THE DOCTOR OF LONESOME RIVER

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TO
CHARLES W. CRANE AND
JOSEPH DEWEY GRAY,
GOOD FRIENDS TO ME
AND TO THIS BOOK

THE DOCTOR OF LONESOME RIVER

Chapter I

The long Alaskan summer day was almost done. The snow peaks glowed strawberry red; against the graying sky the spruce trees on the ridge stood in silhouette—dark, mysterious, and beautiful with that strange, lonesome beauty of the Far North. Out of the deep forest, down the winding trail to the Indian village, a girl rode alone.

There was no one to see her, save the beady-eyed little people of lair and covert, so there was no one to wonder at her presence on this wild trail. Yet a casual visitor would have wondered greatly. She was not an Indian, for all the dusk of her hair and the tan of her cheeks; every drop of blood in her veins was of the conqueror race. Nor did she conform to the usual frontier type of young womanhood—buxom, large-handed, capable-looking, and plain. This girl was as far from plain as the bouquet of exotic bloom that she had gathered on the mountain meadows and now carried in her hand.

Her dark, proud little face was inordinately vivid in the forest shadows—long pointed eyes, black as jet, under severe, straight brows, white forehead, delicate nose, mobile red mouth, and tanned cheeks sloping swiftly to a firm, pointed chin. She looked small and slight in her big saddle, and her little body had an exquisite symmetry foreign to this rough scene.

It was inconceivable that she had lacked close contact with the finer things of civilization. Plainly she had spent a great part of her life in some wonderful school far from these solitudes. She was dressed simply, as her environment demanded, yet with an unconscious respect for her own type of beauty. Her nut-brown riding suit was smartly cut, her brown boots were trim, and the bright tie at the collar of her blouse and the equally red feather on her soft felt hat perfectly set off her vivid face.

Intelligence was here, alert and fine, and warm humor and gaiety—qualities that one might remember in a face glimpsed in a crowd, but hardly to be expected in a rider on this far, lost trail. Yet in spite of all this, she fitted into the picture. Her father, riding to meet her up the mountain side, could see deeper than most, and he knew that she was not an alien, but a true daughter of the forest, a wild flower of the North. In her face was something shy, rare, and mysterious—a beauty that did not belong to cities, but to growing things, snow, starlight, running water, and soft shadows. No doubt she had grown up in the green wood, close to the breast of earth. She had

lived with rain, mist, and wind; she had walked alone in the tree aisles under the moon.

No small part of the girl's grace and good looks came from the man coming to meet her from the village. In his youth he must have been handsome; even in sickness and old age he was still distinguished. His white head towered nearly a foot above hers, and advanced years had not bowed his lean form. His clean-shaven face was gray and heavily lined, but a splendid intelligence lighted it still.

He swayed in his saddle and kissed his daughter's cheek. "You're a joy to my eyes, Molly," he told her. "I was particularly worried about you today. I've been cursing myself for letting you go alone."

"Nonsense." Molly Foster's voice was deep and full-toned. "What were you afraid of? You knew I had my pistol."

"And I knew you could shoot it, too, if worse came to worst. Well, I suppose it was foolish, but I was afraid you'd meet some of that pack of ruffians on the pass, and they'd make trouble for you. Times have changed in Alaska, Molly. In the old days a girl could ride from Nome to Fairbanks without a moment's fear of anyone, but now the country's getting too civilized to be safe. Men who will go to the lengths these are going aren't to be trusted anywhere."

"They're probably not so bad as we think, really. Few people are, when you come down to it. There's only one really bad one—the man who is behind the whole thing, and sooner or later we'll find out who he is, and find a way to beat him. . . . But we've got to do it all ourselves."

Foster glanced up quickly. "You talked to the deputy marshal?"

"Yes, and he can't help us. He has an enormous territory to look over, and the best he can do is to keep some semblance of order in the gold camp, let alone in a remote reservation like ours. He is with us in spirit, but he says that you are the accredited Indian agent and must protect your own people."

"Did he explain what means I could use to enforce my authority?" the old man asked bitterly. "Molly, we'll keep on fighting, but the odds are increasing against us every day, and it looks as though my whole life's work will go to waste. I don't refer to the money I've made. That's for you and for Dick, if ever he comes to claim his share. You know what I mean—my life's dream of saving our people from extermination and keeping them from going to the dogs like all the rest of the Alaskan tribes."

“Surely we can protect them a few months longer. Then the new reservation will be ready, and the people will be safe.”

“Yes, but think what can happen in a few months! There was a white man in the village last night, with Bear Claw’s daughter—Bear Claw let him have her for a bottle of whisky. When the curse of the white man comes upon an Indian tribe, it sweeps through it like wildfire, and there is nothing under heaven that can save it. I’ve seen the same thing happen before.”

“Why should you care so much?” Molly smiled tenderly. “Well, I know why. You’ve given your life to them.”

“Yes, and I owe them a tremendous debt—don’t forget that. Molly, if it were an old cathedral, or a painting, or any other work of art that was in danger of being destroyed, thousands of big-hearted men all over the world would rush to its defense. But when it is a wonderful tribe of people that is going down to extinction and ruin—a work of God that can never be restored to this earth—nobody cares a hang! That is—nobody but you and Stephen and me, and a few officials in Washington, too busy or too far away to give us any help.”

Molly did not answer at once. She drew up her horse on an eminence, and looked down into the green river valley below. In the cool heart of the valley, at the three forks of Lonesome River, an Indian encampment lay half hidden in the spruce trees.

Smoke curled up from many fires, and a blue haze lay over the thickets; otherwise she might have thought that this was a village of the dead. There was no sound, only the peace and beauty of the wild.

“There is home,” she said quietly.

A look of great content came into Foster’s gray, worn face. “Yes, it’s home.”

As the flare of the afterglow died on the peaks, the riders forded the river and rode into the village. At once they were surrounded by a pack of yelling malemiuts, gray narrow-eyed beasts, savage as wolves. Hearing the uproar, the entire population of the village came running out of their log wickiups. What was before an enchanted woodland scene was now a pandemonium of barking dogs, yelling men, cracking whips, and shrieking children.

When peace was restored and the dogs were silenced, many of the Indians came up to greet the riders. Beholding them, Molly could well understand her father’s zeal in their defense. There were few such Indians

left in the whole world. Perhaps in the jungles of the Amazon there was a lost tribe to compare with them, but nowhere in the white man's kingdom.

They hardly seemed the same race as the dull-eyed cannery hands of southern Alaska. The men were proud-looking, with nobly aquiline faces; each brave was over six feet in height, straight as an arrow, lean as a wolf. Their skins were not the unwholesome yellow of the inbred salmon-eaters, but a golden bronze pleasant to see. If they were subject to the white man, they did not acknowledge him publicly. Scorning to imitate his ways, they wore their hair in black braids, in the old Indian custom, and their richly beaded and fringed mooseskin clothes were of native pattern.

The squaws, waiting behind their men, were strong, fine-looking women, in no way comparable to the ungainly basket-sellers on Skagway's wharves. The young girls were striking—their blue-black hair braided and worn in front of their shoulders, their eyes dusky and sparkling under heavy, black brows.

It was a remarkable fact that there was not a single half-breed among them, and that not one of them wore the brand of the white man's plagues. Although most all of the interior Alaskan tribes were originally of high caste, these Lonesome River people seemed to be the equal of the old Senecas, whose tribal fires once lighted the eastern skies. They greeted their white father with a dignity in keeping with their ancient sovereignty of the forest, their immemorial mastery of woodland trails.

This was the last lost village of what was once a considerable Alaskan nation. The rest had gone the way of all flesh, the same as the coast tribes—bred yellow, or more mercifully slain by the white man's whisky, disease, and lust. Because of the faith and courage, and the tireless vigil of one white idealist, this single branch of the tribe still kept its pristine glory.

Foster and Molly turned out their horses and walked arm in arm to their house. Judged from the exterior, this was no more than a large log cabin two stories in height; but once they had passed the threshold, they found a comfort and refinement rare in these wilds. The walls were paneled with the beautifully grained wood of the jack-pine, rubbed down by hand and polished. There were big chairs and divans upholstered in tawny buckskin, hand-made tables on which stood native pottery and flower boxes, and luxurious rugs of bear and wolf.

Foster had made use of the resources of the country. He had not only piped in running water from a spring up the hill, but had installed a small dynamo under the falls to furnish electric light.

Exiled in the wilderness, the Fosters still lived well. Both of them went to their rooms before dinner, Foster to put on a comfortable tweed suit in place of his khaki riding clothes, Molly to don a simple dress. This was their nightly program, an obligation they owed to the civilization they had known and to which Molly, at least, would eventually return. After a good meal they lounged in easy chairs before the hearth.

Molly could not get her mind off her father's problems, even to consider her own.

"Stephen seems to be absolutely loyal to you," she said at last.

"Of course, he is." Foster's eyes glowed. "It was a lucky day for me when I got him to give up his trap line and start a trading post here. What could we have done without him?"

"Well, he has encouraged you, anyway, even if he hasn't accomplished anything definite. I suppose it isn't his fault that matters have grown steadily worse instead of better."

"It's my fault, not his. I don't seem able to do my part, these last weeks, but if we had one more like Stephen, it wouldn't matter. Molly, if your brother could only come here—if his mother would only let him come—he and Stephen together could fight the thing through to victory." He looked fondly at his daughter. "By the way, the boy missed you dreadfully today. He has been wandering around like a lost dog."

Molly stirred uneasily in her chair. "I don't think he actually neglected his business on my account. I can't imagine Stephen doing that."

"He's a good trader. A little too keen, perhaps, but true-hearted and fine. By the way, he's coming to see you tonight."

Foster's eyes were dim, and he did not see the dismay in Molly's face.

"Oh, I can't see him tonight."

"Why not?" Foster chuckled. "I never saw you look prettier."

"But I'm so tired. I don't want to talk to anyone but you."

"I must go and look over the mail you brought. There doesn't seem to be much in it—some government documents about the new reservation, and a letter from Seattle that I haven't had time to open. Stephen won't mind if you're tired, Molly. You know; each other so well—and I hope that before he leaves tonight, you'll know each other even better."

Molly was still a long time. "Is he going to ask me tonight?"

“He told me so. And, Molly, it would be the greatest happiness of my life if you accept him. Even if you went back to the States, where there might be scores of young men for you to choose from, you’d never find a man more worthy of you than Stephen. He is a frontiersman, of course, lacking some of the finish of the city men, but he’s true blue, and I know he can make you happy. Moreover, he is the one man who can help me carry on my work here. No other would take the interest in it that he does.”

Molly’s little hands clenched tight. “I don’t have to decide tonight, do I?”

“I wish you would. I want Stephen for my son—to make up for my lost Dick—and if you married him, he would really be my son. Besides, Molly dear, I want to see you settled. We have been wonderfully happy together—all in all to each other—but this relationship can’t last always. My health isn’t what it once was, and I’m getting to the age where I can’t count much on the future. If you were Stephen’s wife, I should know that you were in safe hands and would have all the happiness you deserve. Don’t tell him no, anyway, dear girl. If you can’t say yes tonight, at least give him some encouragement.”

Foster left the room. Molly sat a long time looking into the fire. Her long, pointed eyes were markedly bright, her exotic face noticeably pale, when at last she rose to let Stephen in.

The big man in the doorway drew her to him with arms like iron; for a fleeting instant she gave him her lips. But she could not go through with the kiss. When his lips touched hers, she turned away with suddenly flaming cheeks.

“Well, I’m glad you’ve warmed up a little, anyway,” Stephen said.

He had a deep, hearty voice, good to hear; and when he came into the lighted room he proved to be good to look at, too. Stephen Hathaway was decidedly handsome in a rugged way. He had curly, brown, boyish-looking hair, large, regular features, and a winning smile. Oddly enough, this smile never seemed to change the expression of his eyes. Steely gray, steely bright, penetrating, and of odd three-cornered shape, they seemed to index a strong soul which no mirth could move. Molly was a high-spirited and courageous girl, yet her own eyes always fell before his. Somehow they dismayed her, for no reason that she could name.

It was characteristic of Stephen that he should come straight to the business in hand. “Let’s don’t waste any more time, Molly,” he said

masterfully. “You know how I love you, and I believe that down in your heart you’re fond of me, too. So let’s be together—always.”

Molly gazed into the fire a long time. Sitting close to Stephen, she was conscious of his superb physical strength and the vital currents of his body; his strong will seemed to reach out to hers and envelop it. But she rallied at last and shook her head.

“I can’t promise now, Stephen.”

The man flushed darkly. “Maybe you think I’m not worthy of you, and you want to marry one of those fellows you met in school.”

“No. I don’t want to marry anyone now. I’m not in love with anyone.”

Stephen knew this was true, as far as possible rivals were concerned. “But you’d be happy, Molly,” he urged. “I know I can make you happy. And with you to help me, I can go on and make you proud of me. I can do big things up here in this new country. And your father approves of me. It would be the biggest thing in his life if you would promise me.”

“I know how father feels about it, and I’d do almost anything in the world to please him. But you must wait awhile, Stephen.”

“But you’ll promise that sometime—”

“I can’t promise anything tonight.” She tried to look into his eyes, but her glance wavered and fell. “In the future, perhaps, but not now.”

Before he could protest, an inner door opened, and Molly’s father burst into the room, carrying an opened letter in his hand.

“*Molly, Molly*,” he was crying, evidently shaken with emotion. “You can’t believe what has happened—”

The girl sprang up in alarm, but when she saw the old man’s flushed face and gleaming eyes, she knew that the news was not wholly ill. When her eyes met his, he seemed ashamed of his outburst and tried to steady himself. Yet his hand trembled so that the letter fell and fluttered to the floor.

“I just got a letter from Dick,” he told her rapidly. “I didn’t think it was from him, because it was postmarked Seattle instead of Ashland, so I didn’t open it right away. Some of the news in it is bad, yet I’ve been expecting it a long time, and—considering the circumstances—you won’t blame me if I don’t take it so hard as I would have twenty years ago.”

Molly’s eyes opened. “Mother is dead?”

The old man bowed his head. “Yes . . . and she held out against me to the last.”

No, Molly would not blame him for his failure to grieve. The disruption of Foster’s marriage had occurred nearly twenty years before, and time had healed the wound. Although he had had two children by the woman—Molly, whom he had kept beside him, his companion and delight, ever since the parting; and his son Dick, whom his wife had kept—he had come to think of her almost as a stranger. Neither would Molly herself feel more than a passing shock. Her mother had poured out all her love on her older child, Dick; and Molly had few tender memories to sharpen her sense of loss.

“That isn’t all that is in the letter,” Molly said.

“No. Not nearly all. There’s some glorious news to help make up for the bad. You can’t guess what it is.”

“Dick is coming up here?”

“Yes, if we want him. That’s what he writes in the letter—that he always wanted to come, and now he is free. Molly, don’t you see what it means? My lost boy is coming back to me.”

Molly’s eyes filled slowly with tears. Her memories of Dick were among the sweetest of her life. As a little girl of five she adored her big brother, ten and almost a man—that adoration had never wholly faded from her heart.

“Is he on the way now?” she managed to ask at last.

“No, but he’ll start as soon as he hears from me. He says he’ll swab decks on the ship to get here. He hasn’t any idea that I can afford to send him all the money he needs—his mother kept the truth from him, to prevent his trying to come before—but he *will* know it when he sees the big check I’m going to write tonight.”

“I’ll write him a letter, too. Dad, it’s too good to be true.”

“But it is true. Read the letter yourself. And now, Molly, we can whip those rascals who are trying to ruin our people. Dick is a fighter—I know he is—and with him to help us, we’re bound to win. There will be four of us now.”

Molly smiled wistfully through her tears. “And maybe he’ll help me, too,” she whispered to some confidant within her own soul.

Chapter II

It was a pay-ward case in a small Seattle hospital, and Dr. Richard Grant, assistant house-surgeon, was in attendance. While the nurses were getting his patient ready, he stood sulking at the end of the room, bored, lonely, and with a dim, bitter smile on his strong, youthful face. But he was always this way at the beginning of an operation. The internes and students knew him of old and waited confidently for a surgical show worth seeing. When the scalpel was actually in his hand, his curled lips would straighten to a hard line, his somber eyes light up, and the sweat of intense concentration bead his temples.

Grant was young, unfamed, and underpaid, yet the most polished surgeons in the city liked to see him operate. Today old Dr. Hollingsworth, dean of the college, had come in to watch his steady, facile hands. With the visiting undergraduates he was almost a hero, perhaps because of the cold passion of his knife, but more likely because of personal traits and beliefs especially appealing to modern youth. As a boy of eighteen he had been through the hell-fire of the Argonne. His boyhood chum had died in his arms there, and he himself had come out with a contempt for life second only to his contempt for death. What older men held sacred he turned to jest. And his deep-seated cynicism, not a pose but a firmly fixed habit of mind, seemed at the outset to add to, rather than detract from, his brilliance as a surgeon. It made him bold—inclement—calloused, perhaps; while other doctors vacillated, he cut deep.

It was true that he seemed to take no personal interest in his patients. Today he did not know the name of the unkempt man on the table: he had searched his face only for symptoms of his condition, and tomorrow would not recognize him if he met him on the street. . . . But he would not meet him on the street. Unless Grant's calm, sure judgment was utterly at fault, the man would leave the city tonight by a one-way thoroughfare on which there was no return.

The man had applied for treatment less than two hours before. To the admittance clerk he had given his name as William Johnson, and his address a cheap lodging house in the city. In a waterfront gambling brawl he had received a knife wound in the side; fearing trouble with the police, he had neglected the cut, and general septicemia of an extreme form had developed. Dr. Grant would now open the well of poison as a matter of course and see

what could be done to the septic organs, but he doubted gravely whether the man would live to get off the table. If he did so live, the shock of the operation, added to the widespread poison from the wound, was certain to carry him off.

Drama moved in that still, white temple of science just before the operation. As the anesthetist was fitting the mask over the patient's face, with cold mercy putting him beyond the reach of pain, the man turned his head, got his mouth free, and spoke quietly in the hushed room.

"Dr. Grant?"

"Yes?" The young surgeon spoke tersely but not unkindly.

"Don't let me die! You see—there's something I've got to do. I just can't die until I've gone up there and helped 'em all I can—" The mask stopped his lips.

"I'll do everything possible," Grant answered.

This was true: he would do everything possible that his science decreed and his light revealed. He had spoken without feeling, yet crisply and with certainty. But old Dr. Hollingsworth, watching from under his grizzled brows, shifted uneasily. For a moment he wished that he could take the scalpel from Dr. Grant's hand and perform the operation himself. He had never been so brilliant as Grant, his hand was never so sure, and yet—and yet—But this was folly: the case was Grant's, not his, and besides it was lost to start with. William Johnson was doomed as surely as if he stood on the gallows, the noose about his neck.

Grant launched into the operation. The first scalpel he picked up, dull from an attendant's neglect, failed to go home at the first gentle stroke and he hurled it across the room with an oath. Thereafter there was no sound save his occasional terse command to his assistant. Old Dr. Hollingsworth, his doubts allayed, and glowing with pride at his former pupil, watched with gleaming eyes.

Meanwhile, Grant had lost himself in his work. For him the warm earth had passed into nothingness, and naught remained but a strange gray world of science, heartless and devitalized. His hand moved; the work progressed. If he made a false motion, Dr. Hollingsworth could not catch it. The presence of the old dean neither inspired nor flurried him; he had forgotten it.

The knife wound in Johnson's side had cut through the outer walls of a large artery. Infection had weakened the inner wall, and when Grant's

incision removed pressure against it, the artery burst in a scarlet fountain. It was the kind of crisis that sometimes shows up a doctor, but Richard Grant did not turn a hair. With a few deft motions he checked the stream of death and calmly went on with his surgery.

"By God, he's got it!" one of the internes whispered in Hollingsworth's ear.

"Got what?"

"The cold gray nerve. You'd think he was performing an autopsy instead of operating on a living man. I believe I can hear his damned brain humming like a dynamo."

"It's beautiful surgery," Hollingsworth replied at last. "It's the most perfect technique I've ever seen. But that's all it is—technique. . . . Yes, and the cold gray nerve that will make him one of the great surgeons of the world, if he'll let it."

In amazing short order the work was finished. Still breathing, the patient was returned to his bed in the pay ward. Washed and dressed, Grant stepped into the corridor to find Dr. Hollingsworth waiting for him. The old man was beaming; Grant's face wore its usual cynical though not unpleasant smile.

"I suppose you're going to lecture me," Grant began easily.

"No, I'm going to praise you with a little mild advice thrown in," the surgeon answered. "That was fine work today. Your technique is as good as any man's in this city, regardless of the short time you have been out of school. There's no reason why you should remain any longer as the house-surgeon here. Why don't you go into private practice?"

Grant looked the older man straight in the eyes.

"Do you advise me to?"

Oddly enough, Hollingsworth seemed disconcerted by this direct question. "Well, it seems a pity that a surgeon of your ability should have to be restricted to free patients on a salary of a hundred and fifty dollars a month."

"Could I do any better in private practice?" Grant spoke with a restrained bitterness that astonished Hollingsworth. "You know I can't, at least for many years. To get patients, you must be able at least to pretend an interest in their disorders, and also in their private lives. Well, I just can't put it over on them. They bore me to death, and they know it. If I should get any cases at all, they would be simple ones from poor people—no money and no

interest either. Here I am sure of tobacco money and occasionally an interesting case."

Hollingsworth stood a long time in deep thought. "You say you cannot pretend an interest you do not feel. I don't think I could, either—that is, *pretend* it. But couldn't you acquire a *real* interest? Couldn't you get in a state of mind whereby any sickness is interesting to you—not as a scientific problem, perhaps, but as something to fight, so that the person who has it can get well?"

"No. I'm sorry for them, but it seems entirely unimportant whether they get well or not."

"You don't mean that. If you do, it's sad. To one who doesn't care about people—and helping them—and serving them—of course, medicine is the worst drudgery on earth—the most unpleasant drudgery, messing about in people's insides. Scientific interest isn't reward enough, and no amount of money, either. The only possible reward is—"

"You are going to say 'service.' Well, I wish I could believe it. I'd like to take old Hippocrates at his word, but I can't make a go of it. Any desire I might have had to serve my fellow men was knocked out of me when I saw what they did one day in the fall of 1918. I wish I hadn't lost my illusions, but I have, and the only person I'm now interested in serving is myself."

Hollingsworth looked at him solemnly. "If you feel this way, you should not have gone into medicine."

"You don't have to tell me that. No matter what physical and mental equipment I may have, it was the worst possible mistake." He laughed a little, grimly though not without humor. "I should have trained my somewhat sensitive hands to open safes."

"Physical and mental equipment," Hollingsworth echoed quietly. "All that is lacking is spiritual equipment and sometimes that comes to a man. Well, Dick, I can't seem to help the situation. Every doctor has to go through a long period of starvation, but he finds plenty of other rewards. Do you know what the word 'profession' really means? It means something professed—something lived for. The making of money is, of course, secondary."

"Not in my case. I wish I had enough money to retire right now. But I never will have, worse luck."

"You never will have as long as you regard your patients as guinea-pigs instead of people, and you'll never have any of the other rewards that I've

found so good."

Hollingsworth shook off his sober mood, smiled, and shook Grant's hand.

"Forget I gave you this advice, my boy. You're an old pupil of mine, or I shouldn't have ventured to do so. And your surgery today was beautiful."

Richard Grant's cynical grin gave way to a frank, friendly smile. Patting the old doctor on the back, he left to look at his patient.

In his bed in the pay ward the man known as William Johnson was fighting his way back to consciousness. With what seemed to be a deliberate effort of will he drove the fumes of ether from his brain. And this was only the beginning of a fight that lasted thirty-six hours, consciousness against deep coma, the healing forces of a stalwart body against the ravages of disease, finally life itself against uncompromising death.

It was as brave a fight as Dick Grant had ever seen, in war or peace, and it touched him as he had not been touched in years. Yet it could not win. Every doctor in the hospital knew this fact. Only Johnson himself denied the certain truth. He still talked of some vague undertaking which he must complete, of something he must do before he was free to die.

"Why, I *can't* die," he said over and over again. "They've sent for me, and I've got to go. I've never done anything for 'em yet, and now is my chance. Aren't they my own folks?"

On the second night after the operation he appeared a little better. In his eyes was a faint luster; he seemed happier, and his talk was more coherent. When his special nurse saw the change, she made it an excuse to ask for leave. If she knew anything, she knew it was only a false rally at best and possibly the calm before the final storm, but she was tired from the long siege, and her young spirit was darkened by the strange shadows hovering in this sick room.

Dr. Grant had no work on hand, so he agreed to stay at Johnson's bedside until her return.

"I know how it is," he told the girl. "You are interested in life, not death. There's nothing you can do anyway, except keep him company."

There were no other patients in the pay ward, so it happened that for three hours after midnight the doctor and the dying man were alone together. Johnson slept quietly for a time, then wakened with what seemed a

surprising burst of strength. Suddenly his voice came clear and level in the hushed room.

"It won't hurt me to try to talk?"

"Not if you feel like it," Grant answered, and this was true: there was little in this world that could hurt William Johnson.

"Well, I feel like talking. And I think I'd better talk some, too, before it's too late." He paused.

Grant asked, "What do you mean—too late?"

"I've got a feeling that I'm not going to pull through. There's something got hold of me good and tight, and I can't get loose. And that means that all I've planned on goes by the board, and sis and dad will wait by the landing, and I won't ever come."

The fact that Johnson could talk so clearly and coherently did not surprise the doctor. He knew that men dying of septicemia often talk well with their last breath. But he was deeply interested in the man's premonition of his own approaching end. This was something he could not explain by any science that he knew.

"Do you feel any worse?"

"No, if anything I feel better, as far as the pain goes. . . . The fact is, I can't feel any pain at all. . . . And maybe that's what scares me so—it's as if my body had quit fighting. Oh, doc, don't let me die if there's any chance to save me! I don't care on my own account—I've made a mess of things from the first—but at last I've got a chance to be of some little use to somebody."

Even now, Dick Grant felt little interest in the drama of this man's life. So often he had listened to the trivial confidences of his patients! Yet out of simple pity for the dying man he encouraged him to talk.

"We'll pull you through if it's possible," he said. "Of course, there's always a chance of failure—you know that—and it's best to be prepared. Is there anything you want done in case you don't get well?"

"There's plenty I want done, but it's not the kind of job I can put off on somebody else. The most you can do for me is give me a decent burial and write a letter to the folks explaining why I can't come. I suppose my ticket will pay for my burial, won't it?"

"Don't worry about that," Dick spoke gently. "We'll take care of you. What ticket do you mean?"

"My steamship and river-boat ticket to Central Alaska. It cost three hundred dollars, and it's about all I have left of a thousand dad sent me."

He paused, as though determining whether or not to take Dick into his confidence.

"Doctor, you come from southern Oregon, don't you?"

"Yes. From Medford."

"The nurse told me so. Well, I come from southern Oregon too, from Ashland, only twelve miles from your home. I've been in Medford a hundred times and worked there in the post-office. So I guess you're the fellow I'll have to call on to clear up my few affairs."

"I know Ashland well. Many a time I've picnicked in the big park there. I'll be glad to do anything I can for you."

"Well, I'll tell you first of all that William Johnson isn't my real name. I took a false name because I was afraid it would get into the papers—the gambling row I was in, and so on—and I didn't want my folks to hear about it. My first name's the same as yours—Dick. My second name is Foster."

Dr. Grant nodded, in no way surprised. Frequently ward patients register under an assumed name, if for no reason other than pride.

"All right, Dick." And beholding the little, cold sweat drops, ominous signs on the patient's forehead, Grant tried to hasten the story. "Now tell me all you want me to do."

"It seems kind of cheap, asking you, especially since I can't even pay your bill," Foster went on sadly. "I had almost six hundred dollars in my pocket, besides the ticket, when I walked into that blackjack game a week ago last night, part of the thousand dad sent me, but now I have barely enough to pay for this bed."

This was the second time he had mentioned the thousand dollars. As an illusion it seemed firmly fixed in his consciousness, or else it was a childish falsehood to win the doctor's respect. Never for an instant did Grant think it might really be so. In spite of his good features and decent speech, Foster did not look like a rich man's son. Often the ward patients told such tales, especially when delirious with fever. Yet not a flick of an eyelash revealed Grant's disbelief.

Foster was silent a long time. A profound sadness stole into his pinched white face. To cheer him, and perhaps through a vague, growing interest in his affairs, Grant continued to question him.

"Where does your father live?"

"He lives in the woods, in Alaska. The place is called Lonesome River, and it isn't far from Moose Landing, where the gold camp is."

"Your father made his money out of gold?"

"No, out of fur. I don't know how—you see, I haven't seen dad since I was ten years old. My father and mother separated when I was ten—she kept me, and father took my sister, who was five. They just reversed the usual course, but I s'pose each had a favorite. That was twenty years ago. Well, mother would never let me go see him, or hardly write to him, as far as she could help herself. It wasn't till I was a man grown that I began to write to sis, and just this year, since mother's death, have I been free to go." He told all this brokenly, with many pauses.

"I wish you *could* go." The words slipped out of Grant's mouth almost unawares.

The wish seemed to touch Foster deeply, because his drawn, pale face lighted up. "They wouldn't even know me. I'd have to tell 'em who I am. But dad hasn't forgotten his little boy, and sis hasn't forgotten her big brother, who was so proud of her, and you bet I haven't forgotten them, either. *I've got to go to them!* They want me and need me. Doctor, I just *can't* die."

But even as he spoke this last frantic denial of his fate, he started visibly, and a look of unutterable awe came into his eyes. That he had received some inner warning not explained in any book of medicine, Dick Grant could not doubt. Perhaps he felt his heart pause in his breast. Possibly he had seen something never to be revealed by living lips. He lay still a moment. Grant leaned nearer and looked down into his face.

"Foster?" he called.

"Yes."

"Is there anything else you want to tell me? I don't think there's much—more—time."

"It's mighty kind of you. . . . Look through my papers and do what's necessary. They're all in the pocket of my suitcase. Turn in my ticket and give me a decent burial. . . . Tell the folks how sorry—I—am—that—I—couldn't—come."

Grant shook off the spell of the voice and remembered that he was a doctor. There were a few forms which he must go through, part of the theory

and practice of medicine, before Foster could be permitted to pass. These he did efficiently and mechanically. He noted first an abrupt rise in the patient's temperature. This in itself was sufficient evidence of the approaching end. Foster's pupils were dilated, and his temples damp with cold sweat. Grant now took his blood-pressure, to find it down to sixty.

The fight was over. Foster was beyond medical aid. Nothing remained now but the administration of a powerful stimulant, part of the routine of emergency treatment, and in this case absolutely an empty form. For a long minute Grant held out against this. In his soul he cursed all medical science, from Hippocrates to Mayo. Why should he trouble further that still gray form on the white bed? But there might be questions asked, and anyway Foster himself would never know.

When the drug took hold, Foster's eyelids fluttered. His lips curled a dim smile as he recognized the kind-faced man bending over him.

"I'm going, doc," he whispered.

"Good-by, old chap." There was no trace now of cynicism on Dick Grant's face.

"I wish—I could have lived—and gone up there—to Alaska. They're in trouble and need help, and now there's no one to give it to 'em."

Grant's lips moved, but he did not speak aloud the futile words that formed there. "I wish I could go in your place, Dick Foster." He meant it with all his heart.

"Now it's too late. . . . I can't see the way. . . . It's getting dark."

Grant glanced toward the electric light. To him, too, it seemed that shadows were lowering. But it was only a trick of fancy. He bent to hear Dick Foster's last words.

"Good-by, little sister Molly. . . . Good-by, dad. . . . Good-by, Dick."

That he should have called the doctor by his first name was probably no more than the vagary of a dying brain. Yet Dick Grant was profoundly startled. Somehow it seemed deeply significant; as though in this last hour there had sprung into being between himself and this stranger from the streets a relationship more intimate than that of warm friends. "Dying men speak truth"—there was something more than superstition in this old saying. Suddenly he knew, beyond reason or thought, that this man's death would change the current of his own life.

Chapter III

Dr. Grant was used to seeing death. Ordinarily it left him unscathed. Yet when he started for the door with the intention of notifying the hospital superintendent that Foster's case was closed, his brain reeled, and his knees almost buckled under him. He had been under a greater strain than he had realized.

Grinning with contempt at his own weakness and folly, he sat down in one of the visitors' chairs to rest. It was at this moment that his eye fell on Foster's suitcase just within the open closet door.

He had promised Foster to look over his papers. True, this was against hospital rules, save in the presence of witnesses, but it was Foster's own wish. He had put his affairs unreservedly in Grant's hands, and it might be that he did not wish them made public. . . . And Dick Grant was in no mood for hospital rules tonight. He got up, took the dead man's papers, and sat down with them under the light.

The first document he picked up was the ticket which Foster had bought at a Seattle agency. It routed him via Skagway and the White Pass Railway to Whitehorse, thence by river steamer and gas boat to Moose Landing, a new gold camp on one of the tributaries of upper Yukon River. Rather to Grant's surprise, it was a first-class ticket costing three hundred dollars. At least part of Foster's story was proved true.

With the ticket were two letters. Grant hesitated a single moment, then took them from their envelopes. The first of the two was written in a small, free feminine hand. It read:

Lonesome River, Alaska,
July first, 1929.

Dearest Dick,

Dad and I can't really believe that you are really coming. As much as it means to him, I think it means even more to me. I've never forgotten you, big brother, and I can't wait to see the man that the little boy I loved so has grown to be.

I'm glad you haven't sent a photograph. I am having so much fun imagining how you will look.

Your letter brought new hope to both father and me. He does not know it, but I need you, too, perhaps more than he does. You will help me decide the hardest problem that has ever faced me. Believe me, Dick, I need you.

Your little sister,

MOLLY.

Grant waited a considerable time before he read the second letter. For no accountable reason his hand was trembling. Yet how could this drama of human lives into which he had stumbled involve himself? As yet he was no more than a spectator.

The second letter was written in the infirm hand of an elderly man:

Lonesome River, Alaska,
July first, 1929.

DEAR SON DICK,

The wonderful news has just reached us. Perhaps Molly can tell you how glad we are; your old dad can't find words.

We know now that everything will be all right. The danger threatening us here—danger not only to the great work I am trying to do, but physical danger to both Molly and me—will disappear when you are lined up on our side. The three of us couldn't quite master it alone. Molly has done her best, and so has Stephen, the young man I got here as trader, but my health isn't what it used to be, and I haven't been able to hold up my end. With one more to help us, our cause will win.

Molly and I laughed when we read how you would swab decks on the ship to get here, but at the same time we were deeply touched and gratified that you would care so much about us. I know now that you must have grown up to be just the kind of man I had hoped you would be, and for this I thank your mother in spite of everything. But she did wrong in making you think that such a course would be necessary. I have plenty of money. You'd be surprised to know that I have accumulated more than a quarter of a million in ready assets. Half of it is yours any time you want it —Molly gets the other half. Moreover there will be no strings on it—if you want to leave Alaska, after you have helped me with my present difficulties, I won't ask you to stay on with us up here.

I am sending you a thousand dollars for your ticket and anything else you want. I want you to be happy, Dicky Boy, after all these years. And we'll count the days until you come.

I wonder if I will know you on the landing. I'm afraid not. But when you see an old man with white hair standing with open arms beside the gangplank, you will know it is your loving

DAD.

So Dick Foster's story was true! He was the son of a rich man, a bountiful man. Had he lived, he would have received more than a hundred thousand dollars.

Long after Dick Grant had finished reading the letter, he continued to hold it before his eyes. The words blurred and ran together as he focused on some vision far off. *More than a hundred thousand dollars!* Suddenly a voice unfamiliar as a stranger's spoke from his lips,

"*Why not?*"

A thrill of intense excitement raced up his spine and made the short hairs at the base of his scalp prickle and creep. His black eyes lighted up under his heavy brows; his clenching hand crushed the letter into a white ball. Coldly and deliberately he answered the question his own lips had asked,

"Yes, why not!"

He sprang up from his chair and, creeping to Foster's bedside, stared down with a startled, almost terrified expression. He did not know why: even in calmer hours he would never be able to explain this unconscious act. It was as though he feared that the silent dead had guessed his thought and would rise to rebuke him. As if to spare the poor, lightless eyes the sight of what he was about to do, he drew the sheet over the still, dead face.

He glanced at the door. At any moment the nurse might return. Without an instant's hesitation Grant began to search Foster's belongings for papers that might reveal his identity. He went through his suitcase, the pockets of his suit, and his purse, but found nothing. He thrust into his own pocket the three documents he had already found and, covering up all signs of his search, seated himself calmly in the bedside chair.

His mind now was wonderfully clear. With the same mental energy that he put into a surgical problem, he began to take stock of the situation. "I wonder if I will know you on the landing. I'm afraid not!" These words, remembered verbatim from an old man's letter, were the crux of the whole

matter. Dick Foster had never sent his photograph to his father and sister. They had not seen him since he was ten years old; they would not recognize him or expect him to recognize them.

Why not? Grant scrutinized the question more coldly now, but the answer was the same. No one but himself knew that Dick Foster was dead. He had given his name as William Johnson; as such, he would be written off the hospital rolls. No one would inquire closely into the affairs of a pay-ward patient dead of blood poison: he would be simply and decently buried, and that would be the end of him.

The more Grant studied the situation, the more it offered. He was practically the same age as the dead man, at the most two or three years older. He had the same coloring—dark hair and eyebrows, and fair complexion—and the same athletic build. Thus he could fulfil any general description which the older Foster might have had of his son. The two did not resemble each other closely, but any family characteristics lacking in Grant's face an old man's imagination could supply.

Many difficulties he could foresee, but practically all of them he knew how to solve. Behind the curtain of the Unknown there might lie a trap Dick could not avoid—some little accident which no human mind could foresee—but this was the luck of the game. He must protect himself in every conceivable way; plan a way out in case of failure, and play his cards boldly. The rest lay with the gods.

Could he throw away this chance? With one coup he could achieve his life's ambition—live in Europe and indulge his whims. No more medical drudgery. No more ward patients with their commonplace ills. No more delving into the bodies of ungrateful people. No skimping and saving to achieve dull, middle-aged prosperity.

No one would actually suffer. Dick Foster, the real victim, was beyond the sting of mean, earthly frauds. The stone over his grave would bear a false name, but if he were aware of it in the Great Perhaps, he would not care. Moreover, Grant would try to square Dick Foster. In impersonating him, naturally he must try to live up to him. He must carry out Foster's ideas and fulfil his aims. Perhaps he wanted to do so anyway—Foster's story had touched him more than he could account for. At this thought a faint, ironical smile, though not unkindly, touched Grant's lips.

