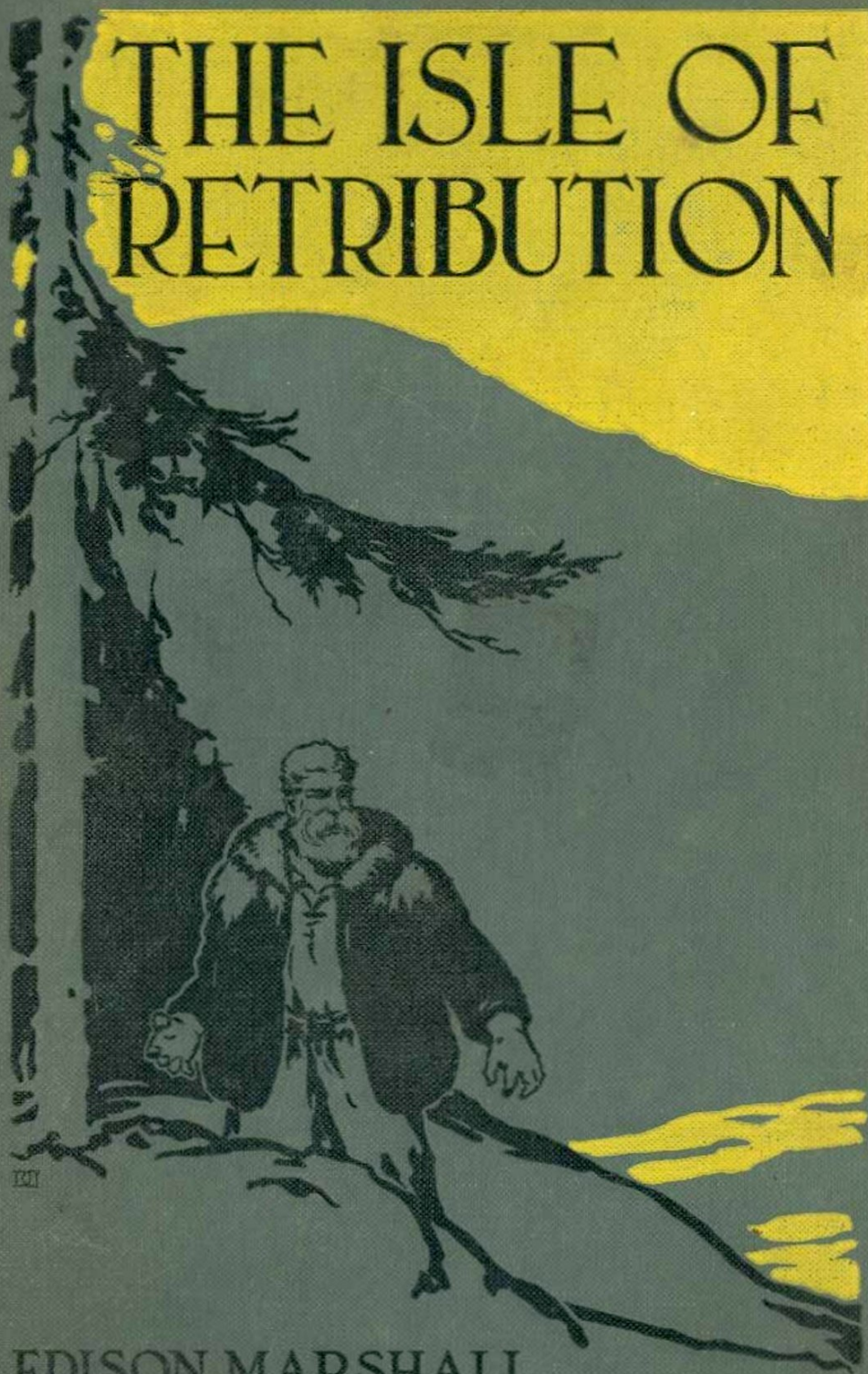


# THE ISLE OF RETRIBUTION



EDISON MARSHALL

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*Title:* The Isle of Retribution

*Date of first publication:* 1923

*Author:* Edison Marshall (1894-1967)

*Illustrator:* Douglas Duer (1887-1964)

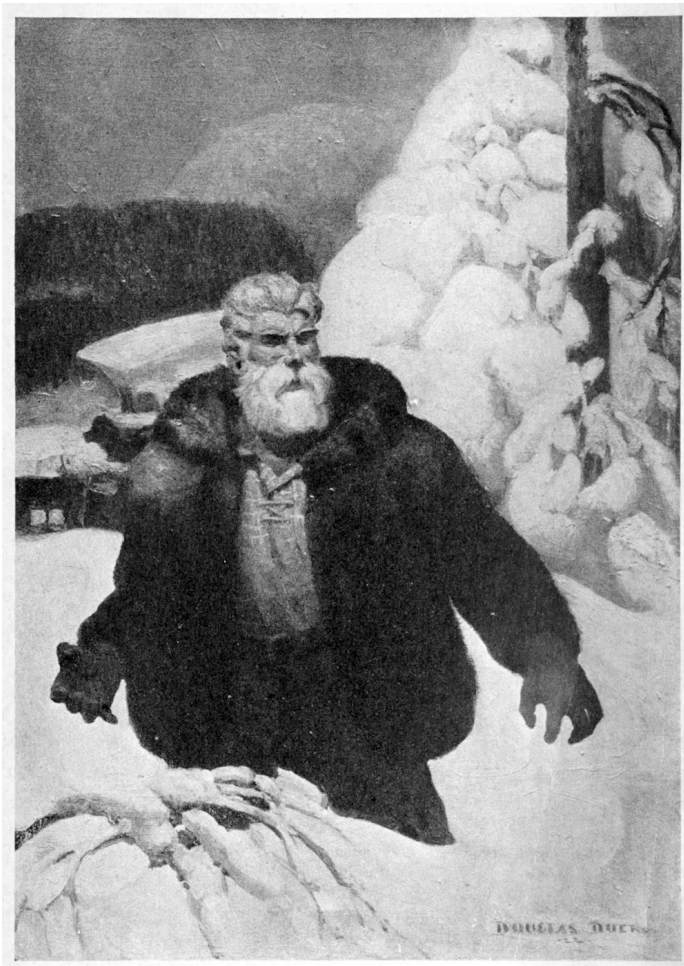
*Date first posted:* Sep. 28, 2022

*Date last updated:* Sep. 28, 2022

Faded Page eBook #20220965

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When he caught sight of the fugitives, they were already out of effective pistol range.

FRONTISPIECE. [See page 308.](#)

# THE ISLE OF RETRIBUTION

BY  
**EDISON MARSHALL**

WITH FRONTISPIECE BY  
DOUGLAS DUER



BOSTON  
LITTLE, BROWN, AND COMPANY  
1923

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Published February, 1923

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

# The Isle of Retribution

## I

THE manifold powers of circumstance were in conspiracy against Ned Cornet this late August afternoon. No detail was important in itself. It had been drizzling slowly and mournfully, but drizzle is not uncommon in Seattle. Ned Cornet had been passing the time pleasantly in the Totem Club, on Fourth Street, doing nothing in particular, nothing exceedingly bad or good or even unusually diverting; but such was quite a customary practice with him. Finally, Cornet's special friend, Rodney Coburn, had just returned from one of his hundred sojourns in far places,—this time from an especially attractive salmon stream in Canada.

The two young men had met in Coburn's room at the Totem Club, and the steward had gone thither with tall glasses and ice. Coburn had not returned empty-handed from Canada. Besides pleasant memories of singing reels and throbbing rods and of salmon that raced like wild sea horses down the riffles, he had brought that which was much less healthful,—various dark bottles of time-honored liquors. Partly in celebration of his return, and partly because of the superior quality of the goods that had accompanied him, his friend Ned raised his afternoon limit from two powerful pre-dinner cocktails to no less than four richly amber whiskies-and-sodas. Thus their meeting was auspicious, and on leaving the club, about seven, it came about that Ned Cornet met the rain.

It was not enough to bother him. He didn't even think about it. It was only a lazy, smoky drizzle that deepened the shadows of falling twilight and blurred the lights in the street. Ned Cornet had a fire within that more or less occupied his thoughts. He didn't notice the rain, and he quite failed to observe the quick pulsation of the powerful engine in his roadster that might otherwise have warned him that he had long since passed the absolute limit that tolerant traffic officers could permit in the way of speed.

Cornet was not really drunk. His stomach was fortified, by some years of experience, against an amount somewhere in the region of a half-pint of the most powerful spirits,—sufficient poison to kill stone dead a good percentage of the lower animals. Being a higher animal Ned held his liquor

surprisingly well. He was somewhat exhilarated, faintly flushed; his eyes had a sparkle as of broken glass, and he felt distinctly warm and friendly toward all the hurrying thousands on the street, but his motor centers were not in the least impaired. Under stress, and by inhaling sharply, he could deceive his own mother into thinking that he had not had a drink. Nevertheless a pleasant recklessness was upon him, and he couldn't take the trouble to observe such stupid things as traffic laws and rain-wet pavements.

But it came about that this exhilaration was not to endure long. In a space of time so short that it resembled some half-glimpsed incident in a dream, Ned found himself, still at his wheel, the car crosswise in the street and the front wheels almost touching the curb, a terrible and ghastly sobriety upon him. Something had happened. He had gone into a perilous skid at the corner of Fourth and Madison, the car had slid sickeningly out of his control, and at the wrong instant a dark shape, all too plainly another automobile, had lurched out of the murk of the rain. There had been no sense of violent shock. All things had slid easily, the sound at his fender was slow and gentle, and people, in the fading light, had slow, peculiar expressions on their faces. Then a great fear, like a sharp point, pricked him and he sprang from his seat in one powerful leap.

Ned Cornet had had automobiles at his command long before it was safe for him to have his hands on them. When cold sober he drove rather too fast, none too carefully, but had an almost incredible mastery over his car. He knew how to pick his wheel tracks over bumpy roads, and he knew the exact curve that a car could take with safety in rounding a corner. Even now, in the crisis that had just been, he had handled his car like the veteran he was. The wonder was not that he had hit the other car, but rather, considering the speed with which he had come, that it should continue to remain before his sight, but little damaged, instead of being shattered into kindling and dust. His instincts had responded rather well. It was a somewhat significant thing, to waken hope in the breast of an otherwise despairing father, that in that stress and terror he had kept his head, he had handled his brakes and wheel in the only way that would be of any possible good, and almost by miracle had avoided a smashing crash that could have easily killed him and every occupant in the colliding car. Nevertheless it was not yet time to receive congratulations from spectators. There had been serious consequences enough. He was suddenly face to face with the fact that in his haste to get home for dinner he had very likely obliterated a human life.

There was a curious, huddled heap on the dim pavement, just beyond the small car he had struck. It was a girl; she lay very still, and the face half covered by the arm seemed very white and lifeless. And blasted by a terror

such as was never known in all his wasted years, Ned leaped, raced, and fell to his knees at her side.

It seemed to him that the soft noise of the crash was not yet dead in the air. It was as if he had made the intervening distance in one leap. In that same little second his brain encompassed limitless areas,—terror, remorse, certain vivid vistas of his past life, the whiteness of the eyelids and the limpness of the little arms, and the startled faces of the spectators who were hurrying toward him. His mental mechanism, dulled before by drink, was keyed to such a degree that the full scope of the accident went home to him in an instant.

The car he had struck was one of the thousands of “jitneys” of which he had so often spoken with contempt. The girl was a shopgirl or factory worker, on her way home. Shaken with horror, but still swift and strong from the stimulus of the crisis, he lifted her head and shoulders in his arms.

It was a dark second in the life of this care-free, self-indulgent son of wealth as he stared into the white, blank, thin face before him. He was closer to the Darkness that men know as Death than he had ever been before,—so close that some of its shadow went into his own eyes, and made them look like odd black holes in his white skin, quite different from the vivid orbs that Rodney Coburn had seen over the tall glasses an hour before. For once, Ned Cornet was face to face with stern reality. And he waited, stricken with despair, for that face to give some sign of life.

It was all the matter of a second. The people who had seen the accident and the remaining passengers of the “jitney” had not yet reached his side. But for all that, the little instant of waiting contained more of the stuff of life than all the rest of Ned Cornet’s time on earth. Then the girl smiled in his face.

“I’m not hurt,” he heard her say, seemingly in answer to some senseless query of his. She shook her head at the same time, and she smiled as she did it. “I know what I’m saying,” she went on. “I’m not hurt—one—bit!”

A great elation and enthusiasm went over the little crowd that was gathering around her. There could be no doubt but that she told the truth. Her voice had the full ring of one whose nerves are absolutely unimpaired. Evidently she had received but the slightest blow from one of the cars when its momentum was all but spent. And now, with the aid of a dozen outstretching hands, she was on her feet.

The little drama, as if hurled in an instant from the void, was already done. Tragedy had been averted; it was merely one of the thousands of unimportant smash-ups that occur in a great city every year. Some of the



spectators were already moving on. In just a moment, before half a dozen more words could be said, other cars were swinging by, and a policeman was on the scene asking questions and jotting down license numbers. Just for a moment he paused at Ned's elbow.

"Your name and address, please?" he asked coldly.

Ned whirled, turning his eyes from the girl's face for the first time. "Ned Cornet," he answered. And he gave his father's address on Queen Anne Hill.

"Show up before Judge Rossman in the morning," he ordered. "The jitney there will send their bills to you. I'd advise you to pay 'em."

"I'll pay 'em," Ned agreed. "I'll throw in an extra twenty to pay for their loss of time."

"This young lady says she ain't hurt," the policeman went on. "It certainly is no credit to you that she ain't. There is plenty of witnesses here if she wants to make a suit."

"I'll give this young lady complete satisfaction," Ned promised. He turned to her in easy friendliness, a queer little crooked smile, winning and astonishingly juvenile, appearing at his mouth. "Now let's get in my car. I'll take you home—and we can talk this over."

They pushed together through the little circle of the curious, he helped her courteously into the big, easy seat of his roadster, and in a moment they were threading their way through the early evening traffic.

"Good Lord," the man breathed. "I wouldn't have blamed that mob if they had lynched me. Where do we go?"

She directed him out Madison, into a district of humble, modest, but respectable residences. "It's lucky you came along—I don't often get a ride clear to my door."

"Lucky! I want to say if it wasn't for all the luck in the world you'd be going to the hospital instead. I'm taking all the blame for that smash back there—I got off mighty lucky. Now let's settle about the dress—and a few other things. First—you're sure you're not hurt?"

He was a little surprised at the gay, girlish smile about her lips. "Not a particle. It would be nice if I could go to the hospital two weeks or so, just to rest—but I haven't the conscience to do it. I'm not even scratched—just pushed over in the street. And I'm afraid I can't even charge you for the dress. I've always had too much conscience, Mr. Cornet."

"Of course I'm going to pay——"

"The dress cost only about twenty dollars—at a sale. And it doesn't seem to be even damaged. Of course it will have to be cleaned. To save you

the embarrassment I see growing in your face, I'll gladly send the bill to you if you like——”

In the bright street light he looked up, studying her face. He had never really observed it before. Before he had watched it for a sign of life that was only the antithesis of death, but now he found himself regarding it from another viewpoint. Her slender, pretty face was wholly in keeping with her humor, her honesty, her instinctive good manners. If she were a factory worker, hard toil had not in the least coarsened or hardened her. Her skin had a healthy freshness, pink like the marvelous pink of certain spring wild flowers, and she had delicate girlish features that wholly suited his appraising eye.

She was one of those girls who have worlds of hair to spend lavishly in setting off piquant faces. It must have been dark brown; at least it looked so in the street light. Below was a clear, girlish brow, with never a line except the friendly ones of companionship and humor. Her eyes seemed to be deeply blue, good-natured, childishly happy, amazingly clear and luminous, a perfect index to her mood. Now they were smiling, partly with delight in the ride and in the luxury of the car, partly from the sheer joy of the adventure. Ned rather wished that the light was better. He'd like to have given them further study.

She had a pretty nose, and full, almost sensuous lips that curled easily and softly as she smiled. Then there was a delectable glimpse of the little hollow of a slender throat, at the collar of her dress.

Ned found himself staring, and he didn't know just why. He was no stranger to women's beauty; some degree of it was the rule rather than the exception in the circle in which he moved; but some way this before him now was beauty of a different kind. It was warm, and it went down inside of him and touched some particular mood and fancy that had never manifested itself before. He had seen such beauty, now and again, in children—young girls with the freshness of a spring flower, just emerging into the bloom of first womanhood, and not yet old enough for him to meet in a social way—but it had never occurred to him that it could linger past the “flapper” age. This girl in his car was in her early twenties—over, rather than under—of medium height, with the slender strength of an expert swimmer, yet her beauty was that of a child.

He couldn't tell, at first, in just what her beauty lay. Other girls had fresh skins, bright eyes, smiling lips and masses of dark, lustrous hair,—and some of them even had the simplicity of good manners. Ned had a quick, sure mind, and for a moment he mused over his wheel as he tried to puzzle it out.

In all probability it lay in the soft, girlish lines about her lips and eyes. Curiously there was not the slightest *hardness* about them. Some way, this girl had missed a certain hardening process that most of his own girl friends had undergone; the life of the twentieth century, in a city of more than three hundred thousand, had left her unscathed. There were only tenderness and girlish sweetness in the lines, not sophistication, not self-love, not recklessness or selfishness that he had some way come to expect.

But soon after this Ned Cornet caught himself with a whispered oath. He was positively maudlin! The excitement, the near approach to tragedy, the influence of the liquor manifesting itself once more in his veins were making him stare and think like a silly fool. The girl was a particularly attractive shopgirl or factory worker, strong and athletic for all her appealing slenderness, doubtless pretty enough to waken considerable interest in certain of his friends who went in for that sort of thing, but he, Ned Cornet, had other interests. The gaze he bent upon her was suddenly indifferent.

They were almost at their destination now, and he did not see the sudden decline of her mood in response to his dying interest. Sensitive as a flower to sunlight, she realized in a moment that a barrier of caste had dropped down between them. She was silent the rest of the way.

“Would you mind telling me what you do—in the way of work, I mean?” he asked her, at her door. “My father has a business that employs many girls. There might be a chance——”

“I can do almost anything with a needle, thank you,” she told him with perfect frankness. “Fitting, hemstitching, embroidery—I could name a dozen other things.”

“We employ dozens of seamstresses and fitters. I suppose I can reach you here—after work-hours. I’ll keep you in mind.”

An instant later he had bidden her good night and driven away, little dreaming that, through the glass pane of the door, her lustrous blue eyes had followed the red spark that was his tail-light till it disappeared in the deepening gloom.

