Wait!" cried Loseis. "Not a word! Gault won't know how much we know. Let him guess!"

Conacher swallowed his anger. Etzooah slipped from his horse, and crawled on the ground like a whipped cur.

Loseis and Conacher mounted and rode on, driving the third horse in front of them. Etzooah, cramped from his long confinement in bonds, staggered along slowly behind them.

CHAPTER XVIII

CONFUSION

WHEN he came to the Slavi village after his long walk, Etzooah crossed the ford, and sticking his head inside the first tepee, awakened the sleepers with a yell. He demanded to know if Yellow-Head and Blackburn's daughter had been seen. A grumbling voice replied that they had taken a canoe and gone down river. Searching for a horse, Etzooah perceived that the whites in their haste had turned out their horses without unsaddling them. The sorrel mare eluded him; she disliked the Indian smell; but he caught the horse he had already ridden so far. It would serve for the short distance he had still to go. Refording the river, he proceeded along the trail.

It was not Gault's habit to confide in his creatures any further than he was forced to. Etzooah's job had been to steer the fur train east across the prairie and hit the big river at Fisher Point, where the fur could be picked up later by the launch and a scow from Good Hope. Etzooah might have guessed that a short shrift was waiting for Conacher at Blackburn's Post, but he had been told nothing of the details of the plot, which, indeed, had been concocted after his departure. Etzooah expected to find Gault and his men camped within a mile or so of the Post, where he had left them earlier that day.

Ere he had gone two miles beyond the Slavi village, the miserable Indian rode fairly into the trap set for the white man. He was pounding along at a good rate over this well-traveled part of the trail, one knee hooked around the horn of his saddle, as was his custom. The thin line, stretched as taut as a wire across the trail, caught him under the chin, and lifted his body clear of the saddle. His knee held him; the horse reared; Etzooah's head was dragged back between his shoulders. As the horse's forefeet dropped back to the ground, there was a horrible soft crack heard. The man's body came away from the saddle, and dropped limply in the trail. The terrified horse ran on.

There was a loud laugh of bravado amongst the trees. Gault stepped out into the trail. "Worked like a charm!" he said. "I think his neck is broke."

Moale dropped to one knee beside the huddled body, and struck a match. “God! . . . It’s Etzooah!” he gasped.

“Etzooah! . . . Etzooah . . . !” said Gault stupidly.

The match had dropped from Moale’s nerveless fingers. He fumbled with another. At last the little flame sprang up. “Look!” he said. “Look!”

“God Almighty!” cried Gault. “What’s he doing back here?”

Moale was feeling under the man’s head. “He’ll never tell you,” he said grimly. “His neck is broke.”

Gault said anxiously: “See if he has the letter on him.”

A search revealed that the letter was gone.

“Then he has been to Conacher,” said Gault. “Drag him into the bush, and we’ll go get that white man.”

“If his body should be found . . .” suggested Moale. “Hadn’t we better drop the tree on him as planned for the other?”

“Hell! I’m not going to waste that trick on a redskin! I may want it later. Pitch him in the river. The current will carry him far beyond the sight of mankind.”

But as Moale started to obey, Gault changed his mind again. “Wait,” he said. “I’ll help you to hoist his body out of way of the coyotes. Conacher was the last man who saw Etzooah alive, understand? We will use that later.”

The Indian’s body, still warm, was hung over two spruce branches. The Crees were summoned to fetch the horses from their hiding-place, and Gault and his three men rode south.

It was full day and the Slavis were packing the horses, in the spongy meadow, when the four big men rode violently down the little pine-clad point. Instantly the Slavis jumped on horses and scattered far and wide in the sea of grass.

Gault had his eye on Tatateecha. “Let them go,” he shouted to his men. He caught the plump headman by the collar as he was climbing on a horse, and flung him in the grass. “Now then!” he said with an oath. “Where’s the white man?” It was a simple matter to signify Conacher’s curling yellow hair and blue eyes.

Another discomfiture awaited the furious trader. Tatateecha, delighted to find that Conacher, and not himself, was the object of Gault's wrath, gave, in signs, a graphic and perfectly truthful account of how Etzooah had arrived the night before and had given Conacher a letter; and how Conacher after reading the letter had put Etzooah on a horse tied hand and foot and had ridden back, leading him. Tatateecha said nothing about the letter Conacher had given him, which was burning a hole in his stomach at that moment.

Gault swore violently, and Tatateecha edged out of reach of his boot. The trader was forced to apply to Moale in his perplexity. "What do you make of it?" he said. "Etzooah was not tied up when we found him?"

Moale shrugged. "One thing is clear," he said, "We've passed Conacher somewhere."

"Then catch fresh horses and we'll ride back!" shouted Gault.

"The fur? . . ." suggested Moale, casting desirous eyes on the scattered bales.

"To hell with the fur! I'm going to get that white man first!"

At six o'clock in the morning they were back at the Slavi village. Splashing through the ford, the first native they came upon was a bent crone, too old to get out of the way. Out of her dim eyes she looked at Gault with indifferent scorn. In reply to the usual question about the white man with the curling hair the color of the sun, she told in signs that he had ridden there in the night when the paleness of the sky was in the north (midnight). Etzooah was not with him then. The white man turned out his horse, took a canoe, and paddled down river.

"Gone back to the girl," growled Gault. "But what in hell could have warned him that we were laying for him in the trail!"

Moale suddenly perceived the well-known sorrel mare grazing amongst the other horses. She was still saddled and bridled. The eyes almost started out of his head. "Look!" he cried pointing.

It was one of the nastiest shocks that Gault had received. He stared at the animal with hanging jaw. "How did that mare get here?" he demanded hoarsely.

The old woman replied by signs that Loseis had come with Conacher in the night.

"What!" shouted Gault. "*What!* . . . Why in hell didn't you say so before?"

The very old woman looked at him calmly. Her glance said: You didn't ask me!

The furious Gault was incapable of dealing with her. Moale, calmer and warier, plied her for further information. She described how Loseis had been up and down in the trail all day. Loseis must have seen Etzooah pass at midday, but she had not come back to the village for her horse until near evening.

"Then in God's name what was she doing all afternoon?" muttered Gault, a certain fear striking into his rage.

Nothing further was to be learned here. The four men rode on in the direction of Blackburn's Post. Moale and the two Crees gave their master a good dozen yards' lead in the trail. The passions of hell were working in the trader's black face. Moale was gray and the Indians yellowish with fatigue and apprehension. It was a safe guess that all three would have been glad then to get out of this ugly business; but they were bound to their master a hundred times over; there was no possibility of dissociating their fortunes from his. They were not bothered by moral scruples; but they feared that Gault's passions had mastered him to such an extent that he was no longer capable of listening to the counsels of prudence.

At a point about a mile short from the Post, they turned out of the trail, and followed the summit of one of the gravelly ridges, picking their way slowly through the scrub. Soon the timber and brush became too thick for them to guide their horses through, and they were obliged to dismount and lead them. After a mile and a half of the roughest sort of going, which included the crossing of a gorge-like coulee, they came out on the trail to Fort Good Hope in a little prairie dotted with clumps of poplars. Here they had left their outfit the day before, and had turned out their remaining horses hobbled.

They cooked and ate a meal in sullen silence. Afterwards Gault dispatched Moale into the Post to spy out the situation.

"Tell her," he said with stiff and bitter lips, "that I couldn't rest for thinking of her alone there, and I sent back to ask if she was all right."

Moale, in his impassive way, set off without expressing any opinion as to the usefulness of this errand.

He was back by the time the sun had completed a quarter of its journey across the sky. Gault was sitting hunched up in the grass almost precisely as

he had left him. In twenty-four hours the trader had not slept. He sprang up at the sight of Moale.

“Well?” he demanded with cruel eagerness.

“I found the two girls in the Women’s House . . .” Moale began.

“Alone?” snarled Gault.

“Alone. Everything looked as usual. When I delivered your message, Loseis listened politely, but her eyes were full of hard laughter. She did not believe me.”

“What did she say?”

“She told me to thank you, and to tell you that there was nothing she required.”

“What then?”

“Conacher, having seen me come, came hurrying across from the men’s house.”

“Without concealment?”

“Why should there be any concealment? They cannot know that Etzooah is dead. They think Etzooah has told us all.”

“Damnation!” muttered the trader. “I am all in the dark! . . . Go on!”

“Conacher had a gun over his arm. . . .”

“A gun?” echoed Gault in angry alarm.

“A gun. I did not have any talk with Conacher. He left it to the girl.”

“What else did she say?”

“She asked me where we were camped. I replied that we had made but a short stage yesterday, because you were anxious about her. It amused her to hear me lie. She didn’t say anything; but only looked at the three-bar brand on my horse’s flank.”

Gault broke out in furious cursing. “You fool! Why didn’t you change to one of the horses we left here?”

“Those horses are not broke for riding.”

“You could have managed.”

“What difference does it make?” said Moale impassively. “They know all.”

“How *can* they know?” cried Gault. “Go on!”

“I told her that we had come upon a bunch of her horses, and I had borrowed one to ride back, so I could save my own. She knew I was lying, of course. Her horses do not range on this side of the coulee. But she said nothing. She asked me politely if I would eat before riding back. I had just eaten, but I said I would, thinking I might learn something by staying.”

“The Beaver girl served me in the kitchen. While I was eating Loseis and Conacher were talking together outside the house. They talked low, but my ears are very sharp. I caught enough of the words to be able to piece together the sense of the whole. Conacher wanted to tell me everything, and try to win me to their side. I heard him say: ‘Insane with jealousy.’ He meant you. His idea was that there was no reason why I should risk my neck for you. But the girl would not agree. She said you had only sent me over there to get information, and if they told me anything it would be playing right into your hand. So nothing was told me. When I had eaten, some more polite speeches were made, and I rode away.”

“You think . . . ?” said Gault, knitting his brows.

“I am sure that they know all,” said Moale. “The girl must have been skulking in the woods yesterday afternoon. She has doubtless learned the Slavi tricks of hiding and moving softly. The way Conacher snatched up his gun shows what they expect of us.”

Gault revealed the big teeth in an ugly smile. “Well . . .” he said slowly, “we won’t disappoint them. We’re in so deep now, we’ve got to go the whole way. . . .”

“You mean . . . ?” asked Moale with his enigmatic eyes fixed intently on Gault’s face.

Gault nodded somberly. “The girl *and* the man,” he said. “Before anybody comes in.”

Moale shrugged acquiescently.

CHAPTER XIX

PREPARING FOR DANGER

AS soon as Moale rode away Loseis, Conacher and Mary-Lou held a council. The sense of common danger drew them very close together; their hearts were soft towards each other. The whites treated the Indian girl exactly as one of themselves. But poor Mary-Lou was not of much help to them. Terror had her in its grip again.

The sunshine drew them outside the door of the Women's House. Loseis cast her eyes about the scene. "Ah! how beautiful the world is!" she murmured. "Only men spoil it!"

"Cheer up!" said Conacher stoutly. "They haven't got us yet!"

"I do not mind danger!" said Loseis quickly. "But such wickedness hurts my breast. It spoils life!"

"I know," said Conacher. "You cannot believe in it."

"Well, never mind our feelings," said Loseis with a shake of her black mane. "What have we got to expect now?"

"We've got the time it will take Moale to ride to his master and report," said Conacher.

"But he's waiting close by, of course," said Loseis. "He may even be watching us from the top of the hill."

"The simplest thing would be for Gault to ride down and break in the door with an ax," said Conacher. "If he does, I'll blow the top of his head off," he added grimly.

Loseis shook her head. "Gault never does the simple thing."

"He may lose his head."

"Moale is there to remind him to be cautious. . . . No! Gault will never attack us in the open. Not while we stick together. I feel that from the inside. He doesn't care what you would think; but he is too conceited to let me *see* what a beast he can be."

“When it came to the final point,” said Conacher, “I don’t believe he could harm you.”

“He’s *got* to kill me now,” said Loseis simply. “I know too much.”

Conacher walked around the Women’s House, studying it. When he returned he said: “I think we had better make this our fortress. There are no windows in the back; it will be the easiest building to defend. And more comfortable for you girls. I’ll bring over my bed and bunk in the kitchen. You two take the inner room. . . . That is, if you agree.”

“You are the captain,” said Loseis with a warm glance.

“Well, we won’t quarrel over who’s the boss,” said Conacher. “Our first job must be to stock up with food, water, ammunition and firewood.”

They scattered to these tasks, glad to have something to occupy their hands. Expecting momentarily to be interrupted, they worked hard and swiftly, always keeping their ears sharpened for hoof-beats on the trail. But there were no alarms. Midday came; they finished their work; and Blackburn’s Post still basked undisturbed in the sunshine.

While Mary-Lou cooked the dinner, Conacher took stock of their supplies. There was ample food, firewood and ammunition—they had taken care to transfer the entire stock of ammunition from the store; but the water supply gave him cause for anxiety. The entire stock of vessels capable of holding water consisted of three small kegs, half a dozen pails and some small pots. The Slavis carried water in birch-bark receptacles.

“Barely a week’s supply,” said Conacher ruefully.

“If the worst comes to the worst we’ll have to cut out washing,” said Loseis smiling. “The Slavis get along without washing.”

After dinner they lounged in front of the house again. This was the hardest time to put in. The uncertainty of what to expect kept them keyed up to a painful pitch. Conacher wished to creep up to the top of the hill to reconnoiter; but Loseis would not hear of it.

“Would you take me with you?” she asked.

He shook his head.

“No, of course not!” said Loseis. “You know very well we might walk smack into a trap.”

They endlessly discussed their chances.

“If Tatateecha makes thirty miles again to-day,” said Conacher; “that will complete one-fifth of the whole distance. . . .”

“Better not count too much on Tatateecha,” warned Loseis. “He is as reliable as water.”

“I know,” said Conacher. “But there’s no harm in figuring. . . . Say he makes the warehouse in eight more days. If Gruber started back instantly—and of course he would on getting my letter; he could make the return journey in five days, or even four if he had plenty of horses. In twelve days then, we may begin to look for relief. After all twelve days is not so much. . . .”

“But Gault will be counting those twelve days, too,” said Loseis in a low tone. “He will not let them pass without acting.”

Seeing how the Indian girl’s head was hanging down, and her face twitching, Loseis said kindly: “Mary-Lou, why don’t you take a horse, and ride to the Slavi village? You can stay with the other Marys. You would be quite safe there. And you can’t do us any good by staying here.”

Mary-Lou, without looking up, slowly shook her head. “I not like live in tepee,” she murmured. “Please, I want stay with you.”

Loseis gave her a hug. “Surely!” she said. “But I hate to see you so broken up.”

“I all right,” said Mary-Lou in a strangled voice. She hastened into the house.

Conacher and Loseis came together. They walked in the grass with linked arms.

“Sweetheart,” murmured Conacher; “you hide it well, but you are suffering too!”

“You mustn’t feel sorry for me,” said Loseis, “or I’ll feel sorry for myself then. . . . It’s only not knowing what to expect! When I see what I have to do, I’ll be all right.”

“If I could only get you away from it all!”

“I have been through it alone,” said Loseis. “Now I have you!”

Later in the afternoon Conacher was sitting by himself at the door, still revolving their chances of receiving help from the outside, when suddenly he perceived a bark canoe with two figures in it coming down the river.

“By God! here’s something to break the suspense!” he cried, leaping up.

Loseis ran to the door. But when she saw the canoe her face showed no relief nor gladness. She suspected who was in it.

And when the canoe landed in the creek mouth, presently an all-too-familiar little rotund figure rose over the top of the bank.

“Tatateecha,” said Loseis in a listless voice.

Conacher’s face fell like a child’s. He groaned aloud in his anger and disappointment. “Oh, the miserable cur!” he cried.

“What would you expect of a Slavi?” said Loseis, shrugging.

They waited for him in a bitter silence. Tatateecha came plodding up the grassy rise with the air of a guilty schoolboy. His companion remained in the canoe. Reaching the top, Tatateecha, with an absurd pretense of not seeing Conacher and Loseis, headed straight across towards the store. Loseis summoned him peremptorily. He came like a dog to get his whipping, twisting his body, and grinning in sickening fear. Still trying to make out that nothing was the matter, he said something to Loseis that caused her to laugh a single bitter note.

“What is it?” demanded Conacher.

“He is out of tobacco,” said Loseis.

“Oh, my God!” cried Conacher. “Tobacco! When we were counting on him to bring us help!”