Suddenly he spoke aloud in the hushed room: "I'll do it! I'll be Dick Foster."

He was still sitting there, faintly smiling, when the nurse returned. “Well, it’s all over,” he began calmly.

The nurse recoiled, then came tiptoeing forward. “You mean—he’s dead.”

“Yes, William Johnson is dead.”

As he pronounced this alias, his eyes were fixed intently on the girl’s face. It might be that in a confidential moment, or possibly in delirium, her patient had told her who he was; if so, she would make some instinctive response. But she knew nothing. In this respect Grant was safe.

“Have you notified the superintendent?”

“Not yet.” And now Dick Grant told the first lie of what must be a growing labyrinth of lies. “Johnson asked me to stay with him till someone came.”

“Don’t tell the superintendent I wasn’t here when he died.”

As soon as Grant could leave the hospital, he drove to a hotel where he was known and cashed a check for three hundred dollars. Watching his opportunity, he placed this sum in the dead man’s suitcase, to pay for a decent burial.

This was only the beginning of his stealthy preparations for his venture. Consulting William Johnson’s admittance card, he learned that Foster had given his birthplace as “Seattle,” and the date of his birth as December 14, 1902. The first was obviously a falsehood to conform with his alias; for all Dick knew, so was the second, yet he was inclined to believe that this was the correct date, simply because Foster would have no reason for concealing it. It was an added card in Dick’s hand, but he would not dare to play it unless forced to do so. The date indicated that he was three years younger than Dick himself.

He inquired at Johnson’s address, the lodging house named on the card, but learned only that a stranger had registered there as William Johnson and had sent out for some bandages and antiseptic. Evidently this was immediately after his injury: until then he had probably lived at some respectable hotel under his own name. There was no point in trying to trace him further: he had left no clue to his real identity to attract the attention of the police, and Dick was convinced that haphazard coroner’s inquiries would not reveal the truth.

Four afternoons later, Dick was packing his trunk for a long journey. But he was not going east to look for openings, as he had told the hospital superintendent; instead he would bear to the northwest, to the great green country of adventure's dreams. And the ticket under which he would sail was signed "Richard Foster."

Dr. Grant was ever a thoroughgoing man. When at last he decided to wield the knife, he cut deep. There would be no half-way measures in the game he would play now. He entered upon his new rôle with the same energy and determination with which he attacked a diseased appendix. He would not merely impersonate Richard Foster: for the period of his engagement he would try to put himself in Richard Foster's place, to act like him, and think and be like him, He would try to forget his own name. He would banish Dick Grant from his mind and soul.

He had the initial "G" removed from his suitcase and "F" substituted; he removed the tailor's label from his clothes. The only example of Foster's handwriting available was his signature on the steamship ticket, but this Dick studied and traced in his spare time until he could imitate it passably.

In his trunk he packed such of his belongings as Foster might be reasonably expected to possess; the rest he meant to leave behind. Yet in this regard he developed an unexpected weakness. Among his things was a small doctor's kit which a rich friend had given him—a wonderfully compact affair weighing only three or four pounds, yet containing all the essentials for an emergency operation—knives, clamps, scissors, and other implements, chloroform, needles and ligatures, a fever thermometer, and a stethoscope. By no stretch of the imagination could Richard Foster, a post-office clerk, possess such an article, yet Grant was somehow strangely reluctant to leave it behind. Cursing himself for a fool did no good. No twisting of his agile mind could make the act sensible. He had never realized before the invincible force of habit: he was used to carrying the tools of his trade wherever he went, and it seemed impossible to start a journey without them.

In this respect, at least, he could not be Richard Foster. For a moment he was aware of deep misgivings about the whole undertaking. It was bigger than he had thought at first—more difficult—more complicated. Perhaps he lacked the will power to bring it to success. And it might be that human beings were not the free agents he liked to believe: that mysterious forces moved them. . . .

Well, if he were caught with the kit, he would have to make up some kind of lie to explain it. He could not leave it behind.

On a warm August afternoon his ship put to sea, and Puget Sound dropped behind him. At once he put aside all fear of failure and began to seek pleasure in the game itself. After all, it was no mean adventure. It promised not only great reward, but excitement—strife—danger. He was young, active, physically strong, fully equipped to play his rôle. A gaiety of spirit, never quite stifled by the cynicism of his later years, saved every troublesome situation and gave him secret mirth. His boyhood seemed to be rolling back upon him as the ship rolled north.

More and more he entered into the spirit of his part. Imagining himself to be Richard Foster, he could look forward with genuine interest, almost with pleasure, to meeting Foster's long-lost family. He would be a good son and brother while the play ran: this was the least he could do, not only for Foster's sake, but for his own.

They were waiting for him now, beyond the blue forests of the nearing ranges . . . no, not for him. He could not carry the grim jest so far. The one for whom they waited lay unknown, falsely named, in a new grave; cynical lips could not laugh away this uncompromising fact.

When he made the acquaintance of Dawson Dan'l, an old miner from the Yukon, he boldly rehearsed his part.

"Have you ever been to Lonesome River?" he asked.

"Lonesome River! Lonesome River! No, I ain't, and mighty few people has, either. But I know whar it is—way back in the Nutzotin Mountains. It used to take all summer to get into it, polin' up the rivers, but now it's dead easy. There's been a young stampede to Moose Landing, and you can cross the divide from thar."

"Did you ever hear of a man there named Foster?"

"Seems to me I has. Been thar a long time, ain't he? Is he kin o' your'n?"

"My father." Dick made the statement casually, marveling at how easy it was.

"*Is* that so! Wal now! Goin' up to visit the old man, eh? Ain't that fine!"

Unlettered, rough-spoken though he was, Dawson Dan'l proved strangely interesting to Dick. He found himself looking up to his old

shipmate, respecting him, and liking him well. Evidently there was something in the great outdoors to bring out what was in a man.

Dick had expected a rather tedious journey and slow-passing, anxious hours. Instead, the hours flew—exciting, thrilling hours—and the journey was the most wonderful he had ever imagined. He had not dreamed that such a gloryland lay at Seattle's northern gate. He had always loved beauty, but somehow he had never known where to look for it or how to find it. Here, in these fastnesses, was its abode.

He loved the thousand nameless islands, dusky blue, perfectly imaged in the still waters. He thrilled at the long vistas which often burst upon his eyes—hushed lagoons, dark coasts, and the silver thread of a distant waterfall. Secret valleys between the hills, ivory glaciers, mysterious bays running back to dim, snow-covered ranges, tide-rips in the moonlight, and the profile of the spruce against the twilight sky—all these he saw, and all of them he made his own.

At the town of Skagway, at the head of Lynn Fiord, he disembarked and took the White Pass Railway into Whitehorse. The pearl peaks and black gorges of the pass surpassed anything he had yet seen. Their rugged grandeur wakened in him a complex mood new to him—a curious feeling of humility, not bemeaning but ennobling.

He felt so small, yet a part of something infinitely great. With this came vague misgivings about the venture on which he was launched. He was not so confident as before. Somehow this seemed too big a country for little tricks. He seemed to feel that it would find him out—show him up—lay him bare.

At Whitehorse he took a river steamer down the lordly Yukon. Even now he could not escape from the vastness of things; indeed, the farther north he went, the more he was overshadowed. God had dreamed these scenes in one of His mightier moods. He had painted them on a canvas that overwhelmed the imagination. The Yukon itself was one of the great rivers of the world, in America second only to the Father of Waters. The ship in which he rode seemed no more than a chip on its powerful cataracts. On each side stretched the forest, boundless, eternal, unfathomed. If man moved here at all, it was only to scratch the gravel for gold, or to build a hut of logs in the shadow of the evergreens.

Dick left the Yukon steamer at the mouth of a north-flowing tributary and, with two miners from Dawson, boarded a shallow-draft, powerfully engined gas boat. In this they crept up the shining road, five miles an hour

where the waters flowed softly, one mile in five hours through the gorge. The forests pressed close upon them now, leaving only a narrow aisle for them to pass.

Four days they fought the river, tying at the bank in the brief nights. Yet these were good days—perhaps the most significant in Dick's life. A strong, active man, sometimes he helped to work the boat up the riffles. Most of the time he sat at the bow, watching the changing vistas of the river, and many and strange were the thoughts that chased each other through his mind. Shortly after noon of the fifth day, the boat rounded a bend and swept up to Moose Landing.

The town was no more than a scar on the breast of the forest. Around a low, rambling building of logs, the roadhouse, clustered perhaps five score log cabins. Two larger buildings were evidently trading stores; a third bore a sign reading "Pete's Pleasure Palace." This last was no doubt a gambling resort and dance hall, always among the first of gold-camp enterprises. In this lost village perhaps five hundred people—miners, traders, and nameless women—lingered awhile, until some other gold strike should summon them.

A group of perhaps twenty were waiting to see the boat land. As Dick's eyes fell on them, his heart began to hammer against his ribs. This was the beginning of his great adventure.

He was the first man down the gangplank. For half a minute he stood, baffled and afraid, pretending to be waiting for his baggage. It seemed to him that he could not possibly go on. The thing was too much for him—too deep—too poignant. . . . But now it was too late. A girl had detached herself from the crowd of onlookers and was stealing toward him, peering into his face.

For one brief instant he could not believe that this was Dick Foster's sister. Her face, her form, her clothes—everything was utterly different from his expectations. Yet when their eyes met, it was with a startled look of recognition. They were not brother and sister, as the girl supposed, yet even Dick found it hard to believe that they were complete strangers. It was as if their fates had been intertwined from the first.

"Dick?" she asked breathlessly.

He took a foolish and illogical satisfaction in the fact that his first speech with her need not be a lie.

"Yes, I'm Dick."

She uttered a happy cry and, running to him, threw both arms about him. A queer shiver passed over him, and slowly, deliberately he raised his own arms and pressed her tight. She kissed him with exquisite tenderness.

The warmth of her lips lingered on his. His brain was in a whirl: for long seconds he was torn between shame, dismay, and some indefinable happiness. Words rushed to his lips, but what they were he did not know, other than that he spoke her name again and again, just as Dick Foster himself might have done. If this were acting, it was of a high order. In any event she never doubted that her long-lost brother, the idol of her infant days, was in her arms again.

Chapter IV

The girl released him at last, and, tugging at his wrist, almost ran him up the river bank to meet her father. Dick rallied as well as he could, and met the old man's eyes.

Dick could see very little resemblance between this man and the ill-fated patient in the pay ward. Evidently the younger Foster had resembled his mother; Molly, her father. This no doubt accounted for the fact that when Foster had separated from his wife he had reversed the usual procedure and had kept his daughter instead of his son.

He smiled quietly and took both of Dick's hands in his own. "So this is my boy!"

Fluttering, Molly stood beside Dick and put her arm around him.

"Would you know him, dad?"

Foster searched Dick's face. The latter rallied all his powers of will and met the searching eyes calmly.

"I think so, but I'm not sure," the old man said at last. "He has our coloring, and a general family resemblance. But he's better looking than he led us to believe."

"Oh, he's wonderful!" Almost jealous of her father, Molly caught Dick's hand. "He looks just as I wanted him to look."

Dick's fears sped away. He had passed the first crisis, and now everything was in his favor. He turned to Molly with glowing eyes.

"You are more beautiful than I imagined you."

"But I sent you my picture?"

Dick did not turn a hair. "Yes, but it didn't do you justice. What a wonderful sister you've grown to be!"

Now they led him away to meet the third member of the welcoming party.

"It was a big day for me when this young man came to Lonesome River," Foster said. "He's been like a son to me."

Hathaway's calm, three-cornered eyes searched Dick's face. He seemed to be sizing him up in view of future dealings.

"And I hope I can really be his son before long," he said, smiling.

For a brief space Dick did not understand. His own guilty conscience made him look for some secret meaning, bearing on his own fraudulence, in the words. But Foster's nodding head and beaming smile soon gave him the clue. Dick glanced toward Molly to find her smile frozen on her face.

They decided to start at once for Lonesome River.

"I'm not popular with a certain element in this town, and the longer we stay, the more chance to get into trouble," Foster explained. "Dick, my boy, you look as if you might be able to hold your own in a free-for-all fight, but I don't want to get you into one the first day of your stay."

Back of the trading building were four saddle horses, standing with dangling bridle reins, and two more wearing pack saddles. Dick soon perceived that the latter had been led across the pass to carry his luggage, and that he was expected to ride the extra saddle horse.

"His name's Tricky, and Tricky's his nature, but I know you won't mind that," Foster said. "I remember how you used to ride that wild pony of yours, as a boy."

"I have hardly seen a horse for ten years," Dick answered doubtfully. "I've almost forgotten what side you get on."

"Then Molly shall take Tricky—she's the real horseman of the party—and you ride Sal. We don't want you to begin by breaking a leg."

"I don't know but that he's safer on Tricky than on old Sal," the girl said thoughtfully. "Tricky might throw him off, if he feels like it, but he'll take him through the quagmire and up the steeps. I don't trust old Sal. She's a perfect fool."

Nevertheless, this was the final arrangement. Molly was to lead the way, Dick second, and old Foster third, so that Dick could talk to both of them on the trail. Stephen Hathaway would bring up the rear. In this fashion they dipped into a little damp trail winding between the birch trees.

At once the ugly town dropped out of sight and mind. Fragrant and green and cool, the forest closed around them. Almost at once its magic took hold of Dick. The horses walked noiselessly in the wet mold of the trail. There was no sound nor echo of sound between earth and sky. And this silence was

ancient as the hills themselves—pregnant with wisdom, haunted by a holy and unnamable spirit.

Dick enjoyed the ride from the first moment. His knees suffered an occasional painful knock from adjacent tree trunks, and once or twice a young sapling, bent forward by Molly's horse, banged back at him with savage force, but he grinned cheerfully at these mishaps and learned to avoid them.

The trail grew more narrow as they proceeded, and many moss-grown logs lay across it. Turning in her saddle, Molly watched his progress and coached him in the tricks of mountain riding. He would never forget her vivid face, sometimes lighted by a shaft of sunlight slanting down through the boughs, sometimes like a pale flower in the fernlike green of the spruce.

"Kick old Sal in the ribs when you come to a log across the trail," the girl told him prosaically.

"Why should I be so cruel to this well-behaved old horse?" Dick demanded.

"So she'll clear the logs in one jump, instead of stepping over them. It's prettier and safer. She's not nearly so likely to catch her feet and fall."

This proved to be sound advice. But even the most vigorous kick could not hasten Sal over the logs with the grace and ease displayed by Tricky. Dick soon perceived that there is as much difference between horses as between men. The simple fact was that, regardless of her reputation of docility, Sal was not in Tricky's class.

The quality of the two animals was even more noticeable as the trail began to wind to the first tables of the hills. On the steeps Tricky snorted loudly, stretched his neck, and scrambled up. Sal slipped, pawed the ground wildly, and finally gave in, panting, while her rider dismounted.

Yet none of these minor discomforts could dull Dick's pleasure in the trip. As he mounted higher, the land unmasked its beauty. The river was no more than a bright cord woven through a divine tapestry. Dark hollows between the hills, sweet natural meadows coursed by the finest filaments of silver thread, cloud shadows chasing each other over the long slopes, red and yellow flame in the lowlands, where the frost had painted the birch trees—all these Dick saw, and all of them worked a magic in his soul. Best of all were the occasional lone aspen trees in the long reaches of the glades—one incredible blaze of gold amid the somber green.

As the trail climbed, it demanded more careful riding. Often it was so steep that Molly herself slipped out of her saddle and walked, to save her mount rather than through any sense of fear. It zigzagged up sharp grass slopes, where the horses grunted and the saddles slipped back on their haunches; it crossed high passes where Dick was almost afraid to look down; it made breath-taking descents into the hushed vales between the ridges. Low-hanging limbs clubbed him often, and the close trunks set traps to catch him and break his bones. Still he would not have had it changed in one particular. He was living more keenly than at any time in his remembrance, save for an occasional intense moment in a difficult surgical operation.

Looking back with sisterly concern, Molly saw that his dark face was flushed, not pale, and his eyes fairly gleaming. She nodded and smiled at him in girlish satisfaction, pleased that this wild trail, so disconcerting to most tenderfeet, had not shaken his nerve.

He felt a puzzling desire to share his delight with her.

"This is the real thing, isn't it?" he called.

"It isn't what it used to be. You see, people from the camp come out here hunting, but it is still one of the greatest game countries on earth. We're getting into wilder country now, and I think perhaps I can show you something really worth seeing soon."

And it was soon. As they were crossing a ridge, Molly pulled up her horse in evident excitement. She beckoned Dick beside her and pointed across the glen to a bare ridge beyond. Up the naked hillside a burly animal moved leisurely. Even at a distance of three hundred yards he expressed raw, primal strength. Dick saw at once that it was a bear, and when he perceived its high shoulders and swaggering carriage, he instantly guessed that it was the monarch of all bears, the grizzly. The brute made a thrilling picture, as his fur caught the sun. Wild animals are usually hard to see in the changing light and shadow of their haunts, but once seen, they are somehow memorably vivid. Dick would never forget this scene—the old gray king of the North, his mountains towering around him, moving with restrained power up his secret trails.

But the picture was to be abruptly shattered. Stephen Hathaway's keen eyes had also perceived the grizzly. Pushing his horse past Foster's, he dismounted silently, slipped his rifle from its saddle scabbard, and came stealing up to the eminence where Molly stood. His face was darkly flushed; his triangular marksman's eyes were steely bright.

“How I hate to kill the old fellow!” he said, as his rifle glided slowly to his shoulder. “But there’s no way out of it.”

“What harm is he doing?” Dick demanded.

“None, now, but he’s too dangerous to let live. The country’s getting too thickly settled for brutes like him. He’ll kill stock, and he’s likely to kill a man some day, too.”

“I’m tired of that kind of talk,” Molly broke in. Her face was flushed too, her eyes gleaming. “I’ve heard it ever since we came up here, and the higher the price of grizzly skins, the more I have to listen to it.”

Dick was a keen student of human nature, and he knew that her charge was true. For a few brief seconds he felt a hearty contempt for the man’s obvious hypocrisy. But the pot must not call the kettle black. A smile of utter cynicism and self-scorn moved on his lips. In the joy of the ride he had almost forgotten the sharp practice that had brought him up this trail.

Foster swung down from his horse and laid a hand on Stephen’s shoulder.

“Let him live, Steve,” he urged. “I don’t question but what you’re sincere—Molly doesn’t either, really—but let’s put the old cuss on parole.”

“And maybe let him kill some poor prospector, hiking unarmed through the woods,” Stephen said hotly. “That may be your idea of what’s right, but it’s not mine.”

Somewhat to Dick’s surprise, Foster protested no more. Molly, too, stood back, with a look of sharp but hopeless dismay. Evidently this man Hathaway was a strong character. And Dick had never seen a clearer, colder eye than this that lowered to the sights, or a steadier, deadlier aim. Before the rifle cracked Dick knew the bear was doomed.

Watching, he saw it collapse, its power and glory shattered in a split second by a penny’s worth of lead. But he did not get to see the flush of triumph in Stephen’s face. When the rifle roared, Dick’s mare suddenly bolted. Her nerve was never too good, and in her panic she almost pitched off the trail. Dick was not prepared for the sudden lurch, and spilled from the saddle.

Here were all the potentialities for a serious accident. Dick’s shoe was too far through the stirrup, and he could not fall clear. Panic-stricken, the mare started to drag him through the rocks and fallen logs of the hillside.

It was Molly and Tricky who saved him. The girl took in the situation at a glance, and her wits were quick. She cut her horse with her riding whip, at the same instant jerking her rein. The plucky animal pivoted on his hind legs, then shot forward like a well-trained cow-pony. A tangle of logs was in his way, but he cleared them in one flying leap—burst through a thicket—and in five seconds cut off the runaway mare before she could get her stride.

She planted her feet and stopped; Dick fell free. To the girl's immeasurable relief he sprang up at once with no sign of serious injury. Seizing his mare's bridle, he vented his rage upon her with one vicious jerk of her bit, then turned with a bitter smile to his companion.

Molly flung off her horse, threw her arms about Dick, and kissed his bleeding cheek.

"You might have been killed!" she gasped.

"Not much loss."

He spoke grimly, almost as if he were in earnest. But when he started to thank her for what she had done, and praise her resourcefulness, another matter was forced on his attention.

Foster came running up and began to examine Dick's minor hurts.

"A little skin torn off here and there, and some bad bruises on your hip," he announced authoritatively. "I'll have you fixed up in no time."

Dick glanced quickly into his face. Even now he suspected the truth, and when Foster fumbled in his kit and procured antiseptic and bandages, he was almost sure. Many laymen carried such articles for emergencies, but they did not handle them in quite this way. For brief seconds Dick watched the play of long, skilful trained hands; then he *knew*.

Dying in the hospital, Richard Foster had omitted one important detail of his story. His father was a doctor.

Chapter V

Dick was staggered by this revelation. It upset everything. Already shaken by his fall, for a moment he felt unable to grasp and meet the situation. He thought surely the consternation in his face would betray him. But soon he began to rally his scattered faculties. How could he contend with the fact that the older Foster was also a doctor? Only by constant vigilance, infinite care. He must suppress every professional mannerism. He must exile from his body all the doctor's tricks of gesture, and from his speech all medical terms. He must neither act, talk, look, nor think like a doctor; otherwise the truth would burst on Foster in a flash. It was a wonder that he had not already betrayed himself to those trained eyes.

Stephen rode off to look after his trophy; the others swung down the trail onto the Lonesome River watershed. The country that now opened before them charmed Dick to silence. No doubt it was one of the most beautiful regions in all beautiful Alaska—an immense green valley, guarded by the sheer walls of the ranges and the white towers of the peaks. It was not all woodland. There were miles of open parks, broken by scattered clumps of spruce trees black as jet and watered by a network of silver brooks. At every turn in the trail there was a new vista—thickets of cottonwood, gilded by the forest—deep-cut chasms in the hills, from which streams came pouring like wild white horses—lost little meadows hidden among the trees, where the caribou doe crept to foal her young—haunted lakes, nameless, secret, blue as sapphire.

In the young dark they rode down into the village and turned loose their horses at Foster's door.

Dick went to the pleasant room Molly had got ready for him, and brushed off the dust of travel; then she led him to the cheery dining-room where Foster was waiting. If Stephen had returned, he had gone to his own quarters above the trading store. No matter how close he was to Molly, he would seem an intruder tonight. This was Richard Foster's homecoming dinner; no outsider must come in!

The chill of early night had blown down from the snow peaks, so a fire had been kindled in the big grate at the end of the room. There was no other light save the soft aura of candles on the table. Shadows leaped; a rosy glow played on Molly's bare arms, danced over her hair, and revealed the luster in her eyes. Glass and silver shone on the white cloth.

Near the door stood an Indian woman in a white apron. Tall, rawboned, and lean, she might be anywhere between forty and sixty years of age. Her face was incredibly wrinkled, like an old parchment, but vivid black eyes lighted it still. She bent forward as Dick came in, peering intently. For a brief second he thought she might be his Nemesis. But she seemed pleased, because she nodded, and a trace of a smile curled her lips.

"Needa, this is Dick, my brother," Molly said. "Dick, this is *almost* my mother. She has taken care of me ever since we came north, eighteen years ago."

Dick shook the hard, lean hand, then took his seat at the table. He was conscious of the Indian woman's brooding eyes as she moved behind him to serve.

Deeply moved by what seemed a long-waited reunion, Dr. Foster bent his head to say grace. "Bless, O Lord, this homecoming," came the murmur of his voice in the hushed room. "Thank Thee, O Lord, that my son has come home."

Dick's imagination soared, and for a moment he was almost afraid to glance into the shadowed corner of the room. Mystery had surrounded him all day; where did it begin and where might not it end? How was he or anyone else to know but that Richard Foster *had* come home and was watching with brooding, reproachful eyes the three in the candlelight? But if so, he could not denounce the impostor in his chair. His lips were sealed.

The meal that followed was merry. Molly's laugh rippled again and again over the board. Dick talked freely, scorning to take refuge in a pretended dullness and reserve, and trusting to his steady mind and quick uptake to keep him out of trouble. On the whole he enjoyed this part of the play. It was a thrilling test of his wit and imagination. If it were not for such scenes as had just passed—an aged man humbly giving thanks for a blessing that would never come—he could play the whole show through with zest.

He managed to ward off or give vague answers to questions regarding Richard Foster's past life, and to reveal nothing of his own past that Richard Foster himself might not have experienced. Once or twice he got on thin ice, but managed to wriggle safely off.

The food was plain but good. There was a roast of caribou, one of the finest meats on the broad earth, and vegetables raised in Foster's own garden.

“We’re not too far north to grow almost anything we want,” Dr. Foster explained. “The winters are cold—colder than you can very well imagine—but in the long summer days vegetables grow fast as weeds, crisp and delicious. Of course, we have to import flour, sugar, and coffee, but we have plenty of fresh reindeer milk.”

It was not until after dinner, when the three were sitting about a chuckling fire in the big, warm living-room, that Foster begin to discuss the troubles mentioned in his letter.

“You must understand from the first that I owe these Indians here a tremendous debt,” he said. “If you miss that point, you can never quite grasp my position. I suppose you know a little of what happened when your mother and I separated.”

“Very little.” Dick gazed quietly into the fire. “She hardly ever mentioned you.”

“Well, you might as well know that the failure of our marriage broke me up. I took it harder than I should have, I suppose. I wanted to get away from every familiar scene, so I came to Alaska and brought Molly with me. That was in the spring of 1911.”

“You wanted to practice medicine in the gold camps, I suppose?”

“Yes, that was my vague idea. But I was so broken, physically and mentally, that I didn’t quite know what I did want. Anyway, the placer mines were already giving out, and the gold camps were disappearing one by one. I tried my hand at various things to make a living for Molly and myself”—the old man smiled ruefully—“and finally went prospecting far into the interior. Needa, the Indian girl, was with us, taking care of Molly; her faith and fidelity were the first obligation imposed on me toward the whole Indian race.”

Molly’s eyes grew moist, evidently at some poignant memory. As if seeking comfort, she drew Dick’s hand into her lap and held it between her own.

“I won’t harrow you with the tale of what we went through in the terrible winter of 1911,” Foster went on. “I’ll simply say that although Needa fought for us like a faithful dog we came clear into the shadow of death by hunger and cold. We were making for the settlements south of here, but we gave out and were finally rescued just in time by the Lonesome River Indians. They took us in, fed us, cared for us, nursed us back to life.”

“And that was another debt,” Dick commented.

Foster mused in silence a considerable time. “My life was not much value to me in those days,” he went on at last, “but I had to live for Molly’s sake. The most wonderful thing of all, like a miracle now that I look back upon it, is that they not only saved my life, but made it worth living for its own sake. They literally brought me back from a mental and moral death ten times more dreadful than the swift physical death that had trapped us in the forest.”

Dick nodded but did not speak. He himself had seen men die while their bodies still lived on.

“They are wonderful people, these Lonesome River Indians. All the tribes have fine qualities, some more, some less, and it is sad that we wiped them out before they had a chance to teach us what they knew. These people here are the bravest I have ever known—modern Spartans, contemptuous of pain, defiant of all danger, living the most rigorous outdoor life in one of the most rigorous climates in the world. As they fed me and I grew stronger, they forced me to go with them on their hunting and trapping expeditions. They made me compete with them in their bone-breaking games. Before the ice broke again, I was whole—mentally and physically and morally. Dick—I was a man again!” He raised his head as he spoke, and the firelight showed his fine old face kindling with emotion.

“A sound mind in a sound body,” Dick mused aloud. “There’s something in it, true enough.”

“I could keep on with my profession,” Foster continued. “Dick, if you were a doctor, you would understand what that means—to be able to keep on with the practice of medicine.”

Dick sat utterly motionless in his chair. His face grew wan and pinched; he was glad that the shadows lay dark upon it. “Did that mean so much to you?” he asked at last in a low voice.

“I wish you were a doctor, so you could understand. If your mother and I hadn’t separated, you *would* have been a doctor—that was my plan from the beginning. And where do you suppose I found my opening, Dick? Right here in this village.”

“I shouldn’t have thought it offered much of a future.”

“No, not in money—at least, it didn’t seem to promise any great reward along that line—nor did it offer much in the way of fame and honors. Yet it was a splendid opening. There was sickness here that needed expert attention. There were injuries resulting from accidents in hunting. Best of

all, there was a wonderful opportunity to try to preserve and perpetuate the last of a great tribe—to fight for them, and to stave off the degeneracy and extinction that have overwhelmed practically all the rest of the Indian race."

"In other words, a great chance for service," Dick said in a flat voice.

"Yes, if you want to call it a fancy name like that. I called it a great chance for a satisfactory and worthwhile and happy life. I was thoroughly selfish about it. I knew that if I could preserve these people—their strength and racial purity and rugged Spartan virtue—it would be the most interesting and exciting and high-paid job I could ask for, although I didn't think much of the pay would come in the form of money. It was a good place to live. The climate was tough but healthy, the country indescribably beautiful, and the outdoor life fine. What more could a man ask?

"Well, I went ahead. I took it up with the medical board and got an appointment as the government doctor for this district at a nominal salary. They told me that I could collect fees on the side, if I were able to get them. I already had the confidence and affection of the natives, and everything worked out just as happily as I thought it would. In the years since, I have become an institution here. The Indians have their own chief, but I am the great chief, the 'White Father' as they call me. I've cured their sick and bandaged up their wounds and kept them on the straight road. Until this last year, I have preserved them from the disease and death and degeneracy of the white man's camps."

"I don't see how you could do it alone," Dick said. "These Indians must have had furs that the white men wanted. How did you keep them out?"

"Yes, the Indians had quantities of fur and still have. They are the most energetic trappers in the North. But actually I had very little difficulty until last year. The only whites who came here were occasional traders, or perhaps prospectors and big-game hunters up the tributaries of the White River. They visited the tribe, but only with my permission. You see, I had a little influence with the government authorities, and I got them to designate Lonesome River valley as an Indian reservation, with me as agent working without salary. I could order out anyone that I disapproved of, and though I had no way to enforce my orders save with my own fists, the occasional visitor never questioned my authority."

"The Indians sold their furs to wandering traders?"

"In the old days, yes. Later they began to demand more and more of the white man's luxuries, so I began to look for someone to open a trading post

here, to treat the Indians fairly, and at the same time to help me preserve the tribe. When Stephen Hathaway came through, prospecting and trapping, I knew that I had found my man."

Shading his eyes, Dick looked quizzically into the old doctor's face.

"But matters have grown worse instead of better?"

"Much worse. The gold strike at Moose Landing has brought in all kinds of riffraff, and they've been crossing the divide and coming into this village against my orders. The Indians can't protect themselves or protect their own women. They can't hold out against white people. They never could, and they never will."

"And I suppose all the white man's ills are pouring down here in a flood."

"Yes, in a flood." Foster stood up, his eyes blazing. "A flood of ruin and destruction! If it isn't stopped right away, there will soon be half-breed children born in the tribe, and that is always the beginning of the end. There will be disease that we can't cure, not to mention the possibility of some deadly contagion to wipe out the whole tribe. You see, Dick, these natives haven't developed any resistance to the white man's ills. Even a minor malady like measles is often fatal to them."

A trace of Dick's old smile touched his lips. "I think I've heard that before."

"The thugs from the village are using a weapon we can't combat—whisky. Somehow they are smuggling it into the village, and we can't stop it. And you know what whisky does to Indians. They'll sell their souls for it—all of them—and it wipes them out."

Yes, Dick knew this fact—knew it as a doctor.

Exhausted by his burst of feeling, Foster sank back in his chair. "Maybe you can help us stop it, Dick," he went on at last. "Maybe you can succeed where we failed. Somehow I don't seem able to take hold as I used to. Perhaps it's advancing years—partly it's a little trouble I'm having with my heart."

Dick studied his face, wondering what that "little trouble" might be. Whatever it was, it could not be neglected much longer. There were certain signs in his face and body apparent enough to a doctor.

"You can count me in," he said. "I'll do everything I can to help you in your fight, and you can bet I'll stay to the end."

Dick spoke vigorously, and with absolute sincerity. They *could* count him in. While the play lasted, he would be Richard Foster, fair weather or foul. This was the least he could do, unless he were a hopeless cad and a coward.

"That's my son!" Foster said exultantly. "Molly, you told me how it would be. This is one of the happiest moments of my life."

Molly got up, bent over Dick, and kissed him on the cheek.

"And you're *my* brother," she whispered, in girlish exultation. "I'm so proud of you, Dick."

He flushed scarlet, as if with pleasure. "Wait till you see how I come through, before you give me too much credit," he said.

"You'll come through, and we'll win," Foster told him. "It will be a hard fight, I think, but only for a few months. Then the government will have passed a measure I proposed, to set aside a big district in the Endicott Range solely for these Lonesome River Indians, where they will be properly guarded, and white civilians won't be permitted at all. Then the whole tribe will trek up there, beyond the last gold camp, and if I'm able, I'll trek with them."

Foster now pressed Dick's hand and bade him good night.

"You are among your own folks tonight," he told the youth. "If you are one-tenth as happy about it as we are, you'll hardly be able to sleep. You've brought new hope to an old man's heart."

Dick opened his lips to speak, but no words came forth. Somehow he could not go on with the scene tonight, even if the success of the whole enterprise depended on it. He could not play up to those tremulous hands and gleaming pale eyes.

Chapter VI

Dick was uneasy when he came down to breakfast. Perhaps in some sleepless lonely hour, when thoughts fly at random and the imagination soars, a question had risen in the mind of either Foster or his daughter. It need be no more than a passing fancy to wreck his enterprise. If the slightest shadow of suspicion ever fell on him, he was done for.

But as soon as he saw their faces, he knew he was safe. There were no shadows in their wide-open shining eyes; there was nothing but perfect trust and growing affection in their welcoming smiles. The last trace of his fear disappeared when Molly flung her slim arms about him and kissed him jubilantly.

"It's great to see you," Foster said. "I had unhappy dreams about you—that you were dead, and your ghost had come in your place. They were curiously vivid, too—persisting several seconds after I wakened. I could hardly shake off the queer sensation of reality."

"I suppose they were the aftermath of that wild experience on the trail yesterday," Dick said evenly. "I came close enough to being a ghost, I tell you."

After breakfast, Foster and his daughter led Dick to a structure of turf and stone behind the house. It was built like an Eskimo igloo, half underground, to offer almost perfect insulation against heat and cold. Foster turned the key of a big padlock, opened a low, heavy door, and threw the beam from his flashlight on what might be the hoard of a barbarian king.

The round, dome-shaped room was packed to the roof with fine fur. There was string after string of ermine, silken, soft, and white, perfidious vestments of the crudest little cutthroats in the wild. There were stacks of mink, dark and glossy as sable, and big bales of rare marten from the secret fastnesses of the woodland. Hanging about the walls were thick bundles of fur which for a breathless moment Dick could not identify. When the flashlight beam danced over them, they rippled like snow-water in the moonlight; they were the supreme achievement of the divine artist-spirit that moved in this white North. If there had not been so many of them, Dick would have thought that they were silver fox.

"What are those?" he asked, when at last he got his breath.

“Silver fox.”

“By the great horn spoon! There must be more’n a hundred of them.”

“I think there are about one hundred and eighty. I’d have to look into the book to say for sure.”

There were bundles of red fox, like sullen, smoldering fire in the shadowed room. There were rich pelts of otter, full of all the magic lights that dance and shift and change in the deep eddies and whirlpools of the otter’s realm; there were dusky beaver from the glamorous pools of the lowland meadows; there were tawny lynx from the wintry ramparts of the far ranges. But Dick looked in vain for the cheaper pelts—marmot and badger and skunk—and every skin of the great store seemed to be perfectly furred and prime.

Dick’s eyes glittered in the half-dark. He knew little about fine furs, but any tyro could tell that this was a priceless treasure. He possessed an active imagination, and he could fancy these dark bales as a gift to Vercingetorix from some blond subject prince beyond Rome’s sway—as the dower of Pocahontas when she wed her white captain—as the hoarded gleanings of a Russian governor in Baronof Castle in old Sitka; but to save him he could not credit them as the private store of an old white doctor to an Indian tribe. Still unable to make adequate comment, he followed Foster out of the treasure house and watched him lock the door.

“Is this the fur depot for the whole tribe?” Dick asked steadily. Only the brilliance of his black eyes betrayed his suppressed excitement.

“No. Each Indian keeps his own furs.”

“You don’t mean that they all belong to you?”

“No. None of them.” Foster smiled cryptically.

The devil of greed had hold of Dick, and he could hardly hide his disappointment. “Whose are they, then?”

Foster seemed to be waiting for this question. Evidently this was a moment long anticipated, a scene planned in detail in lonely, longing hours. “They’re not mine any more, but yours and Molly’s,” his voice boomed. “Any time you want to claim them.”

“I can’t understand it,” Dick managed to answer at last. “There’s more than a quarter of a million here—you said so in your letter. How could you accumulate such a treasure?”

But before Foster could explain, light was thrown on the matter from an unexpected source. An old Indian, tall, lean, and forbidding, emerged from a near-by wickiup and stalked slowly near. Dick's imagination was fired by the dignity and pride of his bearing and the look of power in his bronzed, wrinkled face. He did not even glance at Dick, but stood haughtily by, waiting for Foster to address him.

"Good morning, Chief Nache-Tennon," Foster said solemnly.

"Good meat, White Father," was the stately answer.

"Chief, I want you to shake hands with my son, who has come back to me after many years. His name is Dick, and he is a great chief. Tell your people that they must honor him as they do the White Father himself."

Then, turning to Dick: "Son, this is the grand old man of the tribe, the direct descendant of a powerful family of chiefs who used to rule the whole of the upper Yukon. His name, Nache-Tennon, means Strong Mountain in their tongue, but Molly calls him Chief Strongheart, a name that fits him very well indeed."

Dick offered his hand, and the old chief shook it haughtily.

"Good meat, Chief Strongheart," Dick said.

"Good meat, Chief Dick, son of the White Father."

"What can I do for you this morning?" Foster asked kindly. "Is your little granddaughter sick again?"

"She well now. Red spots, they all go away. She run, jump, play, pull Big Chief's hair. But she plenty sick last moon."

"Yes, I remember that she was."

"You come see her, give medicine, do charm with hot water bottle. You say, she get well now, chief bring six ermine skins. Chief, he say, if little girl she get well, he bring skins; if she no get well, die, Chief no bring skins. But she get well—run, jump, play, red spots he gone. Chief, he keep promise."

Reaching in his mooseskin poke, the chief brought out a small string of ermine pelts, presented them, and took his departure. Foster took them and, without a word, locked them in the storehouse.

"I suppose the mystery is solved, isn't it, Dick?" Foster asked. "That treasure in furs is the fruit of nearly twenty years' medical practice in one of the richest fur countries in the world."