## II

NED CORNET kept well within the speed laws on his way back to his father's beautiful home on Queen Anne Hill. He was none too well pleased with himself, and his thoughts were busy. There would be some sort of a scene with Godfrey Cornet, the gray man whose self-amassed wealth would ultimately settle for the damages to the "jitney" and the affront to the municipality,—perhaps only a frown, a moment's coldness about the lips, but a scene nevertheless. He looked forward to it with great displeasure.

It was a curious thing that lately he had begun to feel vague embarrassment and discomfiture in his father's presence. He had been finding it a comfort to avoid him, to go to his club on the evenings his father spent at home, and especially to shun intimate conversation with him. Ned didn't know just why this was true; perhaps he had never paused to think about it before. He simply felt more at ease away from his father, more free to go his own way. Some way, the very look on the gray face was a reproach.

No one could look at Godfrey Cornet and doubt that he was the veteran of many wars. The battles he had fought had been those of economic stress, but they had scarred him none the less. His face was written over, like an ancient scroll, with deep, dark lines, and every one marked him as the fighter he was.

Every one of his fine features told the same story. His mouth was hard and grim, but it could smile with the kindest, most boyish pleasure on occasion. His nose was like an eagle's beak, his face was lean with never a sagging muscle, his eyes, coal black, had each bright points as of blades of steel. People always wondered at his trim, erect form, giving little sign of his advanced years. He still looked hard as an athlete; and so he was. He had never permitted "vile luxury's contagion" to corrupt his tissues. For all the luxury with which he had surrounded his wife and son, he himself had always lived frugally: simple food, sufficient exercise, the most personal and detailed contact with his great business. He had fought upward from utter poverty to the presidency and ownership of one of the greatest fur houses of his country, partly through the exercise of the principle of absolute business integrity, mostly through the sheer dynamic force of the man. His competitors knew him as a fair but remorseless fighter; but his fame carried far beyond the confines of his resident city. Bearded trappers, running their

lines through the desolate wastes of the North, were used to seeing him come venturing up their gray rivers in the spring, fur-clad and wind-tanned, —finding his relaxation and keeping fit by personally attending to the buying of some of his furs. Thus it was hard for a soft man to feel easy in his presence.

Ned Cornet wished that he didn't have to face him to-night. The interview, probably short, certainly courteous, would leave him a vague discomfort and discontent that could only be alleviated by further drinks, many of them and strong. But there was nothing to do but face it. Dependence was a hard lot; unlike such men as Rodney Coburn and Rex Nard, Ned had no great income-yielding capital in his own name. He was somewhat downcast and sullen as he entered the cheerfully lighted hallway of his father's house.

In the soft light it was immediately evident that he was his father's son, yet there were certain marked differences between them. Warrior blood had some way failed to come down to Ned. For all his stalwart body, he gave no particular image of strength. There was noticeable extra weight at his abdomen and in the flesh of his neck, and there was also an undeniable flabbiness of his facial muscles.

Godfrey Cornet's hands and face were peculiarly trim and hard and brown, but in the bright light and under careful scrutiny, his son's showed somewhat sallow. To a casual observer he showed unmistakable signs of an easy life and luxurious surroundings; but the mark of prolonged dissipation was not immediately evident. Perhaps the little triangles on either side of his irises were not the hard, bluish-white they should be; possibly there was the faintest beginning of a network of fine, red lines just below the swollen flesh sacks beneath his eyes. The eyes themselves were black and vivid, not unlike his father's; he had a straight, good nose, a rather crooked, friendly mouth, and the curly brown hair of a child. As yet there was no real viciousness in his face. There was amiable weakness, truly, but plenty of friendly boyishness and good will.

He took his place at the stately table so gravely and quietly that his parent's interest was at once wakened. His father smiled quietly at him across the board.

"Well, Ned," he asked at last. "What is it to-day?"

"Nothing very much. A very close call, though, to real tragedy. I might as well tell you about it, as likely enough it'll be in the papers to-morrow. I went into a bad skid at Fourth and Madison, hit a jitney, and before we got quite stopped managed to knock a girl over on the pavement. Didn't hurt her

a particle. But there's a hundred dollars' damage to the jit—and a pretty severe scare for your young son.”

As he talked, his eyes met those of his father, almost as if he were afraid to look away. The older man made little comment. He went on with his dessert, and soon the talk veered to other matters.

There hadn't been any kind of a scene, after all. It was true that his father looked rather drawn and tired,—more so than usual. Perhaps difficult problems had come up to-day at the store. His voice had a peculiar, subdued, quiet note that wasn't quite familiar. Ned felt a somber heaviness in the air.

He did not excuse himself and hurry away as he had hoped to do. He seemed to feel that to make such an offer would precipitate some impending issue that he had no desire to meet. His father's thoughts were busy; both his wife and his son missed the usual absorbingly interesting discourse that was a tradition at the Cornet table. The older man finished his coffee, slowly lighted a long, sleek cigar, and for a moment rested with elbows on the table.

“Well, Ned, I suppose I might as well get this off my chest,” he began at last. “Now is as auspicious a time as any. You say you got a good scare to-day. I'm hoping that it put you in a mood so that at least you can give me a good hearing.”

The man spoke rather humbly. The air was electric when he paused. Ned leaned forward.

“It wasn't anything—that accident to-day,” he answered in a tone of annoyance. “It could have happened to any one on slippery pavements. But that's ridiculous—about a good hearing. I hope I always have heard everything you wanted to tell me, sir.”

“You've been a very attentive son.” Godfrey Cornet paused again. “The trouble, I'm afraid, is that I haven't been a very attentive father. I've attended to my business—and little else—and now I'm paying the piper.

“Please bear with me. It was only a little accident, as you say. The trouble of it is that it points the way that things are going. It could very easily have been a terrible accident—a dead girl under your speeding wheels, a charge of manslaughter instead of the good joke of being arrested for speeding, a term in the penitentiary instead of a fine. Ned, if you had killed the girl it would have been fully right and just for you to spend a good many of the best years of your life behind prison walls. I ask myself whether or not I would bring my influence to bear, in that case, to keep you from going there. I'm ashamed to say that I would.

“You may wonder about that. I would know, in my heart, that you should go there. I am not sure but that you should go there now, as it is. But I would

also know that I have been criminal too—criminally neglectful, slothful, avoiding my obligations—just as much as you have been neglectful and slothful and avoiding your obligations toward the other residents of this city when, half-intoxicated, you drove your car at a breakneck pace through the city streets. I can't accuse you without also accusing myself. Therefore I would try to keep you out of prison. In doing that, I would see in myself further proof of my old weakness—a weak desire to spare you when the prison might make a man of you.”

Ned recoiled at the words, but his father threw him a quick smile. “That cuts a little, doesn't it? I can't help it. Ned, your mother and I have always loved you too well. I suppose it is one of the curses of this age—that ease and softness have made us a hysterical, sentimental people, and we love our children not wisely, but too well. I've sheltered you, instead of exposing you to the world. The war did not stiffen you—doubtless because you were one of the millions that never reached the front.”

Ned leaned forward. “That wasn't my fault,” he said with fire. “You know that wasn't my fault.”

“I know it wasn't. The fact remains that you lost out. Let me go on. I've made it easy for you, always, instead of bitter hard as I should have done. I've surrounded you with luxury instead of hardship. You've never done an honest day's toil on earth. You don't know what it is to sweat, to be so tired you can't stand, to wonder where the next meal is coming from, to know what a hard and bitter thing life is!

“A girl, thrown on the pavement. A working girl, you said—probably homely, certainly not your idea of a girl. Perhaps, in your heart, you think it wouldn't have much mattered if you had killed her, except for the awkwardness to you. She was just one of thousands. You, my son, are Ned Cornet—one of our city's most exalted social set, one of our fashionable young clubmen.”

His tone had changed to one of unspeakable bitterness. Ned leaned forward in appeal. “That isn't true,” he said sharply. “I'm not a damned snob!”

“Perhaps not. I'm not sure that I know what a snob is. I've never met one—only men who have pretended to be snobs to hide their fear of me. Let me say, though, Ned—whatever her lot, no matter how menial her toil, your life could be spared much easier than hers. It would be better that you should be snuffed out than that she should lose one of her working hands. Likely you felt superior to her as you drove her home; in reality you were infinitely inferior. She has gone much farther than you have. She knows

more of life; she is harder and better and truer and worth more to this dark world in which we live. The world could ill afford to lose her, a fighter, a worker. It would be better off to lose you—a shirker, a slacker!

“I’m not accusing you. God knows the blame is on my own head. For my part I sprang from the world of toil—never do I go out into that society in which you move but that I thank God for the bitter toil I knew in youth. The reason is that it has put me infinitely above them. Such soft friends as you have wither before my eyes, knowing well that they can not meet me on even grounds; or else they take refuge in an air of conceit, a pretense of caste, that deceives themselves no more than it deceives me. They talk behind my back of my humble origin—fearfully clothing their own nakedness with the garments of worthy, fighting men who have preceded them—and yet their most exalted gates open before my knock. They dare not shut their doors to me. They treat me with the respect that is born of fear.

“That toil, that hard schooling, has made me what I am and given me the highest degree possible of human happiness. I find a satisfaction in living; I am able to hold my head up among men. I have health, the adoring love of a wonderful woman; I give service to the world. I can see old age coming upon me without regret, without vain tears for what might have been, without fear for whatever fate lies beyond. I am schooled for that fate, Ned. I’ve got strength to meet it. My spirit will not be buffeted willy-nilly in those winds that blow between the worlds. I am a man, I’ve done man’s work, and I can hold my place with other men in the great trials to come.

“What those tests are, I do not know. Personally I lean toward an older theology, one mostly outworn now, one cast away by weak men because they are afraid to believe in it. It is not for me to say that Dante foresaw falsely. The only thing I can not believe is the legend over the door—‘Abandon Hope, ye who enter here.’ There is no gateway here or hereafter that can shut out Hope. I believe that no matter how terrible the punishment that lies within those gates, however hard the school, there is a way through and out at last.

“Hell is not the dream of a religious fanatic, Ned. I believe in it just as surely as I believe in a heaven. There must be some school, some bitter, dreadful training camp for those who leave this world unfitted to go on to a higher, better world. Lately souls have been going there in ever-increasing numbers. Let softness and self-indulgence and luxury continue to degenerate this nation, and all travel will be in that direction. My hope is yet, the urge behind all that I’m saying to you to-night, is that you may take some other way.”



His black eyes gleamed over the board. For the moment, he might have been some prophet of old, preaching the Word to the hosts of Israel. The long dining room was deathly still as he paused. Realizing that the intensity of his feeling was wakening the somber poetry within him, revealing his inmost, secret nature, he steadied himself, watching the upcurling smoke of his cigar. When he spoke again his voice and words were wholly commonplace.

“There is no force in heaven or earth so strong as moral force,” he said. “In the end, nothing can stand against it. If it dies in this land, Lord help us—because we will be unable to help ourselves. We can then no longer drive the heathen from our walls. With it, we are great—without it we are a race of weaklings. And with luxury and ease upon us, it seems to me I see it manifested ever less and less.

“Ned, there’s one thing to bring it back—and that is hardship. I mean by hardship all that is opposite to ease: self-restraint instead of license; service instead of self-love; devotion to a cause of right rather than to pleasure; most of all, hard work instead of ease. I’ve heard it said, as a thing to be deplored, that shirt sleeves go to shirt sleeves every three generations. Thank God it is so. There is nothing like shirt sleeves, Ned, to make a man—and hard-working, bunching muscles under them. And through my own weakness I’ve let those fine muscles of yours grow flabby and soft.

“Your mother and I have a lot to answer for. Both of us were busy, I with my business, she with her household cares and social duties, and it was easier to give you what you wanted than to refuse you things for your own good. It was easier to let you go soft than to provide hardship for you. It was pleasanter to give in than to hold out—and we loved you too much to put you through what we should have put you through. We excused you your early excesses. All young men did it, we told each other—you were merely sowing your wild oats. Then I found, too late, that I could not interest you in work—in business. You had always played, and you didn’t want to stop playing. And your games weren’t entirely harmless.

“This thing we’ve talked over before. I’ve never been firm. I’ve let you grow to man’s years—twenty-nine, I believe—and still be a child in experience. The work you do around my business could be done by a seventeen-year-old boy. You don’t know what it means to keep a business day. You come when you like and go when you like. In your folly you are no longer careful of the rights of other, better people—or you wouldn’t have driven as you did to-day. You can no longer be bright and attractive at dinner except under the stimulation of cocktails—nothing really vicious yet, but pointing to the way things are going. Ned, I want to make a man of you.”

He paused again, and their eyes met over the table. All too plainly the elder Cornet saw that his appeal had failed to go home. His son was smiling grimly, his eyes sardonic, unmistakable contempt in the curl of his lips. Whether he was angry or not the gray man opposite could not tell. He hoped so in his heart—that Ned had not sunk so low that he could no longer know the stirring urge of manly anger. A great depression drew nigh and enfolded him.

“This isn’t a theater,” was the calloused reply at last. “You are not delivering a lecture to America’s school children! Strangely, I feel quite able to take care of myself.”

“I only wish that I could feel so too.”

“You must think I’m a child—to try to scare me with threats of hell fire. Father, I didn’t realize that you had this streak of puritanism in you.”

His father made no reply at first. Ned’s bitter smile had seemingly passed to his own lips. “I suppose there’s no use of going on,” he said.

“By all means go on, since you are so warmed up to your subject,” Ned answered coldly. “I wouldn’t like to deprive you of the pleasure. You had something on your mind: what is it?”

“It was a real opportunity for you—a chance to show the stuff you’re made of. It wasn’t much, truly—perhaps I have taken the whole thing too seriously. Ned, I wonder if you like excitement.”

“Do I? You know how I love polo——”

“You love to watch! The point is, do you like excitement well enough to take a slight risk of your life for it? Do you care enough about success, on your own hook, to go through snow and ice to win it? A chance came to-day to make from fifty to a hundred thousand dollars for this firm; all it takes is a little nerve, a little endurance of hardship, a little love of adventure. I hoped to interest you in it—by so doing to get you started along the way that leads to manhood and self-respect. You carry this off successfully, and it’s bound to give you ambition to tackle even harder deals. It means contact with men, a whole world of valuable experience, and a world of fun to boot. It wouldn’t appeal to some of your cheap friends—but heaven knows, if you don’t take it up, I’m going to do it myself.”

“Go ahead, shoot!” Ned urged. He smiled wanly, almost superciliously at the enthusiasm that had overswept his father’s face. The old man’s eyes were gleaming like black diamonds.

It was a curious thing, this love of adventure and trial and achievement! The old man was half-mad, immersed in the Sunday-school sentiments of a

dead and moth-eaten generation, yet it was marvelous the joy that he got out of living! He was one of an older generation, or he would never anticipate pleasure in projects that incurred hardship, work, responsibility, the silences of the waste places such as he knew on his annual fur-buying expeditions. His sense of pleasure was weird; yet he was consistent, to say the least. Now he was wildly elated from merely *thinking* about his great scheme,—doubtless some stupid plan to add further prestige to the great fur house of Godfrey Cornet. Ned himself could not find such happiness in twice the number of drinks that were his usual wont.

“It’s simply this,” his father went on, barely able to curb his enthusiasm. “To-day I met Leo Schaffner at lunch, and in our talk he gave me what I consider a real business inspiration. He tells me, in his various jobbing houses, he has several thousand silk and velvet gowns and coats and wraps left on his hands in the financial depression that immediately followed the war. He was cussing his luck because he didn’t know what to do with them. Of course they were part of the surplus that helped glut the markets when hard times made people stop buying—stock that was manufactured during the booming days of the war. He told me that this finery was made of the most beautiful silks and velvets, but all of it was a good three seasons out of style. He offered me the lot of two thousand for—I’m ashamed to tell you how much.”

“Almost nothing!” his son prompted him.

“Yes. Almost nothing. And I took him up.”

His son leaned back, keenly interested for the first time. “Good Lord, why? You can’t go into business selling out-of-date women’s clothes!”

“Can’t, eh? Son, while he was talking to me, it occurred to me all at once that the least of those gowns, the poorest one in the lot, was worth at least a marten skin! Think of it! A marten skin, from Northern Canada and Alaska, returned the trapper around sixty dollars in 1920. Now let me get down to brass tacks.

“It’s true I don’t intend to sell any of those hairy old white trappers any women’s silk gowns. But this was what I was going to have you do: first you were to hire a good auxiliary schooner—a strong, sturdy, seaworthy two-masted craft such as is used in northern trading. You’d fit that craft out with a few weeks’ supplies and fill the hold with a couple of thousand of those gowns. You’d need two or three men to run the launch—I believe the usual crew is a pilot, a first and second engineer, and a cook—and you’d have to have a seamstress to do fitting and make minor alterations. Then you’d start up for Bering Sea.

“You may not know it, but along the coast of Alaska, and throughout the islands of Bering Sea there are hundreds of little, scattered tribes of Indians, all of them trappers of the finest, high-priced furs. Nor do their women dress in furs and skins altogether, either, as popular legend would have you believe. Through their hot, long summer days they wear dresses like American women, and the gayer and prettier the dresses, the better they like ’em. To my knowledge, no one has ever fed them silk—simply because silk was too high—but being women, red or white, they’d simply go crazy over it.

“The other factor in the combination is that the *Intrepid*, due to the unsettled fur market, failed to do any extensive buying on her last annual trading trip through the islands, and as a result practically all the Indians have their full catch on hand. The *Intrepid* is the only trader through the particular chain of islands I have in mind—the Skopin group, north and east of the Aleutian chain—and she’s not counting on going up again till spring. Then she’ll reap a rich harvest—unless you get there first.

“The Skopin Islands are charted—any that are inhabited at all—easy to find, easy to get to with a seaworthy launch. Every one of those Indians you’ll find there will buy a dress for his squaw or his daughter to show off in, during the summer, and pay for it with a fine piece of fur. For some of the brighter, richer gowns I haven’t any doubt but that you could get blue and silver fox. As I say, the worst of ’em is worth at least a single marten. Considering your lack of space, I’d limit you to marten, blue and silver fox, fisher and mink, and perhaps such other freak furs as would bring a high price—no white fox or muskrat or beaver, perhaps not even ermine and land otter. Ply along from island to island, starting north and working south and west clear out among the Aleuts, to keep out of the way of the winter, showing your dresses at the Indian villages and trading them for furs!

“This is August. I’m already arranging for a license. You’d have to get going in a week. Hit as far north as you want—the farther you go the better you will do—and then work south. Making a big chain that cuts off the currents and the tides, the Skopin group is surrounded by an unbroken ice sheet in midwinter, so you have to count on rounding the Aleutian Peninsula into Pacific waters some time in November. If you wait much longer you’re apt not to get out before spring.