Loseis held up a restraining hand. “You will only frighten him stupid,” she said. “Let me find out what happened.”

The miserable Tatateecha told his story to Loseis, who translated it for Conacher. “He says, early this morning when they were packing up for the start, Gault, and his three big men suddenly rode into their camp, and the Slavis jumped on horses and spread in every direction. Gault, when he found you were gone, turned right back, but Tatateecha couldn’t round up the Slavis by himself, he says. One by one they gained the trail and galloped home; and there was nothing for it but for him to come home too. . . . It may be true. It has the sound of truth.”

“Leaving all the fur and the pack-horses where they were, I suppose,” said Conacher.

Loseis shrugged. “I expect that was bound to be lost,” she said.

“And he calls himself their head man . . . !”

Loseis concealed her bitter disappointment under a mask of indifference. “He isn’t worth swearing at,” she said. “Give him a plug of tobacco, and let him go.”

Tatateecha began to argue for two plugs of tobacco; Conacher with a threatening gesture, sent him flying down the hill.

Supper time was approaching when all further uncertainty was put to an end by the sound of many hoofs pounding down the trail above the Post. Loseis and Conacher prudently retired within the house, and barring the door, each took up a position at one of the little windows looking out on the square. Mary-Lou declined to come to the window. Conacher was in the kitchen; Loseis in her room, and the door open between. Conacher opened his window. Between his feet rested the butt of his express rifle; and he grasped the barrel in one hand.

Presently a numerous cavalcade rode into the grassy square. It seemed to the watchers as if they would never stop coming. Besides Gault and Moale they counted sixteen well-mounted Indians; big, able-looking fellows; mostly having a claim to a distant white ancestor in all probability. There were also several laden horses, and a number of spare ones.

“He’s brought his army against us!” said Conacher with scornful laughter.

“They don’t know what they’re going to be used for,” answered Loseis.

“Might be a good thing for me to tell them,” suggested Conacher.

“Useless,” said Loseis. “There’s never been any police stationed at Fort Good Hope, and they can conceive of no authority higher than Gault’s.”

Reining in, Gault pointed down to the river flat where the Slavi village had lately stood. The Indians rode on down the grassy rise with their pack-horses and spares; and began forthwith to make camp. Gault and Moale were left sitting their horses side by side. Gault, well aware that he was being watched, never looked towards the Women’s House. To all appearances he was as ever, the elegant gentleman; perfectly turned out; his face smooth and bland. He had allowed the rein to fall on his horse’s neck. One hand rested on his hip; and with the other he gesticulated gracefully towards the camp below, as he issued his instructions to the deferential Moale.

“Quite the beau ideal,” said Loseis dryly at her little window.

“So that’s my would-be murderer!” said Conacher at his. “Gives you a funny feeling to set eyes on him when you know.”

Moale dismounted and went to the door of the Men’s House, where he knocked.

“Feeling his way,” said Conacher.

“It will be amusing to hear what excuse he gives for coming back here,” said Loseis.

Conacher raised his gun. “Loseis,” he said soberly, “the quickest way to end this matter would be for me to shoot him off his horse as he sits there.”

Loseis ran to his side. “No, Paul, no!” she cried agitatedly.

“It would be the best way,” he insisted. “He means to kill us if he can. Suppose he gets one of us and the other is left. I’m a pretty good shot. I could get him easily now. It would end it. These other men have nothing against us.”

“No! No! No!” she cried. “Not until he attacks us! I couldn’t bear it!”

Conacher allowed the butt of his gun to thump on the floor again. “Very well,” he said a little sullenly. “Still, I think it would be the best way.”

Receiving no answer at the door of the men’s house, Moale faced about, and came towards them. Conacher and Loseis watched him with heads close together. Moale’s comely olive face was, as always, perfectly expressionless.

“What sort of man is this?” asked Conacher grimly.

“Who can tell?” said Loseis. “He is neither white nor red.”

They opened the door, and stood side by side within the frame to receive him, Conacher with his gun across his arm. At sight of the gun Moale’s eyes narrowed, but he made no reference to it in speech. Bowing to Loseis, he said in his gentle voice:

“Mr. Gault wishes to know if he may speak with you?”

“But why not?” said Loseis coolly. “Speech is free.”

“If he comes unarmed,” added Conacher grimly.

Moale stabbed him with a lightning glance of his strange eyes, but did not speak. Bowing to Loseis again, he turned and went back to Gault.

Loseis and Conacher remained standing in the doorway. The girl said earnestly:

“Paul dear, when he comes, you must hold your anger in.”

“I’m not going to truckle to him,” said Conacher, angry already.

“Of course not! If we showed fear we would be lost. But if we become angry they will use it as an excuse to attack us, and we will be lost, too. We must show neither fear nor anger, but only coldness. My heart tells me that.”

“Oh, you’re right, of course,” groaned Conacher; “but you’re asking almost too much of flesh and blood!”

After a brief colloquy with Moale, Gault dismounted, and came striding towards them with measured steps. He had retained the lordly air of the old-time trader. His self-control was marvelous; he kept his head up, and looked from Loseis to Conacher with brazen coolness. But there was a sort of glassy guard over his eyes. You could not see into them.

“He has his nerve with him,” grumbled Conacher in unwilling admiration. “Marching up to the gun like this, with empty hands.”

“He may have a pistol,” suggested Loseis.

“He’d have to draw it,” said Conacher coolly. “And my gun is in my hands.”

As he drew close, Gault’s eyes flickered once. It must have been like a knife in his breast to see Conacher and Loseis pressed together companionably in the door of their house like a little family. But this was the only sign of feeling he gave.

“Good evening,” he said to Loseis.

“Good evening,” returned Loseis.

Gault went on: “I was somewhat surprised to learn from Moale, when he returned to me to-day, that Conacher was with you.”

“Were you?” said Loseis dryly.

“You told me that he had gone with the fur.”

This was too much for Conacher’s honest simplicity. “You know damned well what brought me back!” he cried.

Loseis laid a restraining hand on his arm. Gault continued to look at Loseis as if Conacher had not spoken. There was a silence which seemed to

bristle with pointing knives.

"Of course it was clear to me that the Slavis would never be able to carry through alone," Gault resumed. "And as I happened to meet the men I had sent for from Fort Good Hope just then, I turned around and brought them back with me, to offer them to you to take out your fur. They are experienced and intelligent men, and can travel anywhere."

Loseis took thought before answering. Why does he trouble to give me all this palaver when he knows he has only to go and get the fur? It occurred to her that candor on her part would be the best means of disconcerting him. She said coolly:

"The Slavis have already returned. The fur has been abandoned at the spot about thirty miles from here, where you saw it early this morning. . . ."

Gault changed color slightly. He could not guess how she had learned this so soon.

"Well, there it lies," Loseis went on. "I do not mean to give you permission to go and get it. On the other hand I cannot prevent you from doing so."

Gault appeared to be debating the question with himself. He finally said: "It is clearly my duty to save this valuable property. I shall therefore send the Crees after it to-morrow."

"As you will," said Loseis.

Gault made to go; and then turned back as if struck by a new thought. "I shall be returning to my own post," he said. "My first thought was to send Moale out with the fur; but your situation cannot be very comfortable here. If you and Conacher would like to accompany the fur train, Moale may remain here to guard your property until you return."

Loseis smiled coldly. So this was what he had been leading up to!

Conacher's blue eyes widened with indignation. "Well, I'll be damned!" he cried. "If this doesn't. . . ."

Loseis touched him warningly. "I thank you," she said to Gault with hard sweetness. "Mr. Conacher and I both thank you. We offer you all the thanks that is due to your most generous offer. But *under the circumstances*, we prefer to remain here."

Gault's face was like a wall. He bowed to Loseis, and left them.

"By God . . . !" began Conacher.

“Hush!” said Loseis. “Anger just gives him an opening to get angry too. But coldness mixes him all up.”

“What a fool he must be to think . . .”

“He is not a fool,” interrupted Loseis. “He knew exactly what he was doing. You see he was not sure if we knew that he meant murder. His object was to find that out. Well, he did find out.”

CHAPTER XX

BESIEGED

A LITTLE tent of pale green silk, trim and elegant, was pitched for Gault in the meadow below, a short distance from the big fire built by the Crees. After supper they could see Gault seated in the place of honor beside the fire, surrounded by his men. Apparently all was peace and good-fellowship in that camp. The attitudes of the men suggested story-telling, and hearty laughter.

"This is for our benefit," said Loseis with a scornful smile.

"I shall watch through the night," said Conacher.

"There will be no open attack."

"Just the same, I'll stay up."

"I will take turns with you."

However, Gault presently crept under his little tent; and the Crees one by one rolled up in their blankets, and lay completely covered up in the redskin manner like a long row of corpses along the edge of the creek bank. The sun went down, and the great silence crept like long fingers out of the darkening sky. The brief hours of darkness passed, and there was no suspicious move nor sound from below. The last of the sunset glow stole around the northern horizon towards the east. In due course the sun rose again, and the camp below lay exactly as before.

Soon afterwards a great bustle began. They built up the fire, breakfasted, caught their horses, and packed up. Moale and the main body of the Crees crossed the creek, and galloped away over the trail to the south. Gault and two men rode up the rise, crossed the little square without a glance towards the Women's House, and went on up the trail behind the store.

"There are four men unaccounted for," said Loseis suddenly. "Only ten went with Moale. I counted them."

"Let's go out and take a look about," said Conacher. "Whatever they are plotting, it will take them a certain time to organize it. For a few minutes anyhow, we will be safe."

They left Mary-Lou, gray with terror, alone in the house. Conacher took his gun. After their night-long vigil it was a delight to get out into the open. Running down the grassy rise together, they joked at danger.

“Funny, here in my own place to be expecting to hear a bullet sing past my ears,” said Loseis.

“ ’S all right if it sings past,” said Conacher, grinning.

As soon as Loseis looked over the creek bank she said: “There was a damaged dug-out lying in the mud here. They have repaired it and gone in it. They must have gone down river, close under the bank. We should have seen them if they had gone up. I don’t know why they should go down river.”

“I think I can explain that,” said Conacher. “There are three possible ways of escape from this place; south by the trail to the lake and beyond; east by the trail to Fort Good Hope; and north down the river. All three ways are now watched by our enemies.”

“I never should have thought of going down river,” said Loseis. “There is nothing there.”

“I have thought of it,” said Conacher. “It would be many hundreds of miles to a post, but it’s a possibility. But with the river watched it would be the most dangerous way of all. All they’d have to do would be to smash our boat, or set it adrift in the current. It would be all day with us then.”

“Just to keep us from escaping wouldn’t do Gault any good,” said Loseis. “We have plenty of grub; and help is bound to arrive in the end. That cannot be the whole of his plan.”

“Oh, no; not the whole of it,” said Conacher grimly. “Time will tell.”

Loseis shivered. “Let’s get back under cover,” she said.

Before returning to the house they made sure that Conacher’s dug-out was still safe where he had left it hidden in the willows with the paddle in the bottom.

“Who knows? It may come in handy,” he said.

The hours of that day dragged by with leaden feet. Nothing happened, and that was the hardest thing to bear. All needed sleep; and all were too highly keyed up to obtain it. Clouds had come up with the sun, and by breakfast time a soft persistent rain was falling, driven in sheets by a cold wind from the northeast. Sharp squalls swept across the little square at intervals, almost blotting out the buildings opposite.

“Well, at any rate we’re better off than the other fellows,” said Conacher with a grim chuckle. “We’ve got a roof over our heads.”

After breakfast in spite of Loseis’ protests, he took up his position in the open doorway, with his gun across his knees. His view out of the window was too much narrowed by the thickness of the log walls, he explained.

“But you offer such a fair mark where you are!” complained Loseis.

“Nobody could shoot me here except from behind the house opposite,” said Conacher. “In order to do that he’s got to show himself; and my eyes are as quick as the next man’s.”

The house opposite bothered Conacher. “If they gained possession of it, it would render our position untenable, as they say in the army communiqués,” he said.

It transpired that there were staples in the door, and a padlock lying somewhere within to fasten it. Conacher announced his intention of going across to bar the shutters and lock the door.

And so it was done. Loseis stood at the door with her gun to cover his passage to and fro across the little square.

Loseis and Conacher, half exasperated, half affectionate, disputed endlessly over who should bear the heavier part of the burden.

“You *must* sleep!” insisted Loseis. “It is to-night that the real danger will come.”

“You sleep first,” said Conacher, “and I’ll promise to match whatever you do, later.”

Towards the end of the afternoon the sky cleared, and the grass of the little square steamed up in the warmth of the late sun.

“I’d give something to be able to run down to the river and back to stretch my legs,” said Conacher longingly.

“Every foot of the flat is commanded from the bench to the north,” said Loseis sharply.

“Very little danger of getting hit if I zigzagged,” said Conacher, partly to tease her.

Loseis changed her tactics. “Very well, I’ll come too,” she said.

“Not on your life!” said Conacher; and the subject was dropped.

They ate their supper; the sun went down; and the great stillness descended. Conacher closed and barred the door then; and went back to the kitchen window. The window was open; and the slender black barrel of his rifle stuck out across the thick log that formed its sill. Accustomed as they were to the evening stillness, in this tense hour it struck awe into their breasts as if it was the first time. They had an indefinable feeling that whatever It was, It would come in this hushed moment. Loseis was at her window; Mary-Lou was crouched on the floor at the back of the room with her hands pressed to her mouth.

Presently they heard that sound which is always associated with the sunset stillness of the Northwest; the long-drawn, intolerably mournful howl of a coyote; a sound calculated to shake stretched nerves. It rose startlingly close; in fact from the ravine through which the creek flowed behind the men's house opposite.

"That is no coyote," said Loseis sharply. "They never come so close to the Post."

Mary-Lou moaned.

The cry was repeated; and was answered from down the river.

"That coyote is afloat in a canoe," said Conacher with a grim chuckle. "The men who went down the river to-day have been instructed to come back at evening to watch us."

Another heartrending howl was raised from the hill back of the store.

"The outposts are establishing communications," said Conacher, carrying it off lightly in order to hearten the girls. "Well, it's a relief to know what and where they are. At this God-awful moment of the day you could imagine anything!"

For awhile the quavering cries went back and forth; then silence. Darkness drew slowly in. At first the sky across the river was like a sea of amber with one or two scraps of cloud floating in it like golden ships. As the warmth gradually faded out it took on the hue of blued steel. The moon was rising later now; to-night there would be an hour or so of darkness before her coming. Conacher had to strain his eyes to make out the details of the house across the way.

The slow minutes passed. In the big chimney the night-breeze kept up a gentle, uneven murmuring that was like somebody speaking to somebody else a little way off. Occasionally the man and the girl whispered from room

to room in the dark just to reassure themselves of the other's warm and breathing presence.

"Paul?"

"Yes, pardner?"

"There's no need for both of us to be watching."

"Well, you take a sleep, old girl."

"Sleep!"

"My sentiments exactly!"

And later:

"Paul, do not remain at the window. Even though they cannot see you, they will guess that you are there. It is like a bull's eye in the side of the house!"

"But I must be looking out!"

"Do as I do. Scrape away the clay, and use a chink between the logs for a peep-hole."

After that Paul lay full length on the floor of the kitchen, with his rifle barrel poked out through the chink.

Suddenly his gun roared outside, blowing the night to pieces as it seemed. A dreadful, low cry escaped from Mary-Lou.

"What was it?" whispered Loseis sharply.

"Man crawling towards the door of the men's house."

"Did you get him?"

"No," said Conacher ruefully. "He streaked back around the corner. It was the merest shadow. I shot too soon."

There was another long wait, much harder to bear for nerves that still recollected the explosion of that shot. Then they became aware by a gentle grayness pervading the scene outside, that the moon had risen. The orb itself was hidden by the buildings opposite.

"He's gone into the little warehouse beyond the store," said Conacher suddenly. "The door has been opened. . . . Damn it! I should have locked that door."

"You couldn't have locked it," said Loseis. "They broke the staples."

“I’ve a good mind to go over there and get him,” muttered Conacher.

“Right across the open, I suppose,” said Loseis bitterly.

“I might steal around behind the buildings.”

“There are probably others there.”

“If I sent a shot through the open door it would give him a good scare.”

“Nothing to be gained by scaring him.”

The edge of the moon peeped over the ridge of the men’s house. A few minutes later she was shining directly into their faces. This had them at a cruel disadvantage, for the other side of the square where one or more of their enemies were lurking, was hidden in the deepest shadow. Conacher swore helplessly under his breath.