“Even yet I don’t see how you accumulated so many. You must have charged mighty high fees.”

“Not so much as you think. You understand, Dick, that conditions have changed greatly in Alaska in the last twenty years. Prices were high in the old days—laborers made twenty dollars a day or more—and as an experienced physician I felt justified in charging ten dollars a visit.”

“That’s fair enough.”

“These Indians had no currency, of course, so they paid me in the immemorial legal tender of the frontier—furs. Well, furs were cheap in those days—dirt-cheap compared to what they are now. I figured them at what they would bring from any wandering trader who had fought his way up the river to this village. For instance, ermine in those days brought about five dollars a dozen in the seaport towns. Here they brought about two dollars a dozen—this was before the rocks had been blasted out of the river gorge, and it took almost a month to work a boat up the rivers from Dawson. So for a call I’d get five dozen ermine, most of which I stored away. You know what five dozen ermine are worth now?”

“About a hundred dollars, I suppose?”

“That’s right. It was the same with the other furs, more or less. For a confinement case, or for a major operation, I charged one or two or three silver foxes, which I estimated as worth about a hundred dollars apiece. Now they’re worth three or four times that much. The only thing I can’t explain is how I had sense enough to keep the fur, instead of selling it from year to year. I can only say that I didn’t need the money—there was very little I could spend it for, up here—and I realized that fur prices would never be lower, but would steadily climb, as fur-bearing animals became scarcer and harder to trap, and the country opened up.”

“And now Molly and I get the benefit of your foresight. She’s entitled to it—she’s been your companion and help—but what have I done to deserve such a gift?” Dick spoke vigorously, but the lust of riches still ran in his blood, and his eyes did not meet Foster’s.

Foster laid his fine, sensitive hand on Dick’s shoulder. “Aren’t you my son? That’s all the claim you need.”

Startled by this direct question, and afraid of the train of thoughts which it might suggest in Molly’s or Foster’s mind, Dick quickly changed the subject. “It seems to me you are taking a big chance, trusting a quarter of a

million in fur to a wooden door with an ordinary padlock. What's to keep some of your Indians from stealing it?"

"My Indians don't steal. In this they are like the Eskimos farther north—they haven't had enough contact with the white men even to imagine stealing. This is true of many primitive folk. And the people in the town don't know the fur is here."

"But the Indians are bound to tell them sooner or later."

"They have very little contact with them, you know. Most of the Indians can't talk English: the few that can wouldn't volunteer this information to strangers. Of course, if a white man gets an Indian drunk and asks him pointblank if I have any valuables, he might reveal the secret, and so I can't feel so secure as I used to. Fur prices will be high next summer; you and Molly might as well sell them then."

"It would be safer. Although they're worth so much money, they're light and easy to carry off."

Yes, they were easy to carry off! A thief need not even break down the wooden door; all he need do was tell a plausible lie to a heart-hungry old man. But Dick would not weaken again: of this he was sure. Rich fur has ever the power to fire men's imagination, in this respect it is like jewels and raw gold.

Molly suggested that he walk with her down to Lonesome River to watch the squaws catch salmon. They reclined side by side on the green bank, soothed and made quietly happy by the long, bright vista of the stream.

They were wholly at ease with each other. Neither felt the slightest embarrassment in the long pauses in their conversation. Dick wondered at this: it was as if they had known each other for years. His eyes wandered to her face again and again, delighting to watch its color come and go in accompaniment of her mood, and to see the play and change of the lights in her eyes and the little ghosts of smiles about her lips, as her girlish thoughts chased each other through her mind.

At last she seemed to shake off her pensive mood. Soberly she turned to her companion.

"I wrote you that I needed you almost as much as father did. Of course, my problem isn't half so important as his. His involves the happiness of a whole tribe. Mine—involves only my happiness, and father's, and perhaps one other man's."

“I believe I know what it is.” Dick spoke with genuine and heart-felt interest. “You are being forced into a marriage.”

“Not forced.” Molly spoke tensely. “Oh, you mustn’t use that word, because father wouldn’t dream of forcing me to anything. He’s the kindest man in the world. Yet it is force in a way. The strongest kind of force, because love is behind it.”

“I believe I can understand how strong it is. Your father wants you to marry Stephen, and Stephen himself wants you to. And rather than disappoint your father and force the issue, you have never said no, but have let him think that you intend to do it. And now that you are face to face with it, you don’t want to go through with it.”

“Why do you say ‘*your*’ father. He’s yours as much as he is mine.”

Dick was shaken through and through by this slip of speech. Absorbed in Molly’s story, he had missed his own cues. But his mind moved with its old keenness, and almost instantly he was master of the situation. “No,” he said thoughtfully. “He is not nearly so much my father as he is yours. You grew up with him, the light of his life—you and he have been comrades and pals since the beginning. I am, in a way, a stranger. It will be a long time before I can think and speak intimately about him.”

“Of course, that’s true. And you’ve explained my whole difficulty. Father and I are so close—we have been such pals, the whole world to each other, for so many years—that I can’t bear to make him unhappy, especially in these last years. I’d go through almost anything for his sake—even a marriage with a man I don’t quite seem able to learn to love.”

“If he is unattractive to you, you just can’t marry him, and that’s all there is to it.”

“He is not unattractive to me. Stephen would attract almost any girl. He is a strong character—at least, a terribly determined one—and he always gets what he goes after. I can’t make you understand it, I suppose, but every time I come near him I have the feeling that sooner or later he is going to get *me*. He is silent—stealthy—almost deadly, for all his good looks and hearty laugh and self-righteousness. You know how he can shoot—well, that’s characteristic. He is physically strong, too—strong as a grizzly bear—and this makes him more interesting. But I don’t love him. I have no real affection for him at all. The truth is that I’m afraid of him.”

“Have you ever promised to marry him?”

"No, not an out-and-out promise. I asked him to wait until you came, then I would decide for certain. Partly it was just an excuse to put him off, yet I did want to see what you thought of him—and tell me whether you think I could possibly be happy with him."

"But surely you're not going to marry a man you don't love? No matter what I or anyone else thinks about him, you cannot do that."

"I don't know. It isn't as though we lived in Seattle, where I'd be thrown with many different men. Here there is no one but him and me—a man and a woman—and if I don't watch out, I'll find myself his wife, if for no other reason than it's the line of least resistance. Stephen is a strong man—you must realize this. Some day he'll be a leader in Alaska, unless something trips him up—some weakness that he conceals. I tell you, Dick, Stephen Hathaway always gets what he wants, no matter to what lengths he must go, and I'm afraid of him."

Dick's narrowed eyes searched her face, as a doctor might search the face of a patient for hidden symptoms. Did she, in spite of her protests, love Stephen Hathaway? At first he was inclined to suspect so, but her enlarged pupils and quickened breath told a different story. High-spirited girl though she was, mistress of the high trails and valkyr of the ranges, still she feared Stephen Hathaway.

"I'll look him over," Dick promised.

With this in mind, he dropped into the trading store later in the day. He could not deny a growing personal interest in Stephen Hathaway. True, in a few months he himself would drop out of Molly's life, but for the present her destiny was bound up in his own.

Lounging on the counter, he watched Stephen traffic with the Indians. At first he was impressed with Stephen's thrift, his eye for business, and his ability to drive a sharp bargain, combined with a bland and never-failing self-righteousness. But presently he began to feel that the trader drummed too hard. It might be that in exacting the last penny of profit, he was defeating his own ends. He sold his customers goods they did not want, at an extravagant price, and he bullied them into selling their furs far under the market. The goose and the golden eggs! Stephen was a strong character, no doubt, but his strength was somehow misdirected.

Dick came slowly to the realization that he disliked this bronzed, handsome youth with an intensity that startled himself. Under Stephen's plausible exterior, his hearty good nature and lip-service, he was grasping,

avid, and mean. Dick disliked him even more than the yellowish half-breed who acted as his clerk—a shifty-eyed, obsequious Siwash known as Breed Paul.

When business slackened, Stephen swung lithely upon the counter beside Dick.

"I suppose you're mighty worried about your father," he began in a sympathetic voice.

Unaccountably alert and on guard, Dick looked into the calculating three-cornered eyes. "Does he seem worse to you?"

"A good deal worse. But I don't think we ought to encourage him to go out and have an operation. Doctors are a bunch of thieves—the worst in the world—and nine times out of ten their surgery is pure fake."

Dick fought back his anger. To resent this remark would be too ghastly a joke even for him. For more reasons than one he was in no position to defend the ethics of the medical profession.

"Don't you think an operation would prolong his life?" Dick asked cautiously.

"Not a chance. It would just hasten the old man into his grave and give him a lot of pain and trouble and expense besides. You stand with me on this, Dick. You don't know much about disease, of course, but I've made quite a study of it, in my spare time, and I know what I advise is for the best."

"I suppose father will do what you suggest?"

"Pretty sure to. He looks on me as a son, too. I suppose you know I'm going to marry Molly?"

"I didn't know it definitely. I must say that you're a lucky man."

"She's a wonderful girl. The only difficulty is that I want to live outside, where there are real opportunities for a man with money, and she'll want to stay with the old man as long as he lives. But it won't be for long, whether or not he goes with his tribe to the Endicotts. He's got a bad heart."

Dick's eyes narrowed as he searched the eager face before him. Then, to see what lengths the man would go:

"You don't think we'll get our money until father dies?"

Stephen gave him a sharp glance, hesitated, then answered in confidential tones:

"He says we can have it whenever we want it, but Molly won't take our share as long as the old man needs her and wants her to stay with him. But I'm satisfied it won't be for long. I doubt if he'll hang on through the winter."

Dick had expected some such answer. There was no real villainy in it, but something almost as bad—heartlessness and cold, calculating greed. What Dick did not expect was the amazing proposition Stephen made a moment later.

"See here, Dick." Stephen's queer eyes had a sudden avaricious shine. "Why don't we work together?"

A faint, sick loathing, directed not toward Stephen, but toward something back of him and back of these dealings—a loathing as yet unintelligible—crept into Dick's soul. But his voice was even and low, confidential in tone, when he replied.

"In what way do you mean?"

"Let's face the matter frankly and sensibly. You're anxious to get hold of your share as soon as possible, and I'm anxious to marry Molly and get our share. Well, you help me, and I'll help you. You may not know it, but Molly hasn't definitely promised me yet. She's been close to it a time or two, but she's always hung back; girls are slow to know their own minds. Well, you put in a good word for me. Urge her to tie up with me right away. She's crazy about you—if you weren't her brother, I'd be jealous—and your word with her is law. If you tell her I'm all right and she ought to marry me for her own and her father's sake, she'll do it straight off."

"That's all very well, but I don't see where I come in." Dick's eyes were brilliant, but otherwise his face was a white mask. "I don't need any help in getting my share. As the old man's son, my position is already secure."

"There's many a slip, you know. The fur might be stolen—anything might happen. The sooner you get hold of yours, the better; anyway you are in just as big a hurry as I am. Well, I've got a lot of influence with the old man. If you help me with Molly, I'll talk him into sending all three of us—you and Molly and me—outside with the fur before the winter freeze-up. If Molly won't leave him—and I guess she won't—I'll talk him into letting you go anyway, with your share, on some excuse we can figure out. Then you won't have to spend the winter in this God-forsaken wilderness."

But when Dick searched his heart for anger, he could not find it. He found only a new self-knowledge bitter as wormwood. When he tried to gaze with scorn upon the hypocrite, he discovered that he was peering into the mirror of his own soul.

Why had Stephen spoken so boldly? As yet he had not the slightest suspicion that Dick was not Foster's son. The only possible answer, Dick believed, was that they were birds of a feather. And it is true that such birds flock together, as the adage says. They know how to recognize each other with their sharp, beady eyes.

The bitter truth seemed to be that Stephen knew Dick better than the latter knew himself. It takes a thief to catch a thief: had Stephen instinctively perceived that here was a kindred spirit? Had he found a streak in Dick's soul disguised and hidden until now—a streak crooked as a snake, yellow as a cur dog?

"I'll think over what you say and let you know later," he answered humbly at last. And it was not indignation that flushed his face so red, but shame.

Chapter VII

Although he could never fully atone for the wrong he had done the Fosters, Dick still had one chance to do good. This chance he would take and make the most of, for the sake of his conscience and future peace of mind.

Dr. Foster's life work was in jeopardy. Hardly a night passed but that the riffraff of the gold-camp stole into the village to debauch the tribe. How swiftly perdition would overtake them only Foster himself could realize. Once before, he had seen the white gale of ruin sweep through a native village—but even Dick knew, by the light of his medical experience, that there was no time to lose. Not only the integrity of the people was at stake but all that was good and fine in their lives—the splendid physical ideal they followed, their virtue, independence, honor, and primitive nobility. If Dick could help ward off this irreparable disaster—a loss to the natural world which could never be regained—it would be a measure of expiation for his wrong-doing.

He would be a good son and brother till the end of the show. This resolve had inspired him from the first, and it was ten times stronger now. It was the only way he could even begin to make amends to Richard Foster; the only decency that the game permitted. He set about it with almost fanatical zeal.

The first snake to kill was whisky, the chief weapon of the spoilers. In times past it had killed more Indians than all the gunpowder ever made: unless dammed at its source, it would wipe out the power and glory of the Lonesome River tribe. The Indians themselves could not combat it. It would buy anything that they possessed, from the finest fox pelt to the brightest-eyed daughter of the chief. One bottle of it would reduce proud old Strongheart to a sodden beggar, lower than the lowest Siwash in the salmon canneries to the south. In its trail came disease and death, cruelty, vice, and bloodshed. Nor could Foster's teachings prevail in the least. The Indians would not heed his warnings against it, and in their lust for more drink would not tell through whom they had procured it.

Obviously the supply was brought in from the gold-camp, but how and by whom remained a mystery. It seemed likely that one of the English-speaking natives connived with the gold-camp crowd, and since he seemed to cover his trail with white man's cunning, Dick was inclined to suspect

Breed Paul, Stephen's half-caste clerk. This charge Stephen himself denied, claiming that the bootleggers in Moose Landing worked their trade alone.

On the third night of Dick's visit fire-water flowed freely. No doubt the smugglers had brought in a packhorse load and had escaped with a small fortune in prime fur. There were madness, degradation, and bestiality in the village that night—wild shouts, cries of fear, and once a child screaming sharply in agony. Foster was up till dawn, but the power had passed from his hands. The wickiups were closed to him tonight.

In the morning the village presented a desolate scene. Most of the men lay insensible, robbed of valuable furs and half dead from poison; many of the squaws still hid in the forest from the drink-crazed braves. There were no cooking fires before the lodges, and no fishing parties on the river bank. Dick need not be told again of the utterly disastrous effect of strong drink upon primitive people.

Not alone for Dick Foster's sake, but for his own, he would help fight this scourge. And the hour came—a tragic and terrible hour—when this resolve became a solemn vow, the foremost purpose of his life.

It came about while Molly was helping her father reestablish order in the village. She comforted the pitiful, neglected children and encouraged the frightened squaws to return to their huts. The last to go was a woman whom she called Long Hair, the wife of Bear Claw, one of the head men of the tribe.

"Bear Claw, him kill me," the woman protested. "When him drink red water, he crazy, want scalp somebody sure. Long Hair, she no go."

In the end Molly had to walk with her to the door of her wickiup. Gray with fear, the squaw softly opened the door, peered in a long time, then came stealing back.

"Long Hair, she afraid," she said. "Molly, she not know Bear Claw. When him drink red water, he devil."

"But he's asleep now, isn't he, Long Hair?" Molly asked. "When he wakes up, he'll be all right."

"He asleep, but he still got red water. Bottle him half full, sit beside him on floor. When he drink him, he go crazy some more."

"I'll get the bottle and take it away. Then you needn't be afraid."

Molly stole into the darkened hut. At once she decided that there was nothing to fear from the fallen brave: he lay like a dead man on the floor, a

half-empty bottle beside him. In the half-light she crept near, softly picked up the bottle, and started to withdraw.

But Bear Claw was not asleep. His body was inert, but his drink-crazed mind was wandering in a strange, red delirium. His lids were half down over his eyes, but he saw the girl's white hand as it removed his treasure. Disaster came upon her in one stride.

With a hideous yell he leaped up, reached a long, brown, naked arm, and seized her shoulder. With one powerful jerk he knocked her backward supine on the floor. The whole act was incredibly quick and deadly; what had seemed an image of lifeless clay sprang to life in the guise of a fiend. Like a panther he was over her, his knee on her body, one hand pinning down her free arm and the other brandishing a long-bladed knife which he had snatched from his belt.

A scream, long, loud, and heart-rending, broke from her lips; then with wide-open, starting eyes, she watched him aim his knife. She must not scream again! How she knew this fact she would never be able to explain, even though she survived; it was as if a calm low voice spoke within her soul:

"Don't make a sound! Lie still and don't make a sound."

Perhaps it was instinct beyond human understanding. Perhaps it was a light cast by her bright intelligence, a saving light from a mind that was versed in Indian psychology, and that continued to function accurately, in spite of the paralyzing drug of terror, in her behalf. If she could lie silent and motionless, Bear Claw might not strike for several seconds. There is a strange, tragic love of cruelty in the souls of even the highest-type Indians, and except when there is long-harbored hate to goad them on, they do not like to kill quickly. Bear Claw's crazed brain was murder-bent, but if allowed to take his own time, he would prolong this scene. But if the white girl screamed again, he would silence her. His unstable mind could not stand the sharp dagger thrust of sound, and it would break down in a burst of homicidal frenzy.

Desperately fighting for time, she locked her lips. By some strength of will and valor of soul, she checked the convulsive retching of her throat.

Still the voice spoke softly to her inner ear, "Lie still and don't make a sound."

She did lie still. Brave heart that she was, she tried to lie limp in his grasp. Her eyes round and starting from their sockets, gazed into his face.

“If you move, me kill,” the man said hoarsely in some tragic acme of passion. “If you no move, me kill.”

Molly did not move, yet she was fighting the most appalling battle of her life. At first she fought for consciousness—to drive off the black mists blotting out her brain—and then she fought for sanity. It became hard for her to know that this wild beast crouching upon her was only Bear Claw, her friend since childhood, and not a figment of nightmare. His ordinarily impassive face was distorted and drawn till it looked like the fear masks of the medicine men; his teeth were bared like a panther’s; his eyes were those of a maniac, fiery red, staring, almost blind.

He lowered the point of the knife until it barely pricked the skin over her heart. Then he raised it again, brandishing it slowly in the air. She knew by the growing darkness in his face that her time was almost up.

“Don’t kill me, Bear Claw!” she gasped.

“If you move, me kill,” came the muttered answer. “If you no move, me kill.”

Apparently the game was played and lost. Help could not arrive in time. But as she waited, half-insensible already from terror and shock, again she heard a warning voice:

“Lie still, Molly. Don’t move a muscle.”

The words were not greatly different from those that had admonished her before, but they seemed to come from outside her head. The tone was low and clear as before, but it seemed like actual sound instead of a ghost-whisper. Slowly the stupendous truth came home. The voice was not an illusion—there was someone in the doorway! Bear Claw’s squaw, screaming in the village road, had summoned help.

Her vision cleared, and she could see that Bear Claw had thrown up his head like a wolf disturbed at a feast. His mad eyes rolled toward the doorway with a lethal glare that would haunt her long. At the same instant she felt his grip tighten upon her and saw the knife tremble, as his wrist grew tense and his fingers closed more firmly upon the hilt. Turning her own gaze, she saw Dick, his eyes like black holes in his stark, white face, standing on the threshold.

She did not dare to hope but that he would rush in and try to save her by main force. He carried no rifle whereby he could destroy from a distance the crazed brain that sought her life, and in his terror and woe he would not comprehend that her only chance was still to play for time. But she had not

reckoned on the trained mind of a surgeon. Not once, but a hundred times, he had fought death apart and alone, when victory or defeat depended utterly on the steadiness of his nerve and the coolness of his thought, when a human life hung in the balance on his finger-tips and one little false gesture would cost all.

Grim, tried physician that he was, he diagnosed her case at a glance. He perceived that if he made a threatening movement in Bear Claw's direction, Molly's life was forfeit. And although the killer might follow his victim soon, dispatched in an outburst of empty vengeance, he could not bring her back.

"Lie still, Molly," he cautioned again in a low tone. Then, in a quiet voice of authority which certain internes in a distant hospital might still remember, "Chief, put down your knife."

"Me no chief, me Bear Claw," was the answer, sullen but not without pride. "If you move, me kill. If you no move, me kill."

Dick looked him steadfastly in the face.

"Put down your knife, Bear Claw. You are a great chief, but you should fight men, not women. Only a coward fights women."

"Bear Claw, him no coward. Him fight, kill anybody—"

"Let the girl get up, then. It is Molly, your old friend. If you kill her, you are a coward."

As he spoke, Dick advanced slowly into the room. Bear Claw shook his head, as if he were trying to dispel a mist from his brain, and with a dazed look stared at the knife in his hand. Only for one second did he relax his vigilance, but that one second was enough. Dick struck like a whirlwind.

He did not take time to bend and grapple with the crazed Indian. His foot shot out with a powerful thrust, and his boot toe caught Bear Claw at the collar bone. No blow of his fist could be half so disastrous. The Indian spun backward clear of the floor and landed with a crash. Instantly Dick snatched up the fainting girl and ran with her down the village road. A moment later he burst into her house and laid her on a couch.

It was only by the thin margin of chance that he did not instantly betray himself as a doctor. In his fears for Molly he had forgotten his rôle: habit too strong to resist made him begin to minister to her, listening to her heart and counting her pulse. The only thing that saved him was the girl's fainting spell.

Not till she began to revive did he remember the part he must play. He released her wrist and covered her hand with his own, then sat quietly beside her as she fought her way back to consciousness. As her gaze fastened on his, the pitiful terror began to fade from her face, and a look of unbelieving happiness kindled it.

He knew now that she had suffered no lasting harm. Her body was young and strong, her nerves sound from vigorous outdoor life, her mind resilient and sane; she could weather even a shock like this. But she must take a few days' rest in bed. If Dr. Foster did not prescribe this treatment on his own volition, Dick himself must find a way to suggest it to him. Even at best she would sometimes waken from her dreams to see Bear Claw's maniacal eyes looking into her own and his knife poised above her heart.

When Foster came in, he took immediate charge of the patient. Because his understanding gaze could perceive what a younger doctor's had overlooked entirety—that Molly was not the only one cruelly shaken and desolated by the near-tragedy—he ordered Dick out of the room. The latter stumbled upstairs and for a long hour sat on the edge of his bed, his head buried in his arms. At last he slept, haunted by fearful dreams.

But he was cheerful enough when he came again to Molly's room. And when the spruce trees stood in a splendid profile against the evening sky, she wakened from a restful sleep, her eyes sober but unshadowed, her lips dimly smiling. She lay with her hair spread in dark beauty against the pillow.

When she saw him bending over her, she drew his head down and kissed him on the lips.

"Dick, Dick," was all she could say.

But he laughed at her, and his gaiety soon wakened laughter in her, too. Even when she insisted on inquiring into Bear Claw's fate, he would not let her thoughts turn darkly upon what was past.

"The old brave is nursing a broken collarbone, but he ought to feel lucky it isn't his neck," Dick said. "He is very remorseful and swears he won't ever drink again—that is, until he gets another bottle. But what about me, Molly? You haven't condoled with me for all I've suffered."

She glanced up quickly in alarm, but the sparkle in his eyes relieved her at once.

"I believe I'll have to go back to Seattle," he went on. "This life up here is too exciting for me. One week I'm in a runaway—the next I have to save

you from a scalping red man. You don't know it, but I'm naturally delicate, and my nerves can't stand all this excitement—"

"Your nerves!" Her mirth died on her lips, and she spoke solemnly. "You haven't any nerves. I've never seen anyone like you, even in Alaska, where there are men of iron. You are wonderful, Dick. You truly are."

Almost crying, she threw her arms about him. "You have fulfilled every hope I had of you. You have more than lived up to my childhood ideal."

She could not understand why the jubilant gleam in his eyes so swiftly faded and why his face turned slowly gray.

"You mustn't say that, Molly," he told her sadly. "You mustn't believe it."

"I do believe it. I know it."

"It isn't so. I'm not worthy of it. I'd like to be, but I'm not." Then, with fierce self-contempt, "You don't know all I've done in my life—the mean and crooked things—the advantages I've taken—the lies I've told."

But her face flamed, and she would not listen.

"I know you haven't done anything very bad, and if you have, I forgive you."

Half crying, half laughing, perilously close to hysteria, she clung to him. But he seized her face in his two hands and made her look straight at him.

"Do you know what you are saying, Molly?" he demanded tensely. "You say that no matter what I have done in the past, you will forgive it. I want you to repeat that, if you really mean it."

Her eyes slowly widened. "I know you couldn't have done anything really mean—or crooked—as you say. It wouldn't be possible—for Dr. Foster's son."

"Tell me what you would consider an unforgivable offense. You can speak frankly with me. Tell me exactly what would put me beyond the pale in your eyes, just to relieve my fears—"

For many seconds she did not reply. Then: "I can't tolerate cowardice. It's forbidden by the first law of the North."

"I'm all right there. I don't think I'm a coward."

"I can't bear a cheat in any kind of game. It seems so contemptible, so base. But I'll tell you what would be hardest of all for me to stand, and this,

too, is by wilderness law. It's a creed I picked up as a child, in the mining camps and the forest, and it can never change."

"What is it?" Dick asked hoarsely.

"Any wrong done to someone of my own blood. I suppose it's the spirit of the clan, always so strong in frontier people. If anyone harmed or betrayed or took advantage of either my brother or my father, I should never forgive him, and I should hate him always, no matter what excuse he had. It may be unreasonable, but it's true, and I can't help it."

And to bear witness to her words and earnest sober tone, the little red flags of danger waved in her cheeks, and a warning signal glowed for an instant in her long eyes.

Chapter VIII

Dick could see plainly now. If there was such a thing as retribution in this world, Molly would be the agent of it. If she found him out, she probably would not prosecute him in the courts, or try to bring harm to him in any way, yet she would punish him as he had never dreamed he could be punished in this world or the next.

Why should he care so much? Certainly he was not in love with Molly. He had committed his share of folly in his lifetime, but he did not think he was fool enough to fall in love with the absolutely unattainable. Molly thought that she was his sister. As long as she thought so, she would give him only a sister's love. If she ever learned the truth, she could not bear him in her sight. Yet her love for him gave his life new meaning. It meant more than anything he had ever imagined; more than he could tell. It went down into his body and reached his very soul.

She must never know that he was a fake, even after his purpose was accomplished. Therefore he must plan his exit from the scene in such a way that she could retain a happy memory of him. Perhaps he would go on a journey, and word would come back of his drowning in some far sea. Then, resuming his own name, he could make a home in a foreign land, far from these ranges.

In the meantime he must play the game with all the cunning and care he possessed. No more could he regard it as a thrilling adventure: the stakes were too high. What a hard game it was! At every turn in the trail, it seemed, there was a trap for him.

Hardly a week later an incident occurred that might easily have spelled disaster. In rearranging the contents of his trunk, he had uncovered his small doctor's kit; impelled by some strange whim he had taken it out to look at it, try the edge of the knives, and feel again the familiar tools in his hand. He was just closing the kit when Molly burst into the room. Busy with some household task, she had not stopped to knock.

"I didn't know you were here, Dick," she began. Instantly her sharp eyes fell on the little black case. "What is that?"

He cursed the day he had brought it. Why had he not thrown such an incriminating article into the sea? He knew why—because he was a doctor in spite of himself, and his professional habits had been too strong to break.

"I'll let you guess," he said, smiling.

He was playing for time and would take his cue from her next words.

"It looks like a doctor's satchel."

"That's exactly what it is. Have you any idea what I'm going to do with it?"

"I can't possibly imagine."

"I got it as a present for father." The words flowed forth easily. "I think I'll give it to him on Christmas."

"How thoughtful you are, Dick! It's a wonderful gift. What are the initials R.G. on the case?"

"The initials of the doctor from whom I got it. It's a fine set, Molly—small and compact, probably much better than father's old one. Incidentally it's not a bad thing for anyone to carry in these wilds—it has ligatures and other emergency equipment. Until I give it to him, I think I'll pack it around myself."

"I think you're the most wonderful son that any father could want." Molly hugged him ecstatically. "I won't breathe a word about it to anyone."

So the day was saved. Not a shadow of suspicion flitted across Molly's mind. In a way Dick was glad that the incident had occurred, because from now on he need not hide the kit from Molly. When they rode abroad, he could carry it in his packsack and not deny his strange, childish, almost irresistible desire to keep it always in reach. On the other hand his confidence had been severely shaken. No doubt there would be other close calls in the future; one of them he might not survive. It was only too apparent that he was skating on thin ice.

Only a few nights later the ice creaked and cracked again. This crisis rose without warning, on a chill September evening when Stephen was Molly's guest for dinner.

After the meal, when Dick, Stephen, and the Fosters were seated about the fireplace, someone brought up the subject of ghosts. It was a fitting night for ghost stories. Winter was on the march; his scouts were riding hard. The wind moaned in the spruce trees; a cold, driving rain, half sleet, beat at the windows.

After Dr. Foster had told a weird tale of old Nome, Molly jumped up with shining eyes.

“I’m going to the kitchen and ask Needa to come in here,” she said. “She’s always at her best on a night like this.”

Dick stirred uneasily. He had always feared the deep, occult eyes of the old Indian woman. “What do you want her to do?”

“I want her to tell your fortune. She’s wonderful, when conditions are favorable for her. I think she’s a real medium.”

Dick did not believe in mediums, yet he had no desire to challenge Needa, and when Molly vanished through the kitchen door, he felt a distinct warning of danger. But it was too late to protest. Molly reappeared, leading the old squaw by the hand. Dick’s only consolation was that he was not alone in his misery. Stephen’s handsome, bronzed face wore a look of dismay: plainly he, too, harbored secrets he did not wish revealed.

“I think this is childish,” Stephen said sourly. “Molly, take the old woman back.”

“It’s childish, but it is astonishing just the same,” Foster replied. “No one with a clear conscience can possibly object to a little fortune-telling. It looks bad, Stephen, for you to protest.”

He was jesting, but Dick was afraid to turn such jests toward himself. He had been about to second Stephen’s protest; now he thought better of it.

While Molly was placing a stool in front of the fireplace, Needa stood like a statue of bronze. She seemed to be looking through the walls to some mysterious source of things hidden in the dark forest that was her home. Her eyes drew farther and farther back into their cavernous sockets; a rapt look came into her wrinkled face.

Molly switched off the electric lights. Only the flickering firelight remained; shadows cavorted in the corners of the room.

Needa moved slowly toward the hearth and crouched down on the stool prepared for her. She seemed to be watching the little wreaths and streamers of smoke from the back log, and the lapping of the red flame. There were none of the usual histrionics that go with a spiritualistic séance—merely an old Indian woman looking steadfastly into the fire. But this made her divination seem all the more authentic. Dick waited with growing uneasiness.

“What do you see, Needa?” Molly asked softly at last.

“Needa, she see plenty trouble,” was the muttered answer. “But when spring come, trouble he gone.”

“Will all of us be alive to see the spring come?”

“One—two—three—four—five,” the soothsayer counted slowly. “Needa, she see five little smokes curling up to sky. One smoke he go, two smoke he go, one smoke he come back. One—two—three—four. When spring come, we only four, not five. One of us fade away.”

Dr. Foster smiled quietly, but he was startled, none the less. “Are you sure, Needa?”

“Needa, she sure.”

“Is it your smoke that is gone, or mine? We are both old and our candles are almost out anyway. Don’t be afraid to speak the truth.”

“Smokes, they whirl and change. Needa no can tell. Maybe her, maybe doctor, maybe Dick, maybe Stephen. Molly, her smoke go strong. She see spring come sure.”

“I guess you don’t mean me,” Stephen broke in. He uttered a short contemptuous laugh. “This is the worst drivel I ever heard.”

Dick’s eyes kindled angrily; he liked this man less than ever. He too put little faith in the prophecies, but it was not even decent to make light of the somber old woman in the firelight.

“Of course, she doesn’t mean you, Stephen,” Foster said.

But Dick would not let the matter rest. “What do you see for Stephen, Needa?”

“Stephen’s smoke, he strong now. But him twist and turn. Fire, it crackle loud . . . fire, it speak to Needa . . .”

Dick felt a queer tingle in his scalp. It was true that the fire was crackling with a strange vehemence. It could easily be explained by the sudden igniting of charred fuel, yet the effect was uncanny. For the first time since they had met, Dick suspected Stephen might be a moral coward, for all his physical bravery. His face looked gray in the dim, red firelight.

“What does the fire say?” Dick went on remorselessly.

“It say something Molly read in book. Long time ago Molly read it aloud to Needa, out of big medicine book. Needa, she no understand. It big, big, medicine.”

“Can you repeat it?” Molly asked.

" 'He—who—kills—by—the—sword—must—be-killed—by—the—sword.' That's what fire say to Needa. . . . Needa no understand."

Neither did the others understand. What had called forth this prophecy, the most terrible of all prophecies, from the squaw's inscrutable mind?

"It's from the New Testament, isn't it?" Dick asked. "How could she have ever learned it?"

"I probably read it to her long ago, although I don't remember it," Molly answered quietly, so as not to disturb the soothsayer. "I used to read to her out of the Bible when I was a little girl."

Evidently Stephen was much relieved by this explanation. The solemn phrases had impressed him more than he liked to admit; on the thin lips of the old savage they had seemed to ring with truth.

"The words sounded big to her, and she remembered them," he said scornfully. "Now she's spouting them to impress us. Well, when I start killing people with a sword, I'll be willing to have someone do the same to me. I don't know what I'd want of a sword, when I've got the old bear rifle."

Molly crept close to Needa and took her brown, withered hand in her own.

"Now, what do you see for Dick?"

Needa seemed bewildered. She passed one shaking hand over her face, and her lips uttered a faint sound like a moan of pain. "What—I see—for—Dick?"

"Yes. What is my brother's fortune?"

"Your brother . . . *he dead*!"

Dick remained absolutely motionless in his chair. His body made not the slightest start to betray his guilt to these alert-eyed spectators. Yet the earth was giving way under his feet, and the heavens were falling down upon his head.

He would either save himself or be hopelessly lost, in the next seconds. As yet Needa's words had hardly sunk home to her listeners' mystery-haunted minds; they were still looking for some hidden or symbolical meaning.

With one powerful drive of his will Dick rallied all his faculties to meet this crisis. His resourceful brain moved to his rescue. "Do you mean that I'm going to die?" he asked sharply.

This direct, uncompromising question achieved its purpose—riveting the others' attention and diverting their thoughts from the startling statement just made. It seemed to baffle Needa herself. She whimpered a little, as though in pain, and slowly turned her eyes to his. Mustering all his courage, Dick met that dark, prophetic gaze without flinching.

"Needa, she no understand. . . . Voice, he speak in the fire, speak from your mouth same time. . . . Smokes, they change—they run together—they mix Needa up. . . . Voice from the fire, he sound sad. He say, 'Be true—be true.' He say, 'Keep your promise.' He say, 'Do what's right.' "

There followed a long space of breathless silence. Dick could not save himself again. Events must take their course; he could match wits with living men, but not with the dead. For this one hair-raising moment he did not doubt that the spirit of Richard Foster was in the room.

Suddenly Stephen's harsh voice broke the silence. "She's quoting from the Bible again, isn't she? Certainly she didn't think all that up herself."

"Hush, Stephen." Dr. Foster spoke with suppressed excitement. "I think we were tuning in on something important then. Let Needa try to get it through."

But the spell was broken. Stephen's voice had called Needa back from her far wanderings, and now the border gate was closed. She started, rubbed her eyes, and stood up.

"Needa, she no see anything more," she said in her flat, guttural voice.

When she had left the room, Molly came stealing to Dick's side. Her eyes were shining with excitement.

"Those messages were for you, Dick. Have you any idea what they mean?"

"Haven't the least idea," was his cheerful answer.

"You don't know anyone who might have sent them to you?"

"Someone who is dead, you mean? I lost my best friend in the war, but I don't think the message came from him."

This was true. If these tidings had come from beyond the border, they had not been sent by a friend. Instead they were a plea for justice from one whom he had wronged. And in spite of what he had told Molly, their meaning seemed plain enough.

“Be true, be true!” But he was not true, either to himself, to a dying man who had trusted him, or to his profession. “Keep your promise!” But he had broken the most sacred promise a man can make—over a death-bed. “Do what’s right!” But he had not done right, and every hour that went by he was doing greater wrong.

Yet he must go on. He was too deeply involved to quit the game now; he had mortgaged everything he owned. Perhaps he did not want to quit. The situation here had become so complicated, and so many opposing forces swayed him, that he no longer knew his own mind. In any event he must continue to play his part.

Dr. Foster soon went to his room. Molly had never seen him look so ill, tired, and old. Stephen, despairing of an hour alone with Molly, departed moodily to his quarters above the trading post. Dick and the girl stood at last in the open doorway, listening to the wind in the spruce trees.

From the unseen immensity of forest there rose a weird chant, a solemn chorus. It seemed to be the prelude of some great change soon to be enacted here. The air was full of the hiss of sleet and the beat of driving rain in the spruce trees. From the vault of the sky floated down the mournful honk of a lone goose southward bound.

“It’s snowing on the pass tonight,” Molly said. “Winter is coming.”

“Would you like to fly away from it, like that old wanderer in the sky?”

“No, not for my own sake. I love the white winters. But I dread it on father’s account. Did you see his face when he went to bed? I never saw him look so tired and used up.”

Dick shifted uneasily. This was an unwelcome verification of what he himself had observed, that tonight the old man’s face had a faint bluish tinge only too significant to a doctor. The truth was that he had tried hard from the very first not to notice or think of the old man’s physical frailties. He could not help him fight them, and they only further complicated a situation almost too deep for him already. Now he found that he could not escape so easily. This was part of the game he must play. And this was one deal in which he could not cheat.

“I noticed that he seemed worse,” Dick said. “He is a long way from a well man.”

“Don’t you think we ought to insist on his going outside for surgical treatment?”

“I think he should go out for a thorough examination, provided he can stand the trip. I’m not sure that he can, in the present bad weather. It’s a rough, tiring journey, and winter is coming on.”

“Perhaps Needa’s prophecies took the heart out of him. If one of our party is gone when spring comes, I suppose it will be he.” Molly spoke sadly, and the light from the doorway showed bright tears on her lashes.

Dick bent his head and kissed her tenderly. “Try to forget those prophecies. No one on earth can read the future; at the best she could tell us only what is in our own minds. Your father may live on for many years. Men often do, with heart trouble. And there’s at least a chance that expert surgery might give him back his health.”