“That’s the whole story. The cargo of furs you should bring out should be worth close to a hundred thousand. Expenses won’t be fifteen thousand in all. It would mean work; dealing with a bunch of crafty redskins isn’t play for boys! Maybe there’d be cold and rough weather, for Bering Sea deserves no man’s trust. But it would be the finest sport in the world, an opportunity

to take Alaskan bear and tundra caribou—plenty of adventure and excitement and tremendous profits to boot. It would be a man's job, Ned—but you'd get a kick out of it you never got out of a booze party in your life. And we split the profits seventy-five—twenty-five—the lion's share to you.”

He waited, to watch Ned's face. The young man seemed to be musing. “I could use fifty thousand, pretty neat,” he observed at last.

“Yes—and don't forget the fun you'd have.”

“But good Lord, think of it. Three months away from Second Avenue.”

“The finest three months of your life—worth all the rest of your stupid, silly past time put together.”

Almost trembling in his eagerness, the old man waited for his son's reply. The latter took out a cigarette, lighted it, and gazed meditatively through the smoke. “Fifty thousand!” he whispered greedily. “And I suppose I could stand the hardship.”

Then he looked up, faintly smiling. “I'll go, if Lenore will let me,” he pronounced at last.

### III

THE exact moment that her name was on Ned's lips, Lenore Hardenworth herself, in her apartment in a region of fashionable apartments eight blocks from the Cornet home, was also wondering at the perverse ways of parents. It was strange how their selfish interests could disarrange one's happiest plans. All in all, Lenore was in a wretched mood, savagely angry at the world in general and her mother in particular.

They had had a rather unpleasant half-hour over their cigarettes. Mrs. Hardenworth had been obdurate; Lenore's prettiest pouts and most winsome ways hadn't moved her a particle. The former knew all such little wiles; time was when she had practiced them herself with consummate art, and she was not likely to be taken in with them in her old age! Seeing that these were fruitless, her daughter had taken the more desperate stand of anger, always her last resort in getting what she wanted, but to-night it some way failed in the desired effect. There had been almost, if not quite, a scene between these two handsome women under the chandelier's gleam—and the results, from Lenore's point of view, had been absolutely nil. Mrs. Hardenworth had calmly stood her ground.

It was the way of the old, Lenore reflected, to give too much of their thought and interest to their own fancied ills. Not even a daughter's brilliant career could stand between. And who would have guessed that the "nervousness" her mother had complained of so long, pandered to by a fashionable quack and nursed like a baby by the woman herself, should ever lead to such disquieting results. The doctor had recommended a sea voyage to the woman, and the old fool had taken him at his word.

It was not that Lenore felt she could not spare, for some months, her mother's guiding influence. It was merely that sea voyages cost money, and money, at that particular time, was scarce and growing scarcer about the Hardenworth apartment. Lenore needed all that was available for her own fall and winter gowns, a mink or marten coat to take the place of her near-seal cloak, and for such entertaining as would be needed to hold her place in her own set. Seemingly the only course that remained was to move forward the date of her marriage to Ned, at present set for the following spring.

She dried her eyes, powdered her nose; and for all the late storm made a bewitching picture as she tripped to the door in answer to her fiancé's knock.

Lenore Hardenworth was in all probability the most beautiful girl in her own stylish set and one of the most handsome women in her native city. She was really well known, remembered long and in many places, for her hair. It was simply shimmering gold, and it framed a face of flowerlike beauty,—an even-featured, oval face, softly tinted and daintily piquant. Hers was not a particularly warm beauty, yet it never failed to win a second glance. She had fine, firm lips, a delicate throat, and she had picked up an attractive way of half-dropping firm, white lids over her gray, languorous eyes.

No one could wonder that Lenore Hardenworth was a social success. Besides her beauty of face, the grace of a slender but well-muscled form, she unquestionably had a great deal of ambition and spirit. She was well schooled in the tricks of her trade: charming and ingratiating with her girl friends, sweet and deeply respectful to the old, and striking a fine balance between recklessness and demureness with available men. It can be said for Lenore that she wasted no time with men who were not eligible, in every sense of the word. Lenore had her way to make in this world of trial and stress.

Long ago Ned had chosen her from among her girl friends as the most worthy of his courtship,—a girl who could rule over his house, who loved the life that he lived, whose personal appeal was the greatest. Best of all, she was the product of his own time: a modern girl in every sense of the word. The puritanism he deplored in his own parents was conspicuously absent in her. She smoked with the ease and satisfaction of a man; she held her liquor like a veteran; and of prudery she would never be accused. Not that she was ever rough or crude. Indeed there was a finesse about her harmless little immoralities that made them, to him, wholly adorable and charming. She was always among the first to learn the new dances, and no matter what their murky origin—whether the Barbary Coast or some sordid tenderloin of a great Eastern city—she seemed to be able to dance them without ever conveying the image of vulgarity. Her idea of pleasure ran along with his. Life, at her side, offered only the most delectable vistas.

Besides, the man loved her. His devotion was such that it was the subject of considerable amusement among the more sophisticated of their set. He'd take the *egg*, rather than the *horse-and-buggy*, they told each other, and to those inured in the newest slang, the meaning was simply that Lenore, rather than Ned, would be head of their house. The reason, they explained wisely, was that it spelled disaster to give too much of one's self to a wife these days. Such devotion put a man at a disadvantage. The woman, sure of her husband, would be speedily bored and soon find other interests. Of course Lenore loved him too, but she kept herself better in hand. For all his modern

viewpoint, it was to be doubted that Ned had got completely away from the influence of a dead and moth-eaten generation. Possibly some little vestige of his parent's puritanism prevailed in him still!

Ned came in soberly, kissed the girl's inviting lips, then sat beside her on the big divan. Studying his grave face, she waited for him to speak.

"Bad news," he said at last.

She caught her breath in a quick gasp. It was a curious thing, indicating, perhaps, a more devout interest in him than her friends gave her credit for, that a sudden sense of dismay seemed to sweep over her. Yet surely no great disaster had befallen. There was no cause to fear that some one of the mighty arms on which they leaned for happiness—the great fur house of Cornet, for instance—had weakened and fallen. Some of the warm color paled in her face.

"What is it?" She spoke almost breathlessly, and he turned toward her with wakened interest.

"Nothing very important," he told her casually. "I'm afraid I startled you with my lugubrious tones. I've got to go away for three months."

She stared a moment in silence, and a warm flush, higher and more angry than that which had just faded, returned to her cheeks. Just for an instant there was a vague, almost imperceptible hardening of the little lines about her beautiful eyes.

"Ned! You can't! After all our plans. I won't hear of it——"

"Wait, dearest!" the man pleaded. "Of course I won't go if you say not ——"

"Of course I say not——"

"But it's a real opportunity—to make forty or fifty thousand. Wait till I tell you about it, anyway."

He told her simply: the exact plan that his father had proposed. Her interest quickened as he talked. She had a proper respect for wealth, and the idea of the large profits went home speedily and surely to her imagination, shutting out for the moment all other aspects of the affair. And soon she found herself sitting erect, listening keenly to his every word.

The idea of trading obsolete gowns for beautiful furs was particularly attractive to her. "I've got some old things I could spare," she told him eagerly. "Why couldn't you take those with you and trade them to some old squaw for furs?"

"I could! I don't see why I shouldn't bring you back some beauties."



Her eyes were suddenly lustful. "I'd like some silver fox—and enough sable for a great wrap. Oh, Ned—do you think you could get them for me?"

His face seemed rather drawn and mirthless as he returned her stare. It had been too complete a victory. It can be said for the man that he had come with the idea of persuading Lenore to let him go, to let him leave her arms for the sake of the advantages to be accrued from the expedition, but at least he wanted her to show some regret. He didn't entirely relish her sudden, unbounded enthusiasm, and the avaricious gleam in her eyes depressed and estranged him.

But Lenore made no response to his darkened mood. Sensitive as she usually was, she seemed untouched by it, wholly unaware of his displeasure. She was thinking of silver fox, and the thought was as fascinating as that of gold to a miser. And now her mind was reaching farther, moving in a greater orbit, and for the moment she sat almost breathless. Suddenly she turned to him with shining eyes.

"Ned, what kind of a trip will this be?" she asked him.

He was more held by the undertone of excitement in her voice than by the question itself. "What is it?" he asked. "What do you mean——?"

"I mean—will it be a hard trip—one of danger and discomfort?"

"I don't think so. I'm going to get a comfortable yacht—it will be a launch, of course, but a big, comfortable one—have a good cook and pleasant surroundings. You know, traveling by water has got any other method skinned. In fact, it ought to be as comfortable as staying at a club, not to mention the sport in hunting, and so on. I don't intend to go too far or too long—your little Ned doesn't like discomfort any too well to deliberately hunt it up. I can make it just as easy a trip as I want. It's all in my hands—hiring crew, schooner, itinerary, and everything. Of course, father told a wild story about cold and hardship and danger, but I don't believe there's a thing in it."

"I don't either. It makes me laugh, those wild and woolly stories about the North! It's just about as wild as Ballard! Edith Courtney went clear to Juneau and back on a boat not long ago and didn't have a single adventure—except with a handsome young big-game hunter in the cabin."

"But Juneau—is just the beginning of Alaska!"

"I don't care. This hardship they talk about is all poppycock, and you know it—and the danger too. To hear your father talk, and some of the others of the older generation, you'd think they had been through the infernal regions! They didn't have the sporting instincts that've been developed in the last generation, Ned. Any one of our friends would go

through what they went through and not even bother to tell about it. I tell you this generation is better and stronger than any one that preceded it, and their stories of privation and danger are just a scream! I'm no more afraid of the North than I am of you."

She paused, and he stared at her blankly. He knew perfectly well that some brilliant idea had occurred to her: he was simply waiting for her to tell it. She moved nearer and slipped her hand between his.

"Ned, I've a wonderful plan," she told him. "There's no reason why we should be separated for three months. You say the hiring of the launch, itinerary, and everything is in your hands. Why not take mother and me with you?"

"My dear——"

"Why not? Tell me that! The doctor has just recommended her a sea trip. Where could she get a better one? Of course you'd have to get a big, comfortable launch——"

"I intended to get that, anyway." Slowly the light that shone in her face stole into his. "Are you a good sailor——?"

"It just happens that neither mother nor I know what sea-sickness means. Otherwise, I'm afraid we wouldn't find very much pleasure in the trip. You remember the time, in Rex Nard's yacht, off Columbia River bar? But won't you be in the inside passage, anyway?"

"The inside passage doesn't go across the Bay of Alaska—but father says it's all quiet water among the islands we'll trade at, in Bering Sea. It freezes over tight in winter, so it must be quiet." He paused, drinking in the advantages of the plan. They would be together; that point alone was inducement enough for him. By one stroke an arduous, unpleasant business venture could be turned into a pleasure trip, an excursion on a private yacht over the wintry waters of the North. It was true that Lenore's point of view was slightly different, but her enthusiasm was no less than his. The plan was a perfect answer to the problem of her mother's sea trip and the inevitable expense involved. She knew her mother's thrifty disposition; she would be only too glad to take her voyage as the guest of her daughter's fiancé. And both of them could robe themselves in such furs as had never been seen on Second Avenue before.

"Take you—I should say I will take you—and your mother, too," he was exclaiming with the utmost enthusiasm and delight. "Lenore, it will be a *regular* party—a joy-ride such as we never took before."

For a moment they were silent, lost in their own musings. The wind off the Sound signaled to them at the windows—rattling faintly like ghost hands

stretched with infinite difficulty from some dim, far-off Hereafter. It had lately blown from Bering Sea, and perhaps it had a message for them. Perhaps it had heard the scornful words they had spoken of the North—of the strange, gray, forgotten world over which it had lately swept—but there was no need to tell them that they lied. A few days more would find them venturing northward, and they could find out for themselves. But perhaps the wind had a note of grim, sardonic laughter as it sped on in its ceaseless journey.

## IV

NED planned to rise early, but sleep was heavy upon him when he tried to waken. It was after ten when he had finished breakfast and was ready to begin active preparations for the excursion. His first work, of course, was to see about hiring a launch.

Ten minutes' ride took him to the office of his friend, Rex Nard, vice-president of a great marine-outfitting establishment, and five minutes' conversation with this gentleman told him all he wanted to know. Yes, as it happened Nard knew of a corking craft that was at that moment in need of a charterer, possibly just the thing that Cornet wanted. The only difficulty, Nard explained, was that it was probably a much better schooner than was needed for casual excursions into northern waters.

"This particular craft was built for a scientific expedition sent out by one of the great museums," Nard explained. "It isn't just a fisherman's scow. She has a nifty galley and a snug little dining saloon, and two foxy little staterooms for extra toney passengers. Quite an up-stage little boat. Comfortable as any yacht you ever saw."

"Staunch and seaworthy?"

"Man, this big-spectacled outfit that had it built took it clear into the Arctic Sea—after walrus and polar bear and narwhal and musk ox; and she's built right. I'd cross the Pacific in her any day. Her present owners bought her with the idea of putting her into coastal service, both passengers and freight, between various of the little far northern towns, but the general exodus out of portions of Alaska has left her temporarily without a job."

"How about cargo space?"

"I don't know exactly—but it was big enough for several tons of walrus and musk ox skeletons, so it ought to suit you."

"What do you think I could get her for?"

"I don't think—I know. I was talking to her owner yesterday noon. You can get her for ninety days for five thousand dollars—seventy-five per for a shorter time. That includes the services of four men, licensed pilot, first and second engineer, and a nigger cook; and gas and oil for the motor."

Ned stood up, his black eyes sparkling with elation, and put on his hat. "Where do I find her?"

“Hunt up Ole Knutsen, at this address.” Nard wrote an instant on a strip of paper. “The name of the craft is the *Charon*.”

“The *Charon*! My heavens, wasn’t he the old boy who piloted the lost souls across the river Styx? If I were a bit superstitious——”

“You’d be afraid you were headed straight for the infernal regions, eh? It does seem to be tempting providence to ride in a boat with such a name. Fortunately the average man Knutsen hires for his crew doesn’t know Charon from Adam. Seamen, my boy, are the most superstitious crowd on earth. No one can follow the sea and not be superstitious—don’t ask me why. It gets to them, some way, inside.”

“Sorry I can’t stay to hear a lecture on the subject.” Ned turned toward the door. “Now for Mr. Knutsen.”

Ned drove to the designated address, found the owner of the craft, and executed a charter after ten minutes of conversation. Knutsen was a big, good-natured man with a goodly share of Norse blood that had paled his eyes and hair. Together they drew up the list of supplies.

“Of course, we might put in some of dis stuff at nordern ports,” Knutsen told him in the unmistakable accent of the Norse. “You’d save money, though, by getting it here.”

“All except one item—last but not least,” Ned assured him. “I’ve got to stop at Vancouver.”

“Canadian territory, eh——?”

“Canadian whisky. Six cases of imperial quarts. We’ll be gone a long time, and a sailor needs his grog.”

At which the only comment was made after the door had closed and the aristocratic fur trader had gone his way. The Norseman sat a long time looking into the ashes of his pipe. “Six cases—by Yiminy!” he commented, with good cheer. “If his Pop want to make money out of dis deal he better go himself!”

There was really very little else for Ned to do. The silk gowns and wraps that were to be his principal article of trade would not be received for a few days at least; and seemingly he had arranged for everything. He started leisurely back toward his father’s office.

But yes, there was one thing more. His father had said that his staff must include a fitter,—a woman who could ply the needle and make minor alterations in the gowns. For a moment he mused on the pleasant possibility

that Lenore and her mother could hold up that end of the undertaking. It would give them something to do, an interest in the venture; it would save the cost of hiring a seamstress. But at once he laughed at himself for the thought. He could imagine the frigid, caste-proud Mrs. Hardenworth in the rôle of seamstress! In the first place she likely didn't know one end of a needle from another. If in some humble days ago she had known how to sew, she was not the type that would care to admit it now. He had to recognize this fact, even though she were his sweetheart's mother. Nor would she be likely to take kindly to the suggestion. The belligerence with which she had always found it necessary to support her assumption of caste would manifest itself only too promptly should he suggest that she become a needlewoman, even on a lark. Such larks appealed to neither Mrs. Hardenworth nor her daughter. And neither of them would care for such intimate relations with the squaws, native of far northern villages. The two passengers could scarcely be induced to speak to such as these, much less fit their dresses. No, he might as well plan on taking one of his father's fitters.

And at this point in his thoughts he paused, startled. Later, when the idea that had come to him had lost its novelty, he still wondered about that strange little start that seemed to go all over him. It was some time before he could convince himself of the real explanation—that, though seamstress she was, on a plane as far different from his own Lenore as night was from day, the friendliness and particularly the good sportsmanship of his last night's victim had wakened real gratitude and friendship for her. He felt really gracious toward her, and since it was necessary that the expedition include a seamstress, it would not be bad at all to have her along. She had shown the best of taste on the way home after the accident, and certainly she would offend Lenore's and his own sensibilities less than the average of his father's employees.

He knew where he could procure some one to do the fitting. Had not Bess Gilbert, when he had left her at her door the previous evening, told him that she knew all manner of needlecraft? Her well-modeled, athletic, though slender form could endure such hardships as the work involved; and she had the temperament exactly needed: adventurous, uncomplaining, courageous. He turned at once out Madison where Bess lived.

She was at work at that hour, a gray, sweet-faced woman told him, but he was given directions where he might find her. Ten minutes later he was talking to the young lady herself.

Wholly without warmth, just like the matter of business that it was, he told her his plan and offered her the position. It was for ninety days, he said, and owing to the nature of the work, irregular hours and more or less

hardship, her pay would be twice that which she received in the city. Would she care to go?

She looked up at him with blue eyes smiling,—a smile that crept down to her lips for all that she tried to repel it. She looked straight into Ned's eyes as she answered him simply, candidly, quite like a social equal instead of a lowly employee. And there was a lilt in her voice that caught Ned's attention in spite of himself.

“I haven't had many opportunities for ocean travel,” she told him—and whether or not she was laughing at him Ned Cornet couldn't have sworn! Her tone was certainly suspiciously merry. “Mr. Cornet, I'll be glad enough to accompany your party, any time you say.”

## V

IT was a jesting, hilarious crowd that gathered one sunlit morning to watch the departure of the *Charon*. Rodney Coburn was there, and Rex Nard, various matrons who were members of Mrs. Hardenworth's bridge club, and an outer and inner ring of satellites that gyrated around such social suns as Ned and Lenore. Every one was very happy, and no one seemed to take the expedition seriously. The idea of Ned Cornet, he of the curly brown hair, in the rôle of fur trader in the frozen wastes of the North appealed to his friends as being irresistibly comic. The nearest approach to seriousness was Coburn's envy.