By and by a cloud crept across the moon dimming her silvery glare.

“He’s come out of the warehouse,” said Conacher in surprise. “The door is closed now. . . . I don’t understand that. Why should he come out unless he had found a better place? What other place is there where he could sit in hiding and watch us?”

There was no answer forthcoming. The moon came out again, bathing the little square within the crouching buildings in her misty radiance. As she rose higher their vision was the less obscured. Nothing stirred outside. The earth was so still, one fancied one could feel its great swing to the east. Time passed, and that fear against which the bravest hearts are not proof, lay upon them heavier and heavier; the fear of the unknown.

Conacher at his loophole muttered and swore under his breath. “When I knew where he was it was all right. . . . This is hellish . . . !”

Finally, when the eastern sky was beginning to get ready for dawn, he jumped up. “I can’t stand this,” he cried. “I’ve got to find out where they are, and what they’re up to!”

Loseis found him in the dark. “Oh, hush!” she whispered. “Maybe there’s an ear pressed against the back wall! . . . What are you going to do?”

Conacher put his lips to her ear. “Make a dummy, and show it at the door,” he said. Even at that moment a chuckle sounded in his voice.

They closed the shutters, stuffed up their peep-holes and lighted a lamp. Conacher tied a broom to the back of a chair with the brush uppermost. He then tied a piece of firewood athwart the broom handle just under the brush.

This was for shoulders. They dared not use hammer and nails. Upon this frame he hung one of Mary-Lou's dresses, and completed the figure by forcing a small cooking pot over the brush of the broom, with a piece of white cloth hanging down in front to represent a face. In the moonlight at a hundred paces distance they judged that it would serve. Conacher blew out the light again.

"I'll manipulate the chair," he said to Loseis. "You go back to your peep-hole. You must be watching for the flash in case he shoots. Mary-Lou, you must open the door. There's no danger if you keep behind it."

Conacher waited until Loseis was at her place. "All clear outside?" he asked.

"I can see nothing," she whispered.

"All right then, Mary."

They could hear her gasping softly for breath, as she drew the door slowly open. The night stole into the room. All three hearts were beating furiously. Conacher, lying on the floor, grasped the legs of the chair, and thrust it forward a little. At first he tipped it to represent a face peeping around the doorframe, and quickly withdrew it. After repeating this once or twice, he allowed the whole figure to show in the doorway, swaying a little like a living body.

"Any movement across the way?" he whispered to Loseis.

"Nothing!"

Finally he allowed the figure to tip forward as if to peer outside the door. From across the square two shots crashed out almost simultaneously. One bullet shattered the chair back; the other buried itself deep in the log wall across the kitchen. It was a relief to hear those shots, waiting for them was so dreadful. Conacher jerked the remains of the chair out of sight, and Mary-Lou slammed the door. All three of them were panting for breath.

"Well?" demanded Conacher excitedly.

"They are inside my father's house," said Loseis desperately.

"Impossible!" he cried in dismay.

"Yes! They are doing the same as us. Shooting through chinks between the logs."

"How could they have got in? There are no windows in the back."

“Who knows? Dug underneath the wall, maybe.”

For the first time Conacher showed discouragement. “Oh, God!” he groaned. “By night or day they’ve got us covered!”

CHAPTER XXI

A LEAP FOR FREEDOM

ON the third morning following, Loseis and Conacher were seated at a little table in the kitchen of the Women's House, with a scarcely touched meal between them. In the inner room Mary-Lou was lying on a mattress with her face turned towards the wall, asleep—or despairing. In the kitchen all was in apple pie order; a fire burning on the well-swept hearth with a small pot of water bubbling upon it; the shutter of the little window flung back, and the sunshine streaming in; outside all green and peaceful to the eye. There was nothing to indicate the horror of the situation but the faces of the two at the table. Those gaunt and gray young faces, deeply seamed and sunken eyed, told a tale of seventy-two hours' horror. Neither had had more than a snatch or two of broken sleep. Three endless nights and days and no hope of relief. It was the absence of hope which had aged them.

Conacher rested his cheek in his palm, and gloomily traced imaginary lines on the oilcloth cover with his fork. Loseis' eyes, which looked truly enormous now, were fixed on the young man's face, all tenderness.

"You have brought all this on your head through mixing in my miserable affairs," she murmured.

He looked up quickly. "Oh, don't say a thing like that!" he protested, hurt to the quick. "It seems to divide us. How can we be divided now? Your fate is my fate and mine yours!"

Loseis looked down, somewhat comforted. But she yearned for more explicit comfort still. "I wonder you do not hate me," she whispered.

"Loseis!" he said sharply, "if you say such things to me, you will have me blubbering like Mary-Lou. That would be a nice thing!" And the tears actually stood in his eyes.

The sight of those tears was sweet to Loseis; but she went on perversely: "Sometimes I think you do hate me. You do not like to look at me any more. Always you turn your eyes away."

Conacher turned his eyes away then. “The truth is, I can’t bear to look at you,” he murmured. “Such a child as you are, and so plucky and proud; never a word of complaint out of you. It drives me wild to think I can’t save you from this!”

Loseis glided swiftly around the table, and caught his head against her breast. “Ah, you blessed Paul!” she crooned, brooding over him. “I was just trying to make you say again that you loved me. You mustn’t grieve so over me. Think what it would be for me if you weren’t here!”

She dropped to her knees beside his chair. Speech would no longer serve to convey their feelings. They snatched a moment of poignant happiness out of the surrounding horror.

Finally Conacher, partly withdrawing himself from her arms, sat up straight. “This can’t go on!” he said, striking the table.

“What is in your mind?” she asked anxiously.

“We have plenty of food,” he said, “and the water is still holding out; but what is the use of it all? To be trapped like this would break anybody’s nerve; knowing night and day that the guns were covering you. If we stay here they’re certain to get us in the end. Time is passing. If we give them no opportunity to pick us off, they’ll drive us out of our shelter. They have only to build a fire against the back wall of this house . . .”

“Oh, Heaven!” murmured Loseis.

“I don’t want to frighten you unnecessarily,” he said, stroking back her hair; “but we’ve got to face the worst. I’ve been looking for it to happen every night. That’s why I couldn’t sleep. How simple for Gault to shoot us down as we ran out, and throw our bodies back on the fire . . . I say we must make a break for it, while we are able to choose our own time.”

“But where could we go?” faltered Loseis.

“I’ve been thinking about that. God knows, I have had plenty of time! The three obvious ways out are closed to us, but there is a fourth way . . .”

“Where?”

“Across the river and over the prairie to the north or northwest.”

“But that is the unknown country!” said Loseis with widening eyes. “No white man has ever been across there!”

“True,” said Conacher; “but after all it’s just a country like any other. And I’m accustomed to making my own way.”

“Nobody knows what is on the other side!”

“I know,” said Conacher. “It’s part of my job to map this country; and I carry the existing map in my mind. Two or three hundred miles away—I can only make a rough guess as to the distance; there is an important river called the Mud River. We only have reports of it from the Indians. But the name tells you what kind of a river it is. It must be a prairie river like this one; fairly deep and moderately swift. If there are cottonwood trees I could make a rough dug-out; or I could always make rafts. The Mud River eventually falls into the Sinclair. It is up the Sinclair River that my outfit is making its way at present. According to their schedule they will make the mouth of the Mud River on July fifteenth. That gives us a month. If we are too late we could follow them up the Sinclair. They travel slow on account of the work they have to do. It is the best chance I see. No woman has ever made such a journey, but men have; and you are as plucky and strong as a boy.”

“I can do it if you can,” said Loseis quickly. “But how could we escape from here with an outfit; grub, blankets, ax, gun, ammunition?”

“It would have to be a mighty slim outfit,” said Conacher. “I could feed you with my gun if I had to.”

“Across the river there are only a few broken horses,” said Loseis. “We could not be sure of finding them at the moment we needed them.”

“We may have to walk,” said Conacher.

“But when Gault missed us, he could swim his horses over. What chance would we have then?”

“Not much of a one. . . . But a crazy idea has been coming back to me again and again. Maybe the very craziness of it is in its favor. . . .”

“What is it?”

“If we could persuade Gault that we had committed suicide in our desperation . . . . ?”

Loseis’ eyes widened like a child’s.

“Can you swim?” asked Conacher.

She sadly shook her head.

“Hm! that’s awkward. . . . But maybe I could manage. . . . There is that little air pillow in my outfit. . . .”

They heard Mary-Lou approaching out of the next room, and drew apart.

“What on earth will we do with her?” whispered Loseis.

Conacher shook his head in complete perplexity. “We’ll talk it over later,” he whispered.

Mary-Lou had come to clean up the breakfast dishes. The past four days had made a shocking change in the appearance of the comely Indian girl. She was too apathetic to resent being excluded from their counsels; and Conacher and Loseis went on with their whispering.

All day they alternately whispered together, and parted from each other to think over the matter afresh. To have this absorbing matter to talk over relieved the tension; the hours passed more quickly. They surveyed their plan from every angle, continually rejecting this expedient, and accepting that. Little by little they built up a reasonable-seeming structure. Of course the best plan they could make depended upon so many chances for its success, that there were many moments when they despaired. But at such moments Conacher would always say: “Still, anything would be better than this!” Whereupon they would set their wits to work afresh.

Some hours later Conacher said: “One thing is certain. It would have twice as good a chance of success if we could prepare Gault’s mind beforehand for such a thing to happen. We ought to send him a letter.”

“How could we send him a letter?” asked Loseis.

Recollecting the Indian trophies that hung on the walls of Loseis’ room, Conacher went in there. Loseis, following, saw him take down a bow, and test the string.

“It has hardened some,” he said: “But it will do.”

Loseis, getting the idea, smiled. “But would they dare to come out and get it?” she asked.

“Oh, curiosity is a strong motive,” said Conacher. “And anyway, I have suspected every night that they came part way across the square at the darkest time before the moon comes up, to make sure that we didn’t slip out.”

They sat down to concoct the letter. “You must write it,” said Conacher. “It would be more effective.”

After a couple of hours’ work and many drafts, they produced the following:

“To Gault:

> "Why do you torture me so? I have never harmed you. Mary-Lou died the first night, and we buried her under the floor. Our water is gone. Conacher is acting so strangely I am afraid of what he may do. He doesn't know I am writing this. I will shoot it over to you while he sleeps. If there is any decency or mercy in your heart let me see you ride away from this place to-morrow. I cannot stand this any longer.
>
> "LAURENTIA BLACKBURN."

Conacher and Loseis smiled grimly over this effusion. But Loseis quickly frowned.

"I cannot bear to have him think I would whine for mercy like that," she murmured.

"Yes, but think of the pleasure of fooling him later," Conacher pointed out.

To send their letter they chose a moment after sunset, while there was still light enough to aim it. Throwing open the door, they all stood back on the chance of receiving a bullet from across the way: but their enemies gave no sign. It fell to Loseis' part to dispatch the letter, since she was accustomed to handling the bow and arrow. The letter had been fastened around the shaft with a thread. After waiting a moment or two, Loseis took up her stand far enough back from the door so that she could not possibly be seen. Drawing the bow-string to her ear, she let it twang. The arrow sped across the open space, and stuck fast in the wall of the men's house, a few inches from the door. Conacher slammed their door shut.

Next morning as soon as it became light, they perceived that the arrow still remained fixed in the wall. Their hearts sunk, thinking that their ruse had failed. But as the light strengthened Loseis' sharp eyes discovered that the white band around the shaft was gone.

"They have it!" she cried.

All day long they anxiously watched for any sign of activity on the part of their enemies. If any reply had been made to their letter it might have seriously embarrassed them, but none was made. As the endless, endless day finally rounded towards its close, Conacher said grimly:

"It must be to-night."

Loseis nodded.

They did not take Mary-Lou into their confidence until the latest possible moment. They supped; and the dishes were washed. Finally when Conacher began to lay out the bundles they were to carry, she had to be told. The mind of the overwrought girl was distracted by the thought of more danger.

“Let me stay here,” she moaned. “Let me stay here and die!”

“Why die?” said Conacher patiently. “We’re offering you a chance to live!”

“I cannot do it!”

“You have the easiest part of all,” Loseis pointed out.

“We have told them that you are dead and buried,” said Conacher laughing. “Whether they believe it or not, they’re not going to bother about you until they catch Loseis and me. We have only got to run from the door to the corner of the house. There’s not one chance in a hundred they can get us in that space if we run abreast. Once around the corner we are out of range until they can get out of the house.”

After long persuasion, Mary-Lou agreed to try it.

“Now listen,” said Conacher, with an appearance of great cheerfulness; “here’s the plan. At the corner of the house we divide. Loseis and I run down to the flat, and strike for my dug-out, while you hit directly into the woods behind this house. You are to make your way entirely around the Post by the side hill, and cross the creek, and make your way as best you can to the Slavi village. Take your time to it. If you get there by to-morrow night it will do. When it is dark to-morrow night take three horses . . .”

“But not my horse,” put in Loseis. “She is too well known.”

“Three horses,” resumed Conacher; “and as much grub as Tatateecha will let you have. . . .”

“They have plenty of smoked meat and smoked fish,” said Loseis.

“What place can I appoint for a meeting?” asked Conacher of Loseis.

“The Old Wives’ Slough. It is the furthest point that I have been with my father. About ten miles west of here, and the same distance north of the Slavi village.”

“Have you been there?” Conacher asked Mary-Lou.

She shook her head.

“Do you know the North Star?”

She nodded.

“Good! Then take the horses and the grub when it becomes dark to-morrow night, and ride ten miles in the direction of the North Star to that slough in the prairie.”

“There is a trail from the Slavi village,” put in Loseis.

“Loseis and I will be waiting for you there,” said Conacher.

“In the poplar bluff on the south side of the slough,” added Loseis.

“If we are not there,” added Conacher with a smile for Loseis’ benefit, “why, turn around and ride back to the Slavi village.”

Conacher repeated these instructions over again, and made Mary-Lou say it all after him. Both he and Loseis feared that in the unnerved red girl they had but a broken reed to lean upon. However they had no other. Once clear of that den of horror they hoped that she might recover herself somewhat.

Then the packs were made. Each was to take a blanket with a small package of food rolled up inside it. In addition Conacher had his gun and an ammunition belt containing a hundred shells, and a small cooking-pot packed with matches, tea and tobacco. Loseis was to take a smaller belt of shells and a small ax. Mary-Lou was given Conacher’s smaller gun and ammunition for it. Everything was to be strapped on their backs, in order to leave both arms free.

“How shall we know the proper moment to start out?” asked Loseis.

“The moon does not rise to-night until after midnight,” said Conacher. “The darkest time will be about two hours after sundown. I will mark a candle and light it when the sun goes down. When it has burned two inches we will make a break.”

“That will only give us an hour or so before the moon comes up.”

“The first few minutes will decide everything,” he said, smiling at her.

They were ready, of course, long before it was time to set out. Conacher made it his job to keep up the spirits of his little party. He suggested having another meal, but no one ate but himself. After that there was nothing to do but sit down and look at the candle. Very hard on the nerves. A half a dozen times Loseis sprang up like a haggard little panther, crying:

“It’s perfectly dark. Let’s start.”

To which Conacher would always reply in his calm and cheerful style: “No! When you settle on a thing, you must stick to it.”

As the candle burned down towards the fateful mark, the three pairs of eyes were fixed on it in painful intensity, and three hearts rose slowly into three throats. The last ten minutes were the hardest.

“Now!” said Conacher briskly, at last.

They adjusted their packs. Under her pack Loseis wore the deflated air pillow fastened between her shoulders by a harness of twine contrived by Conacher. Both Loseis and Conacher felt that this might well be the moment of farewell, but neither spoke of it. It was all expressed in an exchange of looks. Mary-Lou was piteously striving to get her breath. Conacher’s last act before leaving was to throw a pailful of the precious water on the fire, that no reflection of the glow might betray them when the door was opened. The room was filled with hissing steam.

“Wait a moment,” whispered Conacher in the darkness. “They might possibly have heard that sound. Give them time to forget it. . . . Me first, then Loseis, then Mary-Lou. Take hands. Run like hell around the corner of the house. . . . I am opening the door now. . . .”

They ran out and turned, putting every nerve into it. Instantly, the guns across the grass roared out. They heard the twin bullets plug deep into the logs behind them. The guns crashed again. They gained the corner of the house unhurt. Immediately the cry of the coyote was raised not a hundred yards away; almost in their ears it seemed. It was more human than coyote. Their enemies were outside the house. Already they could hear the sound of running feet. Other cries answered the first one: from the hill behind; from the ravine; from the river.