Molly clung to him. “Oh, I wish there was a surgeon here!”

She felt Dick’s body slowly stiffen.

“There are surgeons in Fairbanks and Cordova, but they probably couldn’t help your father,” he told her at last. “If he needs surgery at all, it is likely of a most delicate kind, requiring a specialist—you know the trouble centers about his heart. He’d have to go to Seattle and possibly across the continent. But, Molly, we’ll hope for the best.”

“And pray for a miracle.” For a moment she listened to the long cries of the wind; her vivid face was pensive. “I wish *you* were a surgeon,” she went on dreamily. “You would have been, if father and mother hadn’t separated. You would have made a wonderful one, with those fine hands of yours.”

Dick could not answer. His throat seemed to close. He thought she would surely hear his heart pounding against his ribs.

“How I wish you knew how to use the surgeon’s kit you brought for father!” she went on, as if some devil of the perverse, wishing to torture him, were speaking through her lips. “If you could, I know you would save his life.”

Chapter IX

Winter was on the march. His scouts rode by daily. In the far fastnesses there were wars and rumors of wars.

New snow lay on the hills and steadily encroached upon the valleys. On clear nights the frost descended like cold star dust from uttermost space, silvering and weighing down the dead grass. The autumn gales stripped off the golden raiment of the deciduous trees, and they shuddered and waved their naked limbs at the graying skies. The tall spruce trees bent darkly to one another, moaning.

The water fowl circled uneasily, hour after hour, over the shimmering pools where they had brooded, till some far call came to them, and they headed south. The horned sheep and wild goats moved down from their ledges and lofty grass slopes to the edge of the timber. The wolves were gathering into gray bands, and when the moon broke through the clouds and shone down on the haunted forest, they sat in a ring, lifted up their fierce heads, and broke into the ancient Song of the Pack, which is the dirge of the dying year.

At Lonesome River the villagers put on their winter furs. The last run of the salmon was taken from the fish-wheels; food-pokes were crammed with jerky and bear-root for bread-making.

The four white people were busy, too, these frosty fall days. Food supplies were laid in, snowshoes mended and made ready. Dick took it upon himself to cut fuel for the winter, and day after day, from breakfast time till dark, his ax rang in the forest. It was the best kind of medicine for his body and soul. His muscles hardened, and his lean frame filled out; his face became as bronzed as Stephen's. While his arms swung the ax, his thoughts were free to roam in new fields and bring him back new wisdom. He did not know it, but he himself was of greater stature as he stood among the dark giants of the hills. He was growing, body and soul.

He did not forget the war he must wage in behalf of Foster and his people. On bright days he mounted to the ridges above the village and watched through binoculars for smuggling activities on the pass. He made unexpected visits to the wickiups in the dead of night; he traced down and uncovered a smuggler's cache in the woods, from which he took not only a packhorse load of fire-water, but a bale of prime furs stolen from the natives;

he kept watch for bobbing lanterns on the trail. Slowly but surely he was getting results. Fire-water flowed less freely at Lonesome River, and the profits of the whisky-runners fell steadily.

Who was behind this illicit trading he did not yet know. Dick guessed it was some bold character from the gold-camp who made rendezvous in the woods. He avoided Dick's traps as though he had seen them set: apparently by the aid of native spies he knew everything occurring in the village. A striking proof of this later fact was that in his liquor dealings he had black-listed Bear Claw. Dick liked to think that the invader had taken this step out of consideration for Bear Claw's helpless family, but the likelier truth was that he feared for his own life. In any event Bear Claw was left out of the village orgies, and the bottle-demon drove him to frenzy no more.

October passed in sleet and snow, and still Dick had never met one of the whisky-runners face to face. But one wild November night events took a startling turn. While he and the Fosters were sitting about the hearth, listening to the hoarse shouts of the blustering wind, a loud knock sounded on the front door.

The three looked into one another's eyes. Not one of them could imagine who this late visitor might be. The knock was not Stephen's—he had taken his horses and was hunting moose on the lower river—and when the natives wished to see the White Father, they invariably came to the back door. Dick sprang up, and Molly followed him to the hall.

When Dick threw open the door, the wind rushed in with a whoop, and the blowing snow streaked by in the lamplight. Dimmed by the eddies whirling round him was a tall figure of a man Dick had never seen before. His face looked haggard and gray in the yellow gleam from the doorway.

"Is Dr. Foster here?"

"Yes."

"I got to see him. I hate to has to come to him, but I got to. Can I come in?"

"Of course."

Molly's tone was penitent. In her sharp alarm she had momentarily forgotten the ancient code of the North, by which not even an enemy can be denied the haven of the fire. The stranger walked into the lighted room, and now both Molly and her father recognized him. His name was Larsen; he was supposed to work for one of the traders in the gold-camp.

The big man removed his hat from the blond head and stood awkwardly before the doctor.

"I hate to has to come to you," he said. "You has no call to do anyt'ing for us, but it's put up to me, and I can't get out of it. You know Shorty Newhouse?"

Dr. Foster nodded. Newhouse was a troublesome ruffian, a gambler and whisky-seller, whom he had once ordered off the reservation.

"Newhouse and me crossed the pass dis afternoon. We had two packloads of whisky to turn over to the boss, who'd trade it for fur. The storm slowed us up, and instead of camping we tried to go on to the meeting place. We got off the trail in the dark, and Shorty's horse rolled down the mountain side wit' him. He's bad hurt."

With a visible effort Foster straightened his stooped shoulders. "Is he lying out in the weather?"

"No. I got him on a packhorse, and packed him as far as the shack on Otter Creek. But he screamed and yelled, and I couldn't pack him no furder. I t'ink he's dying."

"And you want me to come to him?"

"I want you to, but I ain't got nerve to ask you. Shorty is my pard, good or bad. Maybe you couldn't do not'ing for him. Maybe he deserves what he got, and if so, I deserve it, too. But he'll die sure if you don't come."

Molly uttered a low cry and laid her hand on her father's arm. "Oh, you can't go out tonight. It's a five-mile ride to Otter Creek. It will kill you."

"If the man needs me, I'll have to go," Foster answered quietly.

When Dick heard that simple statement, so free from heroics of any kind, his eyes lighted up.

"But maybe it's a trap," Molly persisted. "They are your worst enemies."

"Lady, if you t'ink dat, I want you to shoot me dead." Larsen's look and tone held something of dignity. "Not one in the whole gang is mean enough for dat, 'cept maybe one."

Molly nodded, biting her lips. She knew that Larsen was speaking the truth in every syllable. And she knew, too—sadly and darkly—that her own entreaties were false, unworthy of her.

Meanwhile Dick stood to one side, an intense look on his face. He had just come perilously near to revealing his secret. Larsen's story had conjured up the past; he had responded as naturally as when the telephone bell beside his bed used to arouse him from a sleep. "I'll go," he had said in a tone of authority.

Then he had remembered. He could not go. He looked up, shaken, to see whether either Molly or Foster had noticed. But they were absorbed in Larsen's story, and if they had heard his remark, they had attached no significance to it. They were so easy to fool, Molly and her father. They never suspected him, no matter what breaks he made. He had only to sit holding his hands, and he was safe.

Not relief, but a strange anguish, pervaded him. The sight of the old white-haired doctor turning to the coat rack, fumbling into his mackinaw, and picking up his satchel, seemed to tear the heart out of him. A lump rose in his throat, but he swallowed it and spoke clearly in the silence.

"You are not well enough to go, are you, father?"

"I have to go, son. Larsen says the man is badly hurt."

"Let me go in your place. I know a good deal about first aid. I'll try to keep him alive until morning; then you can come on."

"That's fine of you, Dick, but first aid won't save the man's life. It's a call I can't refuse, as long as I'm able to go."

"I'm going with you and help you all I can," Dick said. "Will Molly be all right here alone?"

"Don't worry about me." The girl's voice had a bell-like ring in the hushed room. "Needa will be here, and we can look out for ourselves. You go with father and save him all you can."

"I'm never afraid to leave Molly," Foster said. His blue-tinged face lighted with pride. "You ought to see how she can shoot that little pistol of hers."

A dim smile curled Molly's lips. "Anyway that isn't the question." She spoke quietly in utter simplicity.

Her father flashed her a tired smile. "That's the stuff, Molly. And, Dick, I do want you to come, if you can. It will be a tough, cold ride and a trying night, but it may mean the difference between saving that poor chap and letting him die. If you know first aid, you can probably help me a great deal."

There was no trouble about horses. Larsen had brought his own as well as the pack animal on which he had borne the injured man to Otter Creek cabin. Foster's own saddle horse, a fine bay named Buck, always took shelter in the barn on nights like this and would come to his master's call. One of the Indians helped with the saddling, and soon they were ready to start.

Molly kissed her two men good-by. Her father got the first kiss, brave and proud with a comrade's understanding, sweet with a daughter's love, but sad with a woman's woe and fears. How would the old man fare on this desperate ride? There would be exposure and hardship racking his ailing body, slippery trails and perilous steeps. Her eyes were wide and bright when she turned to Dick.

"I'll do everything I can," Dick promised, when Molly rushed to his arms.

But even this was not wholly true. He would not dare do too much in helping Foster treat his patient, for fear of showing his hand.

"I know you will. You are wonderful, Dick—I love you more than you'll ever understand. And tonight you're a doctor, too, going out to save life."

What a tragic farce it was! Shaken through and through, Dick turned away and mounted his horse. Foster did likewise; Molly followed the men into the storm to give them their lanterns. Dick could never forget this parting scene, any more than the girl's fateful words of farewell, still ringing in his ears.

As she handed up his lantern, the weird yellow gleam lighted her face. It was vivid as a star in the cheerless dark; it had a beauty he had never seen there before. Her long, pointed eyes caught and threw back the light. Her lips were parted, as though they were thrilling from his kiss. A distance off, the other two horsemen looked like Titans and cast gigantic shadows on the snowy ground. Big, wet flakes fluttered and whirled out of the black sky, glimmered for an instant in the lantern light, and disappeared.

Larsen led the way, Foster next, and Dick brought up the rear. Before they had gone a hundred yards the lighted squares of the windows dimmed and disappeared in the thick snowfall. Winter was riding hard tonight. His cohorts were raiding the land; the raw forces of the North were up in arms.

To fight on to the cabin through this snow-swept forest would be hard enough for Dick and Larsen, men in the prime of youth and strength; for Dr. Foster, white-haired and wasted with disease, it might easily mean disaster.

That he should ride on, now that he had felt the might of the storm, was the most inspiring act of faith Dick had ever seen. If Foster came through and performed his given task, it would be almost irrefutable proof of the spirit's mastery over flesh.

Foster was not an exceptionally spiritual man. He was simply a family doctor, probably behind the times and not overly skilful; there were thousands like him scattered through the land. Yet in his fidelity to what he considered a deep professional obligation he might perform acts tinged with the miraculous. This thought gave Dick pause. It showed all life in a new light.

"You are wonderful, Dick," Molly had said. The roar of the storm in Dick's ears could not drown out the lingering echo of her farewell words. How mistaken she was! If she knew the truth, she would not let him ride in company with the white-haired veteran in front. "I love you more than you will ever understand." Yes, she did love him, the irony of fate. Dick could think of only one jest more grim—that he should learn to love her in return.

The first mile of the Otter Creek trail skirted the timber. It was slippery and treacherous; the horses walked with lowered heads, quivering with fear. When at last they entered the timber, the wind was less keen, but they had to ride through snow-covered brush that banged against them and knocked snow into their faces, up their sleeves, and down their necks.

The ride was not only cold, desolate, and perilous, but one of the strangest Dick could imagine. The bobbing lanterns cast a weird yellow gleam into the snow-swept thickets. They showed the young saplings writhing in agony, and revealed old snags like monsters half hidden in the drifts. The tall trees were giants, alive, menacing. The shadows of the riders were grotesque, monstrous ghosts leaping over the snow.

All the time the pipe-organ of the wind continued its wild tune. This, and the soughing of the forest, the drum-beat of an occasional broken limb swinging against its fellow, the creaking of dead trees and the swish of green branches, made a weird, solemn chorus. This was one of the memorable nights of Dick's life.

Although they were three, each rider felt infinitely alone. When Larsen stopped to look for a blaze, Dick rode up beside him just to see his face and hear his voice.

"Does the old feller seem to be holdin' up all right?" Larsen asked.

"Yes, he's doing fine. Much better than I hoped."

“By Gott, he is a man. And to t’ink he is doing dis for Shorty and me, who has helped to cause him so much trouble. One t’ing you can bet, dat we don’t cause him no more trouble. Dat skinflint can work his game alone from now on.”

“Whom do you mean by ‘that skinflint’?” Dick asked.

Larsen hesitated five long seconds. “I—cannot speak his name.”

“I understand. I just didn’t think. Well, I’m glad you’ll cut out your end of it anyway.”

“You bet you. It was bad business anyhow. But one t’ing I want you to know—we didn’t bring no bottle for dat feller who tried to kill your sister. We say to the od’er man—the one I cannot name—if you let him have any more bottles, we fix you.”

They rode on into the night. Across swollen streams, through quagmire, and over slippery, perilous ledges, the brave mountain horses carried them safely. One by one the lonely ridges dropped behind them. The wind buffeted them, but could not beat them back, and although the snow eddies swept round them, dimming their lanterns and almost blotting them out, always they emerged and pushed on.

They made the cabin at last. Chilled through, stiff and lame, Dick had difficulty getting out of his saddle. His numbed legs almost gave way under him, but he stumbled forward and held his lantern up to see the old doctor’s face. At first he was almost afraid to look closely. What symptoms would he see, so patent to his trained eyes?

Then he almost whooped for joy. Foster had come through the trying hours in wonderful shape. In spite of his illness he seemed to have a reserve vitality amazing in one of his years. He was deeply tired, and the bluish tinge of his flesh was enhanced, but his eyes were still vivid and alive, and the hand that he gave Dick steady and strong.

“Are you all right.”

“Pretty much all right. I’m a tough old fowl, my boy, for all my threescore. If I could just get rid of this cussed heart trouble, I could ride these hills for many a day yet. But I don’t think I can get out of this saddle unless you and Larsen drag me out.”

So they pulled him out with strong, kind hands. Taking their lanterns, the men stumbled into the cabin. And when the hollow, shadow-filled eyes of the broken man on the bunk lifted and saw Foster’s white head in the lantern

light, he uttered what Dick thought was the most eloquent and moving prayer he had ever heard.

"Thank God, doc, you've come!"

Larsen built up the dying fire in the small cabin stove. Foster threw off his mackinaw and began a first hasty examination of his patient. It did not surprise Dick to see him turn at once to his satchel and get out his hypodermic needle. His gray hand was steady as he pressed the point gently into the injured man's arm.

Then in the yellow lantern light Foster began his work. Dick stood beside him, handing him his tools and equipment and helping him with a smooth skill which might have wakened the old man's suspicions, had he not been so intent on the business in hand. Shorty's injuries were not quite so serious as Larsen supposed, yet they required expert treatment if he were ever to walk again. Besides flesh wounds into which dirt and gravel had been ground, he had two serious fractures in his leg, and two broken ribs that threatened to pierce his lung cavity and finish him quickly.

For the broken leg bones Dick made the splints. Risking everything, he made them well, and Dr. Foster stared at them in amazement.

"That's a professional-looking job, my boy," he said. "A first-class doctor was lost in you. Whoever taught you first aid sure knew his business."

While Foster was setting Shorty's broken ribs, Dick watched him appraisingly. Here was something along his own line; his own hand, desolately empty and idle at his side, had a curious itching eagerness. . . . But the old man did a workmanlike job, and Dick could find no fault with it.

At last there was nothing left but a bad flesh wound on Shorty's hand; this must be cleansed, stitched and bandaged. Tired out, his fingernails so blue that Dick could not bear to look at them, the old doctor seemed reluctant to finish this bit.

A reckless light shone suddenly in Dick's eyes. "I'll do that for you, if you want me to."

"You think you can?" Foster's very tone was gray with fatigue.

"I know it. I made quite a study of first aid." Dick smiled bitterly in secret. "I came very near to being a real doctor."

"By heaven, you'd have made a good one! You have every qualification. Dick, I wish that your mother—but it's too late now to think about that.

What an opportunity she threw away! And you would have made the most of it, if you'd only had a chance."

A chance! Dick shivered. "You want me to go ahead on that hand?"

"Go ahead. I'll watch you, and help you if you get into trouble."

And now Dick had to attempt the most difficult bit of acting of the whole play so far. He had to pretend an awkwardness he did not possess, to do a job skilfully yet with no show of skill, to satisfy the trained eyes watching him and yet not reveal the fluence and dexterity of his own trained hands. He began to brush and cleanse the ugly tear. Holding hard on his own wrist, so it would not move too lightly and freely, he threaded his needle and, following Foster's directions, trimmed and stitched the torn skin. Finally he affixed bandage and tape.

"That's simply skookum!" Foster exulted. "If you were five years younger, I'd make you study medicine even now."

In spite of everything Dick glowed warm at the praise. "Glad I could do something."

"Dick, it's been a great night, one of the best in my life. You've showed yourself in a new light, and I'm mighty proud of you. And last but not least —we've done Shorty a first-class job."

Chapter X

When Foster had rested, and dawn broke, he and Dick returned home. The next day the horses were sent down to the lower reaches of the river, where they could find scant winter grazing. Winter swooped down. The frost struck deeper every night, smiting first the lakes and shallow pools, and finally silencing the wild cataracts in the gorges of the mountains. The last of the migratory birds flew southward, leaving only such hardy souls as the Canada jay and the snow-bunting, and the great white owl that skimmed the drifts.

Hunger, riding the land in Winter's track, drove the bears into hibernation. No doubt they went regretfully, because this four-month trance is akin to death. The wolves howled nightly under the cold moon and sang the Fear Song, the first song of life.

Soon the snow began to fall in earnest. Day after day the flakes sifted down, until the spruce trees bowed with the weight, and the land was one white miracle from the Aleutian Mountains to the far slopes of the Endicotts. The forest had seemed a hushed place even in summer, when birds called, and the little furry people rustled in the brush. Now it lay entranced, its least whisper smothered by the snow. The burdened tree limbs could not sway and utter their moaning cries. Such creatures as still wandered through the haunted solitudes crept on cushioned feet, silent as shadows.

In the brief, dark days the snow looked milky white, and the drifts took strange forms like cubist sculpture. In the long bitter nights the clouds usually cleared away, and the stars burned like lamps over the pearl-gray forest. As the cold deepened, the Northern Lights began to whisk and dance in the purple sky.

But winter weather could not vanquish Molly Foster. When the *chechahco* (newcomer) learned how to manage snowshoes, she took him on long, thrilling hikes into the solitudes. He learned to love the great silences; he lived more vitally than ever before. He could understand now why Alaskans prefer their white winters even to their green, flower-scented summers. New vigor came into his body.

Sometimes he and Molly hunted moose in the "yards" in the lower river. They met the caribou plunging through the deep snow; they stalked the wild

sheep at timberline; they tracked and spied upon the lesser folk of the woods, mostly savage little hunters such as mink, marten, and silky ermine with blood-red eyes.

Molly showed Dick that a dot of yellow, like a topaz shining in a little mound of what seemed to be snow, was often the bright eye of a ptarmigan flattened against the drift. Once, in the winter sunlight, she showed him the most convincing-looking ghost Dick had ever imagined—the distinct and unmistakable shadow of a fox bounding across empty snow. The tribal magicians would have told him that this was the spirit-fox of Indian legend; in reality it was a striking instance of protective coloring—a greater wonder than any ghost that ever walked. The fox was present, unseen. He was white as the drifts, and only his shadow showed dark.

Stephen rarely went with them on these expeditions. In the first place his trading activities took most of his time, and besides, he found no pleasure in the solitudes unless he could kill game. To this latter pastime Dick and Molly made strenuous objections. After several minor tragedies and many broken promises, they told him frankly that if he wished to go with them, he must leave his rifle at home.

Except when they were actually hunting meat, they themselves carried nothing but a pistol. Molly stanchly believed that this was the way to see game—that the flash of the sunlight on the gun barrels, or perhaps some strange emanation from the cold steel itself, kept the shy forest folk at a distance. From the wild hunters there seemed nothing to fear. The bears were in hibernation; besides, they almost never made unprovoked attacks upon human beings. Other beasts of prey skulking through these solitudes were mainly night hunters; Molly had grown up with them and did not give them a thought.

She and Dick were particularly fond of skiing. They would climb to the crest of a glittering hill, then Molly would lead the way down the wind-crusted snow slope. Fast, faster, she would fly, until the wind was a trumpet in her ears and her heart a war-drum in her breast; then she would top the rise and soar like a bird. Dick would follow as well as he could, with many a headlong fall.

One afternoon, when they were trying out a new slope on the far side of the river, Molly met with what might have been a serious accident. As she was skimming along just before the take-off, her eyes glittering with the zest of life, her ski struck a dead snag under the snow. The ash broke with a loud

report, and she felt a vicious stab of pain in her ankle as she went hurtling through the air.

She landed on a steep slope, slid like a piece of ice, and fetched up in a soft drift. Risking his own neck, Dick broke his wild descent and piled up beside her. At once he gathered her into his arms, his trained eyes searching her face.

She was trying to smile at him, but the shadows in her eyes, her trembling lips, and the swift ebb of scarlet from her cheeks made this duty hard.

Dick was not in the least deceived. “Where are you hurt, Molly?”

“Nowhere except my ankle. I believe—I twisted it. It *does* hurt, *like—the—dickens*!”

He slipped off her stout boot and with gentle, sensitive fingers made an examination. “No bones broken,” he stated authoritatively. “That’s something to be thankful for. But you won’t do any more walking for a few days at least, old girl.”

“Don’t be silly. I’ve got to walk. We’re more than five miles from home.”

“If we were fifty miles from home, you couldn’t walk on that ankle.” He pressed it gently, and she winced. “You see, don’t you? You’ve got a bad sprain.”

It was characteristic of her that she should try to make light of her pain, not only for his sake but for her own. Partly this was the sporting code of the North; partly it was her native valor, refusing to let her yield to any evil, combined with the heart-felt belief in her mind’s mastery over her body. Quickly she looked for something to occupy her thought, and in this eager search she made a startling discovery.

“Dick, you look just like a doctor,” she said in an amazed tone. “I’ve seen father get that very expression a hundred times.” As she gave way to this wonder, her pain throbbed dully and almost ceased. “And, Dick, you talk like one—and you act like one.”

Dick held hard. By a strong effort of will he made no visible start, and his clean-cut features did not change expression. It was a startling proof of his power of concentration, a great asset in a surgeon.

“How do you account for it?” he asked absently, as he continued to examine the girl’s ankle.

“I can’t account for it, unless it’s hereditary. Father said you ought to have been a doctor—what a shame it is that you weren’t. And why did a man like you have to make his living as a clerk in a post-office? Why couldn’t you have done almost anything you wanted to?”

He pretended not to hear these questions, because he did not know how to answer them. “The next thing is how to get you home,” he said. “Well, that’s obvious. I’m going to carry you.”

“But you can’t carry me five miles.”

“Can’t, eh?” Dick laughed aloud, partly with pleasure in his own sure strength, partly with relief that he had warded off a dangerous crisis. “You weigh only a hundred pounds, and it’s live weight at that. The common pack up here, for a man crossing country, is from sixty to seventy-five pounds. In officers’ training camp—”

He checked himself suddenly. He did not know whether or not Richard Foster had ever served as a cadet in the late war. But Molly’s eyes were on him, and he had to go on.

“—the boys carry eighty pounds, and though they cussed a bit, they made a go of it. Of course, I can get you home, Molly. But we’ll have to start right now if we’re going to make it in before dark.”

The girl glanced toward the low sun. “We can’t make it. It’s impossible. And there’s no moon till after midnight.”

“Moon or no moon, we’ll try to make it in; we’re not going to camp out unless we absolutely have to.”

Molly suggested a short cut between the ridges. The going was rough there in summer, and only the bears and the wolverines laired in the tangle of brush and fallen timber, but now the snow had probably smoothed the way, and they could pass with ease. He wrapped her ankle in his scarf, cached her skis, and lifted her in his arms.

But she would not let him bear her weight in this tiring fashion. Sometimes she clung to him, her slim arms about his neck; sometimes she sat first on one broad shoulder, then the other, holding on to his head; once she insisted that she lie across his shoulder, her left arm supporting her knees —an awkward-looking position, but an easy one for him.

It was a severe test of his strength, but he reveled in it. He breathed the crisp air, and his muscles seemed tireless. Yet this alone could not explain the uplift of his heart, the dim, undefinable happiness tingling through him.

It was good to be carrying the precious warm burden home from the fastnesses—her cheek brushing his own, and her exquisite, slight body pressing against him. . . .

But he must not let his fancy roam. . . . He was almost glad when unexpected difficulties of the trail demanded his full attention. The cut-off was not such easy going as Molly had predicted. The powdery snow had not covered the heaped-up rocks and down-timber in an even sheet, but had drifted before the wind, leaving some of the obstructions almost bare and covering others with huge white mounds. Dick had to feel his way.

The farther he penetrated into the valley, the more trouble he found. It would be hard enough to traverse this rough glen in daylight, with empty arms, let alone in the growing dusk with his precious burden. Half-way through the cut-off, they got into a snarl of down-timber, the bane of woodsmen at any time of year. It was a veritable labyrinth of crisscrossed trunks half hidden in the drifts, old snags thrusting up through the snow, branchy tops, and deep root holes.

For half an hour more Dick struggled on into the waste, the silence, the thickening dark. At last his ski caught in a hidden snare, throwing him forward on his knees. Only by a powerful stiffening of his back did he prevent Molly from being hurled against a tree trunk beyond.

It was all the warning he needed. They simply could not go on without serious risk of life and limb. He set the girl down on the stump, and they smiled into each other's eyes.

"We'll spend the night right here," Dick said. "Why we were such fools as to try to come even this far, I don't know. We won't sleep much, but at least we'll keep warm, and go home tomorrow with our bones intact."

"It's a good thing you're my brother. Otherwise this wouldn't be a laughing matter. I'm sorry I can't help you make camp."

Night was falling, so Dick wasted no more time. Using a ski as a shovel, he cleared away the snow from a level patch of ground between two fallen trees and began to cut firewood. Thanks to Molly's foresight, he was well equipped for this latter task. She had taught him to carry a small hand ax lashed to his packsack whenever he went abroad, and although on many of their trips it had seemed a useless burden, now it stood between them and the cold menace of the dark. Soon the blaze was leaping high, scattering the heavy shadows and making snug and warm their little nook between the fallen trunks.

Molly's poke proved to contain a stick of jerky and a bar of sweet chocolate; these she divided with Dick. Then they sat side by side, resting their backs against a mossy log, and toasting their feet at the fire.

The night thickened around them. The wind had died away, and save for the crackle of flame there was no sound left in the world. This strange, white, enchanted world was wholly theirs tonight. They were utterly alone, close as they had never been before.

Dick was afraid of this closeness. His heart leaped, and he could not make it be still. He tried not to look at Molly—her lips so red, her dreamy long eyes, the whiteness of her face on which the firelight played. He remembered the warmth of her body in his arms. . . .

Nor could he forget in sleep. Exquisite fancies haunted him. . . . Twice a strange, far-ringing call trembled in from the distant ridges before he could arouse himself to listen and heed. . . .

Molly suddenly sat up, an intense look on her face. "Did you hear that, Dick?"

"Yes. What was it?"

"I don't know. It might be a dog-team yelling on our trail—someone coming to look for us. It's hard to tell, so far. And it might be—"

Her words trailed off. Another sound, just at hand, riveted her attention. It was a swishing of snow-laden branches and the thump of feet, as some fast-running creature burst through the thickets, coming directly toward them.

Molly rose to her knees. Dick jumped up, and his pistol gleamed in the firelight.

"I don't think it's anything to be afraid of," he told her rapidly. "But I can't imagine what it can be—"

They strained their eyes into the gloom. The thickets parted, and a gray something, with luminous eyes burst through. Its last bound carried it full into the firelight, where it checked and whirled to gaze into the dark. Instantly Molly recognized it as one of her father's tame reindeer. Apparently it had come to them for protection.

"There's something behind it," Dick warned.

"Don't shoot! I think it's another reindeer. Something is chasing them, I think."

The second animal drew up, snorting, just outside the circle of firelight. It was much larger than the first, and when Molly saw its outline, she uttered a gasp of amazement. It was not another of her father's herd, but a young caribou stag. Often these animals mated—they were close kin in blood—and tonight the doe had brought her mate to the haven of the fire.

As Dick stared at these strange visitors, the reindeer doe reeled and sank down beside the fire. She could flee no more tonight from the peril in the dark; obviously she had run to exhaustion. The caribou snorted again and, forsaking his mate, bounded away.

"What does it mean?" Dick demanded.

"It means that we may have some visitors."

"I know what that sound was now. So do you. You—don't think—they'll attack us—do you?"

"Not likely. They're after the deer, not us."

Into the silence presently a deep, ringing chorus, wild and strange beyond description, came throbbing across the snow. It was the same call they had heard before, but much nearer now. The fallen reindeer lifted her head and gazed into the breathless dark. Molly and Dick looked into each other's eyes.

Dick threw fresh fuel on the fire, then came and stood over Molly, his pistol ready in his hand. But they did not hear the warning chorus again. The silence closed down deeper than ever.

"Perhaps they've swung around the camp, following the caribou," Dick said at last. "Otherwise we'd hear them."

"That's just the trouble. We wouldn't hear them."

Her words trailed off. She raised her arm and pointed into the darkness. Dick looked up in time to see two little yellow moons glow once at the edge of the firelight, and wink out.

Dick was a *chechahco*. For him this forest drama had all the terror of the unknown. Molly saw the blood leave his face, so she reached for his hand and took it between both of hers. He looked down at her in amazement. That she would thus use both her hands, and not keep one of them free for her own defense, steadied and heartened him more than any other thing she could possibly have said or done.

“Don’t worry, old sport,” she told him. “I don’t think they’ll attack us. All they’ll do is give us the thrill of our lives.”

Her tone was brave enough, but her pale cheeks and wide eyes gave her away.

“You can’t put that over on me,” he whispered. “We’re in for trouble, and you know it. I’ve got my nerve back—tell me the truth. What’s going to happen?”

“No one ever knows what’s going to happen when Running Feet come.”

Later he would wonder at her use of this name, the English translation of the tribal term for the gray brethren of the forest. It could only mean that her childhood contacts with the Indians had colored her thought far more than she knew.

“It depends on how hungry they are. If they’re desperate, they may rush the camp to get at the reindeer, and if they do, it will be a fight. But I don’t expect it, and that’s the truth.”

“They’ll wait till the fire burns down, of course.”

“Yes, and we mustn’t let it burn down.”

“But we haven’t much fuel. And if we have to go out into the dark after more—”

“We must get rid of them soon. The quickest way would be to let them have the deer.” She glanced furtively into Dick’s pale face. “What do you think of that?”

“You mean—to force the deer away from the fire, so they can get her?”

“Yes—”

“By God, no! Only as a last resort, to save your life. The deer came to us for help, and she’s one of your father’s herd. I’d sooner take a chance on fighting the wolves.”

Her pale face slowly flushed, and the firelight was a glory in her eyes. “I love you for that, Dick,” she breathed. “I don’t know why it means so much. . . . We’ll see it through together.”

Yes, and they would win. At once the situation lost its sinister aspect and became a magnificent adventure. An intense thrill passed over him, tingling in his scalp and racing up and down his spine. Partly it was sheer excitement, but behind it was something deeper, stranger, far more

significant, that involved Molly. They were comrades here in the firelight—more than comrades. They were mates, and in union they could face any danger, conquer any foe. This forest and this night, and the snow below and the white stars above, were all their own.

"They're all around the fire, aren't they?" Dick whispered.

"Yes. If you want to see them, you must make no sudden motions. Just sit still and turn your head slowly. . . ."

All about the fire the little twin moons shone, winked out, and shone again. As well as Dick could tell, there were a dozen here. They made absolutely no sound, and only the faint bleat of the terrified reindeer relieved the tension of utter silence. Once, when the flame made a sudden upward leap, Dick caught a glimpse of a dark shape, crouched and ominous, against the white background.

Molly pressed Dick's hand.

"Have they been here long enough?" she breathed.

"Long enough. I haven't your confidence, Molly. If the fire should die down, they'd be on us in an instant."

"We'll scare them away. Get your pistol ready and aim it at one of those pairs of eyes. They'll wink out before you can shoot, but will shine again in a moment. When they come again, let him have it."

"But we have only six shells, no more than are in the gun."

"Six are enough. You'll need only one, I think."

Dick rested his arm over the log, following Molly's directions. For a few long, tense seconds he held steady aim, then the twin moons lighted up again still in his line of fire. With a steady finger he pressed the trigger.

At the pistol crack there rose a cry from the darkness. Obviously the bullet had not struck between the eyes, but had given a body wound, but this was all the better for Dick's purpose. The soft sound of a body dropping down was not nearly so alarming to the eery visitors as the sharp yelp of pain. The stricken one bounded off, yelling as he ran; instantly the whole gray band broke for cover. There was nothing left but the empty shadows, the silent forest and the snow, and the deer lying beside the chuckling fire.

Perhaps the gray brethren would kill and devour their wounded comrade—such is the mercy of their clan—but they would not cross this trail again tonight. Molly and Dick could go to sleep in entire safety. But it was not

written that Dick's adventure should come to this quiet end. Poignant hours were to pass before he closed his eyes.

When the crisis was past, Molly slipped close to Dick and nestled against him. His arm was about her shoulders, her hair against his cheek. Warm and secure and exquisitely happy, she slipped away for a few seconds, then half roused and drew Dick's face down to hers.

"I love you, Dick," she whispered sleepily as she kissed him. "Sometimes I love you almost like a sweetheart, instead of a brother. I'm so happy with you. . . ."

Her lips lightly brushing his and this whispered confession were all that was needed to melt the ice about his heart. A flame struck through him, too fierce to check; its white light was in his face and its shine in his eyes. He dared not give back her kiss, because his lips would betray his secret.

What a deep secret it was! Until now he had somehow concealed it even from himself. But he could deny it no more.

Even so, he sealed his lips until light slumber carried the girl away again. Then, "I love you, Molly!" burst forth from the depth of his heart, yet not loud enough to summon her from sleep.

Chapter XI

Love had never come to Dick Grant before, perhaps through chance, perhaps because his cynic's shield had been raised against it. He had known friendship—affection—passion, handmaidens of love, but the thing itself, the profound spiritual wakening and transfiguration, had passed him by. When it came at last, it was a bolt from the blue.

Suddenly it was here. It had broken through all his barriers. Instead of a sweet illusion, a kind of gentle fantasy that he had always imagined it must be, it was the foremost reality of his life. Whatever else was false, this thing was true.

He had thought that love, an illusion, belonged to early youth. He might have expected it in his early or middle twenties, but not now. He was only thirty, true, but old for his years, and he supposed that he had passed the happy days when any emotion could triumph over his reason. He had thought that if he ever cared greatly for a girl, it would be at the utmost a rationalized passion, not a storm like this. The fact that he was a mature man, somewhat cold, cynical, and disillusioned, did not save him but seemed to add force to the storm. It seemed that he had never really lived before. Life had new meaning, a poignancy he had never imagined, a richness he had not dreamed.

As yet he would not let himself think what this would mean. It was enough to hold the sleeping girl in the hollow of his arm—to watch her sweet breathing—to try hard not to waken her with his kisses, because he knew that when she stopped dreaming he must stop too. In the firelight she was the incarnation of an image he had always carried in his soul, the fulfilment of his life-long search for beauty—that quest which every being makes between earth and sky.

Only a few months before, in his talk with old Dr. Hollingsworth, he had denied all that was not material. Of the spirit he had had no comprehension and no hope. He still did not understand the term, but he would never again question its everlasting truth. He himself had just gone through a spiritual experience—the wakening of his love for Molly. True, it had its physical side—the beauty of her form and face made his heart glow—but its greater aspects were surely of the spirit. He could pore over all the medical books ever written and never find its scientific explanation. It was the final rebuttal and reproof to the cynical philosophy of his earlier years.

He had nothing on earth to gain, everything to lose. He could search the world over and find no greater folly, from a cynic's viewpoint, than to fall in love with a girl he could not hope to possess. Yet it remained the most fortunate and splendid experience of his life. Instead of folly, it was a wisdom higher than his own, and the rewards were incalculable.

One of these rewards was already in his hands. It seemed that the physical world about him had new beauty, new meaning. The firelight on the snow, the dark trees mute beneath their white burden, the silence, the vastness, the notched line of the spruce against the rising moon, the calm, sweet vigil of the stars overhead—all these proclaimed a glory he could share, an eternal harmony he could, in the long last, possess, a truth and a fulfilment higher and better than he had ever dreamed.

And now strength came to him to look his earthly fate in the face. He began to talk to Molly, but although his lips moved, no sound came forth to waken her.

"What have you brought me to, sweetheart?" he asked with glowing face. "Look what you've done to me, with your black eyes, and your red lips, and the sweetness of you, and the glory of you. You have turned the tables on me. You have made the punishment fit the crime.

"I tried to steal from you, but instead you've stolen my heart. I tried to fool you, but instead you've made a fool of me, the happiest in the world."

The girl stirred and sighed. The train of his thoughts was checked. But when she slept peacefully again, he resumed his silent discourse.

"What can I do now? Can I tell you who I am? No, if I do that, you will despise me. I haven't forgotten what you told me. You couldn't bear a cheat in any kind of game, you said. And if anyone harmed or played false with your father or your brother, you would hate him always and never forgive him, no matter what excuse he had.

"You meant it, too. If you knew how I've tricked you and betrayed the trust your brother put in me, you couldn't bear me in your sight. You would think of him lying in a neglected grave under a false name, and that would be the end of me.

"I couldn't bear for you to hate me, sweetheart. I'm not worthy of your love, but I want it and need it more than you'll ever know. With it to inspire me, I can go on and justify my life. Always it will give me something to live and work for. It is a star for me to follow to the end."

He mused a long time.

“I can never have you for my own, but I’ll have your love, and that’s better than your hate and contempt. And it’s a sweetheart’s love, not a sister’s. You have hidden the truth from yourself, but you can’t hide it from me.

“Never, never, can I let you know the truth. If I guarded my secret before, I must guard it ten times more closely now. I’ll be happy with you as long as I can, then at last the man you know as Richard Foster will go out of your life. Perhaps he will pretend to go on a journey, and word will come back of his death. And you will mourn for him, and love him, and look up to him—and Dick Grant, practicing surgery in some far country, will have a memory that will always lead him on and make him a better man.”