"I'd like to be in your shoes," he told Ned. "Just think—a chance to take a tundra caribou, a Kodiak bear, and maybe a polar bear and a walrus—all in one swoop! I'll have to hand over my laurels as a big-game hunter when you get back, old boy!"

"Lewis and Clark, Godspeed!" Ted Wynham, known among certain disillusioned newspaper men as "the court jester", announced melodramatically from a snubbing block. "In token of our esteem and good wishes, we wish to present you with this magic key to success and happiness." He held out a small bundle, the size of a jack-knife, carefully wrapped. "You are going North, my children! You, Marco Polo"—he bowed handsomely to Ned—"and you, our lady of the snows,"—addressing Lenore—"and last but not least, the chaperone"—bowing still lower to Mrs. Hardenworth, a big, handsome woman with iron-gray hair and large, even features—"will find full use for the enclosed magic key in the wintry, barbarous, but blessed lands of the North. Gentleman and ladies, you are not venturing into a desert. Indeed, it is a land flowing with milk and honey. And this little watch charm, first aid to all explorers, the friend of all dauntless travelers such as yourselves, explorers' delight, in fact, will come in mighty handy! Accept it, with our compliments!"

He handed the package to Ned, and a great laugh went up when he revealed its contents. It contained a gold-mounted silver cork-screw!

Both Lenore and her mother seemed in a wonderful mood. The ninety-day journey on those far-stretching sunlit waters seemed to promise only happiness for them. Mrs. Hardenworth was getting her sea trip, and under the most pleasant conditions. There would also, it seemed, be certain



chances for material advantages, none of which she intended to overlook. In her trunk she had various of her own gowns—some of them slightly worn, it was true; some of them stained and a trifle musty—yet suddenly immensely valuable in her eyes. She had intended to give them to the first charity that would condescend to accept them, but now she didn't even trust her own daughter with them. Somewhere in those lost and desolate islands of the North she intended trading them for silver fox! Ned had chest upon chest of gowns to trade; surely she would get a chance to work in her own. Her daughter looked forward to the same profitable enterprise, and besides, she had the anticipation of three wonderful, happy months' companionship with the man of her choice.

They had dressed according to their idea of the occasion. Lenore wore a beautifully tailored middie suit that was highly appropriate for summer seas, but was nothing like the garb that Esquimo women wear in the fall journeys in the Oomiacs. Mrs. Hardenworth had a smart tailored suit of small black and white check, a small hat and a beautiful gray veil. Both of them carried winter coats, and both were fitted out with binoculars, cameras, and suchlike oceanic paraphernalia. Knutsen, of course, supposed that their really heavy clothes, great mackinaws and slickers and leather-lined woolens, such as are sometimes needed on Bering Sea, were in the trunks he had helped to stow below. In this regard the blond seaman, helmsman and owner of the craft, had made a slight mistake. In a desire for a wealth of silver fox to wear home both trunks had been filled with discarded gowns to the exclusion of almost everything else.

Ned, in a smart yachting costume, had done rather better by himself. He had talked with Coburn in regard to the outfit, and his duffle bag contained most of the essentials for such a journey. And Bess's big, plain bag was packed full of the warmest clothes she possessed.

Bess did not stand among the happy circle of Ned's friends. Her mother and sister had come down to the dock to bid her good-by, and they seemed to be having a very happy little time among themselves. Bess herself was childishly happy in the anticipation of the adventure. Hard would blow the wind that could chill her, and mighty the wilderness power that could break her spirit!

The captain was almost ready to start the launch. McNab, the chief engineer, was testing his engines; Forest, his assistant, stood on the deck; and the negro cook stood grinning at the window of the galley. But presently there was an abrupt cessation of the babble of voices in the group surrounding Ned.

Only Ted Wynham's voice was left, trailing on at the high pitch he invariably used in trying to make himself heard in a noisy crowd. It sounded oddly loud, now that the laughter had ceased. Ted paused in the middle of a word, startled by the silence, and a secret sense of vague embarrassment swept all his listeners. A tall man was pushing through the crowd, politely asking right of way, his black eyes peering under silver brows. For some inexplicable reason the sound of frolic died before his penetrating gaze.

But the groups caught themselves at once. They must not show fear of this stalwart, aged man with his prophet's eyes. They spoke to him, wishing him good day, and he returned their bows with faultless courtesy. An instant later he stood before his son.

"Mother couldn't get down," Godfrey Cornet said simply. "She sent her love and good wishes. A good trip, Ned—but not too good a trip."

"Why not—too good a trip?"

"A little snow, a little cold—maybe a charging Kodiak bear—fine medicine for the spirit, Ned. Good luck!"

He gave his hand, then turned to extend good wishes to Mrs. Hardenworth and Lenore. He seemed to have a queer, hesitant manner when he addressed the latter, as if he had planned to give some further, more personal message, but now was reconsidering it. Then the little group about him suddenly saw his face grow vivid.

"Where's Miss Gilbert——?"

The group looked from one to another. As always, they were paying the keenest attention to his every word; but they could not remember hearing this name before. "Miss Gilbert?" his son echoed blankly. "Oh, you mean the seamstress——"

"Of course—the other member of your party."

"She's right there, talking to her mother."

A battery of eyes was suddenly turned on the girl. Seemingly she had been merely part of the landscape before, unnoticed except by such clandestine gaze as Ted Wynham bent upon her; but in an instant, because Godfrey Cornet had known her name, she became a personage of at least some small measure of importance. Without knowing why she did it, Mrs. Hardenworth drew herself up to her full height.

Cornet walked courteously to the girl's side and extended his hand. "Good luck to you, and a pleasant journey," he said, smiling down on her. "And, Miss Gilbert, I wonder if I could give you a charge——"

"I'll do my best—anything you ask——"

“I want you to look after my son Ned. He’s never been away from the comforts of civilization before—and if a button came off, he’d never know how to put it on. Don’t let him come to grief, Miss Gilbert. I’m wholly serious—I know what the North is. Don’t let him take too great a risk. Watch out for his health. There’s nothing in this world like a woman’s care.”

There was no ring of laughter behind him. No one liked to take the chance that he was jesting, and no one could get away from the uncomfortable feeling that he might be in earnest. Bess’s reply was entirely grave.

“I’ll remember all you told me,” she told him simply.

“Thank you—and a pleasant voyage.”

Even now the adventurers were getting aboard. Mrs. Hardenworth was handing her bag to Knutsen—she had mistaken him for a cabin boy—with instructions to carry it carefully and put it in her stateroom; Lenore was bidding a joyous farewell to some of her more intimate friends. The engine roared, the water churned beneath the propeller, the pilot called some order in a strident voice. The boat moved easily from the dock.

Swiftly it sped out into the Sound. A great shout was raised from the dock, hands waved, farewell words blew over the sunlit waters. But there was one of the four seafarers on the deck who seemed neither to hear nor to see. He stood silent, a profundity of thought upon him never experienced before.

He was wondering at the reality of the clamor on the shore. How many were there in the farewell party who after a few weeks would even remember his existence? If the blond man at the wheel were in reality Charon, piloting him to some fabled underworld from which he could never return, how quickly he would be forgotten, how soon they would fail to speak his name! He felt peculiarly depressed, inwardly baffled, deeply perplexed.

Were all his associations this same fraud? Was there nothing real or genuine in all the fabric of his life? As he stood erect, gazing out over the shimmering waters, Lenore suddenly gazed at him in amazement.

For the moment there was a striking resemblance to his father about his lips and in the unfathomable blackness of his eyes. Her own reaction was a violent start, a swift feeling of apprehension that she could not analyze or explain. Her instincts were sure and true: she must not let this side of him gain the ascendancy. Her very being seemed to depend on that.

But swiftly she called him from his preoccupation. She had something to show him, she said,—a parting gift that Ted Wynham had left in her

stateroom. It was a dark bottle of a famous whisky, and it would suffice their needs, he had said, until they should reach Vancouver.

## VI

MRS. HARDENWORTH had made it a point to go immediately to her stateroom, but at once she reappeared on deck. She seemed a trifle more erect, her gray eyes singularly wide open.

“Ned, dear, I wonder if that fellow made a mistake when he pointed out my stateroom,” she began rather stiffly. “I want to be sure I’ve got the right one that you meant for me——”

“It’s the one to the right,” Ned answered, somewhat unhappily. He followed her along the deck, indicating the room she and her daughter were to occupy. “Did you think he was slipping something over on you, taking a better one himself?”

“I didn’t know. You can’t ever tell about such men, Ned; you know that very well. Of course, if it is the one you intended for me, I’m only too delighted with it——”

“It’s really the best on the ship. It’s not a big craft, you know; space is limited. I’m sorry it’s so small and dark, and I suppose you’ve already missed the running water. I do hope it won’t be too uncomfortable. Of course, you can have the one on the other side, but it’s really inferior to this——”

“That’s the only other one? Ned, I want you to have the best one——”

“I’m sorry to say I’m not going to have any. Miss Gilbert has to have the other. But there’s a corking berth in the pilot house I’m going to occupy.”

“I’d never let Miss Gilbert have it!” The woman’s eyes flashed. “I wouldn’t hear of it—you putting yourself out for your servant. Why can’t she occupy the berth in the pilot house——”

“I don’t mind at all. Really I don’t. The girl couldn’t be expected to sleep where there are men on watch all night.”

“It’s a shame, just the same. Here she is going to have one of the two best staterooms all to herself.”

At once she returned to her room; but the little scene was not without results. In the first place it implanted a feeling of injury in Ned, whose habits of mind made him singularly open to suggestion; and in the second it left Mrs. Hardenworth with a distinct prejudice against Bess. She was in a

decided ill-humor until tea time, when she again joined Ned and Lenore on the deck.

She was not able to resist the contagion of their own high spirits, and soon she was joining in their chat. Everything made for happiness to-day. The air was cool and bracing, the blue waters glittered in the sun, a quartering wind filled the sails of the *Charon*, and with the help of the auxiliary engines whisked her rollicking northward. None of the three could resist a growing elation, a holiday mood such as had lately come but rarely and which was wholly worth celebrating. Soon Ned excused himself, but reappeared at once with Ted Wynham's parting gift.

"It's a rare day," he announced solemnly.

"And heavens! We haven't christened the ship!" Lenore added drolly.

"Children, children! Not yet a day out! But you mustn't overdo it, either of you!" Mrs. Hardenworth shook her finger to caution them. "Now, Ned, have the colored man bring three glasses and water. I'd prefer ginger ale with mine if you don't mind—I'm dreadfully old-fashioned in that regard."

A moment later all three had watered their liquor to their taste, and were nodding the first "here's how!" Then they talked quietly, enjoying the first stir of the stimulant in their veins.

Through the glass window of the cabin whence she had gone to read a novel Bess watched that first imbibing with lively interest. It was her first opportunity to observe her social superiors in their moments of relaxation, and she didn't quite know what to make of it. It was not that she was wholly unfamiliar with drinking on the part of women. She had known unfortunate girls, now and again, who had been brought to desolation by this very thing, but she had always associated it with squalor and brutality rather than culture and luxury. And she was particularly impressed with the casual way these two beautiful women took down their staggering doses.

They didn't seem to know what whisky was. They drank it like so much water. Evidently they had little respect for the demon that dwells in such poisoned waters,—a respect that in her, because of her greater knowledge of life, was an innate fear. They were like children playing with matches. She felt at first an instinct to warn them, to tell them in that direction lay all that was terrible and deadly, but instantly she knew that such a course would only make her ridiculous in their eyes.

But Bess needn't have felt surprise. Their attitude was only reflective of the recklessness that had come to be the dominant spirit of her age,—at least among those classes from whom, because of their culture and sophistication, the nation could otherwise look for its finest ideals. She saw them take a

second drink, and later, ostensibly hidden from Mrs. Hardenworth's eyes, Ned and Lenore have a sma' wee one together, around the corner of the pilot house.

With that third drink the little gathering on the deck began to have the proportions of a "party." Of course, no one was drunk. Mrs. Hardenworth was an old spartan at holding her liquor; Lenore and Ned were merely stimulated and talkative.

The older woman concealed the bottle in her stateroom, but the effects of what had already been consumed did not at once pass away. Their recklessness increased: it became manifest, to some small degree, in speech. Once or twice Ned's quips were a shade off-color, but always rollicking laughter was the response: once Mrs. Hardenworth, half without thinking, turned a phrase in such a way that a questionable inference could hardly be avoided.

"Why, mama!" Lenore exclaimed, in mock amazement. "Thank heaven you've got the grace to blush."

"You wicked old woman," Ned followed up with pretended gravity. "What if our little needlewoman had heard you!"

In reality Bess Gilbert had overheard the remark, as well as some of Ned's quips that had preceded it, and had been almost unable to believe her ears. It was not that she was particularly ingenuous or innocent. As an employee in a great factory she had a knowledge of life beyond any that these two tenderly bred women could have hoped to gain. But always before she had associated such speech with ill-bred and vulgar people with whom she would not permit herself to associate, never with those who in their attitude and thought presumed to be infinitely her superior.

She was not lacking in good sense; so she gave no sign of having heard. She wondered, however, just how she would have received such sallies had she been properly a member of their party. Wholly independent, with a world of moral courage to support her convictions, she could not have joined in the laughter that followed, even to avoid being conspicuous. It would have been a situation of real embarrassment to her.

The conclusion that she came to was that her three months' journey on board the *Charon* would be beset with many complications.

She made the very sensible resolve to avoid Ned's society and that of his two guests just as much as possible. She saw at once they were not her kind of people; and only unpleasantness would result from her intercourse with them.

She couldn't explain the darkening of her mood that followed this resolve. Surely she did not lean on these three for her happiness: the journey itself offered enough in the way of adventure and pleasure. She anticipated hours of enjoyment with Knutsen, the Norse pilot and owner of the boat, with McNab, the freckled, sandy-haired first engineer, and with Forest, his young assistant. Yet the weight of unhappiness that descended upon her was only too real. She tried in vain to shake it off. A sensible, self-mastered girl, she hated to yield to an oppression that seemingly had its source in her imagination only.

Ned had seemed so fine, so cheery, so companionable the night he had taken her home, after the accident. Yet he was showing himself a weakling: she saw the signs of it too plainly to mistake. She saw him not only on a far different social plane from her own, but some way fallen in her respect. He was separated from her not only by the unstable barrier of caste but by the stone wall of standards. She knew life, this girl of the world of toil, and she seemed to know that all her half-glimpsed, intangible dreams had come to nothing.

And her decision to avoid the three aristocrats stood her in good stead before the night was done, saving her as bitter a moment as any that had oppressed her in all the steep path of her life. Just after the dinner call had sounded, Lenore, Ned, and Mrs. Hardenworth had had a momentous conference in the little dining saloon.

The issue was silly and trivial from the first; but even insignificant things assume dangerous proportions when heady liquor is dying in the veins. It had been too long since Mrs. Hardenworth had had her drinks. She was in a doubtful mood, querulous so far as her own assumption of good breeding would permit, ready to haggle over nothing. The three of them had come into the dining room together: none of the other occupants of the little schooner had yet put in an appearance.

"I see the table's set for four," she began. "Who's the other place for—Captain Knutsen?"

"I'm afraid the captain has to mind his wheel. This isn't an oceanic liner. I suppose the place is set for Miss Gilbert."

Watching the older woman's face, Ned discerned an almost imperceptible hardening of the lines that stretched from the nose to the corners of the lips. Likely he wouldn't have observed it at all except for the fact that he had now and then seen the same thing in Lenore, always when she was displeased.



“Miss Gilbert seems to fill the horizon. May I ask how many more there are in the crew?”

“Just McNab, Forest, and the cook. Both white men take turns at the wheel in open water.”

“That’s three for each table, considering one of the men has to stay at the wheel. Why shouldn’t one of these plates be removed?”

The woman spoke rather softly, but Ned did not mistake the fact that she was wholly in earnest. “I don’t see why not,” he answered rather feebly. “Except, of course—they eat at irregular hours——”

“Listen, Ned. Be sensible. When a seamstress comes to our house she doesn’t eat at the table with us. Not at your house either. Perhaps you’d say that this was different, thrown together as we are on this little boat, but I don’t see that it is different. I hope you won’t mind my suggesting this thing to you. I’ve handled servants all my life—I know how to get along with them with the least degree of friction—and it’s very easy to be *too* kind.”

Ned looked down, his manhood oozing out of him. “But she’s a nice girl \_\_\_\_\_”

“I don’t doubt that she is,” Lenore interrupted him. “That isn’t the point. It isn’t through any attempt to assert superiority that mama is saying what she is. You know we like to be alone, Ned; we don’t want to have to include any one else in our conversation. We’re a little trio here, and we don’t need any one else. Tell the man to take away her plate.”

“Of course, if you prefer it.” Half ashamed of his reluctance, he called the negro and had the fourth plate removed. “Miss Gilbert will eat at the second table,” he explained. When the man had gone, Ned turned in appeal to Lenore. “She’ll be here in a minute. What shall I tell her?”

“Just what you told the servant—that she is to wait for the second table. Ned, you might as well make it clear in the beginning, otherwise it will be a problem all through the trip. Wait till she comes in, then tell her.”

Ned agreed, and they waited for the sound of Bess’s step on the stair. Mrs. Hardenworth’s large lips were set in a hard line: Lenore had a curious, eager expectancy. Quietly Julius served the soup, wondering at the ways of his superiors, the whites, and the long seconds grew into the minutes. Still they did not see Bess’s bright face at the door.

The soup cooled, and Mrs. Hardenworth began to grow impatient. The girl was certainly late in responding to the dinner call! And now, because she was fully aroused, she was no longer willing to accept that which would have constituted, a few minutes before, a pleasant way out of the difficulty,

—the failure of the seamstress to put in an appearance. The victorious foe, at white heat, demands more than mere surrender. The two women, fully determined as to Ned's proper course, were not willing the matter should rest.

“Send for her,” Mrs. Hardenworth urged. “There's no reason you shouldn't get this done and out of the way to-night, so we won't have to be distressed about it again.” Her voice had a ring of conviction; there was no doubt that, in her own mind, she had fully justified this affront to Bess. “You've got to face it some time. Tell the man to ask her to come here—and then politely designate her for the second table. She's an employee of yours, you are in real command of the boat, and it's entirely right and proper.”

Wholly cowed, anxious to sustain the assumption of caste that their words had inferred, he called to the negro waiter. “Please tell Miss Gilbert to come here,” he ordered.