Loseis gave Mary-Lou a gentle push; and the Indian girl disappeared noiselessly into the bush back of the house. Conacher and Loseis took hands and raced down the grassy rise. A voice behind them shouted in English:

“There they go!”

Conacher whispered: “Make first for the creek; then double back towards the willows!”

The surface of the natural meadow was rough, and Conacher went down twice, but was up again like the recoil of a spring. Loseis had the mysterious

sure-footedness of an Indian. Behind them they heard their pursuers falling and cursing. Gault's voice shouted a command in Cree.

"He is telling them to make for the creek," whispered Loseis.

When they had almost reached the edge of the creek bank, they turned sharply to the right, and headed back obliquely across the flat towards the point where the dug-out was hidden. They slackened their pace that they might not betray their whereabouts by further falls. This maneuver was successful for the moment. They heard their pursuers halt at the creek bank. Gault called to men who were evidently approaching down the bed of the creek.

The fugitives gained the river bank, and crawling under the thick willows, presently stumbled on the dug-out lying in a fissure in the earthen bank. So far so good. However, they were not unmindful of the dug-out manned by four Crees somewhere out on the river; and they waited awhile listening.

They heard them coming up-stream, paddling at a furious rate. They passed close to the bank, not half a dozen yards from where Loseis and Conacher were crouching. Conacher gave them a minute, then started to slide the dug-out off the mud.

"They'll see us!" whispered Loseis in alarm.

"Somebody must see us, or we can't pull off the double suicide," said Conacher grimly.

They launched the dug-out and climbed in. Since the paddlers in the other dug-out had their backs turned to them, they could have gained the other shore unseen; but Conacher headed diagonally up-stream, laying such a course that they must be at least heard by those gathered around the mouth of the creek. And they were heard. A chorus of cries was raised. Conacher then steered straight for the opposite shore. In a moment they heard the other dug-out splashing after them.

Immediately to the north of the high-cut bank, there was a smallish flat covered with grass, through the center of which a tiny stream wound its way to the river. It was the usual willow-bordered rivulet flowing quite deep between overhanging banks, which were held from caving in by the roots of the thickly springing willows. The branches of the willows interlaced overhead. This muskrat-haunted stream was an important factor in the plans of the fugitives; but they were not ready to use it yet.

Conacher landed alongside its mouth. The instant the nose of the dug-out touched, they were out. The other dug-out was already half way across the river. They raced through the grass alongside the willow-bordered stream, slipping out of their packs as they ran. A hundred yards or so from the river, Conacher took both packs and boring through the outer willows, tied the packs to branches overhanging the little stream.

Returning to Loseis, they doubled on their tracks, and ran for the steep grassy rise which culminated in the bold knoll where the two graves were. The Crees, having just landed, were stumbling through the grass at a loss. Presently the fugitives were seen, as they wished to be. With renewed cries to their friends across the river, the Crees set after them. Gault's roaring voice was heard from the river.

"They told him that we were running up the hill," whispered Loseis; "and he's telling them to work around back, and head us off on top."

"We may take our time then," said Conacher, falling to a walk.

On top of the knoll they came to a stand. The little enclosure containing the two graves was behind them; and behind that again, the grove of pines. On either side the ground sloped steeply down, and in front it broke off into nothingness.

"Well, here we are," said Conacher lightly; "that was easy!"

"The hardest is before us," murmured Loseis.

Stepping to the edge of the cut-bank, they looked over. The precipitous slide of earth, almost as pale as snow at their feet, was gradually swallowed in the murk. The fact that they could not see the bottom of it, made the leap appear doubly terrible.

"Does your heart fail you, dear?" murmured Conacher.

"Not as long as you are beside me," she whispered.

"Remember to let yourself go limp when you hit the dirt," he said. "Gravity will do the rest. I'll be there before you, because I'm heavier."

He blew up the little air cushion that was strapped to her back.

They could hear the Crees working around the north side of the hill. It was evidently expected that the fugitives meant to run back along the top of the ridge. Below them the river revealed itself merely as a grayish band, a shade or two lighter than its shores. They could just make out the disturbance created by two furiously driven bark canoes about to land below.

These had headed for the south side of the hill. There was some underbrush on that side; and when the occupants landed they could be heard smashing through it. They were evidently working up that side with the object of coming in touch with the other party.

“This is better than I could have hoped for,” said Conacher cheerfully. “We have got them all on the hill.”

“Is it time to go now?” asked Loseis nervously.

“No! No! Wait until they are right on top of us.”

Somewhere back of them the two parties met on top of the ridge. There was a whispered consultation, then a silence, very hard for the listeners to bear. Conacher held Loseis’ hand tightly squeezed within his own. Up there under the wide spreading night sky they became queerly aware of their insignificance. A long silence; then from half a dozen sounds their sharpened senses informed them that their enemies were creeping towards them through the pines.

Loseis caught her breath sharply, and moved towards the edge.

“Steady, sweetheart,” whispered Conacher.

Suddenly there was an astonished cry of: “There!” and a rush of feet.

Loseis and Conacher cried out wildly, as they had rehearsed together: “Good-by! . . . Good-by, all!” And leaped.

CHAPTER XXII

THE SEARCH

LOSEIS could never have described the sensations of that mad roll down the cut-bank. As a matter of fact all sensation was whirled clean out of her; and the first thing she knew was the mighty smack with which her body hit the water. Water it seemed could be almost as hard as wood. She went under.

As she rose again, gasping and wildly reaching, her fingers came in contact with Conacher's coat. In the first second she clutched him in a deathlike grip; in the second she remembered he had told her they would both drown, if she did so; and she released him. She discovered that the air cushion was sufficient to hold her up.

Conacher whispered in her ear: "You are all right?"

"I . . . I think so," she stuttered.

"Put your two hands lightly on my shoulders and I'll tow you. Do not splash."

He swam softly down with the current.

In the first moment there was only silence from above. Then they heard Gault's excited voice:

"Quick! the canoes! Search for them in the river!"

The men came tearing pell-mell down the hill, and Conacher swam with all his strength for the mouth of the little stream.

They gained it none too soon. Finding firm ground underfoot they waded up-stream under the arching willows. The water was up to their waists. They had to move at a snail's pace to avoid splashing. As soon as the upper part of their bodies was exposed to the air, they realized the numbing cold of the water. Loseis clenched her teeth to keep them from chattering.

Meanwhile the two dug-outs had been launched. The men shouted confusedly at each other. Such a search was hopeless in the dark. They could hear Gault savagely cursing his men. It was quite clear that he was not bent

upon rescuing the two, but upon making sure that they did not escape. The voices softened in the distance, as the current carried the dug-outs down. Conacher and Loseis could now permit themselves to move faster through the water.

Conacher drew Loseis along with one hand, and held the other straight over his head as they proceeded through the dark tunnel. An exclamation of satisfaction escaped him as his hand came in contact with the hanging packs. He took them down. A short distance further along there was a break in the willows on the right-hand side, and a back-water whence they climbed out in the grass. Streaming with water, they set off at a jog trot to warm up.

The voices of Gault and the Crees were still receding. Simultaneously it occurred to Conacher and Loseis that they could now permit themselves to hope. Stopping, they flew into each other's arms. It was a moist embrace, but none the less rapturous. After the frightful strain of the past days, the reaction was unnerving. In their joy and relief, they both partly broke down; but neither was ashamed of showing emotion.

"Oh, my Paul!" murmured Loseis. "Perhaps we are going to be happy after all!"

"Perhaps?" cried Conacher. "I should like to see anybody stop us now?"

He was not, however, quite so sure as all that.

The river flat gradually narrowed down to the typical coulee of the prairies, with the little stream running in the bottom. As the ground began to rise, the willows ceased, and the way became rough and stony. Conacher struck obliquely up the steep side of the coulee to find better going over the prairie. The moon rose as they gained the upper level, throwing a strange misty glamour over that vast, fixed, rolling sea. They pressed briskly ahead through the short buffalo grass which did not impede the feet, keeping the North Star over their right shoulders. Their clothes dried slowly; but the exercise of walking kept them warm.

Their hearts were light. The awful bare solitudes, rise behind rise in endless succession, and the deathlike silence had no power to oppress them now. How could they feel lonely walking hand in hand free under the sky? Day stole upon them with enchanting beauty. The prairie was sprinkled with wild roses and the rose madder flower that is called painter's brush. Prairie chickens fluttered from bush to bush companionably; and little furry four-footed creatures scurried for the shelter of their holes. Loseis sang as she walked; and Conacher cracked his jokes.

The sun was rising behind them as they came to the edge of a wide, saucer-like depression in the prairie, holding in the bottom an oval pond of an astonishing blueness. It was dotted with snowy water fowl. All the surrounding country dimpled like a vast cheek in smooth rounds and hollows, was mantled with a tender green, grayish in the shadows. At the left hand side of the lake grew a wide patch of poplar scrub; that is to say, thousands of little saplings growing as thick as hair, and putting forth leaves of so intense a green it was like a shout in the morning. The whole picture was washed with rose color in the horizontal rays of the rising sun.

Loseis drew a long breath. “I never realized how beautiful the prairie was!” she murmured. “It never was so beautiful,” she amended, putting her hand on Conacher’s arm. “How marvelous to one who has been a prisoner! Even if they should catch us we shall have had this!”

“They’re not going to catch us,” said Conacher. “Not while I have a hundred shells in my belt.”

Loseis pointed to the poplar scrub. “That’s the meeting place with Mary-Lou to-night.”

“Too bad we have to waste the day waiting for her,” said Conacher. “We won’t hang about there, it’s too obvious a hiding-place. The high ground on the other side would be a good observation post. Tired?”

“Tired!” sang Loseis. “I am just beginning to feel that I have legs again!”

They headed obliquely across the depression towards a swell of land to the south that enjoyed a slight prominence in the gently rolling sea of grass. The flat appearance of the prairie was deceptive. Some of these insignificant bumps commanded a view for many miles.

Tucked down behind the rise they found a cozy hollow with another patch of the vivid poplar scrub. They sat down at the edge of it to eat part of the food they had brought.

While they were thus engaged, silently and with excellent appetite, a brown bear came ambling placidly out from among the saplings. He looked at them with a start of astonishment so comic that Loseis burst out laughing; then with a great “Woof!” of indignation galloped away up the rise.

Conacher had snatched up his gun. “Fresh meat!” he cried. But with a reluctant shake of his head, he dropped it again.

“Why not?” asked Loseis.

“If we are searched for, the carcass would be found.”

When they had finished eating, Conacher said: “I’m sorry I cannot let you have a fire; but the smoke would betray us for many miles around. Creep in among the trees; take off your damp clothes; wrap up in your blanket and sleep until I call you.”

“What are you going to do?” demanded Loseis, ready to quarrel with him as usual over who should bear the brunt of the hardship.

“I’m going to roll up and sleep at the top of the rise behind a rose bush,” said Conacher grinning. “If they send out a search party they may be expected to appear in about two hours.”

“You are always talking about their searching for us,” said Loseis. “If Gault thinks we are dead he will not look for us. If he thinks we are not dead, we are certain to be caught in these empty spaces. Why worry?”

“There is a third alternative,” said Conacher. “Gault thinks we are dead, but he cannot afford to take any chances. It seems to me he will send out a party to scour the prairie just as a precaution. It is up to us to keep out of their way until they are satisfied. It won’t be as bad as if they *knew* we were here.”

Loseis wished to be allowed to watch from the top of the rise, but Conacher carried his point.

From behind the clump of roses that he had marked on the way over, Conacher was able to survey an expanse of country that faded into gray mist on the horizon. He slept for awhile as he had promised. It was about nine o’clock by the sun, when he perceived the first horseman, no more than a black dot far to the eastward; but a significantly shaped dot. Presently he made out another, and another at wide intervals. The nearest was about four miles distant.

Racing back down the rise, he called to Loseis. When she answered, he said: “Dress as quickly as possible. We must move on.”

When she appeared from among the trees, he explained what he had seen. “Unless I miss my guess,” he said, “they will divide and ride around the high ground surrounding the slough until they meet again. That would bring us right in their line of march. We must get over another rise. You can see that they are combing the country as they come. What we ought to do is to work around behind them.”

Hand in hand like a pair of children they headed south, bent almost double as they climbed the rises, and racing free down the other side. When they had put a couple of heights between them and the slough, they began to

work around towards the east. The prairie is not such a desperate place for fugitives as it might seem. It is true that from the high places you can see for many miles around: but there are always hollows into which you cannot see until you are upon them. At a glance it seems as if the bubbles of earth had been pushed up in meaningless disorder; but such is not the case. Nature sees to it that the country is drained. Every hollow opens into another. Conacher had the mapmaker's instinct for the contour of land, and he was never in doubt as to their proper course. At the same time while they were hidden from their enemies their enemies were hidden from them. It caused the heart to rise in the throat to imagine a horseman suddenly appearing over the grass close by.

After an hour's walking and running, they came upon a good-sized patch of rose scrub folded into the side of a rise. Conacher stopped to survey it.

"A perfect hiding-place if you lay flat on the ground," he said; "yet no one would suppose it. Come on, let's tackle the thorns."

Inch by inch they threaded their painful way along the ground; careful to rearrange the branches they had disturbed upon entering; and cutting with their knives a little tunnel ahead. Finally in the thickest of the patch they lay companionably on the warm, dry ground within whispering distance of each other, and lapped in delicious fragrance. Themselves concealed, they could see out more or less through interstices between the leaves.

"One could fall asleep here, and dream of being in Paradise," said Loseis, sniffing.

"Yes," said Conacher, disengaging a thorn; "and roll over and find one's self in the other place!"

They both dozed, and were awakened simultaneously by the sound of thudding hoofs. They waited with fast-beating hearts. A dark-skinned horseman rode into view along the top of the very rise against whose side they lay. He was less than a hundred yards away; they could distinguish every detail of his somewhat dandified dress.

"Watusk," whispered Loseis.

At sight of the patch of scrub, the Cree reined up his horse, and sat staring directly at them. It caused the goose-flesh to rise upon their bodies; their hearts seemed to stop beating. With infinite caution Conacher drew his gun into position.

"The horse first; then his rider," he whispered.

But after debating a moment, the Cree clapped heels to his horse, and rode on. Presently he disappeared. A long breath of thankfulness escaped from the two hidden ones.

“He will never know how nearly his wife became a widow,” said Conacher.

“Well, they’ve checked this place off,” said Loseis. “Shall we stay here?”

Conacher shook his head. “This will be his second big circle around the slough,” he said. “If he repeats the maneuver he will pass to the south of us. I don’t like the notion of being hemmed in. We’ve got to think of to-night. If they are making the slough their headquarters they will camp there. Unless we head Mary-Lou off she would ride right into them.”

“We must be close upon the trail between the Slavi village and the slough,” said Loseis.

“But we’re still too near the slough. We must make further south.”

Once more they took to the grass. For several hours they saw no more of the searchers. They made their last spell in a poplar bluff (as the patches of scrub are called) overlooking the trail between the lake and the slough, but much nearer the former.

They had not been there long when they were filled with disquietude by the sight of another of the Crees approaching from the direction of the Slavi village.

“He’s been in to look about,” said Conacher. “Natural enough.” As the man drew closer he added with a certain relief: “He doesn’t look as if he had discovered anything important. I guess Mary-Lou has side-stepped him.”

Their thoughts were given a sudden new turn, when the Cree turning out of the trail, put his horse directly for the bluff, Conacher and Loseis hastily retreated within the thickest part of the miniature wood. The Cree could not ride in among the little trees. Dismounting, he tied his horse.

Then began a grim game of I Spy with death for the stakes. Conacher and Loseis enjoyed a certain advantage, because they were aware of their danger, while the redskin was not. He was merely following general instructions to search all likely places of concealment. He was taking no particular care to muffle the sound of his progress, and they could generally follow it. When he went one way they went the other. But there were harrowing periods when they could hear nothing. The bluff was over an acre

in extent, and it was impossible to see more than half a dozen yards through the thickly springing stems. Once he caught them in a corner, and they were almost forced out into the open. Another time they actually had a glimpse of his passing. They stood frozen in their tracks. With what thankful hearts they heard him return to his horse at last. They flung themselves down to let the hideous strain relax.