Again he paused to kiss lightly the lips half smiling in sleep. When he resumed, his fine eyes were glowing.

“So what have you done to me, Molly, with your beauty and fineness and your love? Listen to me, dearest. I’m giving up my scheme against your father. Instead I will help him in his fight to preserve the tribe, and help you find happiness in every way I can. When this play is over, and I take my own name again, I will go straight. And then I’ll try to atone for my breach of faith to your brother by keeping faith with those who trust me as a doctor—by being true to my profession. Last of all—I will always love you, Molly, and give thanks that I found you, even though I had to lose you in the end.”

When the miracle of the dawn was reenacted on the hills, Dick put down the sleeping girl and with his hand ax made a rude sled. He had no nails, but by notching the runners and laying sticks across he fashioned a seat for Molly. Wrapping her warmly in his big coat, he began the long mush home.

He had never known so bright a morning, such a joyous task. Over glistening hills, down into silent, haunted glens, and on to naked plateaus, where the wind howled all day over empty white, across frozen streams and ice-bound lakes, his lean shoulders tugged the sled. His muscles rippled under his skin. His eyes kindled, and his heart glowed.

At last they saw the village hovering white roofed under the spruce trees. A search party was being organized, headed by Chief Strongheart.

“I knew you’d take no harm from the wild creatures,” Foster explained, “but I was afraid you’d fallen in with some of the ruffians from the gold-camp, and they’d made trouble for you. Thank God, you’re safe!”

So the first act of the drama was over. What the second might hold for him, Dick hardly dared imagine. One thing was sure: he could not bring it to a close one moment short of its fated end. Fate had cast him in this part, and he must continue to play it to the final curtain.

One of the first problems that he must face was that of Molly's decision about Stephen. Stephen had been especially persistent of late, wooing the girl with all the energy and determination of his strong, vigorous character, and now he was demanding a definite engagement.

"And I should like to see her settled before next year," Foster said. "I don't know how much longer I'll be with her—I may go north with the tribe, or anything may happen—and Stephen would protect her and look after her so well. Dick, won't you urge her to accept him?"

"I feel like urging her to turn him down." Dick spoke straight from the shoulder. "However, you and I have no right to try to influence her either way."

"I agree with you that we have no right to put pressure on her. But good advice from a father or an older brother saves a girl many a mistake. I only want her to be happy."

"And she wants *you* to be happy—that's the trouble. She loves you so much that she'll do almost anything you want her to, even against her own desires."

"Bless her heart! Yes, I must guard against that. . . . But you watch Stephen, Dick, and see if you don't think better of him."

So Dick kept watch of Stephen. To do so it was necessary to keep a sharp eye on Breed Paul, Stephen's clerk and undertrapper, who had not yet been cleared of the charge of liquor smuggling. The time soon came when he suspected Paul of even bolder crime—and this was one of the most stirring episodes in his whole northern adventure.

It was a clear, cold night in the dark of the moon. As on many previous nights, Dick lay sleepless in his bed, his thoughts shuttling endlessly between hope and fear. Staring with sleepless eyes out his window, it seemed to him he saw a shadow glide slowly across the snow.

For all he knew it was a trick of his eyes. In the starlight the snow itself was one gray shadow from the North Pacific to the Arctic Sea. This was the hour when the imagination, harried by the ancient, hereditary fear of the dark, runs riot, warping the judgment and misleading the senses. But if this

were a fantasm, it persisted all the way along the house, until it disappeared in the region of the fur depot in the rear.

Dick got up silently and leaned out the window. Shivering with cold, and not at all sure but that he was following a will-o'-the-wisp, he watched and waited. Just as he was about to give up and go back to bed like a sensible man, a dim, reflected light brought a pale gleam to the snow, as if someone had pressed the button of a small flashlight half smothered in his hand. It disappeared instantly, but it cleared up all doubt in Dick's mind. There was someone—someone who came in stealth—at the door of the fur depot.

Hastily Dick slipped into his clothes. They were not easy to find in the pitch-black of the room, and he wasted considerable time. When he tried to put his hand on his pistol, he groped about the table in vain. True, he did not always keep it here. Sometimes he left it downstairs for cleaning. Meanwhile time was passing, and the thief might accomplish his purpose and escape.

Finally Dick was faced with the alternative of either turning on his light or going forth unarmed. Grimly he decided on the latter course. In the first place, if the square of his window lighted up, he might as well not go at all; the visitor would slip away in the darkness. In the second place, Dick was in a reckless mood. Since that night by the camp-fire in the winter forest, he had brooded many hours alone. The man known as Richard Foster must soon disappear from these scenes—this fact he realized ever more clearly—and whether he vanished through some chicanery, as he had come, or whether he departed with his head up, on the crest of some magnificent adventure, really did not matter a great deal to Richard Grant. This was the bitter truth. His was a strange soul to start with. He was no longer tormented by a contempt for life—Molly and Dr. Foster had cured him of this—but a cold, grim contempt for death abided in him still.

He walked softly over the packed snow to the entrance of the fur depot. By now his eyes were adjusted to starlight, and he could see that the door was wide open. Noiseless as a shadow, he stood at one side and groped for the padlock. To his astonishment it had not been forced, but had been opened with a key which was still in the lock.

For a moment he thought the intruder had gone, but looking through the crack where the door swung back he saw a tiny beam of light burst out between the fingers of a man's hand. It was directed at one of the bundles of silver fox, and as Dick watched, he saw the intruder's free hand emerge dimly into the light and take down one of the skins. Instantly the gleam went

out, and Dick guessed that the thief was now putting the skin into his poke to carry off.

Why did he not take the whole bundle? The answer was obvious—this was sneak-thieving, not wholesale banditry. The robber meant to cover all traces of his visit, so he could come again. By taking only a few pelts at a time, his pilfering might not be discovered for many months, if at all.

It occurred to Dick that he might softly shut the door and snap the padlock, and have the thief at his mercy. But the plan presented serious difficulties. As soon as the closing door shut out the starlight, the man would hurl himself against it, and break free before Dick could snap the padlock. It was safer to wait and pounce on him when he emerged.

Once more he saw the light glimmer in another corner of the room. This time a half-dozen marten skins went into the bag. And now the thief seemed to have enough. Dick heard dry pelts rattle as he pushed through the bales toward the doorway.

Dick pressed against the wall of the building. A sharp joy burst over him as the sounds came nearer, and he knew that a hand-to-hand conflict was now inevitable. His muscles grew tense, thrilling, eager, and alive; he held his breath as he crouched. He felt no fear; this was a strange fact. Instead he would greet this foe with open arms—powerful, crushing arms, stronger than Dick himself realized—glad of the chance to pour forth in violence some of the dammed-up emotion in his heart.

The thief came stealthily on. As he was softly shutting the door, Dick sprang for him. It was a vicious attack, swift and powerful, and had it taken the man entirely by surprise it surely would have borne him down. But he had been given a split-second warning. Perhaps he had seen Dick's shadow out of the corner of his eye; possibly he realized the danger through some inexplicable sixth sense.

Most men could not have acted on so brief a warning. This man whipped about like a panther. That he was a powerful, quick-minded, agile being, worthy of his steel, Dick could no longer doubt. Already his body was braced, his fists lashing out. The two big men met breast to breast and, grappling, tried to break each other down.

It was no chivalrous duel. The foe was a terror. He lashed in short, heavy-fisted blows to Dick's head and body, trying to knock him out; he sought to disable him by thrusting upward with his knees. He would kill him if he could—of this Dick was certain. He had never encountered such fury.

The odds were in the thief's favor. His chief aim was to break loose and escape; to do this he could employ both hands, head, tooth and nail, knee and foot. But Dick must clutch the man with one arm while he defended himself with the other. Even so, the fight was close and hot. Dick's brain reeled, but still he held on. He was taking frightful punishment, but his blood was up now, and he would not yield.

The fray lasted almost half a minute before Dick definitely began to weaken, and wave after wave of exultation swept him still. Perhaps this was the primal joy of battle that all men know; possibly it was simple pride. He was putting up a magnificent fight! His foe was heavier, stronger by far, yet the utmost he could do was to break away. In any fair field he would not stand a chance with Dick. Those big, sinewy fists could not match the trained, quick surgeon's hands; his lithe, powerful body could never best the doctor's cool, sure brain.

It was an experience never to forget—this combat in the dark with an unknown antagonist. Neither man cried out, one because he feared his voice might be recognized, the other through some instinct of silence, deadly as a snake's. It did not occur to Dick to call for help. If he could not capture the thief alone, he was willing to let him go.

Presently an upstairs window in the house lighted up, inciting the thief to a fresh effort. He lashed a stinging blow into Dick's face, jarring him through and through, then, with a furious burst of strength, began to jerk free from his grasp. Dick fought gamely, still clutching the man's left sleeve, but at last the cloth tore through his fingers. Instantly the man darted away and vanished in the gloom.

Dick was aware that he held some small object in his hand. Dazed, he could not think what it might be, but a wise impulse made him clutch it tight and not drop it in the snow. As yet there was no chance to examine it.

Dr. Foster appeared at the lighted window. "What's the matter there?"

Dick's head was still reeling, but he managed to call up a cheerful reply. "Plenty! I just caught someone trying to steal your fur. Bring a gun and a light."

When the light came, in Dr. Foster's shaking hand, it revealed a moosehide sack lying in the snow beside the doorway, where the thief had dropped it, containing three silver foxskins and a dozen marten.

The old physician could not believe his eyes. "You don't think one of my people did it, do you?" he asked miserably. "Surely they haven't taken to

stealing."

"I don't think so. I'm inclined to think it was a white man, from the way the light shone through his fingers—probably some thug from the gold-camp."

"But no one there knows we have the furs."

"You can't be sure of that. Of course it might have been Breed Paul—I wouldn't put it past him." Dick slipped the key from the padlock which still hung open on its staple. "Is this your key?"

Foster's bluish hand trembled as he held the key to the light. "No, but it's very like it. This looks as if someone in the village has betrayed me."

"Perhaps not. A thief who had time to study that lock could have easily found a key to fit it. Now I think we'd better see how it looks inside."

In his first hasty examination Foster could not tell definitely whether any more of the furs were missing, but was inclined to think that the thief had made at least one other raid.

"You see, he didn't intend the theft to be discovered," Dick said. "He just skimmed the bales."

With the lantern they examined the tracks in the snow. Dick's boots showed plainly; near by were moccasin tracks belonging to the thief. There was little to be gained here. Any Indian in the tribe might have worn that footgear, or any white man who wished to divert suspicion. Dick followed the trail into the village road, where it was lost among a hundred similar tracks.

"It means that the old days are gone," Foster said sadly. "It used to be a man could leave his gold-poke in the cupboard, go hunting for six weeks, and find it untouched when he returned. I wish the whole tribe could start tomorrow for their new lands in the Endicotts."

"In the meantime, we'll have to post a guard every night over the fur depot. The Indians can take turns, and it won't be difficult. Also we'd better put on two or three extra padlocks."

Throughout this talk Dick continued to feel a small, hard object in his hand. For some dim and unaccountable reason he did not want to show it to Dr. Foster: it seemed best to pursue this clue alone. Only when he had closed the door of his own room did he open his hand and look at it.

Just as he thought, it was a small bone button from the sleeve of a man's coat. It had ripped off in his hand in the final tussle. When he found the mates of this button, he would no doubt find the thief.

Early the next morning he sauntered into the trading store. Breed Paul was behind the counter, his fleece-lined coat hung by the stove. If this dark-faced half-breed were last night's thief, he had worn some other garment. Both coat sleeves were made plain, without buttons of any kind.

While Dick considered this fact, Stephen came into the store, wearing his dark-red mackinaw. As he extended his right hand, Dick saw that the cuff was decorated with small bone buttons. There were three of them on this cuff, the right number. They appeared to be of the same color and size as the one Dick carried in his pocket.

His heart leaped, but he suspended judgment. Indeed, he almost threw the case out of court as too absurd to try. Buttons frequently look alike, and anyway it was impossible. . . . As yet he had no chance to glance at Stephen's left cuff.

"I suppose you heard about the attempted theft last night," Dick said easily.

"Yes. Dr. Foster told me about it when I dropped in to inquire about some stores. Well, it serves us all right for being so careless."

As he talked, he slipped off his coat and hung it beside Breed Paul's. The left sleeve hung free, and as Dick glanced at it his eyes slowly narrowed, gleaming bright. Two buttons showed plain as a pikestaff; the third was missing.

Chapter XII

Dick lounged into the chair behind the stove. His brain was cool and steady; the only sign of excitement visible in him was the persisting brilliance of his black eyes. Not much doubt remained now, but even of this he would give Stephen the benefit. Still suspending judgment, he watched his chance and compared the button in his pocket to those on the coat sleeve. They were identical.

Well, he should have suspected it long since. He had realized from the first that Stephen was not only obsessed by greed, but was given to lying and sharp practice.

How far he would go Dick had failed to perceive: it had not occurred to him that a man with such a plausible exterior would commit deliberate crime. Great God, how about himself! He, too, had a plausible exterior—damnably plausible, it seemed—yet it had not kept him from attempting a deliberate swindle. Anyway he should have remembered Stephen's deadliness on the hunting trails, and his resolute character, whereby he would take any risk or go any length to fulfil his desires. This man was no petty crook, but a spoiler of first rank. Dick should have read the truth in his strange, cold, three-cornered eyes.

It was evident now who was behind the whisky-selling in the village. Now that this trade was temporarily restrained, Stephen had taken even a straighter road to riches by pilfering from the fur house. The more he took, the less there would be to divide with Dick in the final settlement. And perhaps he had begun to entertain vague doubts as to whether he would share in the spoil at all. Lately he had sensed a change in Molly's attitude, auguring no good.

Dick yawned, stretched, and swung over to the counter behind which Stephen stood.

"Who do you suppose pulled off that job last night?" Dick asked. "I'm inclined to think it was a white man."

"Of course it was a white man." Stephen continued to weigh tea, adding the totals in neatly written figures. "Some ex-burglar from the gold-camp heard about the treasure, and made a key to fit the lock. He probably intended to make occasional trips over here and get away with thirty thousand dollars' worth of fur. That is"—and Stephen looked up with a

smile—"unless the whole thing was a frame, and you were pulling off the job yourself."

"By Jove, that sounds reasonable. The trouble is that I'm sure of half the fur anyway. Why should I take a risk like that?"

"No one is ever sure of anything. Besides, you might be in a hurry."

"It won't hold water, but it suggests another theory." Dick smiled sardonically. "You might be in a hurry, too, and you're skating on thin ice anyway. I should say that the thief was much more likely to be you."

Stephen laughed boyishly, with undoubted charm. "Yes, and look at this bruise on my cheek. I could have easily got it in the fracas last night."

Dick stared at the black-and-blue spot, unnoticed until now, on Stephen's cheek-bone. "By the way, how *did* you get it."

"Figure it out for yourself, my lad. You can see it looks like a blow from your fist. If you are any good, you can make a first-rate case against me."

He laughed again and went back to his work. A cool customer, this Stephen Hathaway! Dick resumed his seat behind the stove.

What now? Should he report his discovery, of the truth of which no further doubt remained, to Foster and his daughter? Not while there was honor among thieves! The pot must not call the kettle black. He must not expose Stephen for the same crime he had himself tried to commit. But one thing was sure—the depot must be guarded in the future. And Molly must be guarded against a much more evil pillage. Whatever else happened, she must not marry this relentless, desperate criminal.

Therefore he had a talk with Dr. Foster later in the day. They met in the doctor's bedroom; last night's excitement had gone hard with the old physician, and he had decided to spend the day resting.

"I've been thinking over what you told me about Molly and Stephen," Dick began, "and I've made up my mind that they should break off at once. She doesn't love him, in the first place. In the second place, he's not worthy of her. I have watched him closely, and I believe I am a good judge of character."

"I believe you are, too, Dick," Foster agreed. "In this way, as well as many others, you are like a trained physician. I'm not a good example, myself. Most men in my profession acquire a remarkable insight into character, but I failed to catch on."

“Will you take my word for it that Stephen is unfit to marry Molly?”

“I will, Dick, although it goes hard with me. Would you mind telling me what you have against him?”

“Greed. That’s the worst.”

“I’m afraid that is true. I tried to shut my eyes to it, yet it has forced itself upon me.”

“Moreover I don’t think he loves Molly for her own sake. I don’t mean that you should order him out of the house. Just tell him, the next time he asks you to speak for him to Molly, that you have decided against the match. And make the same thing clear to Molly.”

After two hours’ quiet thought, Foster decided Dick was right. Thank God, he had been made to see the light in time; his hungry heart and dim eyes had brought him to the brink of a near-tragedy. Looking back on his past relations with Stephen, he could recall many incidents that might have revealed the truth, had he not deliberately ignored them.

He called Molly to his bedside. “I have something to say to you—about Stephen.”

The radiant smile died on the girl’s lips. “I know what you are going to say. You want me to give Stephen a definite answer. Would you be bitterly disappointed—take it too hard—if I told him no?”

Foster smiled, shook his head, and drew his daughter’s cheek down to his. “I’ve changed my mind about Stephen,” he told her quietly at last. “I won’t take it too hard—in fact, I’d take it a whole lot harder if you accepted him.”

She started and looked quickly into his face. “You mean it?”

“I do mean it. I don’t want Stephen for my son-in-law. I’m ashamed that I put pressure on you as I did. As you can probably guess, it was Dick who showed me how wrong it was.”

“But you are expressing your own views, not his?”

“My own, Molly girl. He just started me on the right track.”

“I think his coming was a providence! It has all turned out so wonderfully that I feel almost afraid—as if there must be trouble waiting for us somewhere. But that’s silly, of course. . . . Dad, you’ve made me a mighty happy girl. I feel as if I’d just put down a heavy pack that I’d been carrying on my back for three long years.”

Her sparkling eyes and rosy cheeks were far more eloquent than her words. Her father blessed her, and blessed the man who had so wisely befriended her, as she bent and kissed his pale cheek. Foster would not go back on this decision.

When Stephen came to him, complaining of Molly's answer and asking Foster to use his influence with her, the old doctor shook his head firmly.

"It's for Molly to say. It's true I have encouraged you a long time, and urged her to encourage you, too, and if she has given you more cause to hope than you really had, it was my fault, not hers; but now I see things in a different light. It was a mistake from the first, Stephen. It was unjust to you, but far more unjust to her. I can't ask her to change her decision."

"You've certainly made a right-about-face," Stephen answered darkly. His odd, steely eyes kindled. "It's queer business, and I believe I see Dick's hand in it."

"I am speaking for myself, not for Dick. But let's be friends, Stephen, even if we can't be father and son. Don't say or do anything that we'd both be sorry about, later."

The youth's handsome face darkened wrathfully, but presently he seemed to get himself in hand. "I'm disappointed, but I'll try to make the best of it. And I hope, the same as you, that it won't make any difference in the friendship between you and me."

Foster beamed on the youth, almost regretting his decision.

"None in the world. And it's a fine upstanding way for you to take it too, Stephen. As long as you play the game square, I want you to continue here as trader, and perhaps go with the tribe when we head north next spring."

But would Dr. Foster ever make this journey? Stephen thought not. If the blue face and hollow eyes told the truth, the end of the winter would find him bound for a much farther country than the Endicott Divide. Stephen had never seen him look so ill. The night's excitement had almost precipitated a crisis in his malady; another such night might easily put him in his grave.

Stephen must look to this. If he were to win the big game he had played so long, there was no more time to lose. Once the rich stakes lay in reach of his hands; now they were slipping away.

He announced that he would mush to town this afternoon to see friends and transact business for the trading store. Somewhat to his surprise, Dick expressed a wish to go too. Stephen hesitated, regarding him with well-

concealed suspicion. Always before Dick had taken trouble to avoid the gold-camp, as if he had enemies there. Well, he did have enemies there, if he but knew it—various whisky dealers and squaw men who hated him for the meddler he was. If they could get a safe, fair chance at him—

Stephen's triangular eyes lighted up. By all means Dick could accompany him to town. He might commit some indiscretion to give Stephen the upper hand, or in the long ride they might arrive at some understanding advantageous to them both.

Dick said he wanted a night out, but his real reasons for making the trip and running the risk of meeting someone he knew, he did not reveal to Molly. One of them was to spy on Stephen. Dick argued that as Stephen's pilfering was now checked, he would take some more desperate way to win the spoil and would broach the plan to his confederates during his visit to the gold-camp. However, this was not Dick's main purpose.

Dr. Foster had declined steadily, these last weeks. This fact was apparent even to Stephen, let alone to the trained eyes of a fellow physician. The excitement of the preceding night had aggravated his malady, and Dick believed that the only hope for him was a particularly difficult and dangerous operation. This, Dick himself could not perform. What did Richard Foster, a post-office clerk, know of scalpels and artery forceps and ligatures? But he could make inquiries at Moose Landing and find out what facilities were available for a winter trip to a hospital.

Both Stephen and himself had big order lists to fill, so they decided to go in separate sleds. Stephen drove his own powerful team; Dick engaged a young native named Black Cloud to drive Molly's team. They made a quick trip over the hard-packed trail and reached Moose Landing just after dark. Leaving Black Cloud staring at the wonders of civilization, Dick hunted up the deputy marshal, from whom he learned that there was no doctor, except a sort of handy-man, in the town. This fact, however, was of no special importance. No ordinary doctor or surgeon would dream of attempting the operation Foster needed, except in an absolute emergency. The marshal said further—and this was the crux of the matter—that if Foster could not wait till spring, he could go out to a hospital by airplane. A wireless message could be sent to Fairbanks, a fast plane dispatched for Lonesome River, and the old doctor could be in Skagway, ready to catch the steamer for Seattle, in six or seven hours' flight. Three days more, by good connections, could find him in a first-rate hospital.

If Foster would agree to the trip and was physically able to stand it, this might solve Dick's problem.

While Dick was talking to the deputy, Stephen was sitting in the back room of Pete's Pleasure Palace in earnest conversation with no less than four of the most notorious characters in the town. One of them was Pete, or Pietro, himself—a Sicilian who had followed nearly every stampede from the Klondike to Mayo, who had been charged with almost every crime in the calendar, and who had yet to spend his first day in jail. The other three were his understrappers—a cockney known as Limejuice 'Arry, a Russian-Aleut quarter-breed called Black Koslof, and an enormous blond-headed man who seemed to have no name at all, but was referred to simply as "Swede." To these Stephen told a story that made their hands clench and their eyes shine.

"I'm not telling you where it is, and you won't find it without my help, so don't try anything until I give you the word," Stephen said. "But you can believe me, it's just as rich as I say it is, and maybe richer. I get half—you fellows split half between you."

"Is it dust or money?" Swede demanded, with an echo of Stephen's own greedy tone.

"I'm not saying. But I told you what it comes to."

"But what's the use of waiting?" Limejuice 'Arry demanded. "Why not tomorrow night as good as any time? I know why—because Mr. 'Athaway has got some other game 'e's going to try first."

It was significant that he, as well as Koslof and Swede, always referred to Stephen in this respectful way; only Pete called him by his first name.

"That's my affair, not yours." Stephen's three-cornered eyes bored into 'Arry's until the little ratty gangster looked away. "You'll either trust me, or you don't come in on it at all." Then, relenting: "At present I have no other plan. If for any reason it becomes impractical, I'll let you know, and you won't lose anything but a little time. None of you have lost anything through me yet, and I don't intend to let you start now."

"That's so," Pietro said, nodding. "Stephen has always treated us square."

"What about the fellow, Dick Foster?" Koslof demanded, in curious, foreign-sounding English. "He has interfered with our business so numerous times. First he puts finishing touches on the racket of whisky. Now, so you say, he will make it difficult to do this venture. *Zut!* A rock should fall on him one time, and he will cause no more difficulty."

Limejuice 'Arry, always more like a mad coyote than a man, suddenly bit his lips. "What if he don't get 'ome tomorrow?" he asked hopefully. "There's always fellows 'unting in the woods: who can tell when one of 'em would mistake him for a deer?"

"Don't try anything so crude as that," Stephen said. "I'll be plain with you. I hate the fellow like a wolverine—he's done nothing but cause trouble from the first—but I won't have any killing."

The Sicilian's black eyes lighted as he smiled into Stephen's face. "You haf changed since ze beeg fight over the fishtrap at Ketchikan," he remarked in gentle tones. "There was a man or two killed then, I remember. But you are right—there shall be no killing. But who can tell when there will be an accident and your friend get shot in the leg? That would be a warning to him, maybe, and would lay him up for a few days out of the way."

"I don't want to have anything to do with it."

"You will not, my friend. But if the deputy marshal investigate, some day, you will testify it was an Indian who lay by the trail and escape. It would be a beeg joke to have Foster's so precious Indians, who must not buy whisky, take a pot-shot at his own son."

"It would be a joke—a mighty good joke. But I repeat—I don't want anything to do with it."

Shortly afterward the conference broke up. Stephen sought amusement according to his taste; Dick and his Indian friend saw a few of the sights, won a few dollars in Pete's games of chance, danced a few times—Dick handled this alone, while Black Cloud looked on in speechless admiration—with the laughing girls of the hall, and went to bed. Shortly after breakfast the party started back for Lonesome River.

All three mushed in silence. Dick was thinking of all that had happened since the last time he had taken the out-bound trail—dramatic and perilous events, and white magic that had moved his heart and soul. And there was a long way still to go. He had not even come in sight of the dim towers of fulfilment. The path was dark.

Stephen seemed self-absorbed. Once, when they met at a difficult place in the trail, Dick thought that his face showed signs of suppressed excitement. He cursed his dogs, as if his nerves were on edge. Black Cloud appeared to be unusually alert, as if he were hunting game. His gaze darted from side to side.

This vigilance became so apparent as the journey progressed that it began to affect Dick. A queer nervousness took him; he, too, watched the thickets beside the trail. He was surprised to find that his body remained constantly poised and set for sudden, violent action, his muscles springy but not flexed, his senses preternaturally sharp.

"What's the matter, Black Cloud?" he demanded at last impatiently. "You're making me jumpy as an old woman. What are you looking for?"

"Black Cloud, he look for trouble."

"But why? Has anything happened?"

"Black Cloud, he don't know why. He feel scared. Something—he not know what—all wrong."

Dick decided this was nonsense. Deliberately he made himself relax, and directed his thoughts into other channels. But Black Cloud continued to keep watch—and for this Dick could thank his lucky stars.

The native's eyes were not so clear and true as Dick's own, but they were trained to the flickering, changing shadows of the woods. They could catch instantly the little variance of light between a natural drift and a white mound under which a ptarmigan was hiding. Particularly they could distinguish between the bejeweled gleam of sunlit snow and the swift, refracted glimmer of a gun barrel. It was this fact that saved Dick from serious injury, if not from death.

Suddenly his voice cracked through the silence, "*Look out!*"

Dick did not stop to question, nor did he try to locate the danger. Actually he did not even stop to think, but leaped to one side before any thought had time to move in his brain. At the same instant Black Cloud came bounding toward him, yelling and pointing toward the thick woods at the right of the trail.

Just why Black Cloud made this leap would remain forever a mystery. He himself could not explain it. Did he mean to shield Dick's body with his own? Possibly so; no man has yet fathomed the inscrutable Indian mind. Perhaps he wanted Dick's protection. More likely, he wanted to stand beside Dick, shoulder to shoulder, and help him combat the danger.

In any event, the act was his own undoing. Just as he reached Dick's side, a rifle roared at sixty yards' distance in the woods. Black Cloud grunted like a man hit in the body with a stone, and seemed to stumble. He went down in a curious huddle in the snow.

Dick knew instantly that the bullet was meant for him. Fury swept through him, the most terrible he had ever known. The attack was so cowardly, so venomous, and his innocent companion had fallen a victim in the reddening snow. It did not occur to him to lie flat and lessen the danger of a second bullet: he could not even think of danger. He began to fight back like a cornered wolf. The report had hardly echoed before he snatched his pistol from its holster and opened fire at a movement in the brush.

His face was livid. The fleshy purses beneath his eyes swelled and turned dark, so that the eyes themselves looked like little, thin crescents of steel. Yet this fury did not affect his shooting. The range was long for a pistol, but so steady was his hand and so deadly his aim that the bullets slashed the brush just beside his foe's body.

This fact went hard with the ambusher. He knew that Dick carried no rifle, so he had anticipated no resistance of any kind. He was a coward, of course, and the whizzing, snapping pistol bullets disturbed the aim of his second shot. The lead flew wide—but the answering shots came whizzing nearer.

He could not face them. His coward's soul began to whimper within him. He slipped out behind his ambush and sped away through the thickets.

Dick's first impulse was to follow him and bring the fight to close quarters among the snow-laden trees. In this case, he might possibly die with a rifle bullet through his heart. A pistol has never the range nor the killing power of a big-game rifle. His enemy could lie in wait for him in the thickets, and fire at a safe distance. Yet, in spite of these opposing odds, he firmly believed that he would return alive, and a meaner form than his be left breathless in the snow. He would hunt the man down in the silent, white glades. The creature's cowardice would betray him in the end, and there would be an empty chair tonight in the anteroom of Pete's Pleasure Palace.

But all this was conjecture. Dick could not leave the scene. At his feet lay a wounded man demanding immediate attention. And now Stephen came running up and diverted the straight course of events.

"What the devil has happened?"

"Someone shot at me and hit Black Cloud."

"Is he dead?"

"You can hear him breathe, can't you?" Dick spoke between his teeth. "Get out my doctor's kit."

The term had slipped out unawares: he had meant to say his first-aid kit. Well, it was too late to call it back, and anyway Stephen's excitement would keep him from catching on. . . . It was hard enough to remember his part at ordinary times—to keep hidden the doctor dwelling in his heart and brain, the doctor's words at his lips and skill in his fingers—let alone in moments like this. His job lay before him. It called him with a voice a thousand times as strong as the voice of caution, of self-interest. From the counterfeit body of Dick Foster, Dr. Richard Grant was emerging, and he could not be kept back.

Yet he *must* keep back. There stood Stephen, watching, waiting. What mercy could Dick expect from him, if once he showed his hand? It would mean ruin—a disaster of such scope that Dick himself could not comprehend it all.

He knelt down beside the injured man and, loosening his clothes, examined his wound. Apparently the ambusher had shot very badly, or else he had deliberately held low. The bullet had entered the very bottom of the abdominal cavity, from the front, and had passed completely through the body. Apparently it had struck no bones, and it was possible that it had not perforated the intestine. If this were so, the injured man and Dick, too, could be saved. Black Cloud might be brought home and put under Dr. Foster's care, and Dick need not show his hand.

Perhaps he would be spared what threatened to be the most stringent moral crisis that had ever come into his life. His eyes kindled with hope.

Glancing toward Black Cloud's face, his eyes narrowed. He had anticipated the Indian's marked pallor beneath his pigment, but his blank and stricken look, the complete voiding of all that was vital in his countenance, startled the doctor deeply. No doubt the man was in shock. Whether this was a mere nervous reaction, without any sinister significance, or was the result of some serious organic injury, was a vital question. As yet he did not know the answer, but he intended to find it.

He took the brown hand in his own. The pulse was weak and fast. Moreover it grew perceptibly weaker and faster in the moment that he held it. He lowered his head to the broad, brown breast, then listened to the man's fast, troubled breathing.

Suddenly he knew. The bullet had nicked the external iliac artery. The man was dying of internal bleeding before his eyes.

The crisis had come, after all, to both of them—a physical crisis to Black Cloud, a tremendous moral one to himself. If he operated at once, he might save the man's life; if he deliberated even for five minutes, the man would certainly die. But now that Dick was faced with this problem, it dissolved into thin air. Whether he liked it or not, he was a doctor.

"*Stop that hemorrhage!*" So clear from the empty air came this peremptory command that Dick could hardly believe it was only a trick of his imagination. Always, always he had been taught to pick up the artery, to tie the broken vein. It was not just a well-learned habit of mind, but second nature. The precious stream of life must not flow in waste.

This was the first law of his being—to pick up the artery, to tie the vein. Whenever he operated, every fresh stroke of his scalpel severed some little channel of the river of life, and always he had to stop and dam it up before he could continue. There was no escape from this law. Human life must be saved—it must not waste away in a crimson flood. How could he resist a force like this?

If it were any other kind of crisis, he could stand off. To most surgical cases there are many angles—the treatment is a matter of the surgeon's judgment. Whether to operate at all or to let nature do her own work of repairs—whether to go ahead now or to wait until the patient is stronger—whether to cut deep and remove the source of the trouble, or to trim and patch—all these questions arise for the surgeon to answer by the light of his judgment, his learning, and the help of God. If this were true today, he could beg the question, postpone the issue, and save himself from disaster. His honest doubts as to the proper treatment would justify him in doing what his hopes and fears urged him to do—to give the man first aid, keep his doctor's hand concealed from Stephen's watchful gaze, and turn the patient over to Dr. Foster. He could not operate to advantage on this snowy trail. Even if Black Cloud had sustained an intestinal perforation, it might be best to carry him on to Dr. Foster's table, where there was proper equipment for surgery.

But this case today was not a perforation, but a severed artery. It did not require the exercise of his judgment, only the work of his hand. *Stop that hemorrhage!* It was the voice of Richard Grant, physician and surgeon, shouting in the ears of the false Richard Foster.

Black Cloud meant little to him. Dick had not known him by sight until yesterday. Personally, as a man rather than a doctor, he still harbored doubts as to the great value and importance of one Indian's life. But he *was* a

doctor, whether he liked it or not. It was not for him to judge what life was or was not worth saving; his business was to save it at any cost.

Could he bribe Stephen to silence? Possibly. But even if Molly herself were standing here, he could not hold back on an open-and-shut case like this. *Stop that hemorrhage!* The order had come, and he must obey.

His decision did not take a second's time. With one movement he drew the injured man out of the trail into the unsullied snow beyond.

"Kneel down here, and do just what I tell you," he told Stephen.

He spoke quietly, rapidly, in an authoritative tone which certain internes in a Seattle hospital might still recognize. Stephen started, and made as if to protest. But when he saw the shine in Dick's black eyes, and the curious still passion in his face, his brows flew up, and he came quickly.

There was no time to boil instruments, not even time to mix an antiseptic solution to dip them in. Dick poured tools and equipment out of his case into the pure snow beside the trail and slipped on rubber gloves. Taking a scalpel lightly in his hand, he made the first strong, steady stroke.

When Stephen saw the brown flesh part clean beneath the blade, his eyes popped forward in their sockets. But this shock was nothing to what he sustained a moment later. As Dick's knife moved swiftly through the abdominal wall, there was a sudden geyser of crimson. It boiled around Dick's hand, and the snow blotted it up in swift, red waves.

Everything went black before Stephen's eyes, and he heard Dick's voice loud and sharp through the thickening gloom:

"*Damn you, if you faint, I'll kill you!*"

Stephen did not faint. He opened his eyes in time to see Dick's fingers delving into the gushing wound. A curious thoughtful look, infinitely calm, came into his face as he searched: it was as if his eyes had turned inward and were looking out the ends of his finger-tips. Presently his wrist grew taut.

"I've got it," he said. "Hand me the forceps—"

"The what?" Stephen gasped.

"The forceps, man, the forceps! Those pincher-like things, and pick them up by the handle."

Clamping the artery, Dick drew it near the surface. Reaching for a ligature he deftly passed it around the artery and drew it tight.

The hemorrhage was stopped. After he had tied the smaller vessels he had cut, he dried the cavity with sponges; then disinfected the wound as well as he could with alcohol. His fingers flew. Black Cloud was still in shock, and unless he were brought out of it quickly, he might not emerge at all.

Finally Dick took needle and gut and sewed up the incision. In his face was a look of triumph: he believed that his rough-and-ready surgery had saved Black Cloud's life.

Once more he tried the patient's pulse. It seemed somewhat stronger already. To make assurance doubly sure, he inserted his hypodermic needle in Black Cloud's arm and administered a powerful stimulant. Still crouching beside the supine figure, he waited for the drug to take hold.

Black Cloud opened his eyes and gazed fixedly at the doctor. His dead look passed away: his lips moved. "Me die?" he asked at last.

"Not by a long shot."

"You fix me?"

"The best I could, old chap. Now lie quiet as you can. We're going to carry you and put you on one of the sleds."

Still blankly staring, Stephen lent his strong back to this task. At the other's direction he wrapped his mackinaw about Black Cloud's body. Then the two white men stood facing each other across the sled.

Stephen shook his head like a man trying to rouse himself from sleep. His open mouth slowly closed; his eyes resumed their odd three-cornered shape and hard gray light. No doubt he was getting himself in hand. His cunning brain, dulled for a time by horror and amazement, began to make sense of what was at first a baffling and incredible situation. His lips began to form a question.

"Well?" Dick encouraged him. He spoke tensely.

"Mighty lucky you happened to have that doctor's kit with you."

"I always carry it. Never can tell when someone's going to take a shot at me from the bushes."

Stephen searched the pale, still face. "You're mighty handy with that little knife. I suppose you got your practice opening dead letters in the post-office where you worked."

If this were deliberate wit and not mere clumsy sarcasm, it was keener than Stephen usually achieved, perhaps the most grim jest Dick had ever

heard. But Dick's mood was grim, too, and he answered in the same vein.

"Not dead *letters*. Nor in a post-office, either."

"And you're skilful with the needle and thread, too. I suppose you learned that patching your own clothes, when you used to be so poor."

"Wrong again." Then, to see what Stephen would say, rather than with the slightest hope of saving the situation, "What I did today was just a little first aid."

A startling change now came over Stephen. His menacing look passed away; his chest expanded, his head went up, and he seemed to drop a heavy burden from his shoulders. As Dick's stock went down, his own would rise. Fortune, flitting from him, had flown to his hands once more. The future was bright.

"First aid, hell!" he exploded. "You must think I'm the blindest fool in Alaska. That was surgery, better than Foster could do himself. You're a doctor."

A dazzling smile flashed briefly over Dick's pale face. "By God, I am!" he agreed.

Chapter XIII

Stephen walked to his sled and picked up his rifle. During the rest of the talk he held it carelessly in his hand. The action amused Dick, yet he rather admired Stephen for his caution. Naturally he did not know how the impostor would take his now inevitable exposure.

"You're a doctor, and that means you're a fake," Stephen said.

Dick did not look at him, but bent and examined the injured man on the sled. He straightened at last. "I suppose that's more or less obvious."

"I don't know what your name is, but it isn't Richard Foster. You are no more Richard Foster than I am."

"All right. What about it?"

"Plenty about it, and don't you forget it. Where is young Foster? Is he dead?"

"Yes, he's dead."

"And you killed him. I think it's plain enough now." Then, guessing shrewdly: "A doctor has plenty of chances to get a man's confidence. Foster confided in you about this proposition up here, and you gave him a few extra drops of morphin. I always said doctors were the worst crooks in the world."