A wide grin cracking his cheeks, failing wholly to understand the real situation and assuming that “de boss” had relented in his purpose to exclude the seamstress from the first table, the colored man sped cheerfully away. Bess had already spoken kindly to him; Julius had deplored the order to remove her plate almost as a personal affront. And he failed to hear Ned's comment that might have revealed the situation in its true light.

“I suppose you're right,” he said weakly, after Julius had gone. “But I feel like a cad, just the same.”

Again they waited for the seamstress to come. The women were grim, forbidding. And in a moment they heard steps at the threshold.

But only Julius, his face beset with gloom, came through the opened door. “De lady say she 'stremely sorry,” he pronounced, bowing. “But she say she's already promised Mista McNab to eat with him!”

## VII

THE *Charon* sped straight north, out of the Sound, through the inside passage. Days were bright; skies were clear, displaying at night a marvelous intricacy of stars; the seas glittered from the kindly September sun. They put in at Vancouver the night following their departure from Seattle, loaded on certain heavy stores, and continued their way in the lea of Vancouver Island.

Straight north, day after day! To McNab, a man who had cruised ten years on Alaskan waters, the air began to feel like home. It was crisp, surging cool in the lungs, fragrant with balsam from the wooded islands. Already Ned had begun to readjust some of his ideas in regard to the North. It was no longer easy to believe that his father had exaggerated its beauty and its appeal, its desolation and its vastness. It was a strange thing for a man used to cities to go day upon day without seeing scarcely a village beside the sea, a single human being other than those of his own party. Here was one place, it seemed, that the hand of man had touched but lightly if at all.

The impression grew the farther north he went. Ever there was less sign of habitation upon the shore. The craft passed through narrow channels between mountains that cropped up from the sea, it skirted wooded islands, it passed forgotten Indian villages where the totem poles stood naked and weather-stained before the forsaken homes of the chiefs. The glasses brought out a wonderland scene just beyond the reach of their unaided sight,—glacier and snow-slide, lofty peaks and water-falls. The mystic, brooding spirit of the North was already over them.

They had touched at Ketchikan, the port of entry to Alaska, and thence headed almost straight west, across the gulf of Alaska and toward the far-stretching end of the Alaskan Peninsula. During these days they were far out of sight of land, surrounded only by an immeasurable ocean that rolled endlessly for none to see or hear.

They were already far beyond the limits of ordinary tourist travel. The big boats plied as far as Anchorage at the head of Cook Inlet—to the north and east of them now—but beyond that point the traffic was largely that of occasional coastal traders, most of them auxiliary schooners of varying respectability. They seemed to have the ocean almost to themselves, never to

see the tip of a sail on the horizon, or a fisherman's craft scudding into port. And the solitude crept into the spirits of the passengers of the *Charon*.

It became vaguely difficult to keep up a holiday atmosphere. It was increasingly hard to be gay, to fight down certain inner voices that had hitherto been stifled. Some way, life didn't seem quite the same, quite the gay dream it had hitherto been. And yet this immeasurable vista of desolate waters—icy cold for all the sunlight that kissed the upreaching lips of the waves—was some way like a dream too. The brain kept clear enough, but it was all somewhat confusing to an inner brain, a secret self that they had scarcely been aware of before. It was hard to say which was the more real,—the gay life they had left, the laughter of which was still an echo in their ears, or these far-stretching wastes of wintry waters.

They couldn't help but be thoughtful. Realities went home to them that they had no desire to admit. A fervent belief in their own sophistication had been their dominant point of view, a disillusionment and a realism that was the tone of their generation, denying all they could not see or hear, holding themselves superciliously aloof from that gracious wonder and simplicity that still blesses little children; but here was something that was inscrutably beyond them. They couldn't laugh it away. They couldn't cast it off with a phrase of cheap slang; demeaning it in order to hold firm to their own philosophy of Self. Here was something that shook their old attitude of self-love and self-sufficiency to its foundations. They thought they knew life, these three; they thought they were bigger than life, that they had mastered it and found it out and stripped all delusions from it, but now their unutterable conceit, the pillar of their lives, was threatening to fall. This sunlit sea was too big for them: too big and too mighty and too old.

The trouble with Ned's generation was that it was a godless generation: the same evil that razed Babylon to the dust. Ned and his kind had come to be sufficient unto themselves. They had lost the wonder and fear of life, and that meant nothing less than the loss of their wonder and fear of the great Author of life. To these, life had been a game that they thought they had mastered. They had laughed to scorn the philosophies that a hundred generations of nobler men had built up with wondering reverence. Made arrogant by luxury and ease, they knew of nothing too big for them, no mystery that their contemptuous gaze could not penetrate, no wonder that their reckless hands could not unveil. They were drunk with their own glories, and the ultimate Source of all things had no place in their philosophies or their thoughts. It was true that churches flourished among them, that Charity received her due; but the old virile faith, the reverent wonder, the mighty urge that has achieved all things that have been worth

achieving were cold and dead in their hearts. But out here in this little, wind-blown craft, surrounded by an immensity of desolation beyond the power of their minds to grasp, it was hard to hold to their old complacency. Their old philosophies were barrenly insufficient, and they couldn't repel an ever deepening sense of awe. The wind, sweeping over them out of the vastness, was a new voice, striking the laughter from their lips and instilling a coldness that was almost fear in their warm, youthful blood. The sun shone now, but soon vast areas, not far off, would be locked tight with ice; never the movement of a wave, never the flash of a sea-bird's wing over the wastes; and the thought sobered them and perhaps humbled them a little too. Sometimes, alone on the deck at night, Ned was close to the dearest reality, the most profound discovery that could possibly touch his life: that the dreadful spirit of God moved upon the face of these desolate waters, no less than, as is told in Genesis, at creation's dawn.

Everything would have been different if they had come in a larger boat, for instance, one of the great liners that plied between Seattle and Anchorage. In that case, likely they would have had no trouble in retaining their old point of view. The brooding tone of the North would have passed them by; the journey could still have remained a holiday instead of the strange, wandering dream that it was. The reason was simply that on a liner they would not have broken all ties with their old life. There would have been games and dancing, the service of menials, social intercourse and all the superficialities and pretenses that had until now composed their lives. Their former standards, the attitudes from which they regarded life, would have been unaltered. There would have been no isolation, and thus no darkening of their moods, no haunting uneasiness that could not be named or described, no whispering voices heard but dimly out of the sea. They could have remained in their own old ramparts of callousness and scorn. But here they were alone,—lost and far on an empty sea, under an empty sky.

There was such a little group of them, only eight in all. The ship was a mere dot in the expanse of blue. Around them endlessly lay the sea, swept by unknown winds, cursed by the winter's cold, like death itself in its infinity and its haunting fear. The life they had left behind was already shadowed and dim: the farewell shouts, the laughter, the gaiety, the teeming crowds that moved and were never still were all like something imagined, unspeakably far off. Only the sea and the sky were left, and the craft struggling wearily, ever farther into the empty North.

Lenore found herself oppressed by an unreasoning fear. Realities were getting home to her, and she was afraid of them. It would have been wiser not to come, yet she couldn't have told why. The launch was wholly

comfortable; she was already accustomed to the cramped quarters. The men of the crew were courteous, Ned the same devoted lover as always. The thing was more an instinct with her: such pleasure as the trip offered could not compensate for an obscure uneasiness, a vague but ominous shadow over her mood and heart that was never lifted. Perhaps a wiser and secret self within the girl, a subconsciousness which was wise with the knowledge of the ages before ever her being emerged from the germ plasm was even now warning her to turn back. It knew her limitations; also it knew the dreadful, savage realm she had dared to penetrate. The North would have no mercy for her if she were found unworthy.

Perhaps in her heart she realized that she represented all that was the antithesis of this far northern domain. She was the child of luxury and ease: the tone and spirit of these wintry seas were travail and desolation. She was the product of a generation that knew life only as a structure that men's civilization had built; out here was life itself, raw and naked, stripped and bare. She was lawless, undisciplined, knowing no code but her own desires; all these seas and the gray fog-laden shores they swept were in the iron grip of Law that went down to the roots of time. She had never looked beyond the surface of things; the heart that pulsed in the breast of this wintry realm lay so deep that only the most wise and old, devotees to nature's secrets, could ever hear it beat. She had the unmistakable feeling that, in an unguarded moment, she had blundered into the camp of an enemy. Ever she discerned a malevolence in the murmur of the wind, a veritable threat in the soft voices of the night.

The nights, her innate sense of artistry told her, were unspeakably beautiful. She had never seen such stars before. They were so large, so white, and yet so unutterably aloof. Sometimes the moon rose in a splash of silver, and its loveliness on the far seas was a thing that words couldn't reach. Yet Lenore did not like things she could not put in words. For all their beauty those magic nights dismayed and disquieted her. They too were of the realities, and for all her past attitude of sophistication, she found that realism was the one thing she could not and dared not accept. Such realities as these, the wide-stretching seas and the infinity of stars, were rapidly stripping her of her dearest delusions; and with them, the very strongholds of her being. Heretofore she had placed her faith in superficialities, finding strength for her spirit and bolstering up her self-respect with such things as pride of ancestry, social position, a certain social attitude of recklessness that she thought became her, and most of all by refusing to believe that life contained any depth that she had not plumbed, any terrors that she dared not brave, any situation that she could not meet and master. But here these

things mattered not at all. Neither ancestry nor social position could save her should the winter cold, hinted at already in the bitter frost of the dawns, swoop down and find her unprotected. Her own personal charm would not fight for her should she fall overboard into the icy waters. Here was a region where recklessness could very easily mean death; and where life itself was suddenly revealed utterly beyond her ken. But there was no turning back. Every hour the *Charon* bore her farther from her home.

Mrs. Hardenworth, whose habits of thought were more firmly established, was only made irritable and petulant by the new surroundings. Never good company except under the stimulation of some social gathering, she was rapidly becoming something of a problem to Ned and Lenore. She was irritable with the crew, on the constant verge of insult to Bess, forecasting disaster for the entire expedition. Unlike Bess, she had never been disciplined to meet hardship and danger; her only resource was guile and her only courage was recklessness; so now she tried to overcome her inner fears with a more reckless attitude toward life. It was no longer necessary for Ned and Lenore to seek the shelter of the pilot house for their third whisky-and-soda. She was only too glad to take it with them. More than once the dinner hour found her glassy-eyed and almost hysterical, only a border removed from actual drunkenness. Never possessing any true moral strength or real good breeding, a certain abandon began to appear in her speech. And they had not yet rounded the Alaskan Peninsula into Bering Sea.

To Ned, the long north and westward journey had been even more a revelation. He also knew the fear, the disillusionment, a swift sense of weakness when before he had been perfectly sure in his own strength; but there was also a more complex reaction,—one that he could not analyze or put into words. He couldn't call it happiness. It wasn't that, unless the mood that follows the hearing of wonderful music is also happiness. Perhaps that was the best comparison: the passion he felt was something like the response made to great music. There had been times at the opera, when all conditions were exactly favorable, that he had felt the same, and once when he had heard Fritz Kreisler play Handel's "Largo." It was a strange reaching and groping, rather than happiness. It was a stir and thrill that touched the most secret chords of his being.

He felt it most at night when the great, white northern stars wheeled through the heavens. It was good to see them undulled by smoke; they touched some side of him that had never been stirred into life before. At such times the sea was lost in mystery.

The truth was that Ned, by the will of the Red Gods, was perceiving something of the real spirit of the North. A sensitive man to start with, he caught something of its mystery and wonder of which, as yet, Lenore had no glimpse. And the result was to bring him to the verge of a far-reaching discovery: that of his own weakness.

He had never admitted weakness before. He had always been so sure of himself, so complacent, so self-sufficient. But curiously these things were dying within him. He found himself doubting, for the first time, the success of this northern adventure. Could he cope with the realities that were beginning to press upon him? Would not this northern wilderness show him up as the weakling he was?

For the first time in his life Ned Cornet knew what realism was. He supposed, in his city life, that he had been a realist: instead he had only been a sophist and a mocker in an environment that was never real from dawn to darkness. He had read books that he had acclaimed among his young friends as masterpieces of realism—usually works whose theme and purpose seemed to be a bald-faced portrayal of sex—but now he saw that their very premise was one of falsehood. Here were the true realities,—unconquerable seas and starry skies and winds from off the waste places.

Unlike Lenore, Ned's regrets were not that he had ever launched forth upon the venture. Rather he found himself regretting that he was not better fitted to contend with it. Perhaps, after all, his father had been right and he had been wrong. For the first time in his life Ned felt the need of greater strength, of stronger sinews.

What if his father had told the truth, and that strict trials awaited him here. It was no longer easy to disbelieve him. Almost any disaster could fall upon him here, in these wastes of sunlit water, in the very shadow of polar ice. The sun itself had lost its warmth. It slanted down upon them from far to the south, and it seemed to be beguiling them, with its golden beauty on the waters, into some deadly trap that had been set for them still farther north. It left Ned some way apprehensive and dismayed. He wished he hadn't been so sure of himself, that he had taken greater pains, in his wasted years, to harden and train himself. Perhaps he was to be weighed in the balance, and it was increasingly hard to believe that he would not be found wanting.

In such a mood he recalled his father's words regarding that dread realm of test and trial that lay somewhere beyond the world: "some bitter, dreadful training camp for those that leave this world unfitted to go on to a higher, better world." He had scorned the thought at first, but now he could hardly get it out of his mind. It suggested some sort of an analogy with his present



condition. These empty seas were playing tricks on his imagination; he could conceive that the journey of which his father had spoken might not be so greatly different than this. There would be the same desolation, the same nearness of the stars, the emptiness and mystery, the same sense of gathering, impending trial and stress. The name of the craft was the *Charon*! The thought chilled him and dismayed him.

For all his boasted realism, Ned Cornet had never got away from superstition. Man is still not far distant from the Cave and the Squatting Place, and superstition is a specter from out the dead centuries that haunts all his days. The coincidence that their craft, plying through these deathly waters, should bear such a name as the *Charon* suddenly suggested a dark possibility to Ned. All at once this man, heretofore so sure, so self-sufficient, so incredulous of anything except his own continued glory and happiness and life, was face to face with the first fear—the simple, primitive fear of death.

Was that his fate at the journey's end? Not mere trial, mere hardship and stress and adventure, but uncompromising death! Was he experiencing a premonition? Was that training camp soon to be a reality, as terribly real as these cold seas and this sky of stars, instead of a mere figment of an old man's childish fancy?

The thought troubled and haunted him, but it proved to be the best possible influence for the man himself. For the first time in his life Ned Cornet was awake. He had been dreaming before: for the first time he had wakened to *life*. Fear, disaster, the dreadful omnipotence of fate were no longer empty words to him: they were stern and immutable realities. He knew what the wolf knows, when he howls to the winter moon from the snow-swept ridge: that he was a child in the hands of Powers so vast and awful that the sublimest human thought could not even reach to them! He could see, dimly as yet but unmistakably, the shadow of that travail that haunts men's days from the beginning to the end.

His father's blood, and in some degree his father's wisdom, was beginning to manifest itself in him. It was only a whispered voice as yet, wholly to be disregarded in the face of too great temptation, yet nevertheless it was the finest and most hopeful thing in his life. And it came particularly clear one still, mysterious night, shortly after the dinner hour, as he faced the North from the deck of the *Charon*.

The schooner's auxiliary engines had pumped her through Unimak Pass by now, the passage between Unimak and Akun Islands, and now she had launched forth into that wide, western portal of the Arctic,—Bering Sea.

Still the wonderful succession of bright days had endured, no less than marvelous, along the mist-swept southern shore of the peninsula, but now the brisk, salty wind from the northwest indicated an impending weather change. It had been a remarkably clear and windless day, and the night that had come down, so swiftly and so soon, was of strange and stirring beauty. The stars had an incredible luster; the sea itself was of an unnamed purple, marvelously deep,—such a color as scientists might find lying beyond the spectrum. And Ned's eyes, to-night, were not dulled by the effects of strong drink.

For some reason that he himself could not satisfactorily explain he hadn't partaken of his usual afternoon whiskies-and-sodas. He simply wasn't in a drinking mood, steadfastly refusing to partake. Lenore, though she had never made it a point to encourage Ned's drinking habits, could not help but regard the refusal as in some way a slight to herself, and was correspondingly downcast and irritable. Wholly out of sorts, she had let him go to the deck alone.

The night's beauty swept him, touching some realm of his spirit deep and apart from his mere love of pleasing visual image. His imagination was keenly alive, and he had a distinct feeling that the North had a surprise in store for him to-night. Some stress and glory was impending: what he did not know.

Facing over the bow he suddenly perceived a faint silver radiance close to the horizon. His first impression was that the boat had taken a south-easterly course, and this argent gleam was merely the banner of the rising moon. Immediately he knew better: except by the absolute disruption of cosmic law, the moon could not rise for at least four hours. He knew of no coast light anywhere in the region, and it was hard to believe that he had caught the far-off glimmer of a ship's light. Seemingly such followers of the sea had been left far behind them.

But as he watched the light grew. His own pulse quickened. And presently a radiant streamer burst straight upward like a rocket, fluttered a moment, and died away.

A strange thrill and stir moved through the intricacy of his nerves. He knew now what this light portended; it was known to every wayfarer in the North, yet the keenest excitement took hold of him. It moved him more than any painted art had ever done, more than any wonderful maze of color and light that a master stage director could effect. The streamer shot up again, more brightly colored now, and then a great ball of fire rolled into the sky,

exploded into a thousand flying fragments, and left a sea of every hue in the spectrum in its wake.

“The Northern Lights!” he told himself. A quiver of exultation passed over him.

There could be no mistake. This was the radiance, the glory that the Red Gods reserve for those who seek the far northern trails. Ever the display increased in wonder and beauty. The streamers were whisking in all directions now, meeting with the effect of collision in the dome of the sky, remaining there to shiver and gleam with incredible beauty; the surging waves of light spread ever farther until, at times, the sky was a fluttering canopy of radiance.

He thought of calling Lenore and Mrs. Hardenworth; but some way the idea slipped out of his mind. In a moment he was too deep in his own mood even to remember that they existed. But not only his exterior world faded from his consciousness. For the moment he forgot *himself*; and with it the old self-love and self-conceit that had pervaded every moment of his past life, colored all his views, and shaped the ends of his destiny. All that was left was that incredible sky and its weird, reflected glamor in the sea.

This was *Aurora Borealis*, never to be known, in its full glory, to those that shun the silent spaces of the North. Suddenly he felt glad that he was here. The moment, by measure of some queer balance beyond his sight, was worth all the rest of his past life put together. Great trials might lie ahead, temptations might tear him down, his own weakness and folly of the past might lay him low in some woeful disaster of the future; yet he was glad that he had come! It was the most profound, the most far-reaching moment of his life.