They ate again. Satisfied now, that they had done their utmost, they rolled up in their blankets, and slept for eight hours on end. It was twilight when they awoke. They ate the last of the food they had brought.

"It will be prairie chicken for breakfast if Mary-Lou doesn't come," remarked Conacher.

"She will come if they have not taken her," said Loseis confidently.

"What I am chiefly afraid of," said Conacher, "is that she will pass right out with fright when we rise beside the trail."

"When we were children we used to signal to each other by imitating the cry of the kill-dee," said Loseis. "I will try that."

When the stars came out they moved down beside the faint track worn in the buffalo grass. Conacher, pulling his blanket around his shoulders, squatted in the grass, smoking, and Loseis leaned her cheek against his shoulder.

"How strange!" she murmured.

"What is, sweetheart?"

"Us two little things out here in the middle of the bald-headed. I feel about an inch high under these stars."

"Better than last night," suggested Conacher.

"Rather! . . . Paul, if we ever have any children, I wonder if this will mean anything to them?"

Conacher was more moved than he cared to show. Loseis, scarcely more than a child herself, dreaming of having children of her own! "Surely!" he said with assumed lightness. "Think how they'll be able to put it over the other kids! 'My Ma and my Pa were chased by Injuns!' "

Loseis chuckled. "If we come through all right it will be a wonderful thing to have shared," she murmured. "It will help us over the tiresome parts."

“You’re a wise little duck!” he whispered.

“Why?”

“Other girls refuse to admit beforehand that there could be any tiresome parts.”

“How do you know?” she asked quickly.

He swallowed his chuckle. “Oh, you learn these things from books, and from other men,” he said.

“I know that I shall not be marrying an angel,” she said, nestling against him; “and I assure you that you are not.”

“Angel enough for me!” he said, kissing her.

There was a vibration in the stillness. At first they thought it was a trick of the desirous imagination; then by degrees they became sure. Horses were approaching along the trail at a walk. The slowness of the pace was eloquent of the red girl’s terrors, and of the loyalty and strength of will that forced her out into the night in spite of her terrors. Conacher and Loseis rose to their feet.

Finally they made out shadowy forms in the trail. Loseis uttered the plaintive cry of the little bird that haunts the edges of the prairie sloughs. The shadowy horses stopped. There was a moment of painful suspense. It was not a natural place, of course, to find the kill-dee.

“Risk it!” whispered Conacher. “Speak to her!”

“Mary-Lou,” said Loseis softly; “we are here!”

There was no answer. They apprehended through the dark that the solitary rider had slipped out of the saddle. Running forward they found her half fainting, but clinging to the horses still.

She quickly recovered. Ah! what a joyful reunion that was! Sharers in danger!—there is no other bond quite the same as this. They all babbled at once. Loseis and Mary-Lou clung to each other weeping; Conacher embraced them both indiscriminately.

“I so scare’!” Mary-Lou whispered in Loseis’ ear. “I know the Crees out here somewhere. I t’ink they get you sure. But I got come jus’ the same. When I see you in the trail I t’ink it is the Crees. I am near die then!”

“You’re the bravest of any of us!” whispered Loseis. “Because you know what fear is!”

While the girls whispered Conacher turned his attention to the horses. Mary-Lou had brought the best procurable, and he was well-pleased. She had brought a fair store of smoked meat and fish also, but not enough to see them through, of course.

"Tatateecha t'ink I lyin' till he see me start," she explained.

"Let us ride," said Conacher. "We can talk as we go."

They mounted. The horses were still fresh and coquettish with the bit. What a delight it was to feel good horseflesh between the knees once more. Their breasts swelled with renewed hope.

"Which way?" asked Loseis.

"Southwest," said Conacher; "because that is the direction they would least expect us to take. At daylight we'll turn, and lay our proper course northwest. Save your horses."

They set off at an easy trot. When the horses settled to their work, they let the reins lie loose on their necks. It was safest to let these prairie-bred beasts choose their own footing. Now the North Star must be kept over the horse's right flank. Conacher chose a bright star in the southwest for a beacon. As they rode they exchanged experiences. Mary-Lou said:

"Las' night all the Crees around the post is after you, so I have no trouble. I walk around the side of the hill, and cross the creek, and climb the ridge. I hide in the bush till daylight. I hear you cry: 'Good-by! Good-by!' across the river. That cry it hurt my heart though I know it is a fool. I t'ink maybe you break a leg on the cut-bank. In the morning I see where some Crees is camp beside the trail, and I go around them. Then I go back to the trail and run to the Slavi village. I am there before the sun is half way up the sky. I sleep long."

"What did you do when the Cree came in?" asked Loseis.

"Wah! He come down from the prairie when nobody is lookin' that way. All are scare'! I snatch up a shawl and put it over my head like the ot'er women. I stay with the ot'er women. He not know me. Bam-bye he go back again."

The course they were following led them roughly parallel with Blackburn's Lake. When the moon rose they could see it palely gleaming in the distance. It was an exhilarating ride; the wind created by their own passage blew cool about their faces; the exercise of riding kept them tingling. With every additional mile that they put between them and their

enemies their hearts rose. Conacher attempted to sing. But though there was no danger in raising the voice here, the great brooding silence was too much for him. In spite of themselves they talked in undertones.

Just before dawn they spelled alongside a poplar bluff to allow the horses to graze. Here the humans enjoyed the luxury of a fire again, and the stimulus of hot food. Though the meal was only of smoked fish without sauce or bread, such a complete sense of comfort is not to be had under civilized conditions. They groaned at the necessity of breaking camp.

After a two-hour rest they saddled, and turned at right angles to their former course. The sun had risen in a cloudless sky, and the air was like wine. At mid-morning they calculated that they were abreast of Old Wives' Slough again, but now many miles to the westward. Coming to another sapphire-colored slough lying under a rather prominent rise to the eastward, which had a well-grown poplar bluff on its slope, Conacher called a halt for the balance of the day.

"We need sleep," he said; "moreover it is just possible if they ride west to-day, that they might catch sight of us from some height or another. The horses will be well hidden alongside the bluff yonder."

Picketing the horses to keep them from straying, they ate again. On this occasion Loseis insisted on being allowed to stand the first watch; and Conacher dispatched her to the top of the rise, while he rolled up in his blanket.

In the afternoon he relieved her. From the top of the rise it was evident that this was the highest point in many miles around. To Conacher lying in the grass smoking, it seemed as if half the world was spread before him. In that crystal clearness he could even trace the line of the valley of Blackburn's River. The easterly horizon was closed in by the land rising on the other side of the river. The pale green sea of the prairie between was always the same, and never quite the same. Apparently every yard of it was open to his vision; but Conacher knew from past experience that this was not so. Every swell of the land melted so softly into the swell beyond that one could not guess the hollow between. Conacher remembered the old-time stories of how the Indians could steal up on the wagon-trains camped in the open prairie.

As if evoked by that thought he saw Indians riding towards him then. It was what he was looking for and least desired to see. He glimpsed them as they crossed a hollow; a moment later they trotted over a little rise. There were three of them, they were less than a mile away; they were heading

directly for the spot where he lay. This time an encounter could not be avoided. All his high hopes came tumbling down like a house of cards.

Conacher ran down the hill to alarm his camp. There was no time to ride away. Best for them to keep the shelter they had. A word told Loseis and Mary-Lou what was upon them. They led the horses close up behind the bluff of trees, and tied them. They scattered the remaining embers of the fire, and beat them out. Conacher and Loseis took up a position within the trees facing the summit of the rise, gun in hand. The girl's face was pale and resolute.

"I can shoot straight, too," she said quietly.

They waited.

"All three of them are together now," said Conacher. "We must get them all. And their horses too. If we get them all it will be some time before Gault learns what has happened. We will still have a chance."

The three horsemen appeared at the top of the rise, and reined up. They were quite at their ease. Each slung a leg over his saddle to rest, and produced a pipe. There they stayed, silhouetted against the tender blue sky. One had a pair of field-glasses which was passed from hand to hand. Conacher and Loseis instinctively drew back a little further amongst the saplings. Suddenly the horses behind them whinnied; and Conacher groaned in bitterness of spirit.

However, at that moment a small troop of wild horses appeared out of a depression to the north. Led by a bay stallion with arched neck and streaming tail, they trotted past. In the chorus of neighing and whinnying which arose, the sounds made by Conacher's horses escaped the notice of the Crees.

After what seemed like an age-long wait to the watchers hidden in the poplars, the three Indians slipped out of their saddles, tightened girths and mounted again.

"Now for it!" whispered Conacher. "Do not fire until they are within a hundred feet. Bring down the horses first. You take the piebald and I'll take the other two."

But to their amazement and delight the riders wheeled and disappeared the way they had come. For a moment they stared at the empty place with hanging mouths. Then Conacher made as if to run out from among the trees. Loseis clutched him.

“It may be a trick!” she gasped.

They waited several minutes, not daring to rejoice yet.

“I *must* go look!” said Conacher. “I must know what they are doing.”

Loseis made no further effort to restrain him; and he ran up to the top of the rise, and flung himself down. At first he could see nothing but grass. Then the three riders rose mysteriously out of the grass, trotting away as they had come; showing their backs . . . their *backs*! Conacher nearly choked with joy. He waited awhile yet to make doubly sure. They disappeared and appeared again, holding steadily to the east. They shrank to mere specks in the green sea.

Conacher leaped to his feet, and charged back down the hill, yelling and brandishing his gun. Loseis snatched up her gun warily. Not until he came close did she comprehend that this was a pantomime of joy. He swept her clean off her feet in his embrace.

“They’ve gone back!” he shouted. “This was the outer edge of their patrol. They’ve given up the search! After this we’ve got nothing to contend with but nature!”

CHAPTER XXIII

HUNGER

NATURE! THEY were to discover during the days that followed that she was no mean antagonist. At first everything went delightfully; the sun warmed and cheered them by day; the stars whispered at night. The moon was swallowed up in the dawn now. On the shortest night of the year there was scarcely any darkness; then the nights began to lengthen imperceptibly. They rode and spelled and rode again. They built great fires. The character of the country never changed. The sea of green grass seemed to be limitless.

On the third day the horse that Conacher rode sickened mysteriously. On the following morning it was incapable of bearing him. Loseis shook her head ominously.

"It is a sort of distemper that attacks them in the summer," she said. "He will be sick for weeks. We might as well leave him. The others may catch it from him."

So Conacher was obliged to set out on foot. The sick horse screamed piteously upon being left behind; and attempted to follow; but fell down in the grass, where he lay struggling feebly and watching them with raised head until they passed out of sight. They could not now hope to make more than thirty or forty miles a day, though all took turns in riding. And still there was no suggestion of their approach to a great river. The prairie rolled on as before. As far as Conacher could tell they had not yet even passed the crown of the watershed. They all had their sickening moments of doubt. Suppose there was no river?

Loseis' worst prognostications were fulfilled. The other two horses sickened. By the sixth day they were all on foot. Mary-Lou's moccasins wore through; and they had nothing out of which to make new ones. Fortunately both Loseis and Conacher wore boots. The prairie which looked so smooth made rough walking for humans, and their progress was cut down, Conacher figured, to between twenty and twenty-miles [missing or incorrect word] a day. The eighth day passed without any sign of the river of

promise. Conacher estimated that they had covered nearly three hundred miles.

They had met with no game on the prairie except the ubiquitous chickens. Conacher was averse to wasting his precious bullets on such small fowl—it is very easy to miss a prairie chicken with a rifle; consequently they had depended on the meat and fish brought by Mary-Lou. On the seventh day it was exhausted, and they ate chicken. On that miserable eighth day some bad fairy waved a wand, and the chicken disappeared from the prairie. During the entire day Conacher did not obtain a shot. Consequently they went supperless to bed.

He was up at sunrise, ranging the prairie while the girls slept. But with no luck. There was nothing living in sight except the gophers who gained the shelter of their burrows ere he could come close enough to hope to hit them with his clumsy gun. In desperation he did shoot at gophers at last, only to plug the earth. When he returned to camp, the girls, having heard the sound of his gun, awaited him with anticipatory smiles, and he had the bitterness of showing them his empty hands. There was no breakfast.

On this first morning it was easy to turn it into a joke.

"Anyway, I'm sick of meat," said Loseis.

"My people lak go 'ongry for awhile," said Mary-Lou. "Mak' the big feed taste better bam-bye."

"Well, it'll save a lot of time," said Conacher with a sheepish grin. He felt responsible for their plight.

They set forth briskly enough; but were very glad to rest when mid-morning came. All of them were now feeling very painful gnawings, but they concealed it from each other. Conacher prowled over the prairie in vain. They listlessly resumed their march.

During the course of the afternoon they came unexpectedly to the lip of a deep coulee with a trickle of water in the bottom. To Conacher's dismay it proved to be flowing in a southerly direction. This was exactly opposite to what he expected. It was against all the theories as to the lay of this unexplored land, and he was ready to despair. However, there was nothing to do but to keep on the way they were going.

An hour later they crossed it again. The water was now flowing north, and Conacher's mind was somewhat relieved. Upon this second crossing they found more water than before in the streamlet, and a fringe of spruce trees, the first grown trees they had seen since leaving Blackburn's River.

They also found, what was more important to them, berry-bushes, and a patch of wild strawberries. Only the strawberries were ripe. Before eating any, they carefully collected them in their little cooking pot, and scrupulously divided them. There was about a cupful apiece.

The berries were deliciously refreshing; but they seemed to have the effect of still further sharpening the pangs of hunger. They searched far up and down the coulee for more, but in vain. It was an isolated patch of trees and bushes.

"Let us get on," Conacher kept urging the girls. "We must reach a game country before our strength fails."

They wearily climbed the steep side of the coulee to the endless rolling prairie again, that they now hated. On this day they suffered a keener pain from hunger than during the days that followed. All three became tight-lipped and silent. Their limbs were leaden; and progress was painfully slow. Twice more they crossed the coulee. No more trees or berries. It was now evident that the general course of the little stream was northwest, which was in line with Conacher's calculations. It was undoubtedly a tributary of the big river they were seeking: but whether the river were ten miles or a hundred miles further, it was impossible to tell. It was exasperating in their fatigued condition to climb in and out of the steep coulee so many times: but even so they made better time than they could have done by following it throughout its crazy windings.

Seeing more spruce trees, they descended into it to spend the night, but found no berries here. They heaped a great fire and made themselves soft beds of spruce boughs: but their empty stomachs refused to be assuaged by these luxuries. Mary-Lou cut three small strips from the top of one of her worn-out moccasins, and boiled them, and handed them around.

"Chew," she said. "It will stop the pains anyhow."

Afterwards a curious false strength seemed to come to them. They felt no desire to sleep, but sat up for hours around their fire under the spruces, talking animatedly with flushed faces and bright eyes.

"When I was a kid," said Conacher, "I had a grand-uncle in New York, who was a great old high-liver. Never thought about anything but eats. He knew all the best restaurants in the city, and what was the proper thing to order in each place. He took me out to dinner a couple of times when I was a boy. Once we went to Delmonico's. I have never forgotten what we ate that day. First oysters. I suppose you don't know oysters, Loseis. Well, they are

the best eating there is. Slip down your throat like velvet. Then a thick soup that was called potage Mongole. God knows what was in it. It was a combination of all the most delicious flavors you ever knew. Then there was something that was called Tournedos Henri Quatre. It was like beef, but it was the sauce that made all the difference. The French are wizards for sauces. We ended up with mince pie; good old American mince pie; and there's nothing better! Oh, what a feed that was!"

"The best thing I ever tasted," said Loseis vivaciously, "was roast pig. Three years ago Jim Cornwall came through from the Crossing with dogs, and brought my father a little frozen pig on his sled for Christmas. We thawed him out and roasted him until his hide crackled. Oh, my dear! the smell alone would drive you crazy; and the taste was better than anything in the world. I can taste him now! Do you member, Mary-Lou?"

"I remember," said Mary-Lou, closing her eyes. "I did taste that pig meat. It was sweeter than young porcupine; it was sweeter than moose-nose or the back-fat of caribou; it was sweeter than all meat."

"And do you remember?" asked Loseis, "when they stuck the knife into him how a little stream of juicy fat ran down?"

"We soaked it up with bread," said Mary-Lou.

The subject was inexhaustible. They discussed it with anxious, drawn, eager faces. It never occurred to them to laugh at each other or at themselves. When they finally slept they dreamed of feasting.