"Not all of them, Steve." Dick's air of confidence startled his companion and gave him pause. "And you're drawing on your imagination about the extra drops of morphin. I tried my best to save Foster's life. You can believe that if you want to; if you don't want to, don't. It doesn't make the slightest difference to me."

Stephen believed him, much against his own desires. "Anyway, you're a crook. You came up here to grab off half of those furs. Well, you won't get them."

"You are going to protect Molly's interests, are you? She shall have the whole lot, and when you marry her—"

"That's my affair, not yours. You're out of it. If you had helped me with her, I might have saved you, but you've worked against me from the first, and now I've got you right. I'll tell Molly the truth soon as I get home."

“And she’ll probably be so grateful that she’ll change her mind about engaging herself to you. Is that what you think?”

It was precisely what Stephen did think, and not without cause. Molly had poured out her love on Dick; when she learned that he was unworthy—that he had betrayed her brother and laid him in a grave under a false name—she would seek solace in Stephen’s arms. He believed that Dick alone had taken her away from him.

“You’re a cool hand to dare to make inquiries about Molly and me. You don’t seem to get it through your head that your game is absolutely up. You’ll be lucky if you don’t land in the jail down to Juneau for trying to obtain money under false pretenses. In any case you’ll be barred from medical practice for the rest of your natural life.”

Dick smiled quietly. “Neither one, Steve.”

“Don’t call me Steve. You’d better be mighty respectful to me. I suppose you think Molly will let you off easy.”

“No, Molly won’t even hear about it.”

“She won’t?” Stephen glanced quickly into Dick’s face, but he could not interpret its calm half-smile. For the first time since the revelation, he began to feel vaguely uneasy. “You fool, didn’t you hear me say I am going to tell her?”

“I heard you say so, but that doesn’t make it so.”

“You think I’ll have mercy on you?”

“Steve, if I had to count on mercy from you, I’d be in a bad way. I saw your kind of mercy today.”

Stephen’s three-cornered eyes opened wide. “What do you mean?”

“Shut up and listen to me!” The smile shot out of Dick’s mouth, leaving it straight and hard, and a sinister shine was in his eyes. “You’re not going to tell Molly what you saw today, and you haven’t a dog’s chance of marrying her. You’ve played your card, and I call it. Do you know what I have in my pocket?”

“No. And don’t you—”

“I have a button off the sleeve of your mackinaw.”

“Well, what about it?”

“It came off in my hand the night you tried to rob the fur house.”

Stephen did not speak at once. A strange, speculative look came into his queer eyes, cold, cruel, lethal. Dick watched him like a cat. Once or twice before he had seen this look when they had hunted together in the white forest. It could mean only one thing—that he was sizing up a target. A quick and certain way out of this present difficulty had occurred to his mind.

But it was only a fleeting impulse at the worst. The danger was too great in more ways than one. Dick was an unknown quantity in a gun fight. Stephen did not trust that slim, deft hand: it was too fast, too steady. He was not without physical courage of a sort, but by the time he swung forward his rifle, his foe's pistol might be out and cracking. If Dick could wield it as handily as his knife—

Anyway there was no need for such desperate measures. His cards were still stronger than Dick's; he would play him trump for trump. Only fools like Limejuice 'Arry resorted to gun fire, and it almost never paid. Stephen himself would trust to the cunning of his brain.

"What's a button?" he demanded. "You can't indict a man on that."

As soon as these words were out of his mouth, he regretted them. They were true enough—Dick's case was flimsy at best. He could easily be exposed as an impostor; then his unsupported word would carry little weight against Stephen. But it would serve Stephen's purpose better for Dick to feel secure. Certainly Dick would not expose him unless forced to do so: he had everything to lose and nothing to gain. He must be induced to believe that his foe was afraid of him; then Stephen could get in the first blow.

The deadly look passed from Stephen's face, and he smiled with frank charm. "We're a great pair, aren't we?"

Dick's breath went out in a gasp of relief. This man-to-man attitude was just what he desired. Was Stephen so blind as to fail to see the weakness of Dick's position? Evidently—and now Dick could hope again.

How he hated to treat with this man! It seemed to grind dirt into his very soul. But there was no way out of it now. Stephen must be silenced, not merely for the present, but permanently, at almost any cost of self-respect. When Dick disappeared from the scene, he must contrive to take Stephen with him, or else put such a threat of exposure upon him that he would never dare to reveal the truth.

"Birds of a feather," he commented, in Stephen's own frank tone.

"A fine pair of crooks, if ever was," Stephen went on. "Our methods were different, but we had the same goal in view—a quarter of a million in

furs. Well, Dick, we'll play the game. You won't make trouble for me—I won't expose you."

Dick repressed the shudder that ran over his frame. "Honor among thieves! I hope you'll keep that agreement as honestly as I will."

"Don't worry. I can be square with a pal." His strange eyes had a crafty shine. "There's one favor I'd like to ask."

"What's that?"

"Say a good word for me to Molly. She thinks the world of you and takes everything you say as law. She's rather turned against me lately, but if you'll help me out, she'll come around all right."

Hemlock was in Dick's cup and ashes in his mouth. Yet he dared not answer this insolence as it should be answered: he must side-step still. "I don't see how I can help you. She decides such matters for herself. But I'll think it over and see what I can do. And in the meantime you must agree to cut out all whisky-selling in the village. It's bound to get you in trouble and spoil the whole show."

"I'll agree to that, but don't forget that I'm counting on you to help me with Molly. She'll do anything you ask. She thinks you're the fount of wisdom, not to mention the soul of truth and honor and square dealing." A sneering smile, utterly malicious, touched Stephen's lips. "And what a shock it would be to her if she ever found out the truth!"

How would they prevent Molly and Dr. Foster from discovering Black Cloud's injury? If Foster saw the wound, he would instantly recognize the handiwork of an experienced surgeon. But Stephen could handle this. Black Cloud would be left with a family of his own totem, two miles from the village. They were to be enjoined never to touch the bandages, and by playing on their superstitions Stephen could frighten them into silence regarding the whole affair.

"All I have to do is tell them that this is big medicine, and if they tell a soul about it, or let it out that he has been injured, or if he shows the scar to anyone before twelve moons, the wound will open, and he will fall over dead. By that time Molly and I will be married, and the old man will be where he can't make you any trouble, either up to the new reservation, or—nine chances out of ten—in his grave."

"Can you manage it all right? You know I must go over from time to time to dress the wound."

"Can I? I can scare these red men into walking on their heads. The old man thinks that he's the boss of the tribe, but I've got the whole outfit, from Chief Strongheart down to the last *klooch* [unmarried girl], wrapped right around my finger, while the old man sits doddering in his chair. Of course, you can't expect anything else. He's getting childish and has lost his grip. Otherwise he wouldn't let you take him in, and swallow hook, bait, and sinker, the way he does."

"I wouldn't say that." Dick spoke in low, dull tones. "You were taken in, too, you know."

"Of course I was. What did I know about Richard Foster that I could check up on you? But even so, I had a feeling that there was something wrong somewhere, and it was only a matter of time till I'd caught you. If the old man had had his wits about him, he would have had you up a tree in a minute."

"It isn't a matter of wits. His mind is still keen, and there are years of good work in him yet, if he can just get well. He was easy to deceive because he was so lonesome for his son, or for someone to be a son to him." Then, with cold recklessness, "That was what saved you, too."

Stephen's handsome face darkened with displeasure. "Speaking of the old man's sickness—it must make you feel pretty sick yourself. Here you are, an expert surgeon, and yet you'll watch him die before your eyes just to save your own skin. I've done some pretty raw things in my life, but I don't believe I could do that."

Dick could make no adequate answer to this charge. False and malicious though it was, still it contained enough truth to flush his cheeks. "I'm doing what I can, short of showing my hand. It's doubtful if an operation is practical in his case. Anyway, it can be performed much better in Seattle, or across the continent."

"Well, it's a good excuse, anyway." Stephen gave him a leering grin. "We won't quarrel about that: you play your game, and I'll play mine. But I wouldn't be in a hurry about shipping the old man out. Doctors are crooks—you know that better than I do—and they'll take a lot of his money, give him pain and trouble, and kill him all the quicker."

Dick hardly heard this last. Though his pride was shaken, it was still strong enough to hold beneath contempt such heartless and calculated hypocrisy. But he could not ignore the comment Stephen had just made. "It's a good excuse, anyway." The words would rankle forever.

Was this true? Heaven forbid! Even so, he must keep to his course and pin his faith on it to the last. Every other path led to Gehenna, for his body and soul. He believed he had reached his peak. Further and higher he could not go: the power was not in him.

When they drove into the Indian village, Molly hurried out to meet them. Dressed in her white furs, she seemed to Dick's haunted mind a veritable spirit of the snow, light of feet as the flurries on the wind, pure and unsullied as the trackless drifts in the hallowed woodland. It was nearly midnight, and the magic of the Northern Lights woke the charmed forest from its trance.

The solemn shadows of the trees leaped and danced. Far vistas of unworldly beauty flickered to the sight. The snow-lights ebbed and flowed, blue as heaven, red as hell. Amid this weird carnival she seemed as intangible, as hard to catch and hold, as the lambent flame in the sky. Yet Dick wanted and needed her as never before. Her long eyes were abrim with the love-light; her full lips curled in a dim, sweet smile.

She ran to Dick and threw her slim arms about him. When their lips met, a thrill shot over him almost too intense to conceal. He wanted to fold her in his arms, crush her slim body against his, but he remembered in time and let her go.

"How I've missed you, Dick! It's so lonesome here without you. I can't ever let you go again."

Behind his shoulder Dick heard Stephen utter a throaty, grunting sound. In the faint light his face showed scowling.

"You're very fond of your brother, aren't you, Molly?" he asked in a strained, hard voice.

"I adore him, Stephen. I know he's the most wonderful brother in the world. And I like you, too, for bringing him back to me."

From sheer joy in Dick's return she forgot to take any further notice of Stephen. Leaving him fuming with jealousy and rage, she linked her arm in Dick's and led him to the house. Not all her news was good. Her father had had a particularly bad day. She thought that he was carrying a low fever.

"The main reason I went to Lonesome River was to see what could be done about father's sickness," Dick told her. "I'll tell you all about it later."

"I thought that was why you had gone. You're always so thoughtful, Dick—such a wonderful son to him."

“Don’t say that.” Dick’s tone was bitter. “But God knows I do the best I can.”

At Dick’s request Molly sent for Stephen and invited him to share in the midnight supper she had prepared for the late-comer. Immediately afterward, Stephen made an opportunity to see Molly alone.

“Dear, have you had a chance to talk to Dick since He got back?”

“No.”

“I want you to.” Stephen spoke earnestly, looking into Molly’s eyes. “We got better acquainted on this trip, and he thinks you ought to give me another chance. He knows it is for you to decide, but since he turned you against me in the first place, he thinks that now he has changed his mind about me, you might change yours, too.”

“He didn’t turn me against you, Stephen. No one has. I’m not against you—I just don’t love you in this way.”

“But you’ll listen to Dick, won’t you?”

“Of course. . . . Now you must go; it’s awfully late.”

Molly was greatly puzzled. Could it be that Dick had been won over to Stephen’s cause? If not, why had he asked her to include Stephen in their midnight supper? Dick was a keen judge of men: perhaps her father had been right all the time, and she was wrong.

Yet she felt sharp disappointment. She wanted Dick to take her side against Stephen; otherwise all her trouble might commence again. Perhaps a strange, unaccountable jealousy tormented her, too. She did not want Dick to try to marry her off, but wanted him to be equally jealous. It was silly, almost wicked, for her to feel this way about her own brother, but she couldn’t help it.

In any event she would not yield. She would not marry Stephen if Dick and her father and the whole tribe begged her to. This was her final decision.

When she met Dick in the upper hall, she slipped her arm about his neck and laid her cheek against his. She did not know why his heart leaped so wildly against her own.

“Dick, is it true that you want me to marry Stephen?”

“God forbid!” His tone rang in the hushed hallway.

"He told me you did. He said that you had changed your mind about him, and that I was to ask you about it."

"I haven't changed my mind about him. I would sooner see you dead than married to Stephen, and that isn't just talk, but the plain truth. It's true I begged the question today on the trail. There were some circumstances involved—anyway, I didn't have courage to tell him no. I may have left the impression with him that I would speak to you. But don't give it a thought. I wouldn't have you marry Stephen, no matter what happens to me."

The girl sprang back and looked at him with wide eyes.

"What do you mean? What *could* happen to you?"

"Nothing worth bothering about. I was just making my point. When he comes to you again, tell him definitely no. I'd rather you wouldn't involve me, if you can help it. Tell him that you have made up your mind for yourself, and your brother has nothing to say about it."

Molly nodded, overjoyed that her worries had come to naught, but a little dismayed at Dick's hedging. Her creed was courage. She could not tolerate its lack. Yet she could not fail to see that Dick was reluctant to antagonize Stephen. This fact bore out her contention that her suitor was a strong man—unaccountably and ominously strong. Well, it was Dick's affair, not hers. He was only her brother, not her lover.

She kissed him tenderly and went to her room. In his own room Dick lay wakeful for many weary hours. His thoughts circled far, but the beginning and the end were always one question: Would Stephen keep his bargain?

At last he decided that for the present he was safe. Stephen had apparently failed to see how weak Dick's position was, and before he had time to think it over, Dick could probably find a way to put further pressure upon him. Of course, this pressure must be nothing more or less than fear. No other force could move Stephen an inch. Dick must find indisputable evidence of Stephen's filching and whisky-running and hold it like a club over his head.

In the meantime Stephen's own cunning brain was busy. He rose early and intercepted Molly in her morning walk along the frozen river. They paused under the snow-laden trees.

"Did you talk to Dick last night?"

Molly's heart leaped with a sharp, inexplicable fear. Yet it passed away, and scorn took its place, when she looked straight into Stephen's hard,

calculating eyes. Why had she ever treated with this man? Let her father and Dick conciliate him if they must; she had temporized for the last time. He should know, once for all, where she stood. Nor would she soften her words: he did not deserve her pity, but rather the sting of her hand on his face. Her long eyes lit dangerously.

"Yes, I talked to him," she answered at last in a low voice.

"Didn't he ask you to change your mind about me?"

"He has nothing to do with my affairs with you. It is for me to decide, and I've already told you my decision. I'm not going to marry you. I don't love you, and I wish you wouldn't bring up the matter again."

"That's all right. What I want to know is whether he spoke for me. Well, I know now he didn't. If he had, you wouldn't have taken this tone." Stephen's rugged face darkened with anger. "He cheated me, just as he's cheating you, and he'll pay for it."

Her cheeks began to blaze. "What do you mean? If you dare try to do anything to him—"

"He'll try to get out of it," Stephen went on, unheeding. "He'll probably make up some lie to discredit me. But I've got the goods on him and can prove every word I say. I'm going to tell the truth about this crook that you trust and love so much."

"Oh, I won't listen to you!" Molly was trembling from head to foot. "Don't you dare say anything against my brother."

"Your brother!" The three-cornered eyes lighted with malice. "Your brother!" he repeated in rage and hate. "He's no more your brother than I am, but a fake who came up here to steal."

Chapter XIV

Molly Foster did not exclaim at Stephen's revelation, nor did she turn pale. Instead she seemed to stop living, her mind a blank, her lips dumb, her gaze fixed, her body rigid. But she could not escape so easily. Time passed —the sand ran in the glass of life—events moved on.

The far-away look passed from her eyes. Stephen's face, a white blur in the interminable distance, rushed into focus. She saw the queer, three-cornered lamps under his brows, the malice of his smile. Her mind was no longer paralyzed, but preternaturally keen. When she spoke, her voice was low, level, and clear.

"Stephen, is that true?"

"It's as true as I'm alive."

"How do you know?"

"Because I found out he's a doctor. Your brother wasn't a doctor, and this man is."

Molly still dared to hope. "But aren't you mistaken, Stephen? You know he's an expert at first aid—"

"Yes, he tried to work that on me, but I saw through him. You wouldn't call it first aid, would you, to open a man up, operate on him, and sew him up again? I tell you he's a doctor with years of practice—an expert surgeon. And when I faced him with it, he confessed."

But Molly hardly needed to be told this last. Already the truth was drumming on the door of her mind. Yes, Dick was a doctor. She was blind not to have guessed it before. His hands, his manner, the kit she had seen in his room, his first aid work the night of Shorty's injury—all these bore witness to Stephen's charge. When she had lain half-conscious from shock, after Bear Claw's attack, she had dreamed that the man sitting beside her was a doctor, counting her pulse, listening to her heart, and now she knew that the dream was true.

He was not her brother! Her heart had told her so long ago, but she had refused to believe.

Her thoughts paused in their wild flight and recalled again the steely-eyed man standing before her. She divined most of the story, but there were

still a few points Stephen might clear up.

"Is—is my brother dead?" she asked breathlessly.

"Yes. Dick said so."

"What killed him?"

"I don't know. I wouldn't wonder but that Dick did it himself to get his money."

"No." Molly's eyes lighted like stars, and she shook her head. "I know that isn't so. You do too."

"He denied it, of course. He said that your brother died from an operation. After he was dead, Dick found the letters from you and your father and saw a chance to pass himself off in his place."

Only one question remained. Molly's heart leaped to a wilder beat as she sought the answer, although she did not know why. "How did he happen to confess to you, instead of me?"

"Catch him confessing to you! Catch him confessing to anybody, unless he's made to. I exposed him, I tell you."

"But how?"

Stephen seemed reluctant to tell this part of the story, but he saw no way out of it. "We were coming home from the Landing. Someone took a shot at him—maybe at me, for all I know—"

"Likely at him. His work here has made him many enemies in the gold-camp."

"Good God!" Stephen's strange-looking eyes narrowed with suspicion. "You're not trying to defend him, are you?"

"No." The girl shook her head bitterly. "I just stated a fact. He *has* many enemies—he *has* worked faithfully in dad's cause—but that doesn't make him any less an impostor, and he'll have to answer for it. Go on and tell me what happened."

"The bullet hit Black Cloud in the lower part of the stomach. He was dying before our eyes, and—and—Dick operated on him. I helped him, handing him his tools. He couldn't do anything else, if he had any heart in him at all."

"So he showed his hand before you to save Black Cloud's life!" A dim, bitter smile touched the girl's lips. "I suppose habit was too strong for him in

a sudden crisis like that. And perhaps he thought he could fool you or keep you from telling on him."

"That was just it. He began to operate before he thought what he was doing; probably, if he'd stopped to think, he'd have let the man die. And he did try to bribe me. He thought he could persuade me to let him get away with it—an out-and-out steal of your brother's money. But, Molly, don't let him know that I told you. Pretend to find it out on your own account by asking him a question or two about your family. You can trick him in a minute—he got by this far only because everyone took him on trust. If he knows it came from me, he'll try to retaliate in some way. I'm not afraid of him, but I don't want him making up lies about me. He'd say anything to try to discredit me.

"I won't let him know it came from you." Molly was silent a long time. "And Stephen—don't say anything about it to anyone else. When I think father is able to stand this news, I'll tell him, but I don't want you even to hint it to him. You'll remember this?"

"Yes, but the sooner you turn him out, the better."

"It's our affair, Stephen, not yours. And please realize this: if it ever comes back to me that you have told it, I'll never forgive you, and there can be nothing more between you and me. I'll do what's right, but I want to handle it in my own way, quietly, and without causing talk."

Her eyes were smarting with unshed tears, and she could not force them back much longer. She turned quickly and, trudging blindly home, stumbled up the stairs. Groping her way to her room, she shut and locked her door and quietly lay down on her bed. Then she covered herself and hid her face in the pillow, as if she could never bear to rise and face the light again.

For more than an hour there was no light, no hope. Surrendering to her grief, the first she had ever known and the sharpest she could bear, her slight body was shaken like a branch in the wind, and her pillow was wet. But time passed; she must rise and go on.

A brave soul was Molly Foster. She would rise and go on as well as she could. Now she must call Dick out, trap him with a question, and charge him with his deceit. As Stephen had said, she must turn him out of her house for the impostor he was, and forbid him ever to come into her sight again. But she would not let her father know, for the time being. He must be spared, as far as possible, the sudden shock that had so desolated her; in his present

condition it might easily put him in his grave. He was all that she had left now, and if he were taken—

How she could manage this she did not yet know. She must find some plan whereby Dick would pretend to go on a journey; then she could break the truth gradually to the heart-hungry old man who had learned to love him.

She got up and washed the tear stains from her cheeks, but she could not wash the shadow of woe and pain from her eyes. Only time could do this—time too long and dreary to contemplate. She prayed that it might pass soon. . . . Perhaps to give herself more confidence and to heighten her courage—perhaps only to delay for a little while more the evil hour—she changed her rumpled frock and combed her hair. Then she started bravely out the door.

But she paused at the head of the stairs and covered her face with her hands. From below she could hear the murmur of Dick's voice, kindly and pleasant. Now she must silence this voice forever, as far as she and her father were concerned.

What a bitter duty it was? What a base trick luck and life and love had played her! It was not as though Dick were an out-and-out rogue, worthy of nothing but contempt. In this case, she could face him without a qualm—but in this case she would never have loved him. No man is all bad; even now she did not believe that Dick was fundamentally bad in the least degree. He had his share of strength and weakness; so had she and her father. Through forces operating outside his life he had succumbed to a temptation. Lately she had seen signs of spiritual wakening in him: if he were tempted the same way again, probably he would not fall. He had proved a stanch ally to her father, and he had shown his hand before Stephen to save an Indian's life.

If Dick had repented and confessed on his own account, she and her father, too, might have forgiven him. The situation would have been saved, and she and Dick could have remained friends. Looking back over their many hours together, she recalled several occasions when he had plainly wanted to tell the truth, and what mean fate it was that he had not! But now that she had to expose him, there was no hope. Between them would lie a valley of shame they could not pass. He would be too brave and proud to ask forgiveness, even if she would grant it, and although she would long for him night and day, he would never cross her way again.

As far as she dared dream, this was the end.

She straightened, rallied all her powers of will, and entered the room where Dick and Dr. Foster were talking. It was her intention to call Dick aside on some pretext and tell him what she knew. He looked up to greet her, his face lighting with a smile.

In her darkest imaginings she had not foreseen it would be like this. He was walking to meet her now, and now his arm was about her waist, and he was leading her forward to enlist her support in an argument with her father.

"I think Molly ought to get in on this," he was saying. "You are risking something valuable to yourself, but ten times as valuable to her. Molly, I have been talking to father about his sickness."

Molly's brain reeled. "Oh, what is it?"

"As I told you, I made inquiries at the Landing. We can radio from there to Fairbanks, and a plane can be here in three or four hours' flight. Father can board it here and in five or six hours be in Skagway. Then he can take a comfortable ship for Seattle."

But Foster continued to shake his head. "Children, I'm not going to do it, and that's final."

Molly looked from one to the other. She must give her full attention to this matter in spite of everything. Soon, as soon, she would have only her father left, and she must not lose *him* at any cost.

"Of course, you're going, if your health demands it."

"No. Listen to me, Molly. I admit I have a serious trouble that might kill me any day. But I am in no great pain, and as a doctor I know that men live for years, and have a reasonable amount of fair health, with this same trouble. If I last through the winter, as I confidently expect to, we'll all three go out together, and I'll have the thorough going-over that Dick demands. But I won't go alone."

"But what if a crisis comes?" Dick persisted. "Then there won't be time to get you to Seattle, and nothing on earth can save your life."

"I'm willing to take that chance. Children, I'm an old man, and life—just life, the mere process of living and breathing—doesn't mean to me what it once did. If something should happen to me this winter, it would not be a major tragedy for anyone—just the cutting-down of an old stalk that would soon fall anyway. You two, and Stephen, could carry on my work here until the new reservation is ready and the people move north. On the other hand, to go out in the plane means a hard and tiring and lonely trip that I cannot

bear to face. It would mean going to a hospital, and being among strangers, in a strange scene, for several weeks, probably all for nothing. An old dog like me wants to stay at home with his own folks around him."

"But Molly could go with you."

"Yes, but you need her here to help you in taking care of the tribe. And anyway I'd have to leave one of you, and I can't bear the thought of it. No, I'm not going this winter. If the sickness won't wait till spring, when we can all go out together on a comfortable ship, I won't go at all. I'll lie right here, under my own vine and figtree—with my own stars shining over me."

It was evident that he meant what he said. Molly knew this man and knew it was useless to plead with him. Dick realized it too. Molly was caught up by the look of genuine dismay in his face.

"How would it be to have a surgeon come up here from Seattle?" Dick asked.

"I won't think of it. We have no right to ask a specialist to waste two weeks' time—the very best he could do—on a tenth chance of saving an old man's life, no matter how much we can pay him. He might save a dozen lives in that time."

How characteristic this was! Molly smiled sadly, understandingly into the gray face. "But if there were a surgeon here, you would submit to the operation," she said.

"Yes, provided he was an expert, but I wouldn't let any garden variety of surgeon try a job like this. Of course, I'm ready to make a stiff fight for life and health, if it doesn't mean too great sacrifice."

Molly's eyes began to glitter. "If only Dick were a surgeon—as you always wanted him to be—you'd let him do it, wouldn't you?"

Foster glanced toward Dick's strong, fluent hands. "I think so. I believe I'd go to sleep peacefully, if I knew those hands would wield the knife. What a surgeon you would be, Dick! You have every qualification."

Molly saw Dick's face turn scarlet. For a brief space her resentment passed away, and something akin to pity took its place. No doubt he was drinking deep of the bitter cup. Perhaps he was fighting hard to come clean, but there were obstacles she could not see.

Still she made no move to help him. If he were to be saved, it must be through his own manliness.

If he confessed now for her father's sake, she and her father would probably forgive him. But though she waited long seconds, hoping as she had never hoped before, praying more fervently than she had ever prayed, he said no word.

"Father, what is your trouble? You have kept it from me until now and put me off, but I think I have a right to know."

When Foster hesitated, Dick turned to him earnestly.

"I think so, too. She's grown up and able to stand anything that we can. Tell her just how bad it is."

"I suppose it's best. If I don't tell her, she'll probably think it worse than it really is. Molly, when I was a boy I had an attack of rheumatic fever. Perhaps as a result of this—perhaps from some other cause—one of the valves of my heart is not working properly. It doesn't let through enough blood, and that's what gives my face its bluish tinge."

"And it's growing worse all the time?"

"Possibly so. Of course, if the valve ever fails altogether, I'm done, quick as by a bullet. But many men live for years with this condition."

"Wouldn't an operation save you?"

"Probably not. Nine chances out of ten I shouldn't pull out. You see, the removal of one of the leaflets of the valve to let more blood through is one of the most difficult and dangerous operations in all surgery. As far as I can tell, from reading, it has only been attempted a score or so times in the whole world. However, I can't bear ill health, and I'd try it in a minute if the right man held the knife."

Again Molly looked toward Dick, waiting, hoping, praying. Again the color mounted in his cheeks, but he said no word.

Shortly after this Dr. Foster left the room. Apparently the fateful moment was at hand. Molly's heart turned cold in her breast, yet she faced Dick bravely. She opened her trembling lips to speak.

Still Dick did not dream that she knew the truth. He had played his part so long and had come through so many crises that the constant fear of exposure no longer hung over him. He believed that Molly trusted him implicitly, and from her, least of all, did he expect trouble. He could see that she was deeply distressed, but naturally thought that it was on her father's account.

Before she could speak, he walked swiftly to her, put his arms about her, and gently kissed her pale lips. She had meant to turn aside and avoid the brotherly caress which now she deemed so false, but she was dazed, and his lips were pressing hers before she could act. And now it was too late. The stupendous truth burst upon her in a flash.

She had believed that his kiss would not now be sweet. It would be a Judas kiss, she thought, an evil thing. Instead, it was the most true and poignant and blissful experience of her life. No doubt he had kissed her like this before, but never before had she dared to understand.

She drew back and looked searchingly into his face. In his eyes was a light she had seen many times since that memorable night by the camp-fire under the stars, but until now she had never dared guess its meaning. Now she did not have to guess—she *knew*! No matter the false part he had played, this at least was the ultimate truth, the final unchangeable answer. And her own eyes gave back that light—she could not conceal it. It had been glimmering for weeks in some inner eye of her soul, and now it shone forth.

Dick had plotted to trick her, but he himself had been tricked by a strange, jesting Fate. He had come here to take something to which he had no right, but instead love had taken him. He loved Molly not as a brother, but as a sweetheart.

And she loved him, too. No use to deny it any more or try to fight it. It was the first and the great love of her life, without which her days had and would have no meaning. This was the ultimate truth, the final answer.

But what of the threat she had made the night after her escape from Bear Claw? “If anyone betrayed or took advantage of my brother or my father, I should never forgive him, and I should hate him always”—these had been her words. Yet, though Dick was no doubt guilty of this charge, she did not hate him; she had learned to love him, and if he would give her half a chance, she would forgive him.

Could she take back this threat? No, simply because she had forgotten she had made it. It had burst from her lips in a moment of intense emotion, probably inspired by her growing love for Dick himself. But Dick had not forgotten it. It rang in his ears like the bells of doom. It made a gulf of fear he could not cross, and because she did not know of its existence she could not help him.

“I love you, Dick,” she told him now, as her arms crept about him.

It was the utterance of her deepmost heart, but she made no attempt to restrain it or to hide the fire behind it. She thought that these words might inspire him to new strength—the high, proud strength that love gives—and he would confess. But though she waited dreary seconds his lips remained sealed.

She did not know that these whispered words only made his trial the harder. Her love had been the strongest force of all in his spiritual wakening, yet his fear of losing it was now making him a moral coward. The more she loved him, the harder it was to face her hate and scorn.

To fear her so was a weakness he could not conquer. Her love was the key to that wonderful deeper meaning which life now had for him; if he lost it, he would lose everything. If her love died, all that was worth while in him must die, too, even while his body lived on. No logic, no reason, no dictate of common sense could carry weight against this mysterious but inescapable truth.

And Molly did not know how to help him. One thing, however, she did know; by the light of her woman's wisdom it was the greatest thing of all. Dick and she loved each other, and if there was any way they could have each other in honor and happiness, she meant to bring it to pass. But she would not marry a coward. If Dick did not come clean by his own will and courage, she would banish him from her life and his image from her heart. While there was hope, she would give him every chance.

She would not expose him yet. She would grant him a few more days to fight, to conquer, and to come through.

Chapter XV

While Molly was seeking an answer to her problem, one of her father's problems was brought to a sudden and unexpected solution.

In visiting a wickiup on a sick call, he chanced to see an unusually fine marten skin which Lame Moose, one of the best hunters in the village, had brought in from his trap lines. Because the skin matched a set Foster was collecting for Molly, he offered to buy it.

Usually the braves were glad to oblige their White Father, but today Foster met a determined refusal.

"Lame Moose no sell that skin. He sell plenty other skin—marten, mink, otter—but that skin, he keep'm. Skin he bring Lame Moose good luck."

By questioning the man closely Foster soon got to the bottom of the matter. As he expected, it was nothing more than a childish superstition. Like many good martens, the pelt had orange markings at the throat, and in this case they took an odd shape vaguely suggestive of a three-legged—and therefore a lame—moose. An Indian's imagination did the rest—the skin was a good-luck piece with his name on it, sent him by the gods.

Foster was tolerant of the tribesmen's superstitions, so he dropped the matter and did not recall it until he again visited Lame Moose's wickiup two days later. Today it was the big brave himself who needed attention. His tawny face looked gray; he was violently sick and almost blind with a headache.

"Spirits, they plenty mad at Lame Moose," the native complained.

Foster glanced once into the bloodshot eyes, and saw what the trouble was. This was but one of a score of such cases he had treated in the past few weeks.

"Don't blame it on the spirits. You see, Lame Moose, your good-luck piece isn't big enough medicine to stop the bad luck that lives in a red bottle."

"Lame Moose, he tell you true. Spirits, they plenty mad at him—he drink red water before, but his head no hurt, he no blind, he no sick, anyway so bad. They mad at him for selling good-luck piece."

“Oh, you sold it, did you? You refused to sell it to your White Father, but you traded it for a red bottle.”

“Ugh! Lame Moose, he plenty fool.”

“Who did you sell it to?”

“Lame Moose no tell. If he tell, he die sure. He got bad luck now, but he get heap big bad luck if he tell.”

Foster did not pursue the subject further; he knew the folly of doing so. Instead, he treated the Indian and took his departure. As far as he could foresee, the incident was closed.

Actually it had only begun. Its consequences spread as a wave spreads when a stone is thrown into a pool. It was Fate who had marked that marten skin, not to give good luck to Lame Moose, but to bring to punishment an evil-doer.

When Foster dropped into the trading store, later in the day, he found Stephen preparing a bale of skins for shipment. At the top of the pile was a marten with odd-shaped markings. When Foster’s eye fell on it, he recoiled as from a body blow.

At first he would not believe the truth. There must be some mistake—his failing old eyes had deceived him. He glanced at Stephen, still busy at his task and unaware of his visitor’s consternation. There was no sign of guilt in his open, frank countenance. His eyes were odd-shaped, mirthless, and cold, but never would Foster believe that they were the eyes of a traitor.

Yet for his own peace of mind, he must sift the matter out. Setting his face into an expressionless mask, he reached a shaking hand and took the pelt from the pile. Many martens, no doubt, had odd-shaped markings. Yet when he examined it closely, no doubt remained. Plain as day there stood the lame three-legged moose.

“This is a fine marten, Steve,” Foster said in a dry voice. “Where did you get it?”

Stephen glanced at it carelessly. “It is a good one, isn’t it? One of the natives brought it in to change for grub.”

“Who? I want to ask him where he caught it. It matches the set I’m getting for Molly, and I want to see if he can’t get me some like it.”

This was perfectly plausible. Stephen had no cause to suspect the old man’s motives. Furs from the same creek or mountain are likely to match

each other in color and quality.

"You can have that one if you want it, and I'll take some unmatched skin of yours in exchange. To save my life I can't remember who brought it in. I took in all that batch several weeks ago."

Foster's heart sank. In nearly twenty years in the North he had never been hit so hard. He wished he had not lived to see this day. He had trusted Stephen, favored him, and had given him a chance in life, only to find him not merely ungrateful, but utterly base and false.

His guilt was no longer open to question. He had just told two obvious lies. A keen trader like Stephen would not forget where he had procured a skin of such rare beauty and quality. And the transaction had occurred not weeks before but in the last two days. Even so, Foster would give him the benefit of every possible doubt and not indict him until the case was clear.

He reeled to a chair by the stove and sat for a long time with bowed head. When at last he glanced up, he seemed to have aged ten years. "Stephen, would you mind running an errand? I'll keep store for you."

"I'd be glad to," was the cheerful answer. "I can see that you're not feeling very fit."

"Go down to the end of the village road and see if Flying Moon's little boy is any better, or if they want me to come and see him."

Stephen put on his heavy coat and went out; at once Foster got up and began to search the building. At the rear was a small lock-room, but the key was in the cash-box, and Foster made an easy entrance. At the back of the room he found half a dozen croker-sacks, filled with hard objects packed in straw. When he opened one of them, his case against Stephen was complete.

He knew now why whisky-selling in the village had flourished so. Stephen was the head of the whole ring; the runners from the gold-camp were no more than hirelings. When Larsen and Newhouse had quit their sordid occupation, Stephen's trade had declined, but the supply of contraband on hand indicated that he had reorganized his gang and was about to take up the business on a bigger scale than ever.

Heart-sick, Foster left the store and stumbled home.

When Molly saw his face, she sprang up in alarm. "What has happened? You look as if you'd seen a ghost."

She helped him to his chair before the fire.

“Worse than a ghost, Molly,” he answered at last. “I’ve seen treachery—villainy—ingratitude.”

An actual pain, born of wrecked hopes, stabbed through Molly’s heart. She did not doubt for an instant but that Foster was referring to Dick.

“So you found out, did you?” she murmured.

“I found out the truth at last. Molly, did you know it?”

“I suspected it. But—but perhaps he was tempted—”

“Don’t try to make excuses for him. I won’t hear them. It’s fine of you and generous, but you haven’t thought how wicked he has been. I mean to order him out of the village, and I never want to see his face again.”

Molly nodded sadly. “It’s the end then.”

“The end as far as he is concerned. Thank Heaven, I still have you! I ought to have suspected the truth long ago, but I was so fond of him, and I trusted him so completely. Our troubles began almost from the hour that he came to the village.”

Molly looked up with a dazed expression. “What did you say?”

“Until he came, the men from the gold-camp troubled us scarcely at all. And to think that all the time he has been pretending to help us, he has been selling the stuff himself. He has brought degradation on the tribe. He betrayed me for money and tried to ruin my life’s work. It was he, and no one but he, who was responsible for Bear Claw’s attack on you. And when I found the bottles in his storeroom—”

“Oh!” A wave of crimson swept through Molly’s face, clear to the roots of her hair, and a thrill of intense excitement raced down her spine.

A question rushed to her lips, but she held it back, just in time. Her long eyes, a moment before shadowed with pain, lighted like lamps under her straight brows. “I—I—can understand it’s a hard blow for you—”

“A staggering blow, Molly. But thank God I found him out in time. And how ashamed I am that I put pressure on you to marry him! I dared to back my judgment against the voice of your heart.”

Glancing up, his gaze leaped and was riveted on her face. “What is it, daughter?”

“Why, nothing—”

“Your eyes are absolutely brimming. You look as if you’ve just been delivered from some terrible tragedy.”

“I—I’m relieved that the thing is settled.”

“It isn’t settled, but it’s going to be right now. I’m going out to find the scoundrel and tell him what I know.”

He started to get up, but Molly gently pushed him back into his chair. He must not be allowed to accuse Stephen, for Stephen’s first act of retaliation would be to expose Dick. Her heart raced; her thoughts flew.

“I won’t let you go near him,” she said.

“Surely you don’t think I’m going to ignore it.”

“Of course not. But you’re in no condition to face him. You’d fly into a rage and maybe fall down dead from heart failure.”

This was perfectly true. Molly would have taken this stand on any account.

“It would be hard to keep my temper—I admit that.”

“You mustn’t see him at all. You can write a letter—or, better still, send word to him.”

“Who’s going to carry it? Dick would do it in a minute, but it would mean a fight, and I don’t want that. Even if they fought fair, Stephen would probably half kill him—he’s strong as a bear. Besides, any man who has done this would go to any length. Dick is the only boy I have left now, and I can’t take risks with him.”

Molly smiled dimly into his earnest face. “I promise you Stephen will be gone from the village before night, without either risk to Dick or myself. We’ll handle it without trouble.”

Foster looked relieved; it would have been a trying ordeal to meet Stephen. While he mourned, Molly slipped into her cold-weather parka and stole out into the glistening snow.