Always he had lived close to and bound up in a man-made civilization. In his heart he had worshipped it, rather than the urge and the inspiration that had made it possible: he had always judged the Thing rather than the Source. But for the first time in his life he was close to nature’s heart. He had seen a glory, at nature’s whim, that transcended the most glorious work of man ever beheld in his native city. He was closer to redemption than at any time in his life.

A few feet distant on the deck Bess’s eyes turned from the miracle in the skies to watch the slowly growing light in Ned Cornet’s face. It was well enough for him to find his inspiration in the majesty of nature. Bess was a woman, and that meant that man that is born of woman was her work and her being. She turned her eyes from God to behold this man.

And it was well for her that Lenore was not near enough to see her face in the wan, ghostly radiance of the Northern Lights. Her woman's intuition would have been quick to lay bare the secret of the girl's wildly leaping heart. Bess's eyes were suddenly lustrous with a light no less wonderful than that which played in glory in the sky. Her face was swiftly unutterably beautiful in its tenderness and longing.

And had she not fought against this very thing? She had not dreamed for a moment but that she had conquered and shut away the appeal that this man made to her heart. It would have been easy enough to conquer if he had only remained what he had been,—selfish, reckless, self-loving, inured to his tawdry philosophy of life. But to-night a new strength had come into his face. Perhaps it would be gone to-morrow, but to-night his manhood had come to him. And she couldn't resist it. It swept her heart as the wind sweeps a sea-bird through the sky.

## VIII

BEFORE ever that long night was done, clouds had overswept the sky and a cold rain was beating upon the sea. It swept against the ports of the little craft and brought troubled dreams to Lenore and Mrs. Hardenworth. Bess, who knew life better than these two, to whom the whole journey had been a joyous adventure, did not wholly escape a feeling of uneasiness and dismay. At this latitude and season the weather was little to be trusted.

The drizzle changed to snow that lay white on the deck and hissed softly in the water. As yet, however, it was nothing to fear. Snow was common in these latitudes in September. The sudden break of winter might lead to really serious consequences—perhaps the unpleasant prospect of being ice-bound in some island harbor—but in all probability real winter was still several weeks distant. The scene looked wintry enough to Lenore and Ned, however. The air and the sky and the sea seemed choked with snow.

Lenore found herself wishing she had not been so contemptuous of the North. Perhaps it would have been better not to have taken so many worn-out dresses to trade, but to have filled her chests with woolens and furs. Even in her big coat she couldn't stay warm on the deck. The wind was icy out of the Arctic seas.

Once more the craft plied among islands; but now that they had passed into Bering Sea the character of the land had changed. These were not the dull-green, wooded isles met with on first entering Alaskan waters. Wild and inhospitable though the latter had seemed, they were fairy bowers compared to these. Nor did the mossy mainland continue to show a marvelous beryl green through mist.

In the first place, even the prevailing color scheme had undergone an ominous change from blue to gray. The sun kissed the sea no more: under the sifting snow it stretched infinitely bleak and forbidding. Gray were the clouds in the sky that had been the purest, most serene blue. And now even the islands had lost their varied tints.

Evergreen forests almost always look blue at a distance,—bluish-green when the sun is bright, bluish-black under clouds. But these voyagers saw, with a dim, haunting dread, that the forests mostly had been left far behind them. The islands they passed now were no longer heavily wooded; only a few of the sheltered valleys and the south slopes of the hills bore thickets of

stunted aspen, birch, and Sitka spruce. Mostly these too were gray, gray as granite, merely a different shade of gray from that of the sea from which they rose.

The truth was that these islands were far-scattered fragments of the Barrens, those great wastes of moss and tundra between the timber belt and the eternal ice cap of the pole. Largely treeless, wind-swept, mostly unpeopled except for a few furtive creatures of the wild, they seemed no part of the world that Ned and Lenore had previously known. They were all so gray, so bleak, swept with an unearthly sadness, silent except for the weary beat of waves upon their craggy shores.

Mostly the islands were mere snow-swept mountains protruding above the waters, at a distance seemingly as gray as the rest of the toneless landscape. Only the less mountainous of the islands had human occupants, and these were in small, far-scattered Indian villages. Seemingly they had reached the dim, gray limits of the world: surely they must soon turn back. Indeed, these were the Skopins, the group that comprised Ned's first trading ground, and Muchinoff Island, the northern-most land in the group and the point selected as his first stopping place, from which he would begin the long homeward journey from island to island, was only a few days' journey beyond.

Yet they sped northward a while more, nothing changing except day and night. Indeed, day and night itself seemed no longer the unvarying reality that it used to be. Between the dark clouds and the dark sea, night never seemed to go completely away. Day after day they caught no glimpse of the sun.

The islands were seen but dimly through mist, as might the outlying shores of a Twilight Land, a place where souls might come but never living men,—a gray and eerie training camp like that of which Ned's father had spoken. It was all real enough, truly, remorselessly real; yet Ned couldn't escape from the superstitious fear he had known at first. The gray, desolate character of the islands seemed to bear it out. It grew on him, rather than lessened.

Yet his standards were changing. Things that had not concerned him a few weeks before mattered terribly now. For instance, the bareness of the islands oppressed him, and he found himself longing for the sight of trees. Just trees,—bending in the wind, shaking off their leaves in the fall. They hadn't mattered before: he had regarded them as mere ornaments that nature supplied for lawns and parks, if indeed he had ever consciously regarded them at all; but now they were ever so much more important than a hundred

things that had previously seemed absolutely essential to his life and happiness. Had his thought reached further, he could have understood, now, the joy of Columbus—journeying in waters scarcely less known than these—at the sight of the floating branch; or the exultation in the Ark when the dove returned with its sprig of greenery.

Lately the ship had taken a northeastern turn, following the island chain, and the cloudy, windy, rainy days found them not far from the mainland, in a region that would be wholly ice-bound in a few weeks more. And when they were still a full day from their turning point, Knutsen sought out Ned on the deck.

“Mr. Cornet, do you know where we’re getting?” he asked quietly.

Unconsciously startled by his tone, Ned whirled toward him. “I don’t know these waters,” he replied. “I suppose we’re approaching Muchinoff Island.”

“Quite a sail between here and der, yet. Mr. Cornet, we’re getting into de most unknown and untraveled waters in all dis part of the Nort’. De boats to Nome go way outside here, and de trut’ is I’m way out of my old haunts. I’m traveling by chart only; neither me nor McNab, nor very many oder people know very much the waterways between dese islands. You’re up here to trade for furs, and you haven’t got all winter. You know dat dese waters here, shut off from the currents, are going to be tighter dan a drum before very many weeks. Why don’t you make your destination Tzar Island, and start back from dere?”

“You think it’s really dangerous?”

“Not really dangerous, maybe, but mighty awkward if anyt’ing should go wrong wit’ de old brig. You understan’ dat not one out of four of dese little islands is inhabited. Some of de larger islands have only a scattered village or two; some of ’em haven’t a living human being. Der’s plenty and plenty of islands not even named in dis chart, and I’d hate to hit the reefs of one after dark! Der’s no one to send S. O. S. calls to, in case of trouble, even if we had wireless. De only boat I know dat works carefully through dis country is anot’er trader, the *Intrepid*—and dat won’t be along till spring. Mr. Cornet, it’s best for you to know dat you’re in one of the most uninhabited and barren countries——”

“And the most dreary and generally damnable,” Ned agreed with enthusiasm. “Why didn’t you tell me this before? Muchinoff Island isn’t anything in my young life. I picked it out as a starting point simply because it was the farthest north of the Skopins, but since there seems to be plenty of territory——”

“It will make you hump some to cover all de good territory now, including some of the best of de Aleuts, and get around Alaskan Peninsula before winter sets in, in earnest. Tzar Island is yust to our nort’east. Shall I head toward it?”

“How long will it take——”

“Depends on de wind. Dis is a ticklish stretch of water in here, shallow in spots, but safe enough, I guess. I think we can skim along and make it in long before dawn.”

“Then do it!” Ned’s face suddenly brightened. “The sooner I can shake my legs on shore, the better I’ll like it.”

The seaman left him, and for a moment Ned stood almost drunk with exultation on the deck. Even now they were nearing the journey’s end. A few hours more, and they could turn back from this dreary, accursed wintry sea,—this gray, unpeopled desolation that had chilled his heart. It was true that the long journey home, broken by many stops, still lay before, but at least he would face the south! Once on his native shores, forever out of this twilight land and away from its voice of reproach, he could be content with his old standards, regain his old self-confidence. He could take up his old life where he had left it, forgetting these desolate wastes as he would a dream.

He was a fool ever to regret his wasted days! He laughed at himself for ever giving an instant’s thought to his father’s doleful words. The worst of the journey was over, they had only to go back the way they had come; and his puzzling sense of weakness, his premonition of disaster, most of all his superstitious fear of death had been the veriest nonsense. His imagination had simply got out of bounds.

The old *Charon*! He had been afraid of her name. Seemingly he had forgotten, for the time, that he was a man of the twentieth century, the product of the most wonderful civilization the world had ever seen. He had been frightened by old bogeys, maudlin with time-worn sentiments. And now his old egotism had returned to him, seemingly unshaken.

Presently he turned, made his way into the hold, and opened one of a pile of iron-bound wooden cases. When he returned to the dining saloon he carried a dark bottle in each hand.

“All hands celebrate to-night!” he cried. “We’re going to go home!”

Out of the sea the wind seemed to answer him. It swept by, laughing.



## IX

NED'S news was received with the keenest delight by Lenore and Mrs. Hardenworth. The latter regained her lost amiability with promptness. Lenore's reaction was not dissimilar from Ned's; in her native city she could come into her own again.

The bottles were greeted with shouts of delight. Ned went immediately to the sideboard and procured half a dozen glasses.

"All hands partake to-night," he explained. "It's going to be a *real* party."

He mixed whiskies-and-sodas for Lenore and Mrs. Hardenworth; then started to make the rounds of the crew with a bottle and glasses. He did not, however, waste time offering any to Bess. The latter had already evinced an innate fear of it, wholly apart from sentimentality and nonsense. She had lived in a circle and environment where strong drink had not been merely a thing to jest over and sing songs about, to drink lightly and receive therefrom pleasant exhilaration; but where it was a living demon, haunting and shadowing every hour. She had no false sophistication—her knowledge of life was all too real—and she had no desire to toy with poison and play with fire. Both were realities to her. She knew that they had blasted life on life, all as sturdy and seemingly as invincible as her own. Her abstinence was not a moral issue with her. It was simply that she knew here was a foe that met men in their pleasant hours, greeted them in friendly ways, and then, by insidious, slow attack, cast them down and left them miserably to die; and she was simply afraid for her life of it. Ned, on the other hand, would have laughed at the thought of its ever mastering him. He felt himself immune from the tragedies that had afflicted other men. It was part of the conceit of his generation.

But Ned found plenty of customers for his whisky. McNab, at the wheel, wished him happy days over two fingers of straight liquor in the glass, and Knutsen, his pale eyes gleaming, poured himself a staggering portion. "Go ahead," Ned encouraged him when the seaman apologized for his greediness. "The sky's the limit to-night." And Forest in the engine room, and Julius in the kitchen absorbed a man's-size drink with right good will.

Ned was able to make the rounds again before the call for dinner; and the attitude of his guests was changed in but one instance. McNab seemed to

be measuring his liquor with exceeding care. He was a man who knew his own limits, and he apparently did not intend to overstep them. He took a small drink, but Knutsen, his superior, consumed as big a portion as before.

It was an elated, spirited trio that sat down at the little table in the saloon. Not one of them could ever remember a happier mood. Julius served the dinner with a flourish; and they had only laughter when a sudden lurch of the craft slid the sugar bowl off the table to the floor.

“Hello, the ship’s drunk too,” Ned commented gaily.

They were really in too glad a mood to see anything but sport in the suddenly rocking table. The truth was that the wind had suddenly sprung into a brisk gale, rolling heavy seas and bobbing the little craft about like a cork. The three screamed with laughter, holding fast to their slipping chairs, and Lenore rescued the bottle that was tipping precariously on the buffet.

“We’d better have a little extra one,” she told them. “I’ll be seasick if we don’t.”

She had to speak rather loudly to make herself heard. The wind was no longer laughing lightly and happily at their port bows. It had suddenly burst into a frantic roar, swelling to the proportions of a thunder clap and dying away on a long, weird wail that filled the sky and the sea. Instantly it burst forth loudly again, and the snow whipped against the glass of the ports.

Ned stood up, braced himself, and immediately poured the drinks. But it was not only to save Lenore an attack of sea-sickness. He was also swayed by the fact that the heat of the room seemed to be swiftly escaping. Fortunately, there was still warmth in plenty in the bottle, so he need not be depressed by a mere fall of temperature. He glanced about the room, rather suspecting that one of the ports had been left open. The saloon, however, was as tightly closed as was possible for it to be.

He turned at once, made his way through the gale that swept the deck, and procured Lenore’s and Mrs. Hardenworth’s heaviest coats. He noticed as he passed that Bess had sought refuge in the engine room. Ned waved to her then returned to his guests.

The room was already noticeably colder, not so much from the drop in temperature—a thermometer would have still registered above freezing—as from the chilling, penetrating quality of the wind that forced an entrance as if through the ship’s seams. There seemed no pause, now, between the mighty, roaring gusts. The long, weird wail they had heard at first was only an overtone, in some way oppressive to the imagination. The rattle at the window was loud for the soft sweep of snow. Ned saw why in a moment: the snow had changed to sleet.

There was no opportunity to make comment before Knutsen lurched into the room. "It's tough, isn't it?" he commented. "Mr. Cornet, I want another shot of dat stuff before I take de wheel."

Ned, not uninfluenced by his cups, extended the bottle with a roar of laughter. "You know what's good for you," he commented. "Where's McNab? Let him have one too."

"He's still at de wheel, but I don't think he'd care for one. He's a funny old wolf, at times. Mrs. Hardenworth, how do you like dis weat'er?"

"I don't like it very well." She held fast to the slipping table. "Of course, you'd tell us if there was any danger——"

"Not a bit of danger. Yust a squall. Dis isn't rough—you ought to see what it would be outside dis chain of islands. But it's mighty chilly." He poured the stiff drink down his great throat, then buttoned his coat tight.

Ned, for a moment secretly appalled by the storm, felt his old recklessness returning. The captain said it was only a squall,—and were they not soon to turn south? In fact, their direction now was no longer north, but rather in an easterly direction toward Tzar Island. He was warm now, glowing; the rocking of the boat only increased his exhilaration.

"There's only three or four shots left in this bottle," he said, holding up the second of the two quarts he had taken from the case. "You'd better have one more with us before you go. A man burns up lots of whisky without hurting him any on a night like this. Then take the bottle in with you to keep you warm at the wheel."

Knutsen needed no second urging. He was of a race that yields easily to drink, and he wanted to conquer the last, least little whisper of his fear of the night and the storm. He drank once more, pocketed the bottle, then made his way to the pilot house.

"You're not going to try to ride her through?" McNab asked, as he yielded the wheel.

"Of course. You're not afraid of a little flurry like dis."

His voice gave no sign of the four powerful drinks he had consumed. A tough man physically, the truth was he was still a long way from actual drunkenness. But even a small amount of liquor had a distressing effect upon him,—a particularly unfortunate effect for one who habitually has the lives of other human beings in his charge. He always lost the fine edge of his caution. With drink upon him, he was willing to take a chance.

McNab stared into his glittering eyes, and for a moment his lips were tightly compressed. "This isn't a little flurry," he answered at last coldly.

“It’s a young gale, and God knows what it will be by morning. You know and I know we shouldn’t attempt things here that we can do with safety in waters we’re familiar with. Right now we can run into the lea of Ivan Island and find a harbor. There’s a good one just south of the point.”

“We’re not going to run into Ivan Island. I want to feel dry land. We’re going to head on toward Tzar Island.”

“You run a little more of that bottle down your neck and you’ll be heading us into hell. Listen, Cap’n.” McNab paused, deeply troubled. “You let me take the wheel, and you go in and celebrate with the party. You won’t do any damage then.”

“And you get back to your engine and mind your own business.” Little angry points of light shot into Knutsen’s eyes. “And if you see Cornet, tell him to bring up another bottle. Dis one’s almost empty.”

McNab turned to the door, where for a moment he stood listening to the wild raging of the wind. Then he climbed down into the engine room.

There was nothing in his face, as he entered, to reveal the paths of his thought. He was wholly casual, wholly commonplace, seemingly not in the least alarmed. He stepped to Bess’s side, half smiling.

“I wonder if you can help me?” he asked.

The girl stood up, a straight, athletic figure at his side. “I’ll try, of course.”

“It depends—have you any influence with young Cornet?”

Bess slowly shook her head. “I’m afraid I can’t help you,” she told him, very gravely. “I have no influence with him at all. What is it you wanted me to do?”

“I wanted you to tell him to put up the booze. Particularly to keep the captain from getting any more. This is a bum night. It’s against the rules of the sea to scare passengers, but somehow, I figure you’re the stuff that can stand it and maybe hold out. This isn’t a night to have a shipload of drunks. There may be some tight places before the morning.

“There’s only one way.” The girl’s lips were close to his ear, else he couldn’t have heard in the roar of the storm and the flapping of the sails. “Listen, McNab. How much has he got in the dining saloon?”

“None, now, I don’t think. He only brought up two bottles, and Knutsen’s got one of ’em—not much in it, though. They must have emptied the other.”

“Then we’re all clear.” She suddenly straightened, a look of unswervable intent in her face. “McNab, it’s better to make some one—violently mad at

you—isn't it, if maybe you can save him from trouble? If you want to see him get ahead and make a success of a big venture—it isn't wrong, is it, to do something against his will that you know is right?"

McNab looked at her as before now he had looked at strong men with whom he had stood the watch. "What are you gettin' at?"

His voice was gruff, but it didn't offend her. She felt that they were on common ground.

"If may be human lives are the stake, a person can't stand by for one man's anger," she went on.

"Human lives are the first consideration," the man answered. "That's the rule of the sea. Most sea rules are good rules—built on sense—all except the one that you can't take the wheel away from a drunken captain. What's your idea?"

"You know as well as I do. I promised his father before I left that I'd look after Ned. He was in earnest—and Ned needs looking after now if he ever did. Mr. Cornet won't blame me, either. Show me how to get down in the hold."

McNab suddenly chuckled and patted her on the back with rough familiarity, yet with fervent companionship. "You've got the stuff," he said. "But you can't lift them alone. I'm with you till the last dog is hung."

## X

ON the exposed deck the storm met the two adventurers with a yell. For the first time Bess knew its full fury, as the wind buffeted her, and the sleet swept like fine shot into her face. They clung to the railing, then fought their way to the hold.