Another day of misery followed no different from the day before, except that the pangs of hunger were less sharp and more enervating. It was hard to keep walking. It nearly broke Conacher's heart to see the boyish Loseis pressing on with set face, quite unconscious of how she was staggering in her tracks. He took the second gun from her. She fought like a little spitfire to regain it, weeping out of anger and weakness. Her anger smoldered all the rest of the day, making the way even more bitter. Mary-Lou stood starvation better than either of the whites. They found another tantalizing patch of berries; and wasted hours looking for more. As on the night before, their supper consisted of a small strip of boiled hide apiece.

On the third day of starvation it seemed a wonder that they were able to move at all. Nevertheless they staggered on for a few miles. To add to their miseries it rained copiously; and their blankets soaked up some additional pounds of water. All day a division existed between Conacher and Loseis that was harder to bear than starvation. It was due to nothing in the world

but compassion. It made each tender heart rage to behold the misery of the other. Especially Conacher's, because he told himself that no woman ought to be subjected to such an ordeal. He supposed from Loseis' black looks that she was blaming him for having led her into this, and he was ready to blow his brains out.

The little stream having received a tributary from the south, flowed with increased speed and volume. It now held a fairly straight course for the northwest; and it became evident that the whole country was sloping gently in that direction. The walls of the coulee gradually became higher; in the bottom it was now continuously wooded; but they felt too weak to climb down for a few berries. These changes in the country suggested that they were approaching the bottom of the watershed, and at midday from a rise in the prairie, Conacher at last beheld a blue shadow athwart the westerly horizon which indicated the valley of a considerable river. It seemed like a mockery now. It was a good twenty-five miles distant, and in their weakened state that was half a world away.

At the end of the day they made a detour from the coulee to visit a small slough and a poplar bluff that they had marked from a rise. It was a likely place to find bear. There was no bear, but the water of the slough was sweet, and they determined to spend the night in that spot. Will it be our last camp? Conacher thought with dread in his heart. The sky was still threatening, and he constructed an inclined thatch of poplar leaves, with a fire in front for the girls. They chewed their strips of boiled hide. This finished one moccasin, except for the ragged lower part, that Mary-Lou had bound round her foot. Afterwards, when Loseis, with a cold face, turned to seek her blanket, Conacher felt that he could bear no more.

"Loseis . . . !" he murmured heart-brokenly.

Mary-Lou vanished away amongst the little trees.

"What is it?" asked Loseis coldly.

"I cannot bear it . . . !"

"What?"

"Your look! . . . Forgive me!"

"For what must I forgive you?"

"I don't know. Whatever it is that I have done that angers you. For getting you into this scrape."

Her face looked very small and pinched. It worked curiously with anger. Her voice came unnaturally sharp: “Forgive you! What sort of talk is this? Are you trying to make me feel worse than I feel already? Aren’t you satisfied with doing most of the work, and walking twice as far to hunt, and carrying a double load, but you must make me feel what a burden I am by asking me to forgive you!”

He only dimly understood the torment of this proud nature. “But Loseis . . . !” he protested, staring, “this is foolishness . . . !”

“Of course! of course! of course! I am a fool! That is well understood!”

“Listen to me,” he said doggedly. “You say I carry too heavy a burden. Why add to it with your cold and angry looks? The weight of two guns is nothing to me. It is your hard eyes that break me down.”

Loseis’ reply was to burst into tears.

He took her in his arms. “Don’t you love me any more?” he whispered.

She crept within his arms, but she abused him still. “You fool! it is because I love you so, that I am always angry. It drives me wild to think that I should spoil the life of a man like you!”

“But that’s nonsense!” said Conacher. “I am nothing in particular. A man only has one life. How could he spend it better? We shall go together. What else matters . . . Don’t you feel better now?”

“A little bit,” she admitted. “But to-morrow I shall be angry with you again. You are too good and patient. If you turned hateful I should feel better. It would even things up a little.”

“You’re a funny one!” he murmured.

However, the air *was* cleared; and they rolled up in their blankets with a bit of comfort at their hearts.

When Conacher awoke next morning a light rain was drifting down. He pulled his blanket closer around him. Lying there like that one did not suffer; it was warm; the pangs of hunger did not make themselves felt; a comfortable numbness filled the frame. But the thought of getting up was hideous. For a long time he lay struggling with it. Useless for him to tell himself that he was the head of the party; the girls were dependent on him; it was up to him to find them food; he felt that he *could not* get up; the effort was too great.

In the end he had to get up. The first few moments were the worst. He stood in the rain, swaying and nauseated, a black mist swimming before his eyes. Each morning it was much worse. If he could conquer this first weakness, he could go on through the day—but to-morrow morning! He shook that thought away. He forced himself to walk up and down, supporting himself by the little trees. After awhile he felt better. Picking up his gun, he started on his hopeless circuit of the bluff.

He paused in front of the little shelter he had constructed for the girls. They slept. Loseis was lying with her head pillowed on Mary-Lou's shoulder like a child. In her weakness she looked entirely the child, the sick child. At the sight of those transparent cheeks and bluish eyelids, Conacher's breast was wrung with agony. The worst of overcoming the physical weakness was, that one then began to think again, with horrible clearness. How could he ask this exhausted child to go on any further? She was dearer to him than his life. Would it not be kinder to end her sufferings while she slept? She opened her eyes, and smiled at him enchantingly. That smile capped his agony. Swallowing the groan that was forced up by his breast, he smiled back, and staggered on.

Like all the prairie sloughs, this one lay in a dish-like depression surrounded by a shallow rim of grass. Conacher had made half his round of the bluff, when over this rim at a distance of about a hundred yards appeared a lumbering black body of an astonishing bigness. For an instant he thought his senses were failing him; he began to tremble violently; but he quickly realized that it was a veritable bear. A bear's eye-sight is not very keen, and the animal had not seen him. He drew back amongst the little trees, struggling to control his excitement. You *can not* miss him! he kept telling himself.

The bear was evidently making for the bluff to breakfast off poplar bark. Conacher realized with a pang that he was directly in the wind of the animal. The bear was in no hurry. He turned aside to snuff and scratch at the roots of a clump of roses. He was the largest black bear that Conacher had ever seen. The big head was dwarfed by his mighty rump. His black pelt was grayed with moisture. The man's mouth watered ridiculously. The bear turned towards him, and his heart began to thump. Then the animal changed his mind, and sauntered around the rim of the bench. Conacher, stepping with infinite care, kept pace with him amongst the little trees.

The bear disappeared over the edge of the rim, and Conacher's heart almost broke. Should I go after him? he asked himself. No! he is bound to come to the bluff and the slough. The animal reappeared and hope flared up

anew. He was heading towards the bluff again. He was no longer directly in Conacher's wind, consequently the chance of getting him was better. But the deliberation of the beast well-nigh maddened the man. Bruin stood gazing off to the east as if he were debating the choice between this and some other feeding ground. He sat up on his haunches, and licked his paws. Finally he came lumbering towards the trees in a businesslike manner. Conacher raised his gun.

Before the bear had made half the distance that separated them, though Conacher had not moved, the animal's mysterious instinct warned him of the presence of danger. He stopped with a woof! of alarm, and turning in his tracks, galloped back for the shelter of the rim. Conacher fired. The bear's broad beam offered him a goodly mark, and he knew by the tremor that went through the animal that he had hit him: but it was not in a vulnerable spot. He galloped on without a pause. He disappeared over the encircling rim of grass. A voice seemed to cry inside Conacher: "You have lost your last chance!"

He found strength to run as if he had not been starved for four days. As he topped the rise, he saw the bear lying in the grass a hundred feet away; and a great, calm thankfulness filled his breast. It was all right! The animal was not dead, but disabled in his hind quarters. He lay with his head between his paws awaiting the end. Conacher dispatched him with a bullet through the brain.

Crying out: "A bear! I've got him!" Conacher dropped to his knees, and started instanter to skin his prey. Presently Mary-Lou who was more skillful at this job than he, relieved him. Loseis stood looking on like a happy little ghost. They could not wait to skin the bear entire; but cut off a piece of meat, and ran back to the fire with it.

Conacher kept saying over and over like an old woman: "Mind! Mind! Only a little piece at first, or it will make you sick!"

"If there is meat, why not eat?" grumbled Mary-Lou.

Nevertheless she obeyed; and at first only three tiny pieces were set upon pointed sticks to roast over the fire. It may be guessed that they were not *very* well cooked before they were eaten. Conacher and Loseis nibbled them to make them go as far as possible. Mary-Lou saw no sense at all in this proceeding, but loyally followed their example.

"Is that all?" said Loseis wistfully.

“Mary-Lou could put some small pieces in the pot and boil them,” suggested Conacher. “The soup would be good for you.”

“Soup!” said Loseis, making a face.

“Well, by and by we will roast another little piece. To-morrow, if you feel all right, you can eat all you want.”

There was no question of moving on that day. They ate a little more; slept; and ate again. Conacher and Loseis sat happily side by side under the shelter of the leaves, watching Mary-Lou cut off thin slabs of the meat, and hang them in the smoke of the fire. The Indian girl also contrived moccasins for herself out of squares of the hide.

Next morning they awoke with bounding pulses as if they had never known what it was to starve. At breakfast time they feasted without stint. Their cheeks seemed to have filled out over night; their eyes were bright; their teeth gleaming. There was something so comical in the sight of this abrupt transformation, that they continually burst out laughing with their mouths full at the sight of each other’s joy.

They set out again laden with as much meat as they could carry.

CHAPTER XXIV

DOWNSTREAM

AS they descended by imperceptible degrees towards the river, they could no longer make out the line of its valley ahead. The bald-headed prairie now began to take on a parklike aspect. Groups of graceful, full-grown poplars with their greenish yellow bark became more and more numerous, gradually leading them into a well-grown forest of aspen trees, interspersed with spruce. But there were still grassy openings of all sizes, from pretty glades to miniature prairies. Through the trackless forest it was very slow going; giant raspberry bushes, now in blossom, barred the way; rotting trunks lay prone in every direction; and vivid moss treacherously masked the holes where the ancient stems had rotted clean out of the ground.

As the afternoon wore on, and there was no end to this, no sign of any river, a feeling of discouragement attacked them again. Could they have been mistaken? And then without warning, they issued out of the trees on to a grassy knoll; and there, with a magnificent effect of dramatic surprise, lay the long-sought river at their very feet.

It was a thrilling moment. That view, so cunningly masked by the belt of forest, was one of the finest views imaginable. It was a first-class river. It flowed in the bottom of a valley at least six hundred feet deep, and no more than half a mile across from rim to rim. From the opposite rim, the prairie rolled on to the horizon. It was not so much a valley as a deep, clean gash in the prairie. The side upon which they stood was mantled with the deep green of spruce, while the other side rolled up in fantastic knobs and terraces of buffalo grass.

The river poured a smooth, yellowish green flood through the bottom of this mighty trough; just the color of poplar bark. It was broken by several high islands, covered with spruce trees, which stemmed the current like majestic ships. The point upon which they stood was on the outside of a great bend, and they could look far up-stream, where the river seemed to flatten out, and to issue dazzling and molten from the afternoon sun itself.

Conacher's first thought was: "Plenty of water! I'll be able to make a raft. We'll have some easy days now."

They gazed at the noble prospect with full hearts. Conacher in particular was bursting with pride. He felt like the creator of that river, because they had found it where he had said it would be.

"We happen to have hit it just right," he said with a transparent air of carelessness. "In years to come when there is a trail it will strike the river here. Above here, you see, it flows east of north, and at this point it swings around to the westward. That agrees with the Indian reports. It is the only river east of the Rockies that has a westward trend."

"It is too beautiful to be called the Mud River," said Loseis.

"After this it shall be Laurentia's River."

"Suppose there are rapids," suggested the matter-of-fact Mary-Lou.

"It will probably flow smooth for two hundred miles," said Conacher. "Then it will strike the limestone outcrop that crosses the whole country. We'll find rapids, maybe cascades, there."

"And we are the first whites to see it!" murmured Loseis.

"If I can bring him a good sketch map of it, it will put my boss in a good humor," said Conacher.

They made their way down to the water's edge; and chose a camping spot on a curious tongue of land pointing downstream. At the highest stage of water it was an island; but it was now connected with the shore by a bar of dried mud. On one side of them the resistless brown flood swept down silently, its silken surface etched with eddies; on the other side there was a quiet back-water which Conacher said would be ideal for constructing the raft. He spent the remaining hours of daylight in searching for the three big, dead trees that he required for that purpose.

They slept in great comfort on heaps of spruce boughs, with a generous fire between them. Even in July the nights were cold. In the silence of the night they discovered that the smoothly flowing river had a voice. It was neither a roar nor a whisper, but partook of the nature of both sounds. Though scarcely audible, it was tremendous; like the breathing and stirring of a mighty bed-fellow.

The entire following day was devoted to the construction of the raft. Conacher cut down his trees; lopped off the branches; and chopped the trunks in two. He then launched his logs, and floated them together. During

the earlier stages of his labor, he was often obliged to wade thigh deep into the icy water. Since he had neither spikes to fasten the logs, nor rope to lash them together, he was forced patiently to burn holes in them with his ramrod, heated in the fire. Twenty-four such holes had to be burned; and twelve neatly fitting wooden pegs shaped with the ax. Two short lengths were laid across the six logs and pegged down. The peg at each corner was allowed to stick up a few inches. A flooring of poles was then laid on the crosspieces to keep the passengers and their slender baggage dry. These poles were not fastened down, but were held in place by the pegs at each corner. Conacher's last act was to burn a hole in each of the outside logs into which he drove a stout forked branch to serve as a rowlock. The oars were merely small spruce poles flattened with the ax at the broad end.

The builder surveyed his completed effort with a pride that was difficult to conceal. "After all this work," he said with his offhand air, "I shall be good and sore if we have to abandon it in a few miles."

"It is beautiful!" said Loseis.

For a touch of bravura Conacher made a little hearth of clay tiled with flat stones on one end of his raft; and laid a fire ready to light. "So we can boil our meat as we travel," he explained.

"It is like a steamboat!" said Loseis.

They turned in early; and were ready to push off soon after sunrise the following morning. This was the fourteenth morning after their departure from the slough where their enemies had turned back. The raft proved to possess ample buoyancy; they could move about on it with a certain freedom. The floor of poles held them safely above danger of a wetting. Mary-Lou lighted the fire, and put the breakfast on to cook.

Loseis and Conacher sculled out of the back-water. At the foot of the island the current seized them as in a giant hand and drew them along. They took their oars inboard. There was nothing further to do. The tendency of the current itself was to draw them into the center of the stream, and keep them there. They sat down on their blankets to survey the scenery. The raft gyrated slowly in the eddies, giving them views up and down stream without so much as having to turn their heads.

"This is better than walking," said Conacher.

Loseis agreed that it was; nevertheless she looked with some trepidation to see what each new bend of the unknown river had to show.

Conacher assured her on the word of a geologist that as long as it ran between dirt banks there could be no serious obstruction to navigation; when rocks appeared, then look out! He had note-book and compass out to make memoranda of its course. He calculated that the current was running about five miles an hour.

The sun was hot to-day; basking deliciously in its rays, the girl fell into a comfortable doze. The scenery was beautiful and monotonous; they looked at it, only partly aware of what they were looking at, a half smile fixed on their lips. Thus they recuperated from the fatigues of the past few days. Since the raft did not move through the water, but with the water, it came to seem as if it was not moving at all. The raft was the fixed point, and the shores were being slowly rolled past them like a panorama on great spools.

This pleasant dream was rudely broken into by the sound of a hoarse roar downstream.

“Rapid!” said Mary-Lou, moving towards an oar.

Loseis looked reproachfully at Conacher.

They edged the raft close inshore where they could land quickly if need be.

“Let’s have a look at it before you call me a liar,” said Conacher.

Rounding the outside of a bend, they came in view of the white horses leaping below. An exclamation of fear broke from the girls. Conacher caught hold of a fallen tree to stay their progress while he studied the white water.

“Nothing but a riffle,” he announced. “Its bark is worse than its bite. This is a sharper bend than usual, and it’s just the water backing up on the outside that makes all the fuss. Notice that all the waves are regular and unbroken. Deep water. It will be perfectly safe to run it if you are willing.”

“All right if you say so,” said Loseis.

They cast off from their tree. Conacher and Mary-Lou each stood up with an oar, and Loseis crouched behind them.

“Head for the roughest part near the shore,” said Conacher, “and keep her straight; that’s all.”