She found Stephen behind his counter, and at first she did not know how to begin. But he himself soon paved the way.

“Have you turned Dick out of the village yet?” he demanded crossly. “How you can tolerate a crook like that—”

She drew her slight form erect. “We’ve been very tolerant of crooks for a long time, but we’re not going to be any more. And Stephen—you’ll be the

first to go."

His brows went up, and his queer eyes snapped. "What do you mean? If that cursed Dick has lied to you about me—"

"He hasn't said a word about you. Be careful you don't say a word about him either, to me or to anyone else. He has deceived us, true enough, but he hasn't tried to stab us in the back, as you have."

The low voice went straight home to Stephen. His courage was of a mean quality at best, and even this began to ooze away.

"Molly, I don't know what you mean."

"Yes, you do. Father found what you had in the storeroom. He knows all about your treachery." The girl paused; inspiration visited her. "He knows it was you who tried to rob the fur house, too."

"Dick told him that?" The brown cheeks flushed darkly, and the big hands clenched. "He'll pay for that, too."

"I told you Dick did not say a word to father or to me either. If you try to make trouble for him, or tell anyone what you know about him, you'll be driven not only out of this village, but out of all Alaska. Father has a clear case against you, but he'll let the matter drop provided you go peaceably. But if you make trouble, you'll regret it all your life."

"I want to talk to your father. I can explain a good deal."

"You can't talk to him. If you knew the mood he's in, you wouldn't want to see him. He's up in arms against you, and I shouldn't dare say how far he'll go."

Stephen stood silent for long seconds, then raised his head with a semblance of dignity. "Then it's all over between you and me."

"There never was anything between you and me."

He seemed about to speak further, but thought better of it, and he turned silently up the stairs to his living quarters. Less than an hour later he was mushing toward Moose Landing, his face flushed with repressed rage, his lips set in a determined line.

The next day saw another secret meeting in the anteroom of Pete's Pleasure Palace. Sicilian Pietro himself sat at Stephen's right hand, and about him, in a whispering group, were Limejuice 'Arry, Black Koslof, Swede, and a newcomer, Breed Paul.

“The game’s up, out there,” Stephen announced. “We’ve played and lost, mostly on Dick’s account. And to lose out to a crook like him—”

“A crook?” Pietro spoke gently, but there was an eager sparkle in his eyes. Before now, he had profited exceedingly by knowing shameful things about seeming honest men. “What ees his game?”

Stephen checked the words that rushed to his lips. There was no advantage in exposing the impostor to these eager listeners. Sometime he might want to make use of what he knew about Dick, a deep game better played alone. Besides, Molly’s parting threat echoed with a strange persistence in his ears. It angered him that her quiet words should sway him in the least, yet cunning was best, after all.

“I’ve got nothing on him,” he answered at last. “He may or may not be a crook for all I know, but I do know he spoiled our show. I wish the bullet somebody fired at him the other day had put a hole through his head. Of all the poor shooting I ever saw, that was the worst.”

As he talked, he looked idly toward Limejuice ’Arry.

The cockney stirred uneasily. “I don’t know who it was done it, but I do know who said there wasn’t to be no shooting at all, and if there was any, to aim low at ’is legs. Nobody could ’it anything if ’e ’ad to do that.”

“It was good sense, too. What good did the shooting do—none, except to half kill a native? And I don’t want any shooting now, either. I’d like to see him in a hospital for a few months, but there’s nobody around here who can be trusted to put him there without running the risk of killing him, or killing somebody else, and that means a flock of marshals and lots of trouble.”

“It ees true,” Dago Pete said. “Now let us come to business. What ees on your mind, Hathaway?”

Stephen sprang up, tested the lock on the door, and bent down to his fellow conspirators.

“I’ll tell you what’s on my mind, and it’s the biggest chance you fellows have ever had, or ever will have, if you stay in this God-forsaken country twenty years.” His voice shook a little with suppressed excitement. “It’s a game that makes our little whisky-running into the reservation look like penny ante.”

He began to give details. Even Koslof, whose introvert mind had a great capacity for the fine points of a game, had to admit that they were well planned. They covered not only the advance on the enemy stronghold, but a

safe retreat; not merely the procurement of great wealth, but means whereby it could be cached and later shipped out of the country without leaving a clue that the keenest deputy marshal could follow. As he talked, his listeners drew closer, and the avid look on his handsome, bronzed face passed speedily to their own.

Many of Stephen's schemes had fallen through, but this, the biggest and the most daring, would recoup all he had lost. It was desperate, but so was he. And these henchmen tested it in every detail, sifted it for weaknesses, looked upon it with cold, measuring eyes, and found it good.

In his exultation, Stephen had forgotten the grim prophecy quoted by Needa, that early winter night beside Foster's hearth. "They who kill by the sword must be killed by the sword." It was meaningless anyway. The plan could not fail.

Chapter XVI

The night following Stephen's departure, Dr. Foster's condition took a turn for the worse. He complained of swollen ankles, a dangerous symptom in this case, and the slight bluish tinge of his countenance was more pronounced. Watching his chance, Dick glanced at his thin hands. As he had expected, the moons at the base of the nails were blue as indigo.

No doubt his discovery of Stephen's perfidy had been a severe shock to him. He could not stand many more such shocks. His heart was overtaxed now; a sudden additional strain, or more likely, the reaction following a sustained period of excitement or over-exertion, might put him out like a bullet through his brain. But what could Dick do about it? Nothing in this world.

The operation Foster needed was one of the most difficult in all medical science. Dick had never attempted it, and only once had he seen it done—at a famous clinic in Boston. It demanded not only the greatest manual dexterity and anatomical knowledge, but a kind of surgical genius which he had never showed he possessed. Without the operation Foster might live weeks, months, possibly years. On the other hand, if Dick should reveal his secret, and attempt the operation, the old man was practically certain to die on the table.

It was also possible that Dr. Foster would not submit to an operation by Dick's knife. As soon as he learned that Dick was an impostor, he would order him out of the house, and Dick would have thrown away Molly's love in vain.

Yet he could not dismiss the matter from his mind. Night after night he performed the operation in his dreams, always with the most tragic results; in his waking hours he found himself plotting it out, step after step, thrust after thrust, crisis after crisis. He went even further. Partly to satisfy his idle curiosity, but mainly because the impulse was too strong to resist, he devised a steel hook which might, theoretically, be useful in extracting one or more leaflets of the auricular-ventricular opening. After it was as perfect as he could make it, he put it away in his kit, resolving never to look at it again.

Molly, sitting before the hearth between Dick and Foster, looked from one face to the other. In the old doctor's visage she saw unmistakable signs of his decline; in Dick's she found cognizance of these signs, and a confused

reaction of doubt, fear, hope, and remorse. Was he man enough to try to save her father? The whole issue had stripped down to this. Here lay his one chance for salvation—mercy and forgiveness from those he had tried to defraud—and Molly's one hope of happiness. Whenever he opened his lips to speak her heart leaped into her throat. No flicker of expression passed over his face but that she prayed it was a sign he was coming through.

She could not wait much longer for him. Her pride would not permit it. Since she had learned who he was, she too was living a lie. His confession must come soon, while he still felt secure, and before he suspected that Molly might know the truth; otherwise it would have no value. She would not listen to one word of it then, and would banish him, as far as her strength let her, from her mind and heart.

He must act on his own free will. He could not wait until he saw that he was about to be exposed, then find grace. She would give him a few hours more, possibly a day or two, in which to come clean; then no matter if it broke her heart and her father's, too, she would unmask him. This was her firm resolve, and she would not fail.

It was true that the task grew harder with every passing moment. Fate seemed to be deliberately tormenting her. Loving him so, she could not keep her eyes from him, and every gesture he made and every smile he gave made her love him more. She knew he had no right to caress her, nor had she the right to permit his caresses, yet she longed to have him take her in his arms; and even when his hand touched hers, an electric thrill ran through her. She day-dreamed of the kisses he had given her—innocent kisses, yet so haunting, so sweet. The thought of parting from him—of putting him out of her life, never to see him smile again, or touch his lips, or look into his eyes—threw her into a panic and made the pain-devils stab and twist her heart.

The task was hard on her father's account too. Save for Molly herself, Dick was the light of his eyes, and Stephen's disgrace complicated the situation still further.

"I can't get over what happened today," the old doctor said, musing. "To think how much I cared for that boy, and how I trusted him—then to have him turn out not only a crook, but a traitor. Thank heaven, Dick, I have you. I think that your coming was a providence to give me someone to lean on now. Stephen failed me, but you have more than fulfilled my highest hopes for you. Praise God, all men are not crooks and traitors!"

Dick's face turned gray. This was almost more than he could bear. One thing was sure—this strange tragic-comedy could not go on much longer.

Tonight he would perfect plans for the disappearance of Richard Foster. He would go on a trip, and word would come back of his death. Dr. Foster could thus cherish a tender memory of his lost son, and Molly's love would follow him through the years. This was the most he could hope for now—mercy and hope and remembrance to lead him on. He must be grateful even for this and thankful that his punishment was no greater.

Yet before Dick could put this plan into practice, and before Molly could decide that the moment had come to expose him, Fate moved again.

Three knocks were heard on the rear door. Their solemn ceremonial sound startled Dick, and Molly met his eyes with a smile.

"That's one of the Indians on what he considers an important mission," she explained. "It's a head man, too—I can always tell by the self-important way he knocks. Really, when these people haven't whisky to degrade them, they are one of the most dignified races that ever existed."

She hurried to the door and admitted Nache-Tennon—Chief Strongheart, Molly called him—the grand old man of the tribe. The tall copper-colored dignitary drew up haughtily before Dr. Foster.

"Great White Father!"

"Good meat, Chief Nache-Tennon!"

"You come to chief's wickiup? Little girl, chief's son's daughter, she plenty sick."

"Do you mean White Moon, the little girl who had the red spots?"

"Ugh! She no got red spots now, but she sick. Her throat he hurt. When she try eat, she cry."

"I don't think it's very serious, chief. I suppose she has a sore throat. Yet I'd better see her."

Molly pushed forward and laid her hand on her father's shoulder. "Can't it wait till morning? It's bitter cold tonight—when I opened the door, it almost took my breath. It's close to forty below."

The old man hesitated. "I think I'd better take a look at her, Molly. I'll wrap up warm, and I don't think it will hurt me any. It probably isn't serious, but I'd feel better to be sure."

"I've got it!" It was Dick's voice, ringing clear in the hushed room. "I'll go back with Chief Strongheart and take a look at the little girl. I can take her temperature and notice her symptoms, and come back and report to you.

Then, if you think it necessary, you can go to see her tonight. Otherwise you can wait till morning."

Foster hesitated; Molly's eyes began to glitter.

"Of course that's the thing to do. Dick knows a lot about sickness, and common sense will tell him whether the child needs immediate attention. And—and—I'll go with him."

Dick turned hastily. "There's no need of your going. I'll run over and be back in ten minutes."

"I want to go. If you were a doctor, you wouldn't need me, but as it is, maybe I can help you."

Dick nodded, apparently with misgivings, and Foster explained the situation to the chief.

"My son is a wise man," he said. "He is a kind of doctor himself. He will go and bring me word of your little girl."

Dick took Foster's satchel, and a moment later Molly and he were hastening to the chief's wickiup. They were gay, in spite of the killing cold of the night and the solemn watch of the snow-swept spruce trees looming over them; perhaps they were trying to conceal from each other their grave thoughts and the keen excitement both felt. Dick was wondering how he could diagnose the child's sickness without appearing too professional. Molly's heart thrilled at the situation; perhaps in some stress to come Dick might find redemption.

Their talk died away as they turned into the dimly lighted wickiup. At the first glance at the dusky child on the pallet, an intense look came into Dick's face.

Molly watched him breathlessly. She was as intent on his symptoms—manifesting the state of the spiritual sickness he had suffered so long—as he was on the child's. He seemed to have forgotten Molly's presence. Instead of an impostor, living a lie for material gain, he was a doctor heart and soul. Surely she would have recognized that now, even if Stephen had never exposed him. The expression on his face, his position as he bent over the pallet, and his confident manner all bespoke his profession. Old Chief Strongheart, uneasy at first, nodded his head with satisfaction. The sleeping child stirred, looked up at the doctor, and smiled dimly.

Even Molly did not realize the full significance of what she saw. Dick had not only forgotten the rôle he had played so long, but for this brief,

passing moment had come into his own. The case did not present an interesting scientific problem. Although the little girl was desperately ill—this he knew at a glance—her ailment was probably a common one. Yet he was carried out of himself. No surgical complication in his experience had ever taken him so hard. As he bent over the child, he focused upon her not only his medical skill, but the healing warmth of his heart.

Was this Dick Grant, the cynic, the agnostic? Interns in a distant hospital could scarcely have believed their eyes.

The child's dark skin was flushed with fever. Her troubled breathing, the sweat at her temples, and the strange lights of her dusky eyes—all told him that she was in the throes of some serious malady. He took her brown hand in his and with a far-away look on his face counted her pulse. Apparently he did not need to take her temperature—the touch of his fingers on her forehead told him that she was running a high fever.

Glancing up he found Molly watching him in wonder. Yet even this did not break the spell; he did not seem to realize that he was betraying himself with every motion he made.

"Molly, we've got a sick child here. Do you think you can get her to let me look into her throat?"

Molly gazed steadfastly into his face. "Can you tell anything by that? I thought only a doctor—"

"I can tell something. At least I can describe how it looks to your father. Now let's be quick."

In a moment Molly had won the child's confidence and had induced her to open her mouth. And when Dick's flashlight showed a white membrane on the tonsils, his eyes began to sparkle with excitement.

"Did you see that membrane, Molly?"

"I saw something white. . . . What does it mean?"

"It means—but we'll let your father say. I think I'll put a swab of cotton down there and see if I can't collect a bit of that membrane to take home to your father. He can test it, and it may save him a trip."

Dick performed this task with a show of awkwardness and inexperience which Molly saw through at a glance. Then he turned to the old chief waiting patiently at the head of the bed.

“I shall go now, but I shall come back soon with medicine. In the meantime, chief, do not go into any of the wickiups of the people for fear you carry the sickness with you.”

A moment later Molly and Dick were tramping home to make their report. Dick seemed preoccupied; Molly’s gaze kept stealing up to his fine profile plainly visible in the moonlight.

“You were wonderful tonight,” she told him at last.

“Far from it!”

“I believe you can succeed in anything you try, if you just *will* to do so. You inspired such confidence in those poor people. I don’t believe anything can conquer you.”

He pressed her hand between both of his. “I can’t even conquer myself,” he answered quietly at last.

He guarded his speech carefully in reporting to Foster.

“The child is very sick—I can tell that from her appearance—and has a high fever. I counted her pulse—it was one hundred and twenty. There was a membrane in her throat.”

Foster’s expression grew tense. He waited a long breath. “Did you say a membrane?”

“Yes. I thought you might like to look at it, so I swabbed out her throat and brought back the swab.”

“Just the thing. I’ll make a culture. But the difficulty is we can’t know for certain for twenty-four hours.”

“There’s no doubt in my mind right now.”

Dick spoke impulsively, and was in deep water before he knew it. Foster glanced up with a startled air.

“What do you think it is?”

“I—I suppose it’s diphtheria. I’ve always understood that it is recognized by a membrane on the throat.”

“So it is. And I’m only too afraid you’re right. That means we’ll all have to get busy right now, or we’ll have an epidemic here that may almost wipe out the tribe.”

The first step was to procure diphtheria antitoxin. An investigation of Foster's cabinets showed only a few tubes of the life-saving serum, and this was old and of doubtful value. At Dick's insistence one of the young braves was called from his hut and dispatched with a fast dog-team to Moose Landing; there he would send a wireless message from Foster to a hospital in Fairbanks. The Indian village of Lonesome River was threatened with a diphtheria epidemic—so the terse message read—and all available antitoxin must be sent by airplane at once.

"If there's a plane in the city, it ought to get here by tomorrow night," Foster said. "And that won't be one moment too soon."

Foster bundled up and went to see the sick child. He soon diagnosed her sickness as diphtheria, but there was little he could do until the antitoxin arrived. In the meantime Dick took it upon himself to make a tour of the wickiups. When he and Foster met again just after midnight his look was grim.

"We're in for it," Dick said quietly.

"Not more cases?"

"Five more at the lowest count. Fever and membranous throat. Five or six others that look suspicious. If Fairbanks has plenty of serum and an airplane handy, we may come through all right. If not—"

"If not, there's certain to be a heavy loss of life."

The disease swept through the village like fire. At dawn there were ten cases, at noon five more. As yet all the victims were children, but several of the adults showed signs of succumbing, a situation ominous in the extreme.

These Indians had little resistance to the white man's maladies. It was entirely within the bounds of possibility that if the plague were not checked soon, it might wipe out the tribe. Such disasters had happened before now, in the history of the North.

Until the antitoxin arrived the problem was mainly one of intelligent nursing; and Dick and Molly launched into it. They must prevent contact between the sick and the well. They must see that the patients were given soft, easily digested food and plenty of water, that the huts were kept at a fairly even temperature, and that, to some degree at least, sanitary conditions should prevail.

It was no light responsibility, no easy task. The Indians were without resources of their own, and, panic-stricken by the rapid spread of the

sickness, they seemed unable to follow the simplest instructions. If the squaws would tend fire, melt snow and keep house, it was the most Molly could expect of them. Food for the sick she prepared in her own kitchen, with Needa's help; from there it was distributed to the various wickiups.

Foster would have been helpless without his two lieutenants. Molly's insight into Indian nature, combined with her mastery of their language, enabled her to win the tribesmen's confidence and help them, as far as their limitations permitted, to help themselves. She comforted the sick children, and persuaded their parents to bar out the native witch doctors, now raising their heads in the tribe. And Dick was Foster's right arm. He not only carried out the simple defensive tactics which Foster prescribed, but launched a vigorous offensive of his own.

Because all three worked separately, Dick was able to treat the patients in his care without showing his hand to Molly and her father. From one midnight to another he did not rest his head. Two cases were already nearing their crises; death was flying faster than the plane from Fairbanks, and he believed that only by heroic treatment could life be saved. He painted the throats of these children with antiseptic; when their fever rose too high, he tied ice-bags over their hearts; he watched their faces hour after hour, easing them over danger points and keeping them fighting by a careful administering of stimulants.

All this he did, not reluctantly, not dutifully, but ardently and happily. His talk with Hollingsworth in the Seattle hospital seemed long ago and far away. He had come to a new feeling about disease. No longer was it merely a scientific problem, cold and dead, but an evil to fight and conquer with every faculty of his brain and all the might of his heart and soul. He was a doctor in the true sense of the word. This meant, when all was said and done, that he was a priest—ordained to the service of God through service to his fellow men.

He knew now that the successful practice of medicine can never be purely the exercise of brain and hand, but must be of the spirit as well. The true doctor must be consecrated to an ideal of brotherly love; somehow this gives him access to a healing power greater than his own. In some manner men cannot know—natural, no doubt, yet so clouded in mystery that to mortal eyes it must seem miraculous—the true doctor's powers are hereby enhanced, not merely his personal influence over his patient's minds, but his actual medical skill.

Only the wisest physicians can appreciate this fact, but a fact it is, and Dick could begin to glimpse it at last. True learning is impossible without love. Perhaps the terms are almost synonymous. And all greatness springs from love—all truth, all light. When Dick had begun this northern adventure, the only god he knew was science. He had not known that science itself is only one manifestation of the Loving God; that no man ever made a great scientific discovery unless inspired by love.

It was love of man that inspired Dick now. He wanted to drive the devils of disease from the bodies of these dusky children and make them well; this was the profession of his mind and soul. They were only savages. By no light of reason could he see that their lives were of the least value to the world. Yet no self-sacrifice would be too great if he could save them—this truth he saw by a light greater than reason, the Light of the World itself.

Even if he never found strength to confess his sin to Molly, in a sense Dick had come through. He had found himself, and he would not lose the way again. He had suffered and had caused others to suffer, yet a great end had been achieved. As he sat beside the rude pallet of an Indian child, watching its every breath, his vision cleared, and for a brief time he could see all his life and fate in true perspective. Suddenly his heart glowed warm with thanksgiving.

He was bound to lose Molly, whatever happened, yet he was glad that she had come into his life and glad that this whole northern drama had come to pass. It was Molly's love that had wakened his spirit from sleep. His eyes were opened; he saw beauty and worth where before was darkness. . . . The dignity and fineness of Dr. Foster's life and deeds; the splendor of God's handiwork, as manifested everywhere in this splendid North; the glory in a squaw's face as her brown baby nursed at her breast—all these had changed him, molded him, added to his stature. Love had come to him, and such was its miraculous quality that he could pour it out upon all the world, and his heart still remain full. When the curtain finally rang down on these strange events, he could go on and fulfil his destiny foreordained since time's beginning. He would pick up his surgeon's knife where he had laid it down, and from now on it would be a sword in his hands in the service of man. He would make the most of his opportunities. He would do his work.

He was called from his thoughts by the hum of an airplane. The ship landed on a small frozen lake five miles from the village; a dog-team was dispatched at once to meet the aviator and bring in his precious freight. This was just before dusk; three hours later the antitoxin was in Foster's hands.

By now his bacterial culture showed that the outbreak was indeed diphtheria, so he and Dick started out at once to give the treatment.

They visited every known case in the village. The needle plunged deep under tawny skin; a philter more wonderful than all the alchemists of the Middle Ages could ever dream swept through the river of the blood on its life-saving mission. It was man's genius, God-given, fighting the devil of disease. Could it hold the foe in check, and finally vanquish him, or had it come too late?

When the work was done, the two men reeled home through the snow. Molly was waiting to give them hot coffee, and her tired smile as they came into the room touched Dick's heart as never before. He wanted to take her in his arms, kiss her hands, her sweet eyelids, and her child's mouth, and beg forgiveness. But this boon was not given. For this, the scales had not yet fallen from his eyes. He did not know that the lights were burning low and the curtain was about to descend. He thought that the play must go on.

Foster drank his coffee and went to bed; Dick remained in his chair, staring blindly at his empty cup. At last Molly crept to his side and touched his hand.

"You must rest too, Dick."

He rallied with an effort, and his look of entreaty touched her almost to tears. "I suppose so. But I must get up in two hours. I'll ask Needa to call me."

She stroked his smooth, black hair. "I love you, Dick," she told him, her eyes brimming. "I shall always love you."

"Always? Even if I should go away and we never see each other again?"

"Yes. No matter what happens, I shall always love you."

But he could not believe her. This was his punishment.

He left the room, and when Needa called him, two hours later, went back to his patients. From hut to hut he tramped through the long night.

Two days and two nights more the battle raged. Ten new infections developed in this period, but the antitoxin was ready, and Foster nipped them in the bud. At last the foe began to give ground. The lighter cases began to mend; all but two of the sick children were out of danger.

For many days yet, Molly and her two doctors must make shift with short rest and hasty meals, but it was a winning fight from now on, and their spirits were strong. Indeed, Molly was fervently grateful for the hard toil and long hours; they saved her from brooding too darkly on her vanishing hopes. Her mind was occupied during the day, and the sleep of weariness balmed her at night. Dick too was glad that the days were so full, the nights so swift. In service to these dusky children he could begin to gain back part of what he had thrown away, and find a measure of consolation.

These trying days went hard with Dr. Foster. Every night found him close to exhaustion. The actual work of treating and nursing the sick he could relegate to Molly and Dick, yet the children craved the sight of him, and he could not refuse them. He sat for hours beside their pallets, comforting them; he steadied the tribesmen and prevented a disastrous panic. Even so, he stood up marvelously well. His face was haggard, but the ominous blue tinge was not so much in evidence, and Dick dared to hope that the valve trouble had temporarily cleared up.

"Anyway I've got to keep going," Foster said. "They are my people, and I must help them through this trouble until I'm not able to help them any more. It's my life and work."

Little White Moon was the last of the sick to pass the crisis. Late one night she emerged from her stupor and told Dick, by a quickening of her black eyes, that she had come safely through the valley of the shadows and would soon be able to play again. Molly was in the hut at the time, and she wet with her tears the little, brown, fevered hand. Then she and Dick walked home together under the snow-laden spruce trees.

The moon was not risen, so she could not see his face. Yet she knew that he was caught up in some solemn exaltation—not mere personal triumph, but something higher.

"What a victory it is!" His voice in the dark had a low, vibrant ring. "Twenty cases of diphtheria, and not one death. What a tribute to medical science!"

"I suppose we would have lost half of them, if we hadn't had antitoxin."

"More than half. These Indians have little resistance to diphtheria. Moreover there would have been many more cases. In the old days, Molly, doctors couldn't fight this disease. They could give their patients good nursing, but had no way to kill the germ. But a few patient doctors kept on working and experimenting, and developed a serum that is an almost certain

cure for diphtheria, provided it is given in time. They didn't do it for money. All they got out of it, in a material way, was a living. They did it to keep faith with their profession and, through this, with humanity. It's a big thing, isn't it?"

"And what a wonderful reward! The saving of human life."

"I never really realized before how worth while it is. Men are so true, brave, well-meaning—I don't mean just great scientists, but ordinary men, who do their work the best they can. What a privilege it is, what an opportunity, for those patient doctors to be able to serve them, and save them for the world!"

"What an obligation, too!" Molly spoke in low tones. "Yet I suppose some had the chance and threw it away."

"Many of them, I suppose. Simply because they failed to understand and appreciate the true worth of mankind. Well, if I live and am given the chance I'll never throw it away again."

She waited a long time for him to go on, but he said no more.

"What do you mean, Dick?"

"Nothing that I can explain. Molly, I want to tell you something—"

She pressed his hand, and her throat filled so that she could hardly speak. "Yes—"

"I'm going away from here before long. I'm going back to the States. I can't explain why I have to go—it has to do with something in my past life—but you and your father will have to trust me and believe me when I say that it is inevitable."

Her thrilling heart grew still. "And you can't even tell father why?"

"I can't tell anyone. It must sound strange to you, but it wouldn't be strange if you understood. You have trusted me until now. I ask you, from the bottom of my heart, to continue to trust me."

They paused for a moment outside the door. The rising moon was a silver gleam on the eastern skyline; they saw the tall spruce trees standing in profile between.

"You'll come back?" she managed to ask at last.

"Perhaps. I'll come back if I can."

“And—and—you’ll take the inheritance father wants you to have?” Her breath failed as she waited his answer.

“No. That may seem queer to you too, but I can’t take anything now. I—can’t bother with it now, but—but if I live, I’ll come back and get it later. . . . I want you to tell father that, so he won’t urge me to take it now.”

A dim, sad smile curled the girl’s lips. “You mean this, Dick?”

“Yes, Molly. It’s the only course left for me.”

“And you’ll go soon?”

“As soon as I can arrange it. I wish I could tell you the necessity for it, but I can’t.”

“I am sorry you won’t tell me. Perhaps I could help you.” Molly looked into his eyes, faintly visible under the rising moon. “Anyway I trust you. I know that you will do the best you can according to your powers. If you feel that you must go, I won’t ask you to stay.”

No, she would not ask him to stay. At the last she would kiss his lips and let him go without one word, one gesture of hers, to hold him. She would be too proud to ask him to stay until, standing erect, he asked the boon himself. Besides, her ideals inherited from her father and nurtured in this bright North, would not let her yield.

She had always set great store on courage. To her it was the first commandment, and its lack was the one unforgivable sin. She had held to this ever since her earliest childhood. Physical courage Dick possessed, this beyond any shadow of doubt. But if he lacked the moral courage to come clean, risking everything for the sake of her love and her father’s life, she would not marry him, no matter if it broke her heart.

When all was said and done, Molly was a daughter of the Great North. Its creed was her own.

Chapter XVII

Just before midnight, clouds blew up from the east, blanketing the stars. The night became one black pall, and not even the snow glimmered gray. The wind rose, blowing the dry snow in stinging sheets. A man could not see his hand before his face.

The thick night and the long groans of the wind depressed Molly, as she stood a moment by her window before going to bed. Dark forebodings haunted her—due, no doubt, to the crisis in her love for Dick. But it is an ill wind that blows no one good, and for six men, crouching about a low fire in the forest above the village, this seemed perfect weather. They could not have ordered better. The soughing of the trees would drown out sound; the blowing snow would wipe out tracks. The darkness would cover every act, and—this seemed a small matter, but it was important—the malemiuts in the village would lie close tonight and would not howl at intruders.

By and large, these six were white men. Two of them, however, had alien blood in their veins—Breed Paul, palpably half native, and Black Koslof, a bewildering double-cross of Russian, Tatar, and Indian. Koslof's three cronies, Pietro, Limejuice 'Arry, and Swede, crouched at one side of the fire; looming over them, the dominant figure, a big man with odd, three-cornered, magnetic eyes.

Stephen's appearance had changed since his last talk with Molly. The avid look around his lips was more in evidence, and there was an undefinable drawing and hardening of all his lineaments. Strange to note, he was no longer handsome. The bad of his nature had triumphed definitely over the good, and the fact was published in his countenance. He could not be trusted far tonight. The poisonous ferments of rage and hate were in his blood; he meant to carry his venture through at no matter what cost.

About midnight he passed a signal to his men. Each took a dog-team and slowly drove down toward the village. The malemiuts, smelling their way in the thick dark, were silent as wolves, and no husky chorus greeted them from the huts. They pulled up back of Foster's home, and, carrying big canvas bags, the invisible file moved on the fur depot.

On the little porch of the structure, sheltered by the eaves, an Indian lay wrapped in his caribou-skin robe. This was the guard Foster had appointed

for the night watch; but since all the available braves took turns at the duty, Stephen did not know who the man was. On this a good deal depended.

It would hardly be possible to take the guard by surprise. Otherwise Swede could have disposed of him neatly, for the necessary time, with one light tap of a blackjack on the top of the skull. The brave seemed to be asleep; actually he was as alert as a fox. His ears were keen, and he would hear the crunch of moccasins on the hard-packed snow before Swede could get in striking distance.

Pressing back with his hand, Stephen halted the file behind him and advanced alone. He walked boldly, without softening his tread; otherwise the guard would be certain to utter some challenge and waken the occupants of the house. This was one of the most critical moments of the night. Even Foster, with twenty years' experience, could never predict what any Indian would do under any given circumstance. The brave's voice might boom forth at any instant.

But white cunning prevailed, and the bold approach put the savage off guard.

When Stephen was ten feet distant, he paused and spoke in an undertone. "This is Stephen Hathaway."

"Ugh!" came the grunting answer.

"Who is it?"

"Bear Claw. What you want?"

Stephen's racing heart thrilled at this word. Surely luck was at his right hand tonight. If he had picked the guard himself, he could not have been better satisfied. There would be no call on Swede and his blackjack. Bear Claw had been Stephen's slave since their first trading deal three years before.

"You want red water?"

"*Ugh!*" The subdued grunt spoke volumes. Here was the whole black story of the red man's downfall.

"If I give it to you, will you go away?"

"*Ugh!*"

Bear Claw would sell his soul and body, let alone the honor of his given word, for this price. His hands were shaking already, and his thin, cruel lips

twitched fitfully. Only those who know the Indian and the tragic passion of his race could begin to understand.

From his mackinaw pocket Stephen took a quart bottle, two-thirds full, and put it in the Indian's hand. The lean, brown fingers that had once gripped Molly's throat closed upon it, and a moment later he had disappeared in the shadows.

Stephen signaled his confederates to come on. To little 'Arry, the ratlike cockney, came first call. As a marksman he was in disgrace, but he knew certain other trades that made him useful on a raid like this. He thrust a short spiral tool into the ring of the first padlock and, turning it strongly, forced the catch. Under his skilled hand all three padlocks gave silently, and the door was unlocked.

Four of the men entered the musk-smelling room and began to cram furs into their moosehide sacks. They worked silently, swiftly. Outside Stephen and Sicilian Pietro stood on guard, their rifles cocked and ready in their hands. They did not mean to lose this prize.

Molly had just drifted to sleep when someone rapped lightly on her door. At first she thought it might be Dick, conscience-plagued and coming to confess. But when she called, Needa's voice answered.

"Needa, she want to come in."

Molly sat up, wide awake. Only rarely since her childhood had her old nurse visited her room at night. At her call the door opened, revealing in a little circle of candlelight the woman's brown hand and the wrinkled parchment of her face. She was clothed in a blanket; her hair, glistening and black for all her long years, hung in two braids in front of her shoulders.

"What is it, Needa?"

The old squaw moved stealthily into the room. "Needa, she no like it!"

"What do you mean?"

"She feel trouble. She feel like she feel long, long time ago, when Needa little girl. Big Hunger, he come to tribe. Game, he all go. Hunt all day, no catch'm. Running Feet—wolves, Needa means—they starve, too; make circle around tent at night."

"But I don't understand, Needa." Molly's eyes looked wide and round in the yellow candlelight. "What are you afraid of now?"

“Wolves, he come back.”

The girl listened to the long cries of the wind. “It isn’t possible. The wolves wouldn’t come so close. Even if they did, they’d do no harm.”

“These wolves—they do harm. Needa no lie!”

“The dogs would be yelling if there were wolves.”

“Dogs, they no yell much on night like this. I tell you, trouble he come. You believe Needa. Needa, she no tell lie.”

Molly looked into the glowing, deep-set eyes, and suddenly she was convinced. She sprang up, slipped on a dressing gown and slippers, and hurried to Dick’s room. He wakened at her light tap on his door, and a moment later they were whispering together at the threshold.

At once Dick stole to the window and opened it silently. The darkness was impenetrable, and at first he could hear no sound but the bass-viol strumming of the wind in the trees. Yet even now he knew that Needa was right, and trouble had come.

“Who’s there?” he called suddenly.

As suddenly came the startling answer. “We’re here, and we’re going to stay.”

It was not Stephen’s voice, but Pietro’s, and Dick did not recognize it. But he did recognize its menace—an implacable, deadly threat in its very tone. They did not mean to be driven from their prey, this grim pack of wolves.

Then, to be sure of his ground, “What are you going to do?”

“We’re going to blow your head off eef you don’t shut that window and let us alone. Eef you lie quiet and don’t interfere wis us, you and your family won’t be hurt. Eef you make trouble for us, we’ll feex you.”

Alarmed by the strange talk, Needa had followed Molly into the room, and the glimmer from her candle revealed the window as a dimly luminous square. Stephen, at a fever pitch of excitement and hating that voice in the darkness from the bottom of his heart, saw a chance to add emphasis to Pietro’s threat. His rifle flung up in his arms and he fired.

He had not shot at Dick. The murder point in this affair had not yet been reached. He aimed above his foe’s head, and the bullets thwacked against the logs.

Dick reeled back out of danger, then said quietly, “Put out the light!”

Needa breathed on the candle, and Molly’s voice came sharp and clear through the thick dark.

“Are you hurt, Dick?”

“No. That was just a reminder. Are you standing by the table?”

“Yes.”

“My pistol is there. Hand it to me.”

She obeyed instantly; the solid pistol butt slipped into his hand. “But you mustn’t shoot it yet. You can’t hit in the dark, and they’ll fire at the flash.”

“Then we must get them to fire first.”

At that instant, Stephen’s rifle roared again, answered by the crash of glass. Molly’s fingers gripped Dick’s arm.

“Where was that?” she breathed.

“It was on this floor. It must have been father’s room.”

“That’s it. He turned on the light, and they blazed at his window. Come —he may be hurt—”

All three ran into the corridor and to their unspeakable relief met the old doctor at the door of his room. He was not hurt nor apparently even greatly terrified. Save for the brilliance of his eyes there was little sign of his intense excitement.

“What’s happening, Dick?” he asked steadily. “Someone shot at my window.”

Dick did not attempt to explain until he had reached a long arm around the door frame and turned off the electric switch. They must not invite another volley until they were prepared to answer it. In the darkness he spoke rapidly, tersely:

“It’s a raid on the fur house. Stephen’s in it, of course, although I haven’t heard his voice—how many more there are I don’t know. They say that if we stay inside and let them alone, they won’t harm us, but if we oppose them they’ll blow our heads off.”

“So we must lie quiet and not interfere with ’em, eh?” the old man muttered grimly. “We must cover up our heads while they get away with my twenty years’ savings! What’s your answer to that, Dick?”

“You know what my answer is. I’m going to shoot it out with them to the last bullet. But—but I don’t want you and Molly to run any risk.”

“Risk, hell!” The words cracked in the silent room and—bursting from the old doctor’s ever-gentle lips—raised the short hairs on Dick’s scalp.

“Have Molly and I lived in this tough country twenty years to be afraid to take risk? We’ll fight it out beside you, Dick, of course, but the question is—how are we going to do it?”

“Can’t we just let go a volley?”

“We wouldn’t have much chance of hitting ’em with four guns.”

True, there were four: for a moment Dick had forgotten the old Indian woman.

“All they’d have to do is stay behind the fur house, and they’d be safe.”

“But they’ll be going in and out, carrying furs. If we can finish off one or two of them, the others may run.”

“Yes, but we don’t want to miss the first volley. We may not get another chance. Let me think.”

“Won’t the Indians hear the shooting and come to help?”

“No hope of that. They’ll hardly hear it anyhow, with the wind blowing this way.”

“I’ve got it!” The triumph in Dick’s face thrilled them all. “Get your flashlight, Molly, and give it to me. I’ll go downstairs to the dining-room—it’s the nearest to the fur house—and you three take windows on this floor. When I pick up one of them with the light, all of you let go at once.”

But Molly seized his arm. “But they’ll shoot at the light.”

“I’ll hold it out from my body. I’m going to try it anyhow. If you don’t help me, I’ll hold the light with one hand and shoot with the other.”

Molly made no further protest. When all was said and done, she was a wilderness girl, and its stern law was the law of her life. At once she sped down the stairs to procure three hunting rifles from the rack in the hall. Pitch-black were the rooms, but she knew every passage and the location of every piece of furniture, and she ran as if she carried a light. A moment later she, Dr. Foster, and Needa all sat at upstairs windows overlooking the fur house, each with a hunting rifle loaded, cocked, and pointed in the general direction of the foe. Tensely they waited for Dick’s light to flash.

Dick had silently raised a downstairs window and, with the flashlight in one hand and his pistol in the other, was waiting his chance. He must pick up one of his foes as soon as he touched the button, otherwise the answering volley might put out the light and himself, too, before the marksmen in the windows above could find their aim.

In the pause between one gust and another, he heard the crunch of feet on the snow. Instantly a narrow shaft of light leaped forth, and a dark figure loomed against the white background. The crack of his pistol was drowned out by the crashing volley over his head.

It was cross-fire, the most deadly attack known to military science. Molly's bullet flew wide—at the last instant mercy moved in her heart, and she thrust aside her rifle barrel—but Needa was living over a bygone war—when her tribe had fought the gray packs at the door of the wickiups, in the winter of the Great Hunger—and pity was not in her. Dr. Foster fired at pointblank range with unerring aim.