Hidden by the darkness and the sleet, no one saw them carry up the heavy liquor cases and drop them into the sea. The noise of the storm concealed the little sound they made. Finally only two bottles remained, the last of a broken case.

“You take one of those and ditch it in your room,” McNab advised. “I’ll keep the other. There might come a time when we’ll find real need for ’em—as a stimulant for some one who is freezing.”

“Take care of both of them,” Bess urged. “I’m not sure I could keep mine, if any one asked for it.”

“I don’t know about that. I believe I’d bet on you. And now it’s done—forget about it.”

Soon they crept back along the deck, McNab to his work, Bess to her stateroom. The latter ignited the lantern that served to light her room, and for a moment stood staring into the little mirror that hung above her washstand. She hadn’t escaped the fear of the night and the storm and of the bold deed she had just done. Her deep, blue eyes were wide, her face was pale, the childlike appeal Ned had noticed long ago was more pronounced than ever. Presently she sat down to await developments.

They were not long in coming. She and McNab had all but encountered Ned on his way to the hold. His bottles were empty, and the desire for strong drink had not left him yet. In the darkness under the deck he groped blindly for his cases.

They seemed to evade him. Breathing hard, he sought a match, scratching it against the wall. Then he stared in dumb and incredulous astonishment.

His stock of liquor was gone. Not even the cases were left. Thinking that perhaps some shift in the position of the stores had concealed them, he made a moment’s frantic search through the hold. Then, raging like a child, and in imminent danger of slipping on the perilous deck, he rushed to the pilot house.

“Captain, do you know what became of my liquors?” he demanded. “I can’t find them in the hold.”

The binnacle light revealed the frenzy and desperation on his drawn face; the mouth was no longer smiling its crooked, boyish smile. Knutsen glanced at him once, then turned his eyes once more over his wheel. For the moment he did not seem to be aware of Ned’s presence. He made, however, one significant motion: his brown hand reached out to the bottle beside him, in which perhaps two good drinks remained, and softly set it among the shadows at his feet.

“I say!” Ned urged. “I tell you my liquor’s gone!”

The captain seemed to be studying the yellow path that his searchlight cut in the darkness. The waves were white-capped and raging; the sleet swept out of the gloom, gleamed a moment in the yellow radiance, then sped on into the night.

“I heard you,” Knutsen answered slowly. “I was thinking about it. I haven’t any idea who took it—if he’s still got it, I’ll see that he gives it back. It was a dirty trick——”

“You don’t know, then, anything about it?” As he waited, Ned got the unmistakable idea that the captain neither knew nor really cared. He was more interested in retaining the two remaining drinks in his own bottle than in helping Ned regain his lost cases. These two were enough for him. It was wholly in keeping with that strange psychology of drunkards that he should have no further cares.

“Of course I don’t know anything about ’em—but I’ll help you investigate in the morning,” he answered. “I’m very sorry, Mr. Cornet—that it should happen aboard my ship——”

“To hell with your ship! I’m going to investigate to-night.”

Ned started out, but he halted in the doorway, arrested by a sudden suspicion. Presently he whirled and made his way to Bess’s stateroom.

He knocked sharply on the door. Bess opened it wide. Then for a long second he stared into her deep-blue, appealing eyes.

“I suppose you did it?” he demanded.

She nodded. “I did it—to save you—from yourself. Not to mention perhaps saving the ship as well.”

His lip drew up in scorn. Angry almost to the verge of childish tears, he could not at first trust himself to speak. “You’ve certainly taken things into your own hands,” he told her bitterly. His wrath gathered, breaking from him

at last in a flood. "You ill-bred prude, I wish I could never lay eyes on you again!"

His scornful eyes saw the pain well into her face. Evidently he had gone the limit: he couldn't have hurt her worse with a blow of his hand. Touched a little in spite of himself, he began to feel the first prick of remorse. Perhaps it had done no good to speak so cruelly. Certainly the whiskies could not be regained. Probably the fool thought she was acting for his own good. He turned, slammed the door, and strode back to the dining saloon.

It was by far the most bitter moment in Bess's life. She had done right, but her payment was a curse from the man she had hoped to serve. All her castles had fallen: her dreams had broken like the bubbles they were. This was the answer to the calling in her heart and the longing in her soul,—the spoken wish that she might pass from his sight forever.

For the last few days, since they had entered this strange, snowy, twilight region, she had had dreams such as she had never dared admit into her heart before. Anything could happen up here. No wonder was too great. It was the kind of place where men found themselves, where all things were in proper balance, and false standards fell away. Some way, she had been on the lookout for a miracle. But the things which had been proven false, which could not live in this bitter world of realities, were her own dreams! They had been the only things that had died. She had been a fool to hope that here, at the wintry edge of the world, she might find the happiness she had missed in her native city. The world was with her yet, crushing her hopes as its rocky crust crushes the fallen nestling before it learns to fly!

But at his post McNab had already forgotten the episode of the liquor cases. Indeed, he had forgotten many other matters of much greater moment. At the present his mind was wholly occupied by two stern realities,—one of them being that the storm still raged in unabated fury, and the other that a drunken captain was driving his craft at a breakneck speed over practically uncharted waters.

The danger lay not only in the fact that Knutsen had disregarded McNab's good advice to seek shelter in one of the island harbors. Even now he was disregarding the way of comparative safety, was not pausing to take soundings, but was racing along before the wind instead of heading into it with the power of the auxiliary engines. With wind and wave hurling her forward, there would be no chance to turn back or avoid any island reef that might suddenly loom in their path. Knutsen was trusting to his sea gods over waters he had never sailed before, torn by storms and lighted only by a feeble searchlight.



Once more McNab lifted his head through the hatch into the pilot house; and for long seconds he studied intently the flushed face over the wheel. They hadn't really helped matters, so far as Knutsen was concerned, by throwing the cases overboard. Seemingly his watch would be over before the fumes of the liquor he had already consumed died in his brain. At present he was in its full flush: wholly reckless, obstinate, uncertain of temper. Was there any possible good in appealing to him further?

"What now?" Knutsen asked gruffly.

"You've forgotten all the seamanship you ever knew," McNab returned angrily. "There's no hurry about reaching Tzar Island. And you're risking every body's life on board, sailing the way you are."

"Are you captain of dis boat?" Knutsen demanded angrily.

"No, but——"

"Den get out of here. I know exactly what I'm doing. You're just as safe as——"

But it came about that Captain Knutsen did not finish the sentence. McNab was never to find out, from Knutsen's lips, just how safe he was. All at once he cried sharply in warning.

Before ever Knutsen heard that sharp cry, he knew what lay ahead. Dulled though his vision was, slow the processes of his brain, he saw that curious ridge of white foam in front,—an inoffensive-looking trail of white across their bows. At the same instant his keen ears caught a new sound, one that was only half-revealed in the roar and beat of the storm.

There was not the pause of an instant before his great, muscular arms made response. At the same instant Forest tried to apply the power of his engines in obedience to the sharp gong from above. And then both Knutsen and McNab braced themselves for the shock they knew would come.

The craft seemed to leap in the water, shuddered like a living thing, and the swath of the searchlight described a long arc into the sleet and the storm. It may have been that Knutsen shouted again—a meaningless sound that was lost quickly in the wind—but for seconds that seemed to drag into interminable centuries he sat absolutely without outward sign of motion. His great hands clutched his wheel, the muscles were set and bunched, but it was as if the man had died and was frozen rigid in an instant of incredible tension. His face utterly without expression, Forest crouched beside his engines.

There was nothing that either of them could do. The waves and wind were a power no man could stay. All their efforts were as useless as

Knutsen's shout; already the little ship was in the remorseless grasp of a great billow that was hurling her toward the ridge of white foam in front. For another instant she seemed to hang suspended, as if suddenly taken wing, and then there was a sheer drop, a sense of falling out of the world. A queer ripping, tearing sound, not loud at all, not half so terrifying as the bluster of the wind, reached them from the hold.

Cold sober, Knutsen turned in his place and gonged down certain orders to Forest. In scarcely a moment, it seemed, they were pulling the battens from the two little lifeboats on the deck.

## XI

KNUTSEN'S brain was entirely clear and sure as he gave his orders on the deck. His hand was steady as iron. His failure to master himself had brought disaster, but he knew how to master a ship at a time like this. From the instant the *Charon* had struck the reef, he was the power upon that storm-swept deck, and whatever hope McNab had lay in him.

In the lantern light, blasted by the wind and in the midst of the surging waves, the scene had little semblance to reality. It was a mad dream from first to last, never to be clearly remembered by the survivors: a queer, confused jumble of vivid images that could never be straightened out. The head-light still threw its glare into the sleet-filled night. The biting, chill wind swept over the deck and into the darkness. The ship settled down like a leaden weight.

Almost at once the four passengers were on deck, waiting to take their meager chance in the lifeboats. The stress, the raging elements, those angry seas that ever leaped higher and nearer, as if coveting their mortal lives, most of all the terror such as had never previously touched them, affected no two of them alike. Of the three women, Bess alone moved forward, out of the shelter of the cabin, to be of what aid she could. Her drawn, white face was oddly childlike in the lantern light. Mrs. Hardenworth had been stricken and silenced by the nearing visage of death; Lenore, almost unconscious with terror, made strangling, sobbing sounds that the wind carried away. And in this moment of infinite travail Ned Cornet felt his manhood stirring within him.

Perhaps it was merely instinct. It is true that men of the most abandoned kind often show startling courage and nobility in a crisis. The reason is simply that the innate virtue of the race, a light and a glory that were implanted in the soul when the body was made in the image of its Maker, comes to the surface and supersedes the base impulses of degeneracy. There is no uneven distribution of that virtue: it is as much a part of man as his hands or his skull; and the difference between one man and another lies only in the degree in which it is developed and made manifest and put in control over the daily life. Perhaps the strength that rose in Ned was merely the assertion of an inner manhood, wholly stripped of the traits that made him the individual he was,—nothing that would endure, nothing that portended a change and growth of character. But at least the best and strongest side of

him was in the ascendancy to-night. The danger left him cool rather than cost him his self-control. The seeming imminence of death steadied him and nerved him.

Bess saw him under the lantern light, and he was not the man who had cursed her at the door of her room. For the moment all things were forgotten except this. Likely the thing he had spoken would come true, now. Perhaps he would get his wish. For one interminable instant in which her heart halted in her breast—as in death—sea and wind and storm ceased to matter.

Ned came up, and Knutsen's cold gaze leaped over his face. "Help me here," he commanded. "McNab, you help Forest and Julius launch the larger boat."

There was not much launching to do. Waves were already bursting over the deck. Knutsen turned once more.

"We want four people in each boat," he directed sharply. "Cornet, you and I and Miss Hardenworth in this one. The other girl will have to get in here too. The other boat's slightly larger—Mrs. Hardenworth, get in with McNab, Forest, and Julius."

Bess shook herself with difficulty from her reverie. This was no time for personal issues, to hearken to the voices of her inmost heart when the captain was shouting through the storm. The only issues remaining now were those of deliverance or disaster, life or death. Even now the white hands of the waves were stretching toward her. Yet this terrible reality did not hold her as it should. Instead, her thoughts still centered upon Ned: the danger was always Ned's instead of her own; it was Ned's life that was suspended by a thread above the abyss. It was hard to remember herself: the instinct of self-preservation was not even now in the ascendancy.

There is a blasting and primitive terror in any great convulsion of the elements. These are man's one reality, the eternal constant in which he plights his faith in a world of bewildering change: the air of heaven, the sky of stars, the unutterable expanse of sea. His spirit can not endure to see them in tumult, broken forth from the restraint of law. Such sights recall from the germ-plasm those first almighty terrors that were the title page of conscious life; and they disrupt quickly the mastery that mind, in a thousand-thousand years, has gained over instinct. Yet for herself Bess was carried out from and beyond the terror of the storm. She had almost forgotten it: it seemed already part of the natural system in which she moved. She was scarcely aware that the captain had shouted to make himself heard; that she must needs shout to answer him: it was as if this were her natural tone of voice, and she was no more conscious of raising it above the bellow of the storm

than are certain fisherfolk, habitants of wave-swept coasts, when they call one to another while working about their nets.

The reason was simply that she was thinking too hard about Ned to remember her own danger, and thus terror could not reach her. It can never curse and blast those who have renounced self for others; and thus, perhaps, she had blundered into that great secret of happiness that wise men have tried to teach since the world was new. Perhaps, in the midst of stress and travail, she had glimpsed for an instant the very soul of life, the star that is the hope and dream of mankind.

But while she had forgotten her own danger, she was all too aware of the promptings of her own heart. The issue went farther than Ned's life. It penetrated, in secret ways, the most intimate depths of her relations with him. It was natural at such a time that she should remember Ned's danger to the exclusion of her own. The strangeness of that moment lay in the fact that she also remembered his wishes and his words. She could not forget their last scene together.

"Put Mrs. Hardenworth in your boat, so she and Lenore can be together," she told Captain Knutsen. "I'll get in the other."

The captain did not seem to hear. He continued to shout his orders. In the work of lowering the lifeboat he had cause to lift his lantern high, and for a moment its yellow gleam was bright upon Bess's drawn, haggard face. Farther off it revealed Ned, white-faced but erect in the beat of the storm.

In one instant's insight, a single glimpse between the storm and the sea, he understood that she was taking him at his word. For some reason beyond his ken—likely beyond hers, too—she had asked to be put in McNab's boat so that his wish he had spoken in anger at the door of her stateroom might come true. How silly, how trivial he had been! Those angry words had not come from his heart: only from some false, superficial side of him that was dying in the storm. He had never dreamed that she would take them seriously. They were the mere spume of a child that had not yet learned to be a man.

"Get in with us," he said shortly. "Don't be silly—as I was." Then, lest she should mistake his sentiment: "Mrs. Hardenworth is twice your weight, and this boat will be overloaded as it is."

The girl looked at him quietly, nodding her head. If he had expected gratitude he was disappointed, for she received the invitation as merely an actuality of her own, immutable destiny. Indeed the wings of destiny were sweeping her forward, her life still intertwined with his, both pawns in the vast, inscrutable movement of events.

He helped her into the dory. Julius, who at the captain's orders had been riffling the cabins, threw blankets to her. Then tenderly, lending her his strength, Ned helped Lenore over the wind-swept deck into the bow seat of the lifeboat, nearest to the seat he would take himself. "Buck up, my girl," he told her, a deep, throbbing note in his voice. "I'll look after you."

Already the deck was deserted. The dim light showed that the larger dory, containing McNab, Forest, Julius, and Mrs. Hardenworth, had already been launched. There was no sign of them now. The darkness and the storm had already dropped between. They could not hear a shout of directions between the three men, not a scream of fear from the terrified woman who was their charge.

It was as if they had never been. Only the *Charon* was left—her decks awash and soon to dive and vanish beneath the waves—and their little group in the dim gleam of the lantern. Knutsen and Ned took their places at the oarlocks, Ned nearer the bow, Knutsen just behind. A great wave seemed to catch them and hurl them away.

Could they live in this little boat on these tumultuous seas? Of course the storm was nothing compared to the tempests weathered successfully by larger lifeboats, but it held the utmost peril here. Any moment might see them overwhelmed. The least of those great waves, catching them just right, might overturn them in an instant.

Already the *Charon* was lost in the darkness, just as the other lifeboat had been lost an instant before. Not even Knutsen could tell in what direction she lay. Still the waves hurried them along. The chill wind shrieked over them, raging that they should have dared to venture into its desolate domains.

Could they live until the morning? Wouldn't cold and exposure make an end to them in the long, bitter hours to come? The odds looked so uneven, the chances so bitterly long against them. Could their little sparks of being, the breath of life that ever was so wan and feeble, the little, wondering moment of self-knowledge that at best seemed only the fabric of a dream—could these prevail against the vast, unspeakable forces of the North? Wouldn't the spark go out in a little while, the breath be blown away on the wings of the wind, the self-light burn down in the gloom? At any moment their fragile boat might strike another submerged reef. There was no light to guide them now. They were lost and alone in an empty ocean, helpless prey to the whims of the North.

The pillars of their strength had fallen. Man's civilization that had been their god was suddenly shown as an empty idol, helpless to aid them now.

The light, the beauty, the strong cities they had loved had no influence here: seemingly death itself could not make these things farther distant, less availing. For the first time since they were born Ned and Lenore were face to face with *life*, and also with the death that shadows life. For the first time they knew the abject terror of utter helplessness. There was nothing they could do. They were impotent prey to whatever fate awaited them. Captain Knutsen, mighty of frame, his blood surging fiercely through the avenues of his veins, and Bess, schooled to hardship, were ever so much better off than they. They were better disciplined, stronger in misfortune, better qualified to meet danger and disaster. For no other reason than that—holding respect for these northern seas—they were more warmly dressed, their chances were better for ultimate survival.

But what awaited them when the night was done? How slight was the chance that, in this world of gray waters, they would ever encounter an inhabited island. It was true that islands surrounded them on all sides, but mostly they were but wastes of wind-swept tundra, not one in four having human habitations. Mostly the islands were large, and such habitations as there might be were scattered in sheltered valleys along the shore, and it was wholly probable that the little boat could pass and miss them entirely. They couldn't survive many days on these wintry waters. The meager supplies of food and the jugs of water in the lifeboats would soon be exhausted, and who could come to their aid? Which one of Ned's friends, wishing him such a joyous farewell at the docks, would ever pause in his play one moment to investigate his fate?

A joy-ride! There was a savage irony in the thought of the holiday spirit with which he had undertaken the expedition. And the voices he had heard out of the sea had evidently told him true when they had foretold his own death. For all his natural optimism, the odds against him seemed too great ever to overcome. And there was but one redeeming thought,—a thought so dimly discerned in the secret mind of the man that it never fully reached his conscious self; so bizarre and strange that he could only attribute it to incipient delirium. It was simply that he had already fortified himself, in some degree, to meet the training camp thereafter!

The journey through the gray, mysterious seas, the nearing heart of nature, most of all to-night's disaster had, in some small measure, given him added strength. It was true that his old conceit was dying in his body. His old sense of mastery over himself and over life was shown as a bitter delusion: rather he was revealed as the helpless prey of forces beyond even his power to name. This self-centered man, who once had looked on life from the seats of the scornful, felt suddenly incompetent even to know the forces that had

broken him down. Yet in spite of all this loss, there was something gained. Instead of false conceit he began to sense the beginnings of real self-mastery. For all his terror, freezing his heart in his breast, he suddenly saw clear; and he knew he had taken an upward step toward Life and Light.