Their hearts beat fast as the shores began to slip by with ever-increasing swiftness. The voice of the rapid was like that of a ravening beast. There is no other feeling quite like that upon the brink of a rapid. The feeling is: No power on earth can save me from it now—well, what the hell! They were

gripped by an exquisite fear. Finally the heavy raft wriggled over the first and the biggest of those strange, fixed billows and stuck her nose in the trough. A sheet of spray flew back over them, whereupon they were seized by a mad exhilaration, and all three yelled like demons. The raft bucked over the short, steep billows like a rogue horse. Conacher and Mary-Lou were forced to their knees; and the latter lost her oar. A moment later they found themselves in smooth water, roaring with laughter.

As soon as they had eaten their supper that night, they pushed off again. The girls slept while Conacher watched throughout the long twilight. The sunset glow alternated with the cold eastern sky as the raft waltzed gracefully in the eddies. They grounded her on a bar during the few hours of darkness; and at dawn they pushed off again; the girls watching now while Conacher slept. He awakened in the sunshine to find them laughing at the antics of the bears on the steep banks.

For three days they traveled in this pleasant fashion. Mooseberries and black currants were ripening now. The bushes grew thickly along the edges of the water and wherever there were berries there were bears. Drifting down silently on the raft, Conacher could always get a shot in the early mornings. The berries made a welcome change from a diet of meat exclusively.

As they traveled north the steep high banks gradually flattened down, and the current of the river slackened. Finally the high banks disappeared altogether; they could see nothing over the tops of the poplars and pines that lined the water's edge. The course of the stream became very tortuous, and progress was slow.

"We're evidently coming to something," Conacher remarked. "This country is a vast belt of silt deposited by the river as the result of some obstruction ahead."

On the fourth day the obstruction appeared in the form of a low wall of limestone through which the river had finally succeeded in forcing a passage. The rock walls were but three or four feet high, and the river slipped between them very swiftly and smoothly with a curious growling sound. On the other side the whole character of the country was changed. Rock appeared everywhere; and the lush vegetation of the prairies was gone.

They had not gone far before they came to a rapid, a real rapid this one, with great bowlders sticking up out of it, that tore the current to white tatters. Landing at a safe distance above, they walked down along the shore

to see if there was a possible channel through. Conacher was naturally averse to abandoning the raft which had cost him such pains.

After a little study, he pointed out to the girls how it might be done. “It would be foolish, though, to risk the guns and ammunition and the ax. You girls carry the things along the shore, and I’ll take the raft down.”

“Suppose you hit a rock?” said Loseis, paling.

“Why, I’d get a ducking, that’s all.”

He accomplished the feat without accident. To the watching Loseis he made an extraordinarily gallant figure, standing on the raft, braced and swaying to every movement; his resolute glance fixed ahead, while he paddled madly to steer it around obstructions.

In the next rapid, an hour or so later, he was not so fortunate. The raft, in spite of his efforts, slid up on a submerged shelf of rock, and rearing on end, flung the loose poles in every direction. Conacher, jumping clear of the wreck, went down with the current. The frame of the raft followed him down; and he contrived to bring it ashore below; and the paddle too. With some new poles the raft was as good as ever.

However, the rapids seemed to grow successively worse; and Loseis forbade him to risk his neck in the next one. They sent the raft down empty. After a mad voyage, battered back and forth on the bowlders, it came through minus its poles, somewhat loosened up but still practicable. They then camped for the night.

On the following day they were nosing along close to the shore with the disquieting roar of a rapid in their ears, but apparently still at some distance. The view down river was cut off by a low, stony hill, sparsely covered with trees, around the base of which the stream wound its way. Suddenly Conacher perceived that the current was sucking ominously along-shore. That part of the shore was much cumbered with old down trees. He drove the raft into the naked branches.

“Grab hold!” he said sharply to the girls.

They missed the first tree. Fine beads of perspiration broke out on Conacher’s forehead. He perceived that in a dozen yards the raft would be beyond his control. He seized the next overhanging branch, and wound a leg around his improvised oarlock to hold the raft. The girls were now fully alive to the danger. Mary-Lou climbed into the tree, and Loseis swiftly passed her their precious few belongings. When everything was ashore

Conacher let the raft go, and it lumbered around the point with surprising swiftness.

“That’s the last of it,” said Conacher sadly.

They climbed the stony hill. As they rounded the top, a hoarse, throaty bellowing buffeted their ears; and a moment later a wild welter of white water was spread before their eyes. They had seen nothing like this. After rounding the hill the stream straightened out, and narrowing down to a quarter of its usual width tumbled down as steeply as a flight of stairs between high wooded banks. The impression of power was overwhelming. The water was forced into great, regular billows which looked to be fifteen feet high. Each billow or ridge of water converged to a point in the middle; and the effect as one looked downstream was of a series of blunt white arrows pointing up. No boat could have lived in that turmoil. The raft—or what was left of it—was already out of sight. The three looked at each other with scared and thankful faces. A close call!

They now had to adjust their minds to traveling on foot again—and this would not be anything like the rolling prairie! The first thing was to roll up their packs, and strap them on their backs. They then descended into the gorge; but found it impossible to make headway along the steep side, impeded with stones and down timber. They were forced to climb a hundred feet or so to level ground. This was scarcely better. Only those who have tried to make their way through a trackless virgin forest can appreciate the difficulties that faced them in the shape of undergrowth, fallen trees and holes in the earth. The débris of ages was heaped in their path. They guided themselves by the sound of the cascade upon their left.

In a mile or so (which had all the effect of ten) the river fell quiet again, and they pushed back to its bank. It was an open question which was the more difficult going. Along the edge of the stream the dead timber brought down by the freshets was left stranded in inextricable tangles. Conacher finally chose a course parallel with the river bank, and a few yards back from the edge. Here they were at least sure of a supply of water. All day long it was a case of climbing over obstacles or through them or chopping a way. Heart-breaking work. They camped while it was still early, completely tired out.

For day after day this continued. There was no lack of dead timber to make another raft: but the rapids followed each other in such close succession that it seemed a waste of time. It was exasperating to have to undergo such crushing labor with the stream running alongside ready to

carry them in the desired direction. “If I only had a dug-out!” Conacher groaned a dozen times a day. But even if they could have taken the time to make a dug-out, there was no suitable timber in that stony land. The noise of their progress through the bush scared away all game; and they would soon have gone hungry, had it not been for the smoked meat which Mary-Lou had thoughtfully provided. Presently this gave out, and they had to lay over for a day, while Conacher hunted a bear, along the river. Their clothes were in rags.

In ten days Conacher figured that they had made about fifty miles: but this was pure guesswork. It was now within two or three days of the time when the surveying outfit was due at the mouth of the Mud River.

The three travelers were sitting gloomily on the shore of the river in a spot where it flowed as smoothly and prettily between poplar and birch-covered shores as a river in a civilized land where picnics might be held. The view downstream was blocked by a graceful island. Suddenly around that island came poking the nose of a birch-bark canoe with a single paddler.

To those three that sight was like a blow between the eyes. They glanced fearfully at each other for confirmation. It was a month since they had seen others of their kind. They stared at the approaching canoe with open mouths. Then Conacher jumped to his feet and hailed. The paddler was arrested in mid-motion. He was no less startled by the meeting than they. After a moment he came paddling gingerly towards them. They saw that it was a white man, an odd, withered, brownish specimen, whose skin was all of a color with his battered hat, and faded khaki jacket.

He grounded his canoe gently in the mud, and stepped out. An old smoked pioneer with a comically injured look which never varied. They shook hands gravely all around before a word was spoken.

“Who are you?” demanded Conacher and Loseis simultaneously.

“Bill Mitchell,” he replied with the shrug and the aggrieved look that were characteristic of him. “Who the hell are you?”

“I am Conacher of the surveying outfit, and this is Miss Blackburn.”

“Blackburn’s daughter!” exclaimed the old man with widening eyes. “Do you mean to tell me you’ve come down from Blackburn’s Post this away!”

Conacher was not anxious to go into lengthy explanations. “We’re expecting to join my outfit on the Sinclair River,” he said quickly. “How far are we from the Sinclair?”

“Matter of ten mile. There’s one rapid between.”

“Well, thank God!” cried Conacher fervently. “Have you seen the surveying outfit?”

“Spelled with them three days since,” replied the old man. “They’re working up-stream slow. Ought to be off the mouth of the Mud River some time to-morrow.”

Conacher and Loseis exchanged a beaming look. All their troubles rolled away. “Well, we didn’t manage that so badly,” said the former, conceitedly.

“What are you doing here?” Conacher asked of the old man.

“Me?” he answered with his disgruntled look; “what do you think I’m doin’? I’m prospectin’ this river. It ain’t never been prospected.”

“But when you get above the rapids it’s a prairie river,” said Conacher. “We came through three hundred miles of it, and there’s likely three hundred miles more above that.”

“Then I’ll work up to the mountains,” said the old man undisturbed.

“You fellows ought to study a little geology before you break your hearts with a journey like this,” said Conacher nettled. “Nobody has ever found any amount of gold on the easterly slope of the Rockies.”

“Mebbe this river comes right through the mountains like the Spirit and the Sinclair,” said the old fellow obstinately.

“Look at it!” said Conacher. “There’s damned little snow water in that. It’s pure prairie mud.”

“Oh, well, I’ve come so far I might as well go see,” he said calmly. “I got all summer. All I want is to get into the mountains before I go into winter quarters.”

Conacher gave him up. He described the upper reaches of the river for his benefit. “How will you get your canoe around the big fall?” he asked.

“Chop a trail through the bush, and then come back for it,” said the old man calmly. “It don’t weigh but forty pound.”

Looking into his canoe they perceived that his entire worldly goods consisted of three bags of flour, a box of ammunition, and a slim dunnage bag of odds and ends. It appeared that his gun was of the same caliber as that carried by Conacher. The old man looked at the other’s still partly filled ammunition belt desirously.

“You’ll be joining your outfit to-morrow,” he said suggestively.

“Tell you what I’ll do,” said Conacher. “Cache your flour here, and carry us down to the mouth of the river and it shall be yours.”

“Don’t mind ef I do,” said Bill Mitchell.

After the labors of the past days that last ten miles was like riding in a taxi. They whisked the light canoe around the rapid with no trouble at all. Below, the Mud River widened out and found its way into the Sinclair through a miniature delta amongst low, grassy islands covered with gigantic cottonwood trees that created a dim green twilight below. Mitchell landed them on a pine-clad point that looked down a reach of the greater river, several miles long. The old man did not get out.

“Won’t you spell with us?” asked Conacher politely.

The pioneer rubbed his hairy chin, and squinted down river as if he had perceived something important down there. “I guess not,” he drawled. “Got to be gettin’ along.” With a casual good-by, he pushed off and resumed his solitary journey up-stream.

“What a strange creature!” murmured Loseis.

“It was the presence of a lady which embarrassed him,” said Conacher. “He confided to me that he had not seen a white girl in seven years.”

Twenty-four hours later it was Conacher who perceived, down at the end of the long reach, the flash of wet paddles in the sun.

“Here they come!” he cried.

The two girls ran to his side. For a long time they could make out nothing but the regular flash of several paddles like heliograph signals. Finally four little black objects took shape down river. The watchers filled with a mounting excitement that became painful to bear; their breasts were like dynamos humming higher and higher until the pitch became unendurable. They had looked forward to this meeting through such hardships and perils! there had been so many days when they despaired of accomplishing it! But here they came at last; men of their own kind; friends; rescuers. Conacher and Loseis felt as if their hearts would crack with joy.

“My God! how astonished they’ll be!” said Conacher shakily.

The impulse to make the most of their friends’ astonishment was irresistible; and the three drew back under cover of the trees. Soon they were

able to distinguish that the approaching party consisted of three white men and eight Indians traveling in three big dug-outs, and a rough, narrow scow that was being poled along close to the shore. Finally Conacher recognized his especial friend.

"Alec Jordan!" he murmured with a tight, warm feeling around the heart. "Good old Alec!"

They saw that the oncoming boats intended to make a landing directly at their feet. It was an inevitable camping-place. The three dug-outs grounded almost simultaneously on the shingle. As the white men rose in their places, Conacher stepped out from among the trees.

"Hello, fellows!" he said in a casual voice.

They stared at him completely awe-struck. "My God!" they murmured in hushed tones; and looked at each other. The Indians in the scow pushed off in a panic and floated away on the current.

Conacher, pale with excitement, but grinning widely, stepped down the bank. "I'm no ghost!" he cried. He marched up to Langmuir, the head of the party. "I want to report for duty," he said simply.

"Report . . . for duty!" stammered Langmuir clownishly.

Jordan was the first to recover from the shock. He flung his arms around his friend. "Conacher! Conacher! *Conacher!*" he yelled, shaking him violently as if to make certain that he was flesh and blood.

"How in hell did you get here?" demanded Langmuir in a voice of extreme bitterness, which was not really bitter.

"Been waitin' for you since yesterday," said Conacher airily. "I cut across the prairie north of Blackburn's Post, and came down the Mud River to head you off. Got a map of the river for you, chief, such as it is."

"Well, I'm damned!" said Langmuir solemnly. And the others echoed him in varying tones: "I'm *damned*!"

Conacher was not yet done surprising them. As they turned to climb the bank, he said somewhat nervously: "I've got a couple of guests with me. . . ."

Loseis stepped into view above. In breeches and Stetson, smiling merrily, yet a little apprehensively, too, she made an enchanting figure. The rents in her clothes, the marks of hardship in her face, only set off the

bravery of her spirit. To those white men so long parted from the women of their race, it was like a miracle.

“Miss Blackburn, gentlemen,” Conacher sang out. “Mr. Langmuir; Mr. Jordan; Mr. Seely.”

They snatched off their hats. “Pleased to meet you,” they mumbled sheepishly.

“Merciful Heaven! am I awake or dreaming!” Langmuir murmured to himself.

CHAPTER XXV

CONCLUSION

THE meeting at the mouth of the Mud River was the beginning of a still longer journey for Loseis. But it was never again allowed to become an arduous one for her. All hands, white and red, joined together to smooth her way. She reigned the undisputed Princess of Langmuir's party, holding them in subjection with her smile.

After a laborious month ascending the Sinclair, plotting the river and collecting geological data and specimens, they came to a lonely trading outpost on the Pacific side of the mountains, called Pinnacle House. It stood amidst wild and beautiful surroundings in a deep green valley between parallel ranges. The pointed limestone peaks gave it its name. How strange it was to find such homely old friends as cabbages, onions and potatoes growing in the trader's garden!

The trader was away on his usual summer journey to bring in supplies; and they found his house occupied at the moment by the Reverend Patrick Geogehagen, a famous character of the country, better known as "Patsy." Patsy was a brawny, bright-eyed wrestler for the Lord, with cherry-colored cheeks, and a spreading black beard that saved him the trouble of wearing a necktie. It was his self-imposed duty to visit and minister to those tribes of Indians who were too poor, too disreputable or too far away to attract the attention of the regular missionaries.

When they hailed him he was cleaning his gun at the door of the single log shack that served both for store and dwelling at Pinnacle House, and there was nothing in his rough dress to indicate his calling. When he introduced himself, Conacher looked at Loseis with a quick, smiling question and Loseis answered it with a quick, smiling assent. Conacher whispered shamefacedly to Patsy, who thereupon gave him a frightful clap on the back, and roared:

"Delighted, my boy!"

Conacher took Langmuir aside. The chief wagged his head in perplexity; and scratched it, and grumbled:

“What the deuce, Conny! Such a thing was never heard of in a party engaged on field work! What will it look like in my report? Oh, Lord! think of the explanations I will be called on to make to all the old women in the Department!”

“Why should it appear in the report?” said Conacher. “It’s none of the Government’s business. Have I been any the worse worker during the past month?”

“No, no! you’ve worked like two! . . . Hm! that’s so. Why should it appear? . . . Go ahead, my boy; and God bless you! I bags to give the bride away.”

As a matter of fact, it *did not* appear. The report of Langmuir’s party is filed away with many others equally decorous, and nobody in the Government ever suspected that they entertained a Princess during the summer and celebrated a wedding.