The dark form in the flashlight beam threw up his arms and fell forward in the snow. Dick dared not hold his light long enough to see which one of his foes this was; savagely he hoped it might be Stephen. As the darkness closed down, the rifles volleyed below. The bullets thwacked the window frame about him and broke the glass over his head, but he reeled back into the room unhurt.

Above him, his comrades fired at the flash of the enemy guns. For a second there was no answer, and Dick hoped that they had either cut down another of the robber band or had routed them entirely. Presently a crashing volley from the doorway of the fur house showed that they had merely taken cover. Even so, prospects were brighter. The cool making-off with the furs no longer went so smoothly forward.

In the silence that followed the shots, Dick heard Stephen cursing his men. But he did not hear the voice of Limejuice 'Arry in reply. The little cockney's bad luck had held to the last.

Dick now turned and raced up the stairs to his comrades. "Can you keep them occupied for a few minutes?" he asked Dr. Foster.

"Yes, but what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to sneak out and see if I can't get some help from the natives."

He heard Molly gasp in the darkness.

"They'll kill you if they catch you."

"They won't catch me. They haven't a chance on a night black as this. Just shoot from time to time, and dodge back before they can fire at the flash. That will make them stay close to the fur house. Molly, you lock the front door behind me and open it again when I tap. I'm afraid to leave it unlocked for fear they'll try a rush."

She followed him down the steps. He slipped the big bolt on the front door and started to steal out. Presently he hesitated and crept back. It was as if he felt her arms reaching toward him in the darkness; they had not even touched him, yet somehow he knew that they were there. And when he groped for her, it was true. He held her fiercely a moment, kissed her lips, and vanished in the thick night.

Muffling his steps, he was soon out of the bandit's hearing. He went straight to the wickiup of Chief Nache-Tennon and knocked ceremoniously on the door.

"Who come?" came a deep voice from within.

"Chief Dick. Open the door, Chief Strongheart."

The patriarch opened the door and stood, an imposing figure, in the dim light of the hearth.

"Chief, there is trouble at the house of the White Father," Dick said. "Men have come to steal the furs and are firing at us with their rifles. Will you and your people help us?"

"My people, they out on trap line. Only this many braves"—the chief held up eight fingers—"sleep in wickiups."

"That is enough. If you will bring them, we can easily drive off the robbers. If you do not come, they may kill the White Father and Molly too."

"Ugh!" The Chief stood for long seconds in thought. "Why not the White Father come himself?"

"He stays by his post, shooting his rifle. Besides, he is old and cannot come quickly through the snow."

"He is old; chief, he old too. But many winters gone we plenty strong, and we run fast, shoot plenty straight, fight anybody. We friends long time, White Father and Chief Nache-Tennon."

Dick did not speak, but let the old man's thoughts flow on.

"We friends heap long time. When Indian have trouble, me call him, he always come. Now he have trouble, he call me. The wind she blow north, the wind she blow south. The summer he come, then the winter. Chief Dick!"

"I hear you, Chief Strongheart!"

"You go back to White Father, tell him Strongheart, he come."

In the meantime there was consternation in the enemy camp. What had seemed an open-and-shut proposition had developed unexpected complications. The owners of the fur had not tamely yielded the prize, as Stephen had promised, but were making a stubborn fight. One of the raiders was already down, blasted by cross-fire; and scattered shots, first from one window and then from another, searched wickedly for the rest.

"We've got to go into that house and take their rifles away from 'em," Swede said. "If we don't they'll pick us off when we try to carry the furs to the sleds."

"We can't raid the house," Stephen answered savagely. "They'd lie in wait in the hall, and shoot us all down. We've got to find some way to drive them out."

"There is only one means to make so," Black Koslof said in a queer, thick tone.

Stephen whirled to him in the dark.

"And I know what it is. But it's too big a risk."

"Where is the risk? If we are caught now, we are caught, and the end is the same. If we are not caught, it is better to have the fur than empty hands."

"We can't stop now," Pietro said. "We've gone thees far, and we might as well go the whole way. What do you fellows mean?"

"Koslof means to sprinkle a little gasoline on the joists and touch a match to it. That would bring them out quick enough, and in the glare we could take away their guns before they could fire a shot. Moreover the fire would daze and bewilder them so they wouldn't attempt to follow us and try to get on to our scheme. And—and—I hate every log and board in that house!"

"It ees the solution! You fools, it ees a sure bet. And eef we don't do it, we will keep on shooting at each other until we are either done for, or else

we haf a charge of murder on our heads. I'd sooner take a chance on thees. Stephen, will you do it or me?"

"I'll do it. It'll do me a lot of good, too, to see this house that might have been mine go up in smoke."

He slipped out of the fur house and, crossing to the trading store, admitted himself with his own key. In these familiar surroundings he worked quickly; five minutes later he emerged with a kerosene tin in his hand. Stealing back to the house, he groped his way around to the opposite side from the fur depot.

It would be safe, he thought, to flash his light and see where to start the fire. The defenders were certain to be on the opposite side, harrying the foe with rifle fire. His hand was steady, and the beam moved without a tremor along the heavy logs of the foundation. Reflecting dimly back, it showed his face drawn and eager.

No one saw him from the windows, and the view of Dick, stealing back from the native village, was cut off by an arm of the forest. Unless all signs failed, he would not be interrupted and could do his work unobserved.

Yet Fate had decreed otherwise. Ten feet away, in a sheltered nook out of the wind, a motionless figure crouched. It was Bear Claw, and he had finished his bottle.

He was not cold. A fire within warmed him. And even before Stephen came, he was not alone. Indeed, the darkness about him was peopled by innumerable beings, all of them uncanny and misshapen, many of them unspeakably horrible. Stephen was simply one other added to the ghastly company—a little more solid, perhaps, than the rest, but no less appalling. It seemed to Bear Claw that this last specter had only one eye, burning yellow and shining bright.

Yes, this newcomer was distinctly different from the others. In the first place he was almost invisible save for his one yellow eye, while the rest were lurid things, glowing faintly like phosphorus in the dark. He made faint sounds as he crept along the house wall; the others were silent as snakes. When Bear Claw shook his head and stared hard, he could still see the shining eye, but the rest faded away when he looked straight at them.

Perhaps he could catch this one and kill it. Moreover, it might have blood in it to run out, and bones to break with an audible sound. At the very thought of this, his hands began to tremble, and his eyes grew large and

larger until they felt as if they would burst from their sockets. He began to creep softly toward the stealing figure.

Did Bear Claw know what he was doing? Yes, and this made his act all the more fiendish. In some cool, sane corner of his brain he knew perfectly that this was not a specter, but a man with a flashlight. His homicidal mania, born of the poison in his blood, made him want to tear the man limb from limb, and his subconscious mind conjured up the fantasy, so he might justify the deed.

Even when sane, he had never made a more silent and perfect stalk. Intent on his plans, Stephen had no inkling of the maniac's presence until he was just beside him. When at last he heard the crunch of moccasins on the hard-packed snow, Bear Claw's tawny arm was already sweeping down.

Startled, Stephen threw his light in the direction of the sound. It showed Bear Claw's face, drawn out of all semblance to a human countenance—a more appalling specter than any Bear Claw had seen in his drunken dreams. It was the true incarnation of the bottle-devil, a horrible symbol of the madness and brutality and death of the red waters. His hand did not clutch a knife, as when he had attacked Molly months before—this he had dropped in the snow—but a more tragic weapon. In the glare of the flashlight it glimmered like a sword.

It was no more or less than an empty quart bottle. Bear Claw swung it down like an Indian club and struck Stephen on the back of the head. There was a low popping sound, and the victim wilted in the snow.

Yet he got up at once. He did not believe he had even lost consciousness. His head felt warm and queer and light, yet he was able to press the button of his flashlight, still clutched tight in his hand, and cast its ray about him. Strangely enough, he was not conscious of fear. It was as if he had passed beyond the reach and need of fear, and somehow it no longer applied to him. But he must go from here to some other place—he could not quite think where or what it was—and so dark was the night that he could not see the way.

Bear Claw lay stretched at his feet, unconscious. Evidently the violence of his attack had used up the last of his nervous energy, and he had collapsed before he could strike the second time. These facts, however, Stephen himself did not and could not grasp. Indeed, he saw no more than a black shadow on the snow and did not know what it was. Like fear and danger, it had somehow passed out of his bourne. Nor had he time to stop and investigate and figure it out. He must leave this place, with his companion.

He walked round the house. Because he came boldly, flashing the light before him, neither his foes nor his friends shot at him from their barricades. Perhaps they were afraid of shooting one of their own number, but Stephen knew this was an illusion. He belonged to neither party—like the shadow he had just seen on the snow, these people and their doings had ceased to concern him. Indeed, they seemed like shadows, too—nothing more.

But he did have one comrade he must look after. He located the huddled form of Limejuice 'Arry, and walked straight up to it. While those queer shadows which used to be his friends and enemies gazed spell-bound at him, he lifted the man in his arms, swung him to his shoulder, and carried him to the nearest of the sleds. There he laid him gently down and covered him with a robe.

They must go together, himself and 'Arry. They were the only ones left of all the company—or else he and 'Arry had gone on and left the others. True, there was a curious dimness about 'Arry, too, a kind of cloud, but he was not half so shadowy as the others, and as the moments passed, this slight barrier seemed to be fading away. In any event they must make the trip together.

"Mush!" Stephen cried, cracking his whip.

At least his lips formed the word, although it was queer he did not hear it come forth. With a powerful lurch of his shoulders he helped the dogs break out the runners. Then, reeling a little but holding fast to the gee-pole, he drove away.

His late companions watched him go in utter amazement. His flashlight was still shining, and as it moved along the snow, it showed dimly the fore part of the sled, where 'Arry was lying, and the straining loins of the nearest dog.

"What's the matter with the fool?" Swede muttered. "Has he gone crazy?"

"I do not know," Pietro answered in an awed whisper. "Why should he drive away with a dead man? There's something queer about it. It geevs me a creepy feeling—"

"Whatever it is, it leaves us in a fine fix. What are we going to do now? The boss is gone, and there's only four of us left. Can we do this job by ourselves?"

For a long moment Pietro did not attempt an answer. He watched the snowfields beyond the house for a reflected glimmer that might mean fire,

but the thick darkness prevailed, and it was plain that Stephen's plan had been frustrated. But there was fire enough down in the native settlement. Torches were blazing in the village road, and the unsteady light showed tall dark forms and leaping shadows.

To be certain, Pietro waited until he saw the torches gather in a close group and begin to move in his direction. There were eight of them, and the men who carried them bore rifles in their free hands.

True, they would make good targets in the darkness. It was possible for the bandits to pick off all eight of them before they reached the house. But Pete would not even consider such a mad idea. He was a gambler, not a gunman. He had lived this long and prospered reasonably by practicing moderation in all things, especially bloodshed; a massacre of this type might appeal to a killer like Black Koslof, but not to him. The venture had been a mistake from the first, and he had learned long ago not to throw good money after bad, nor to continue playing when the wheel ran against him.

"Let's go and go quick," he said. "We've lost."

Without waiting for a reply, he ducked out of the fur house and away. The others followed, crowding each other in the doorway. It occurred to Black Koslof to seize one of the silver foxes from the rich heap on the floor, but a warning shot from the window startled him, and he ran off without it. Presently they were all in their sleds, hurrying towards the pass.

But they did not overtake those who had gone before. For this they must travel on the wings of the wind. Stephen had trudged a short distance, then had fallen forward to lie with 'Arry on the sled. His whip no longer hissed and snapped at the dogs, but they did not stop, and instead began to hurry their pace. Their excited plunging became a nervous trot; the trot quickened to a lope. At last they were flying across the hard-packed snow as if the devil were on their trail. They were yelping, panic-stricken, blind with some unaccustomed and unfathomable terror.

For five miles along the naked ridge sped this ride of death. Stephen clung to the swerving sled, trying to think where he was bound and what was the rendezvous he must keep. Still he could not quite remember. Every time he seemed about to grasp some profound truth, his mind wandered away to the foolish prophecy Needa had spoken, months ago, beside the Foster hearth,

"He who kills by the sword must be killed by the sword!"

Well, it didn't apply to him. His head felt queer and warm and light, but it was not from the blow of a sword, but merely a whisky bottle . . . and he'd recover from this, easy enough. What was there about a whisky bottle to kill a man? Why, he had dealt with these things ever since he was a man grown, off and on. They might be the means of killing an occasional worthless Indian, but not he, Stephen—Stephen—Stephen who?

It was queer he could not remember his last name. When he tried to think of it, his head swam. . . . Well, it did not matter anyway. He and 'Arry were traveling incognito tonight. They had left their names behind, with various other things they no longer needed. . . . And now his first name was slipping away, too.

Once more he shone his flashlight in 'Arry's face. The queer, dim mist upon it had now almost faded away. They were getting to be close friends, he and 'Arry. . . . He was still deliberating on this strange fact, when the dogs gave a sudden sideways jerk.

The sled upset. Stephen and his companion were thrown out. But there was nothing to fear—even when they struck the steep slope and began to roll and slide, still nothing to fear. Presently the whole hillside was rolling, sliding with them. There was a mutter that grew to a rumble, and a rumble that swelled to a roar. Faster and faster they sped, while the snow-world about them fell and passed away in ruin.

The great avalanche soon struck the forest, but even this did not check its thunderous onslaught. The stout trunks snapped off like toothpicks and, sweeping on, mowed down their fellows. A thousand tons of rock and earth torn from the hillside catapulted into the valley, damming up the creek and in time forming a new lake. It was long and narrow, and in summer sunlight bright as a sword.

Chapter XVIII

Listening from an upstairs window, Molly and Dick heard the crack of whips and the breaking out of sled-runners, when the bandits fled. Dick's hand crept and covered hers.

"It's all over," he told her jubilantly.

"Yes, and we're just where we were before." The girl spoke in low tones.

"I don't understand, Molly. What do you mean?"

But she did not explain, and his attention was distracted by the arrival of Chief Strongheart and his men. Both Molly and Dick went out to meet them, to thank and praise them. The Indians seemed somewhat disappointed to miss the fight, but the chief answered Dick with his customary dignity and led the braves back to their wickiups. Then the two white people went to the fur depot to estimate their losses.

To their astonishment, not one skin seemed to be missing. On the floor were several moosehide sacks stuffed to the brim, but the rifle-fire had prevented the bandits from carrying them to their sleds. One other full sack lay near the doorway, where Limejuice 'Arry had dropped it.

Dick's flashlight showed a dark blot on the snow where the victim had fallen, and coming into this, and leading off, a distinct trail of small intermittent blots. Deeply curious, Dick followed it to the thicket where a sled had been broken out, then up the ridge where it disappeared. Between the runner tracks were a man's footprints—a man who walked unsteadily and sometimes staggered and almost fell.

So far the record in the drifts was easy to read. Dick saw that the wounded man, whoever he was, had mushed a short distance behind the sled and had then boarded it. The sled tracks ran on; instead of following them, Dick returned and back-tracked the blood trail past the fur depot and around the house. Close to the wall he found a kerosene can, a broken bottle, and a red stain on the pure snow.

He whipped his light in all directions. Presently he found Bear Claw, like a dead man in the drifts. But he was not dead—Dick could hear him breathing.

He would not last long, exposed to the bitter cold. No doubt it would be a good riddance, yet this was not for Dick to say. He turned and hurried away to get help.

In front of the house he found Molly waiting for him. Briefly he narrated all he knew and guessed of the night's events. One of the bandits was dead; one other—and Dick suspected it might be Stephen—was wounded. It might be a long time before they knew for certain. Now, as soon as he could put on his heavy coat, he must summon help for the unconscious Bear Claw, whose part in the night's drama was not yet revealed.

Events so happened that it never was revealed. Dick had to reconstruct it from various clues and dim footprints in the blowing snow. Bear Claw did not survive to tell the tale; he lay where he had fallen, neglected and alone, until the false heat passed out of his body and the cold came in. Dick did not purposely let him die. But all thought of Bear Claw passed from Dick's mind five minutes after he had found him. At best he was only a minor character in this drama of the North, and he had finished his part. In the final crisis that now arose, he was forgotten.

To help Dick find his coat, Molly turned on the lights in the hall. For a brief space she gazed into his face—ashen and haggard from the long strain and danger of the fight. She seemed to be searching for something—some change or growth which the night's travail might have wrought—but apparently she did not find it, because the eager light slowly faded from her eyes. Even so, she did not deny him a smile, wistful and sweet. He had kept faith tonight.

"Let's ask father about Bear Claw," she said. "He may want to doctor him."

They moved through the rooms, turning on the lights as they went. Here and there they saw broken glass and split panels, the work of stray bullets. They did not know in which room Foster waited, so Molly paused and called.

There was no answer, so she called louder. Suddenly she whirled to Dick, and their eyes met for one poignant instant. Then, with a look of utter despair in her face, she began to fly through the rooms.

"*Father, father!*" But she heard only the echo of her own voice.

She came to the door of his own room and flung it wide open. Glancing in, she swayed and seemed about to faint. Dick saw her face, white as paper, as he dashed by her.

Prone on the floor, his hands and face blue as a cadaver's, lay the old doctor. Plainly he had tried to reach his bed, but had collapsed on the way. For a moment Dick believed that he was dead.

In despair he knelt beside him and touched his hand. Instantly Molly saw his own faltering muscles stiffen and grow strong. The hand was cold and black, but there was life in it yet. Dick could feel in the limp wrist the faint stir of flowing blood. Dr. Foster still breathed.

Yet he might be passing away even now. His breath was dim and low at best, and of his strong heart-beat nothing remained but a faint flutter.

Dick started to spring up with the idea of getting a hypodermic needle and administering a stimulant, when a sudden movement of the limp hand checked him. Watching with narrowed eyes, he saw the red blood begin to steal slowly back into the dead hands and face. The ominous purple hues slowly faded, leaving only a faint blue tinge. The old man opened his eyes and appeared to be trying to orient himself. Presently he recognized Dick and smiled faintly.

Weeping, Molly knelt down and, taking his weak, limp hand, kissed it in the fullness of her love. "Don't speak," she urged. "Oh, don't try to speak. What is it, Dick? Was he struck by a bullet and didn't tell us?"

"No. It's his old trouble. Turn back the blankets—I'm going to put him in bed."

Quickly she obeyed; Dick lifted the big, limp form as he would a child's, and laid it gently down, the white head on the pillow.

Molly stood on the opposite side, and spoke across the bed, "Dick, is there any hope?"

"Not much. He'll pull out of this in a few minutes—he's on the up-bound now. But it was nip and tuck, and the next attack will probably carry him off."

She looked straight into Dick's eyes. In her own eyes was a prayer more eloquent than any breath could speak. "Is there nothing you can do?"

He hesitated a long second. All color passed from his face, and his eyes were like black stones. "Yes—such as it is . . . if you want me to."

"What do you mean?"

"There's one chance in ten—more likely one in a hundred—that he can be saved by an operation. Before God, I tell you I don't know that it is best.

Nine chances out of ten, he would die on the table. The operation has been attempted only a score or so of times in the whole world, and almost always it's a failure. On the other hand, if we let nature alone, he may live for months, possibly for a year. Men *do* live in his condition."

"But he could never be well?"

"No, he'd be a semi-invalid. And the first excitement or over-exertion would likely carry him off."

"And if the operation is successful, he would be well?"

"He might get entirely well and live out his life."

"Who"—Molly's voice quavered, but she went bravely on—"would perform this operation?"

Dick raised his head and looked straight at her.

"I'll tell you. It means a confession that I hoped to the last to be spared, but I'll tell you anyway, and pray to God you won't hate me too much. I am a surgeon. I've deceived you from the first—when there's time, I'll tell you all. I would perform the operation myself, here, tonight. When it's over, I'll go, and you won't have to look at me any more."

The girl sobbed once in the deep silence. The tears welled slowly to her eyes. But she choked back the cry that rushed to her lips—an utterance of thanksgiving that her dearest prayer had been answered—and she steeled herself against flying to him and taking him in her arms. The cup could not pass from him yet. She did not know why—she only knew that he must fight this battle through without aid from her.

If he operated tonight, it must be an act of faith, performed without hope of reward—something would be lost if she held out the possibility of her forgiveness. It was his life's great trial, and he must go through it not as a lover, not as a son, but only as a surgeon. His greatest sin was his betrayal of his profession; tonight he must make atonement. In this way and no other a miracle might come to pass.

"My hate or my love isn't the question tonight," she answered slowly at last, with solemn, moving dignity. "What wrong you have done to us, and how it can be settled after this crisis is over, must be dealt with at some later time. Tonight you are a doctor, nothing more or less."

Dick nodded heavily. No hope, but a strange zeal, shone in his face.

“If you feel, as a doctor, that it is best to operate, I want you to do it,” she went on. “It might help you to know that my father would sooner be dead than a semi-invalid. For my part, I should rather take this one great chance, all or nothing, than live in daily horror of seeing again what we saw tonight; and if father were making the decision himself, this would be a great factor.”

“If your father knew, would he want me to go ahead?”

Before she could answer, there came a dramatic interruption. The white head turned on the pillow, and Dr. Foster’s voice spoke low and clear in the silence,

“I do know.”

Dick jumped as if he had been shot. The hair crept on his scalp. “You mean you’ve heard our talk?”

“Part of it, but it told me nothing I didn’t know already. Dick—I’ve realized almost from the first that you are not my son.”

Dick was a strong man, but his eyes glistened with tears. “You—you saw I was a doctor?”

“Of course. I saw it the night you helped me with the whisky-runner.” He smiled dimly. “Did you think you could fool an old hand like me? Not in my own trade! You must’ve thought I had gone blind in my old age.”

“And you let me go on!” Dick turned away, strode to the window, and stood for a moment looking out into the black night. When he returned, his white face was set like flint. Molly watched him with burning eyes.

“Dr. Foster, I want to attempt the operation.”

Foster hesitated only a few seconds, then nodded his head. “All right, Dick. Go ahead.”

Dick nodded in acknowledgment. His eyes were quite dry now, and glittering; his stricken look had passed utterly away. When he spoke again, his voice was low, firm, decisive. “Molly, you’ll have to act as my assistant. Take my surgical tools—you’ll find them in my room—and boil them. I’ll look over your father’s set and bring you anything extra I may need. Is his operating room ready?”

“It’s all ready, except it’s cold.”

“Tell Needa to light a fire in the heater at once. Tell her to stand by, too—she’ll have to help me with the anesthetic. I’ll join you in a few minutes.”

Half an hour later Foster lay on the table, and Dick and Molly were taking aseptic precaution under the same hot-water spigot. This was an old story to the girl—she had helped her father in many an emergency operation on a tawny body, and she knew just how carefully to brush and scrub her arms, her hands, and the sides of every finger. Needa, in apron, cap, and mask from Foster's cabinets, had already bared the broad chest, and stood at the head of the table waiting orders.

Gloved, masked, and aproned, the surgeon and his assistant approached the table. Dick's gaze leaped about the room, and the first gray dawn of a new hope glimmered in his soul. He could work here. There was nothing to handicap him. He had already questioned Molly as to the names of the instruments and had discovered that she knew them perfectly. Since he would be working on the patient's heart and about the lungs, he could watch the progress of anesthesia and direct Needa without a second's loss of time.

His eyes were already lighting up, as always at the beginning of a difficult operation. But of the cynical smile the internes used to see there was no trace, and his hand seemed to feel lighter, stronger, freer than ever before.

Fully revived from his sinking spell, but wan and pale and haggard, Foster turned his head and greeted Dick with a faint smile.

"I wish I could see you do this, doctor," he murmured. "It would be a mile over my head, but I'd like to look on."

Molly's eyes were wide with dread. "Oh, you mustn't talk!"

"I'd better. It may be my last chance. This is no child's play, the job Dick has set himself. Bend over, Molly. I want to kiss you through that mask and whisper something in your ear."

Dick turned away to inspect the tray of instruments. When he glanced back, Molly was erect, her long eyes dreamy, her lips curled in a wistful smile, her face lifted a little with a child's sweet look upon it. Dick suspected that she was praying, so he waited a few seconds more.

"Are you ready, Dr. Foster?" he asked at last.

"Any time."

"Then we'll go ahead."

"Good luck, then, my boy. . . . I hope to see you both in the morning."

The mask was fitted over his face; the old Indian woman, calm as a summer cloud, began to pour on ether as Dick directed. He saw at once that he would have no trouble with her. Although she had never given anesthetic before, she had seen Molly do so once or twice, and she would not lose her head, no matter what happened. Meanwhile Molly was preparing the skin with an alcohol solution.

Foster drifted off; at last his snoring breath and a glimpse of his eyeball when Needa rolled back the lid told Dick that his patient was in deep anesthesia. Instructing the Indian woman to keep dropping ether on the mask, he took a razor-sharp scalpel lightly in his fingers and made the first gentle stroke.

It was to the left of the breast bone, over the heart. When Molly saw the flesh part and seep crimson, she flung back with a look of horror.

"Dick, I can't go through with it!"

The surgeon cut deeper. "Hush!"

"*I tell you, I can't!*"

He glanced up briefly, and his eyes had a cold shine that shocked her like a dash of ice-water in her face.

"Don't say that again, please," his voice rasped. "Don't say anything till I speak to you."

Already he had forgotten who she was. He saw her not as an individual, but merely as part of the equipment of the operating room. When she perceived this, she seemed to brace up at once. This was psychological suggestion of a potent sort. Her pride was not hurt; she was too big for that. On the contrary she began to feel herself just as he felt her to be—not Foster's daughter, not even a woman, but a puppet to hand his tools and obey his orders.

Yet in some unaccountable way they were closer than ever before. She seemed to enter into his spirit—the spirit not merely of cold science, not of technical surgery, but of life-saving at all cost. Nothing mattered, nothing existed on the earth, but the work in hand. It must be performed quickly, smoothly, perfectly, and the patient brought back as soon as possible from the twilight land of anesthesia.

Dick made his incision from the third rib to three inches below the costal margin. Then he cut across the cartilages connecting the ribs with the breast bone—three of these, one after another—his hand moving steadily, though

with infinite care. Even now he was challenging death. One little slip of his instrument might injure beyond repair the delicate tissues beneath. This task completed, he placed a retractor to enlarge the wound.

One of the most delicate phases of the entire operation now confronted him—the pushing away of the pleura, the membrane connecting the lung with the wall of the body. It was delicate tissue, and if he injured it his case was lost. But pressing it gently with cotton swabs, he worked it slowly out of the way.

Below, exposed to view, was the pericardium, or heart-sac. Within it beat the heart itself, the secret fountain of life. Dick looked up with a queer, abstracted expression; his eyes were lanterns hung in the deep sockets.

"Scissors," he directed.

"What—"

"*Scissors, I said!*" The words cracked like pistol fire in the silent room.

She handed him the instruments, and he cut the pericardium as a seamstress might cut a skirt. When it was open its entire length, he applied sutures to keep it open. Now the heart itself was exposed to view.

Molly stared at it with widening eyes. There it lay, pulsing, throbbing, the inner altar of her father's being, the holy of holies, the mysterious nucleus of his physical existence. When had it started to beat? The wisest surgeon could not tell her; this rhythm she now watched was part and parcel of the infinite rhythm of creation; it had come down in the germ-plasm from the dawn of things. When would it stop? The next minute, if Dick made even the slightest mistake; but if this miracle of medical science were a success, perhaps not for years.

The crucial stage of the whole operation was now at hand. Dick's wrist moved, and to Molly's horror, he took the pulsing, throbbing heart in his hand. He seemed to turn it a little, and draw forward, out of the pericardium, its point, or apex.

It seemed to Molly that at this point Dick's movements quickened. They were still cold and sure, but his fingers flew, and she could no longer follow every step of their work. Chancing to glance up at him she felt as if his hand were clutching her heart, too. His forehead was beaded with sweat, his eyes indrawn and luminous, his face rapt.

No operating-room attendant had ever seen him like this. There was something in his countenance that had not been there before; something rare

and fine, but which utterly evaded discovery. His stroke was different, too—but why, and in just what manner, human eyes were not keen enough to see. He was not operating on a guinea-pig, but on a man. He was not performing an interesting scientific experiment, but fighting to save life. He was not a mere vivisectionist, but a doctor keeping faith with his profession.

Quickly he placed two sutures, to control bleeding, in the point of the left ventricle. Again he called for a scalpel; gasping, Molly placed it in his free right hand. Without a tremor of his wrist he drove the point of the knife between the sutures into the heart itself.

It seemed to miss a beat and tremble in his hand. Then, as it resumed its steady throb, he passed a small hook—the same that he had prepared weeks before—into the incision, hooking one of the leaflets of the valve. The whole purpose of the operation was to remove this leaflet and enlarge the opening between the auricle and ventricle, hitherto restricted as a result of the attack of rheumatic fever years before. If he succeeded, free circulation of Foster's blood might be restored. If he failed, the patient could not live.

It was not enough just to cut the leaflet. In this case, it would go into the blood stream, float down the arteries like a piece of driftwood, strike his brain, and destroy it as a floating tree in a freshet destroys a bridge. He must hold it with the hook while he severed it, then withdraw it.

To accomplish this, he passed a small pair of scissors along the hook. Molly saw him snip them once and withdraw them. When he withdrew the hook, the leaflet came with it.

Sharply he called for needle and gut, and somehow she managed to hand them to him. With quick, steady motions he began to sew up the incision in the heart muscle. This done, he thrust back the apex of the heart and let it resume its natural position. A faint flush, as of dawning triumph, began to overspread the surgeon's face.

But it was premature. A rapid flutter of the patient's heart made Dick lean forward, his eyes narrowing. While he and his assistant held their breath in dread, the heart throbbed once more, then stopped.

It stopped like a clock that had run down. There was not even a tremor to denote life. Verily there was no life; by every scientific definition of the term Dr. Foster was dead.

In the language of the profession he had died on the table. The shock of the operation had overborne him. Molly uttered a low moaning sound more poignant than any scream of despair; for a long second Dick was silent as

the dead man himself, and as still. Then the blood rushed to his face and he turned sharply to his assistant.

"Hypodermic needle!"

Molly's mind was half paralyzed from shock, and she did not hear him. She stood staring down at the lifeless clay, her hands clasped over her breast; Dick had to get the needle himself. Slowly, with relentless purpose, he drove the point into the dead heart.

In the needle was a solution of adrenalin, that powerful stimulant which no chemist can create, but which was discovered in that most marvelous of all laboratories, the body of living creatures. Its reaction on human blood is one of the chemical mysteries of all time. Yet could it bring the dead back to life? Dick waited long, breathless seconds, the dead heart in his hand, and an iron look on his face Molly would never forget; but still there was no sign of animation.

At last the stimulant took hold. The heart fluttered a little—she could see it with her own eyes. But all too probably it was no more than a reflex of some sort, not the return of the vital spark. The flutter seemed to be passing off. . . .

But Dr. Grant had willed that the vital spark should return, and he would not give up. What he had just done—the injection of adrenalin directly into the heart—was accepted procedure in surgical practice, recognized by authority and frequently practiced, but what he did now was sheer inspiration. He had never seen it done, nor did he recall that he had ever heard of a surgeon attempting it. Heart operations where it might occur have been rare in medical history, and only rarely could the opportunity arise. In any event it had risen now, and he seized it with a boldness and resourcefulness hardly short of genius.

With his strong fingers he began to manipulate the still trembling heart. He compressed and relaxed it, just as he would squeeze a rubber ball. If Molly breathed even once, while she watched him, she was never to remember it.

Again and again he compressed it, applying pressure in rhythm with a faint fluttering—the dimmest suggestion of contraction—within. Grosser fingers than his would have never felt that secret stir and, out of time, would have impeded the action of the muscles instead of helping it. Presently the tremor became stronger. A barely perceptible contraction grew into a distinct

beat. Still he continued to squeeze the throbbing heart, in and out, in and out, until it resumed its normal action and circulation was restored.

The dead lungs began to breathe. The purple tints of death faded from the skin. Life—mysterious, transcendent life—returned and moved in Dr. Foster's clay.

Dick's hands began to tremble, and for five long seconds he was forced to pause and steady them. He had been under strain greater than even Molly could realize. Then, with a visible effort of will, he rallied his scattered faculties and plunged again into his work.

Cold and sure once more, he withdrew his hand from the steady-beating heart and let it resume its natural position. Quickly he sutured the pericardium, Molly obeying his orders and handing him his equipment without an instant's hesitation or a single mistake. Part of this strength arose from her own brave heart. The rest came from Dick—the inspiration of his example.

The retractor was removed, and the cut surfaces of the ribs allowed to come together. These he fastened with silver wire ligatures; then, working swiftly, he began to close the wound. His fingers flew as he sewed. The under tissue and the skin were drawn together, and the last knot was tied. The operation was over.

Was it a success? Dick dared to think so. The heart did not falter again, but beat like a trip-hammer, with a steady rhythm and growing strength. That the circulation of his blood was greatly improved was shown by the ease with which Dr. Foster emerged from the ether trance, and the fading-out of the bluish tinge from his face and finger nails. He had weathered the shock of the operation himself. If there was no relapse, and if infection could be prevented, six weeks would find him well.

All this Dick determined by studying his patient and applying his medical knowledge to the case. But Molly had a much more direct route to the truth. She had no need to study and think—she knew! Dick had not fought this great fight in vain. He had not passed through the dark valley only to see his patient die. There would be an answer to the faith he had kept tonight. Whether it would come as the natural consequence of his inspired surgery, or whether it would be intervention from beyond, she did not know—she only knew that it would not fail.

She gave voice to this when she and Dick stood again at Foster's bedside, looking down at the sleeping patient. The anxiety and strain in

Dick's face suddenly touched her heart. She took his limp, tired hand and pressed it against her heart.

"He'll live, Dick," she whispered. "He'll live and get well. I know it."

Then the room turned black before her eyes, and she slipped fainting into Dick's arms.

Six weeks found Dr. Foster on his feet. Unless all signs failed, he was a well man and should live out a full span of years. But he would not attempt to go with his people to their new sanctuary on the far slopes of the Endicotts. Official Washington would relieve him of this duty and send a strong man in his place. Apparently a genuine effort would be made to preserve the last of what was once a savage glory.

Finally the day came when the professional services of Dr. Richard Grant were no longer required. If he remained and did not go forth out of Foster's and his daughter's lives, it must be in some other capacity than family physician. So he and Foster sat together beside the hearth and talked it over, man to man.

"Whether you go, or whether you stay, depends on Molly more than on me," the old doctor said. "For my part, I have forgiven you the wrong you did my son. You broke faith with your profession on the night he died, but you kept faith and made atonement that crucial night six weeks ago. . . . But you must not count too much on this."

"I do count on it. It lifts an unbearable load from my heart."

"I didn't mean just that. I meant that you mustn't think that I'm speaking for both of us—for Molly and me. I'm speaking only for myself. She may see it in a different light. An old man's forgiveness comes easy, you know—especially when he is lonely and has no son to carry on his name or his work. I can understand how greatly you were tempted. There was a time when I, too, walked in the dark valley.

"You'll want to know why I let you stay on here, weeks after I knew you were not my son," the old doctor went on after a long pause. "Well, in the first place, I knew that I could not right the wrong by exposing you—you alone could do that. I knew, too, that my son had died through no fault of yours—this I learned from a friend of mine, in Seattle, whom I got to trace you and who put two and two together."

"I suppose he made my offense public in Seattle?" Dick asked, in a gray voice.

"No. It was all handled confidentially. Even then, months ago, I thought I could see in you the beginnings of regeneration, and I did not want your life to be ruined through one great mistake. . . . I grew fond of you, Dick. Perhaps that mattered most of all."

So at the last, his fate lay in Molly's hands. Well, this was just—she had been its moving spirit since their first meeting under Alaskan skies. It was her love, more than any other power, that had resurrected him—the star that had led him home. If it shone for him still, he could go on. If it had set, he must lose his way in darkness.

Fear had ridden him day and night for six long weeks. This in itself was a full measure of punishment for the wrong he had done. He had watched Molly's face and hung on her words, but though she was gentle with him, and gracious, he could count on nothing more than her compassion. Now he must put an end to this. He must know the truth, no matter how bitter it was.

So he walked with her by the river ice and paused at last in the frozen silence of the forest. For a long time she waited for him to speak, wondering at his ashen face and the deep shadows under his eyes. "Molly, you remember what you told me the night after your trouble with Bear Claw?" he reminded her at last.

"I don't think I do."

"You don't? Molly, that almost makes me hope. You said that if anyone harmed or played false with your father—or your brother—you would hate him always and never forgive him. You—meant that, of course. Didn't you?"

Her long eyes fixed on his. They slowly widened, and light grew in their depths. "Oh, that was what it was!" she cried. "That was what you were fighting all those weeks."

"Of course! But, Molly, I can't fight it any more—I've got to know whether it's true."

Suddenly her pale face began to glow. A smile, ineffably tender, touched her lips. Gently she shook her head.

"You mean—"

"I mean I *didn't* mean it. I thought I did, at the time, but it was only love speaking through my lips—and love doesn't always know what it's saying."

"You mean—love of your vanished brother?"

“No. Love of the one who had taken my brother’s place. But you shouldn’t make me tell you that.”

“And that love isn’t dead?” Dick could hardly speak. “It hasn’t—changed—to hate?”

The radiance in her face answered him. The light passed slowly to his, and at his first eager reaching she slipped into his arms.

The moments came and passed, and he could not let her go. He kissed the happy tears from her eyes and the tremor from her lips, telling her his story in broken, breathless whisperings. His star had not set, but had just begun to rise. Youth—courage—hope—love—they were all his.

Spent in his arms, but her heart fired by a splendor that she saw, she stopped his lips with hers at last and made him listen to her.

“I’ve always loved you like a sweetheart, not like a brother. Father realized this toward the end, and his last message before he took the anesthetic was about you. He said that I was to forgive you for the fault, and go on loving you, whether he lived or died.”

Her eyes grew wide, and the throb in her tone told him that she had been visited by inspiration, perhaps never, in the light and shadow of her life, to come again.

“He didn’t have to tell me that. I couldn’t do otherwise, even if I wanted to. Love, real love, can’t change to hate. They are forever apart. Love can’t die, if it is once born.”

And this was the final truth. She had found it, at last. Love cannot die—whatever else passes away, this remains—eternal, immortal, infinite. And in its great heart there is always forgiveness for the penitent, even in the eleventh hour. It may not be revealed, but it is there.

Love is the Great Physician, who makes the blind see and the lame walk. He heals all wounds, cures all sickness, ends all pain.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled 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.

[The end of *The Doctor of Lonesome River* by Edison Marshall]