There were no wedding garments in the outfit but a great shaving, shearing, washing and brushing-up took place. The fellows decorated the single room of the cabin with spruce branches and flowers from the mountain side. Loseis had to be married in breeches and boots because it was all she had. At least her clothes were neatly mended by this time. Her smile was the smile of a happy bride; and nobody was aware of any incongruity. Conacher looked as frightened as every well-disposed man is supposed to be at his wedding; and large fat tears rolled down the bridesmaid’s dark cheeks. Up to the moment of donning his vestments Patsy joked outrageously; he then became the priest of God. In a free and natural state of society these abrupt contrasts are perfectly well understood. Nobody thought the less of Patsy because he was a man as well as a priest.

Patsy and Mary-Lou conspired together to produce the wedding-feast; and the result, considering the meager resources of Pinnacle House, astonished everybody. They may have been short of the fixings, but they had five kinds of game and fish; and to polish off with, a gigantic roly-poly pudding stuffed with currant jam.

The speeches were no better nor worse than usual. Patsy said in part:

“Sure, friends, I shall look back on this as one of the happiest days of me life! This morning I was not aware that you people as much as existed; this afternoon you are established as the friends of me heart, and shall never be absent from me heart while it beats. Even parsons get discouraged sometimes, though none of ’em would ever admit it but a renegade like me.

This mornin' I was sittin' at the door of this house trying to make up my mind whether to visit the scrofulous Louchoux Indians to the northeast, or the flea-bitten Sikannis to the southeast, and feelin' ready to consign 'em both to perdition. Sure, in all the world there is not such another lousy, thieving, crack-brained, worthless congregation as me own, I was telling meself, when along you came with this lovely girl to remind me of the existence of beauty in the world, and this bold lad to refresh me with the sight of manliness! Would I marry them? says he, blushing. Would I marry them? I was ready to throw my cap in the air at such a chance! That is jam in the life of a forgotten missionary. I consider that in joining these two I have performed the best act of me life. The country ought to profit by it. Here's to the newly married pair! May they live long and obey the scriptural injunction!"

To which Conacher answered:

". . . Er . . . you fellows and the Reverend Patsy . . . I rise to say . . . er . . . that is, to thank you . . . I'm not much of a speaker . . ."

"No?" queried a sarcastic voice.

"That's all right, Jordan. You can laugh. I'll live to see you married yet. . . . Where was I? . . . I only wanted to say, only you interrupt me all the time . . . er . . . to thank you on behalf of Miss Blackburn . . ."

Uproarious laughter drowned him out.

"What's the matter with you all! . . . Oh, I see. I mean the lady beside me, m-m-m-my w-w-w-wife. The late Miss Blackburn . . ."

Renewed laughter.

"Oh, to hell with you!" said Conacher plumping down in his seat laughing. "If any man thinks he can make a better speech let's hear it!"

Next morning they resumed their work on the river. For two weeks longer they toiled up through or around the innumerable rapids, canyons, whirlpools, and waterfalls of the upper Sinclair, before they finally arrived at the little lake in which it took its source.

Here Langmuir gave Conacher leave to press on ahead while the party cleaned up its work for the season. So Conacher, Loseis and Mary-Lou crossed a famous pass and descending the mountain on the other side, plunged all at once into the civilization which Loseis had never seen. Everything in the busy little coast town was strange to her; the close ranks of shops and houses; locomotives; automobiles; electric light and water from a

tap. The Princess was too aristocratic in spirit to betray vulgar amazement; she merely looked and listened quietly. Not until she was alone with her husband did she reveal the wonder and astonishment of her childish heart. For the man it was a wonderful experience to introduce so fresh and ardent a soul to the great world.

There was a short voyage by sea; then the return eastward by railroad over the mountains to the city of Prince George.

In Prince George they had no difficulty in finding John Gruber, who when he was not running Blackburn's outfit into the country, or bringing out his furs, ran a stable in town, and bought and sold horses. They found him in his little office, a tall, strong man with a heavy, honest red face, and a bald red poll surrounded by a fringe of red hair. Gruber had not visited Blackburn's Post since Loseis was a child; and he did not immediately recognize her.

"I am Laurentia Blackburn," she said.

"What!" cried Gruber, staring. "Why . . . of course you are! . . . Well, I'm damned!"

"That's what everybody says!" said Loseis with a rueful smile.

"Where did you come from?" demanded Gruber.

Loseis started to tell her story, but Gruber instantly silenced her. "Wait! Wait!" he cried. "We must do everything regular and proper!" Snatching up his hat, he hustled them through the streets to a tall office building. Here after ascending in an elevator (a fresh marvel to Loseis) they burst unceremoniously into the private office of a little, round, white-haired old gentleman, startling him almost out of his wits.

"Here is Blackburn's daughter!" shouted Gruber.

"God bless my soul!" cried the old gentleman, agitatedly removing his glasses. "What proof have you of that?"

"I've got the proof of my own eyes!"

"Quietly! Quietly!" pleaded the old soul. "Sit down all. Let us proceed in due order if you please."

It turned out that this was Hector Blackburn's lawyer, David Chichester. In simple graphic sentences, Loseis told the two men her story, while they glanced at each other in astonishment, and murmured in indignation and sympathy.

When she had come to the end, Mr. Chichester said gravely: “We all felt that there was something that needed to be explained; but we had nothing to go on.”

“You have later news than mine,” said Loseis eagerly; “Mr. Gruber has been into the country and out again. What has happened?”

The two men looked at each other again. Gruber said: “Show her the newspaper, Mr. Chichester. That tells the whole story.”

From a drawer of his desk, Mr. Chichester produced a copy of the local newspaper now some weeks old, folded in such a manner as to bring into prominence the story that he desired them to read. They were instantly aware of the staring headlines:

ROMANTIC TRAGEDY OF THE NORTH

Young Couple End All for Love

Loseis and Conacher read with their heads close together:

“John Gruber, the well-known horse-dealer and traveler of Prince George, returned yesterday from his annual trip into northern Athabasca bringing news of a strange and poignant tragedy at Blackburn’s Post, a distant trading station in the unexplored portion of the province.

“For many years Mr. Gruber has acted as agent for Hector Blackburn, the last of the powerful free traders, who maintained an almost baronial state in the midst of his vast domain. Each year it has been Mr. Gruber’s custom to take in the year’s supplies for the Post. At a point about half way he would meet the outfit sent out by Hector Blackburn and exchange the store goods for the season’s catch of furs. This year Mr. Gruber waited in vain at the rendezvous. After several weeks had passed, a rumor reached him that Hector Blackburn had been killed by an accident early in June. He then pushed through the rest of the way to Blackburn’s Post.

“He found Mr. Andrew Gault of Fort Good Hope, one of the best-known fur traders in the country, in charge there. Mr. Gault was well-nigh prostrated by a terrible happening which had taken place only two or three days before Mr. Gruber’s arrival. Laurentia Blackburn, the late trader’s only child, had killed herself by leaping from a high cliff into the river, in company with her lover, a young man named Paul Conacher attached to the Geological Survey.

“It was on June third that Hector Blackburn was killed by a fall from his horse. His death left his daughter, a young girl, entirely alone and unprotected in that savage spot. There were no other white persons at Blackburn’s Post. Moreover it was surrounded by a tribe of ignorant Indians who began to get out of hand as soon as the firm control of Hector Blackburn was removed. Mr. Gault, hearing of these things, immediately rode to the girl’s assistance from his Post one hundred and fifty miles away.

“At first the girl evinced nothing but gratitude at his coming. She freely put all her affairs into Mr. Gault’s experienced hands, giving him a power of attorney to transact the necessary business. Mr. Gault sent out for Hector Blackburn’s attorney who is the well-known lawyer, Mr. David Chichester, of this city; but this letter unluckily was lost somewhere on the long journey.

“A few days later the young man, Conacher, turned up at Blackburn’s Post. He too had heard of Blackburn’s death, and was attracted by the rich prize offered in his only child and heiress. A handsome young man, of good address, his conquest of the inexperienced girl was all too easy. Conacher wished to get her business into his own hands, and so worked upon her mind with base insinuations that she turned against her best friend, Mr. Gault.

“Mr. Gault meanwhile, as was clearly his duty, was preparing to send out the season’s fur to Mr. Gruber. By every means in his power, Conacher sought to prevent this. He was finally guilty of the murder of an Indian named Etzooah, a messenger of Mr. Gault’s, under circumstances of peculiar atrocity. The Indian was garroted as he rode through the woods, by a line stretched across the trail by Conacher. It then became Mr. Gault’s duty to apprehend the young man and send him out to justice. But the infatuated girl sheltered him in her own house; and standing at the door with a gun, dared Mr. Gault to come and take him.

“Mr. Gault sent out for the police; and in the meantime contented himself with watching the house to prevent the murderer’s escape. His messenger, taking a different route, passed Mr. Gruber on the way in; and as a matter of fact the police arrived two days after Gruber. But everything was over then. On the third night Conacher and the girl escaped from the house, and obtaining possession of a dug-out, fled across the river. Closely pursued by Mr. Gault, they sought a refuge on top of a high cut-bank opposite the Post. When their pursuers closed in on them, seeing capture, disgrace and separation ahead, they joined hands and with a weird good-by ringing through the night, leaped over the edge of the gravelly cliff and were drowned in the river below. Though Mr. Gault searched for the bodies for many days, they were not found.

“The police conducted an investigation into the sad circumstances. As a result, Sergeant Ferrie in charge of the detail expressed himself as satisfied that Mr. Gault had done all that any man could do in such an inexpressibly distressing situation. Mr. Gault remains in charge of the Post until such time as the Courts may issue letters of administration. No heirs are known.”

Conacher and Loseis looked at each other in amazement.

“By Heaven! what an infernally clever story!” cried Conacher. “I am not surprised that even the police were taken in.”

“God brought us through all our dangers especially so that we could show this man up!” said Loseis.

“We must decide on a course of action,” said Mr. Chichester fussily.

“There can be but one course for my husband and me,” said Loseis quickly. “We will start back for our Post to-morrow.”

“Naturally,” said Conacher.

The other two looked a little flabbergasted at this instant decision.

“The season is growing late,” objected Gruber. “Light snows have already fallen. Ice will be running in the rivers by the time you get there.”

“But the trip *can* be made!” said Loseis.

“Oh, yes, it can be made.”

“Then we’ll make it.”

“One moment,” said Mr. Chichester dryly. “I suppose you know that you have other property beside the fur business.”

“Have I?” said Loseis.

He handed her a sort of statement from amongst his papers. Loseis looked at it, and shook her head.

“I don’t understand it,” she said, passing it to Conacher.

As he studied it, Conacher’s face paled. “Good God!” he muttered. “According to this you are worth over a million dollars. . . . Oh, after what they have said about me, this is terrible!”

“You’ll have to make the best of it!” said Mr. Chichester with a dry twinkle.

Loseis showed a face of quaint distress. “My dear Paul,” she murmured, “I’m so sorry! So sorry! I didn’t know anything about it. It wasn’t my fault,

was it!”

Gruber, who headed the party, breathed with relief when he led them through a pass in the hills down to the edge of the wide meadows surrounding Blackburn’s Lake. October had come in; and during their long ride across the prairie they had met with more than one snow-storm. Fortunately for them the snow had melted; had it remained lying on the prairie, or had they experienced one of the early blizzards that are not unknown at this season, their position would have been serious. Now, with the shelter of the timber at hand, they were safe.

The party was well outfitted of course; but even so, what with the snow, the hard frosts at night and the raw, biting winds by day, traveling had been intensely disagreeable. They carried a small tent for the two women. Gruber had three hot-heads in his company who could not brook the slightest delay. Besides Loseis and Conacher there was young Sergeant Ferrie of the Mounted Police who was no less eager than the other two to bring down retribution on the head of Andrew Gault. The policeman’s professional pride had been wounded. With three troopers he had joined the party at the Crossing. Mary-Lou was also of the party; and six Cree half-breeds from Miwasa Landing. They had upwards of twenty horses.

They slept for the last time on the same little point of high land running out into the meadows, where Conacher had been surprised by Etzooah four months before. The days were growing short now. About eleven o’clock next morning they were riding past the Slavi village on the opposite side of the river. The inhabitants lined up to watch them pass, in silent consternation. Even at the distance they could not have failed to recognize Loseis and the famous yellow head of Conacher.

“Some of them could jump in a canoe and get to the Post with the aid of the current before we could,” suggested Conacher.

“They have no love for Gault,” said Loseis. “There is no reason why they should warn them. The Slavis never look for trouble.”

“Even if he should be warned, he’s got nowhere to run except back to his own Post,” Gruber pointed out. “And there he’d only run into the arms of the other party of police who went down the big river.”

“Just the same,” said Sergeant Ferrie, frowning, “I’ve no intention of letting any other party take him. He belongs to me!”

They urged their weary horses on a little faster.

Suspecting that Gault might make a dash for freedom at the sight of them, Ferrie determined to send a party across country to head him off on the other trail. Two of the white troopers and two Crees were allotted to this duty. They turned off on the same ridge a mile from the Post that Gault had used. In order to give them time to reach their post, the rest of the party halted for their midday meal in the hollow beyond.

When they started out again, Ferrie took command. He wished Loseis and Mary-Lou to remain in that spot with a guard; but Loseis would not hear of it. Much to her disgust she was forced to bring up the rear of the train. As they came in sight of the Post the men's faces were grim. It had a deserted look. Gault had never succeeded in persuading the Slavis to return, and the grassy meadow below the buildings, yellow now, was empty. When they cantered up into the little square within the buildings, that was empty too: Women's House, store, warehouses, Blackburn's House; doors closed and chimneys cold. The bars of the corral were down.

The men paused to consult. Presently the sound of approaching hoofs was heard; and the four men sent across country rode into the square, driving before them four mounted Indians, who were immediately recognizable as belonging to Gault; one of them indeed was Watusk, whom Loseis and Conacher had good cause to remember. He was brought up to Sergeant Ferrie.

"Where is Gault?" demanded the policeman.

"We leave him here, half hour ago," answered Watusk sullenly. "He tell us to go home."

"Told you to go home!" said Ferrie, astonished.

"He know you are coming," Watusk went on impassively. "This man Hooliam," pointing to one of his companions, "was at the Slavi village to see a girl when you ride past. He jomp in a canoe and paddle fas' to tell Gault that Blackburn's daughter and Yellowhead are not dead. They are comin' back with four red-coats."

"What did Gault say to that?" Ferrie asked with a hard smile.

"He jus' smile," said Watusk. "He look on the groun' and tap his leg with his little whip. Bam-bye he say: 'All right, boys. Get your horses and ride home. I will wait here for them.' And we go."

"Then he's still here!" cried Ferrie.

Watusk pointed to Blackburn's house.

“Gault! Come out!” cried Ferrie in a strong voice.

There was no answer.

Ferrie tried the door of the house, and found it barred on the inside. He signified to his men that they were to fetch one of the heavy poles from the corral. Using it as a battering-ram, after two or three blows, the door burst in. Ferrie and Conacher entered the house together.

They found Gault sitting upright in the kitchen in one of Blackburn’s carved chairs. For one dreadful instant they thought that he was laughing at them; in the next they perceived that he was dead. His wide-open eyes were bereft of all sense; his lower jaw was hanging down in a dreadful, idiotic grimace. Yet he sat as straight in the high-backed chair as in life. It was only upon looking closer that they discovered that the man with a strange, last impulse of vanity had tied himself into the chair, that he might be discovered facing his enemies in an upright position. There was a band of canvas around his chest! and another around his forehead; the broad-brimmed Stetson was jammed rakishly down on his head over the band. He had then shot himself through the heart with a revolver, which had slipped from his hand to the floor.

The young men jerked their hats off; and their grim faces softened a little.

“Well, he’s paid,” said Conacher. “We can’t feel any more hard feelings against him!”

“It’s better so,” said Ferrie. “Nobody would want this ugly case advertised by a trial.”

Such was Andrew Gault’s requiem.

They returned outside the house, hat in hand, and all the others knew at a glance what they had found.

If Gault in his strange preparations for death had hoped to leave upon Loseis a last impression of his power, his aim was not realized. She betrayed no wish to look at him again. Loseis’ verdict was more merciful than the young men’s.

“So he is dead!” she murmured, clinging to Conacher’s arm. “He *would* kill himself, of course. . . . Poor fellow! He had never known love when he was young. When he was old love mocked him, and it drove him mad. . . . Ah! how lucky *we* are, my dearest dear!”

They returned to the house across the way where they had known such dreadful days and nights. But the spell of dread was lifted now. Their breasts were calm and free.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

There are two occasions where a word appears to be missing in the original printed book. These places have been marked with a comment.

[The end of *A Backwoods Princess* by Hulbert Footner]