There would not be quite so long a course of training for him, in the Hereafter. He could go through and on more quickly on account of these past days. There *was* a way through and out—his father had told him that—and it wasn't so far distant as when he had first left home. With death so close that he could see into its cavernous eyes, such was Ned's one consolation as the craft drifted before the wind.

The terror that was upon him lifted, just an instant, as he bent to hear what Lenore was trying to tell him. Lenore was his love and his life, the girl to whom he had plighted his troth, and his first obligation was to her. He must see to her first.

"I'm cold," she was sobbing. "I'm freezing to death. Oh, Ned, I'm freezing to death."

Of course it wasn't true. Chill though the night was, the temperature was still above freezing, and the blankets about her largely protected her from the biting winds. She was chilled through, however, as were the other three occupants of the craft; and the fear and the darkness were themselves like ice in her veins. Ned's hands were stiff, but he managed to remove one of his own blankets and wrap it about the shoulders of the girl. The boat lurched forward, sped by the waves and the wind.

The night hours passed over the face of the sea. The wind raged through the sky, biting and bitter for all their warm wraps. It was abating, now, the waves were less high; but if anything its breath was more chill as the hour drew toward dawn. The wind-blown sleet swept into their faces.

Both girls sought refuge in troubled sleep. Ned sat with his arms about Lenore, giving her what warmth he could from his own body. Bess was huddled in her seat. Could their less rugged constitutions stand many hours of such cold and exposure? It was a losing game, already. The North was too much for them. Life is a fragile thing at best: a few hours more might easily spell the end.

But that hour saw the return of an ancient mystery, carrying back the soul to those gray days when the earth was without form, and void. Darkness had been upon the face of the waters, but once more it was divided from the day.

Even here, seemingly at the edge of the world, the ancient miracle did not fail. A grayness, like a mist, spread slowly; and the curtains of darkness



slowly receded. The storm was abating swiftly now; and the dawn broke over an easily rolling sea.

Captain Knutsen, who had sat so long in one position—his gaze fastened on one point of the horizon—that he gave the impression of being unconscious, suddenly started and pointed his hand. His voice, pitched to the noise of the storm, roared out into the quiet dawn.

“Land!” he shouted. “We’re coming to land!”

## XII

NONE of the other three in the lifeboat could make out the little, gray line on the horizon that Captain Knutsen identified as land. Ned, who had been wide awake, prayed that he was not mistaken, yet could not find it in his heart to believe him. Bess and Lenore both started out of their sleep, and the former turned her head wearily, a wan smile about her drawn lips.

“Row, man, row!” Knutsen called happily to Ned. “The only way we can save that girl from collapse is to get her to a fire.” His own oars dipped, and his powerful back bent to the task.

So the issue had got down to that! Ned knew perfectly well that Lenore was the girl meant; in spite of the added blanket, she had fared worse than Bess. Perhaps she had less vitality: perhaps she had not met the night’s adversity with the same spirit. Ned was not an expert oarsman, but it was ever to his credit that he gave all his strength to the oars. And he found to his joy that the night’s adventure had left it largely unimpaired.

With the waves and the wind behind them, Knutsen saw the gray line that was the island slowly strengthen. The time came at last, when his weaker arms were shot through with burning pain, that Ned could also make it out. It was still weary miles away. And there was still the dreadful probability—three chances out of four—that it was uninhabited by human beings.

And death would find them quickly enough if they failed to find human habitations. For all Knutsen’s prowess, for all that he was so obviously a man of his hands, Ned couldn’t see any possibility of sustaining life on one of the barren, wind-swept deserts for more than a few days at most. They had no guns to procure meat from the wild: their little stores of food would not last long. The cold itself, though not now severe, would likely master them quickly. Even if they could find fuel, they had no axe to cut it up for a fire. In all probability, they couldn’t even build a fire in the snow and the sleet.

The stabbing pain in his arms was ever harder to bear. He was paying the price for his long pampering of his muscles. The time soon came when he had to change his stroke, dipping the oars at a cheating angle. Even if it were a matter of life and death to Lenore he couldn’t hold up. He couldn’t stand the pace. Knutsen, however, still rowed untiringly.

Soon the island began to take shape, revealing itself as of medium size in comparison with many of the islands of Bering Sea, yet seemingly large enough to support a kingdom. The gray line they had seen first revealed itself as a low range of mountains, bare and wind-swept, extending the full length of the island. What timber there was—meager growths of Sitka spruce and quivering aspen—appeared only on some of the south slopes of the hills and in scattered patches on the valley floor.

In the gray light of dawn the whole expanse was one of unutterable desolation. Even the rapture that they had felt at deliverance from the sea was some way stifled and dulled in the brooding despair that seemed to be its very spirit. They had passed many bleak, windy islands on the journey; but none but what were gardens compared to this. Ned tried to rouse himself from a strange apathy, a sudden, infinite hopelessness that fell like a shadow over him.

Likely enough it was just a mood with him, nothing innate in the island itself. Probably his own fatigue was playing tricks on his imagination. Yet the solid earth seemed no longer familiar. It was as if he had passed beyond his familiar world, known to his five senses and firm beneath his feet, and had come to an eerie, twilight land beyond the horizon. It was so still, lying so bleak and gray in the midst of these endless waters, seemingly so eternally isolated from all he had known and seen. The physical characteristics of the island enhanced, if anything, its mysterious atmosphere. The mossy barrens that comprised most of the island floor, the little, scattered clumps of timber, the deep valleys through which the shining streams ran to the sea, the rugged, shapeless hills beyond, each real in itself, combined to convey an image of unreality. Over it all lay the snow. The whole land was swept with it.

It was evidently the kingdom of the wild. It was the home of caribou and bear, fox and wolverine rather than men. And the dreadful probability was ever more manifest that the island contained not a single hearth, a single Indian igloo in which they might find shelter.

The place seemed to be utterly uninhabited by human beings. The white shore was nearing now, the craft had reached the mouth of a large harbor formed by the emptying waters of a small river; and as yet the voyagers could not make out a single roof, a single canoe on the shore. Knutsen peered with straining eyes.

“It looks bad,” he said tonelessly. “If there was a village here it ought to be located at the mouth of that river. It’s the logical place for a camp. They always stay near the salmon.”

Straining, Ned suddenly saw what seemed to him a manifestation of human inhabitants. There were clearly pronounced tracks, showing dark against the otherwise unbroken snow, leading from the sea to a patch of heavy forest a quarter of a mile back on the island. He pointed to them, his eye kindling with renewed hope.

But Knutsen shook his head. "I can't tell from here. They might be animal tracks."

The canoe pushed farther into the harbor. The roll of the waves was ever less, and the boat rode evenly on almost quiet water. They would know soon now. They would either find safety, or else their last, little hope would go the way of all the others. Surely they could not live a day unaided in this bleak, desolate land.

But at that instant Bess, who had sat so quiet that her companions had thought her asleep, uttered a low cry. For all its subdued tone, its living note of hope and amazement caused both men to turn to her. Her white face was lifted, her blue eyes shining, and she was pointing to the fringe of timber at the end of the trail in the snow.

"What is it?" she asked in a low tone. "Isn't it a man?"

Her keen eyes had beheld what Knutsen's had missed—a dark form half in shadow against the edge of the scrub timber. For all that it was less than a quarter of a mile distant, both men had to strain to make it out. The explanation lay partly in the depths of the surrounding shadows; partly in the fact that the form was absolutely without motion. It is an undeniable fact that only moving figures are quickly discernible in the light and shadow of the wild places: thus the forest creatures find their refuge from their enemies simply by standing still and so remaining unobserved. The thing at the timber edge had evidently learned this lesson. In its dimness and obscurity it suggested some furtive creature native to the woods.

Yet, for all its lack of motion, this was unmistakably a living being. It was not just an odd-shaped stump, a dark shadow under tree limbs such as so often misleads a big-game hunter. The brain seemed to know it, without further verification by the senses. Bess had said it was the form of a man, and the more intent their gaze, the more probable it seemed that she was right. The fear that had oppressed Knutsen that it might be merely the form of some one of the larger forest creatures—perhaps a bear, standing erect, or a caribou facing them—was evidently groundless. It was a man, and he was plainly standing motionless, fully aware of and watching their approach.

Yet the atmosphere of vagueness prevailed. He was so like a woods creature in the instinctive way he had taken advantage of the concealment of

the shadows. It was a wonder that Bess had ever observed him. And now, drawing closer, his proportions seemed to be considerably larger than is customary in the human species. Now that his outline grew plain, he loomed like a giant. There is nothing so deceptive, however, as the size of an object seen at a distance in the wilderness. The degree of light, the clearness of the atmosphere, the nature of the background and surroundings all have their effect: often a snow-hare looks as big as a fox or a porcupine as large as a bear. Ned, sharing none of Knutsen's inner sense of unrest, yielding at last to the rapture of impending deliverance, raised his arms and shouted across the waters.

"I want to be sure he sees us," he explained quickly.

Knutsen strove to rid himself of the unwonted dismay that took hold of him. A deep-buried subconsciousness had suddenly manifested itself within him, but the messages it conveyed were proven ridiculous by his own good sense. It was the first time, however, that this inner voice had ever led him astray. Surely this was deliverance, life instead of what had seemed certain death, yet he was oppressed and baffled as he had never been in his life before.

It was soon made plain that the man had caught Ned's signal. He lifted his arm, then came walking down toward the water's edge. Then Knutsen, who until now had rowed steadily, paused with his paddles poised in the air.

"It's not an Indian," he breathed quickly. Ned turned to look at him in amazement, yet not knowing at what he was amazed. "It's a white man!"

"Isn't that all the better?" Ned demanded. "God knows I'm glad to see any kind of a man."

After all, wasn't that good sense? Trapping, fox-farming, any one of a dozen undertakings took white men into these northern realms. Conquering his own ridiculous fears—fears that partook of the nature of actual forewarnings—Knutsen drove his oars with added force into the water. The boat leaped forward: in a moment more they touched the bank.

Their deliverer, a great blond man seemingly of Northeastern Europe, was already at the water's edge, watching them with a strange and inexplicable glitter in gray, sardonic eyes. He was a mighty, bearded man, clothed in furs; already he was bent, his hands on the bow of the boat. Already Ned was climbing out upon the shore.

Partly to remove the silly dismay that had overwhelmed him, partly because it was the first thought that would come to the mind of a wayfarer of the sea, Knutsen turned with a question. "What island is dis?" he asked.

The stranger turned with a grim, meaning smile. “Hell,” he answered simply.

Both Ned and Knutsen stood erect to stare at him. The wind made curious whispers down through the long slit of the river valley. “Hell?” Knutsen echoed. “Is dat its name——”

“It’s the name I gave it. You’ll think it’s that before you get away.”

## XIII

THE stranger's voice was deep and full, so far-carrying, so masterful, that it might have been the articulation of the raw elements among which he lived, rather than the utterance of human vocal chords. It held all his listeners; it wakened Lenore from the apathy brought by cold and exposure. They had wondered, at first, that a member of the white race should make his home on this remote and desolate isle, but after they had heard his voice they knew that this was his fitting environment. If any man's home should be here, in this lost and snowy desert, here was the man.

The background of the North was reflected in his voice. It was as if he had caught its tone from the sea and the wild, through long acquaintance with them. It was commanding, passionate, and yet, to a man of rare sensitiveness, it would have had an unmistakable quality of beauty; at least, something that is like beauty and which can be heard in many of Nature's voices: the chant of the wolf pack on the ridge, or even certain sounds of beating waves. The explanation was simply that he had lived so long in the North, he was so intrinsically its child in nature and temperament, that it had begun to mold him after its own raw forces. The fact that his voice had a deeply sardonic note was wholly in character. The North, too, has a cruel, grim humor that breaks men's hearts.

His accent was plainly not that of an American. He had not been born to the English tongue; very plainly he had learned it, thoroughly and laboriously. His own tongue still echoed faintly in the way he mouthed some of his vowels, and in a distinct purring note, as of a giant cat, in his softer sounds.

Ned observed these things more in an inner mind, rather than with his conscious intelligence. Outwardly he was simply listening to what the man said. The note of dimness and unreality was wholly gone now. The voice was indescribably vivid; the man himself was compellingly vivid too. It was no longer to be wondered at that he had appeared of such gigantic proportions when they had seen him across the snow. In reality he was a giant of a man, about six feet and a half in height, huge of body, mighty of arm and limb, weighing, stripped down to muscle and sinew, practically three hundred pounds. Beside him, Knutsen no longer gave the image of strength.

Even in his own city, surrounded by the civilization that he loved, Ned couldn't have passed this man by with a casual glance. In the first place there is something irresistibly compelling about mere physical strength. The strength of this man beside the sea seemed resistless. It was to be seen in his lithe motions; his great, long-fingered, big-knuckled hands; in the lurch of his shoulders; in his great thighs and long, powerful arms. He was plainly, as far as age went, at the apex of his strength,—not over forty-one, not less than thirty-eight. He drew up the boat with one hand, reaching the other to help Lenore out on to the shore.

It came about, because he reached it toward Lenore, that Ned noticed his hand before ever he really took time to study his face. It was a mighty, muscular hand,—a reaching, clasping, clenching, killing hand. It crushed the lives from things that its owner didn't like. On the back and extending almost to the great, purple nails was blond, coarse hair.

But it wasn't mere brute strength that made him the compelling personality that he was. There was also the strength of an iron purpose, a self-confidence gained by battle with and conquest of the raw forces of his island home. Here was a man who knew no law but his own. And he was as remorseless as the snow that sifted down upon him.

If Lenore's thought processes had been the same as when she had left her city home, she would have been stirred to envy by his garb. There was little about him that suggested intercourse with the outside world. He was dressed from head to foot in furs and skins of the most rare and beautiful kinds. His jacket and trousers seemed to be of lynx, his cap was unmistakably silver fox. But it came about that neither she nor Ned did more than casually notice his garb: both were held and darkly fascinated by the great, bearded face.

The blond hair grew in a great mat about his lips and jowls. His nose was straight, his eyebrows heavy, all his features remarkably even and well-proportioned. But none of these lesser features could be noticed because of the compelling attraction of his gray, vivid eyes.

Ned didn't know why he was startled, so carried out of himself when he looked at them. In the first place they were the index of what was once, and perhaps still, a lively and penetrating intelligence. This island man, however mad he might be, was not a mere physical hulk,—an ox with dull nerves and stupid brain. The vivid orbs indicated a nervous system that was highly developed and sensitive, though heaven knew what slant, what paths from the normal, the development took. They were not the eyes of a man blind to beauty, dull to art. He was likely fully sensitive to the dreadful, eerie beauty



of his own northern home; if anything, it got home to him too deeply and invoked in him its own terrible mood. They were sardonic eyes too,—the eyes of a man who, secure in his own strength, knew men's weaknesses and knew how to make use of them.

Yet none of these traits got down to the real soul of the man. They didn't even explain the wild and piercing glitter in the gray orbs. Whatever his creed was, he was a fanatic in it. An inhuman zeal marked every word, every glance. There is a proper balance to maintain in life, a quietude, most of all a temperance in all things; and to lose it means to pass beyond the pale. This island man was irremediably steeped in some ghastly philosophy of his own; a dreadful code of life outside the laws of heaven and earth. Some evil disease, not named in any work on medicine, had distilled its dire toxin into his heart.

There is no law of God or man north of sixty-three,—and the thing held good with him. But there is devil's law; and it was the law on which his life was bent.

It was the most evil, the most terrible face that any one of these four had ever seen. The art that touched him was never true art, the art of the soul and the heart, but something diseased, something uncanny and diabolical, beyond the pale of life. His genius was an evil genius: they saw it in every motion, in every line of his wicked face.

There was no kindly warmth, no sympathy, no human understanding either in his voice or his face. Plainly he was as remorseless as the remorseless land in which he lived. Now, as they looked, his hairy hands might have been the rending paws of a beast.

Perhaps it was madness, perhaps some weird abnormality that only a great psychologist could trace, perhaps merely wickedness without redemption, but whatever the nature of the disease that was upon him it had had a ghastly and inhuman influence. The heart in his breast had lost the high, human attributes of mercy and sympathy. They knew in one glance that here was a man that knew no restraints other than those prompted by his own desires. In him the self-will and resolution that carries so many men into power or crime was developed to the *nth* power; he was a fitting child of the savage powers of nature among which he lived.

“Pardon me for not making myself known sooner,” he began in his deep, sardonic voice. “My name is Doomsdorf—trapper, and seemingly owner of this island. At least I'm the only living man on it, except yourselves.” His speech, though careless and queerly accented, had no mark of ignorance or

ill-breeding. "I told you the island's name—believe me, it fits it perfectly. Welcome to it——"

Ned straightened, white-faced. "Mr. Doomsdorf, these girls are chilled through—one of them is near to collapse from exposure. Will you save that till later and help me get them to a fire?"

For all the creeping terror that was possessing his veins, Ned made a brave effort to hold his voice steady. The man looked down at him, his lip curling. "Pardon my negligence," he replied easily. "Of course she isn't used to the cold yet—but that will come in time." He bowed slightly to the shivering girl on the shore. "If you follow my tracks up to the wood, you'll find my shack—and there's a fire in the stove." He looked familiarly into her face. "You're not really cold, you know—you just *think* you are. Walk fast, and it will warm you up."

Ned bent, seized an armful of blankets from the boat, then stepped to Lenore's side. "The captain will help you, Miss Gilbert," he said to Bess. Then he and the golden-haired girl he loved started together through the six-inch snowfall toward the woods. Bess, stricken and appalled, but yet not knowing which way to turn, took the trail behind them. But Knutsen still waited on the shore, beside the boat.

He came of a strong breed, and he was known in his own world as a strong man. It was part of the teaching of that world, and always the instinct of such men as he to look fate in the face, never to evade it, never to seek shelter in false hope. He knew the world better than any of the three who had come with him; the menace that they sensed but dimly but which dismayed and oppressed them was only too real to him. Even now, out of his sight, Ned was trying to make himself believe that the man was likely but a simple trapper, distorted into a demon by the delirium brought on by the dreadful night just passed; but Knutsen made no such attempt. He saw in Doomsdorf a perfect embodiment of the utter ruthlessness and brutality that the Far North sometimes bestows on its sons.

Knutsen knew this north country. He knew of what it was capable,—the queer, uncanny quirks that it put in the souls of men. Doomsdorf, incredible to Ned and Bess, was wholly plausible to him. He feared him to the depths of his heart, yet in some measure, at least, these three were in his charge, and if worst came to worst, he must stand between them and this island devil with his own life. He had stayed on the shore after the others had gone so that he might find out the truth.

He was not long in learning. Through some innate, vague, almost inexplicable desire to shelter his three charges and to spare them the truth,

he wanted to wait until all three of them had disappeared in the wood; but even this was denied him. Lenore and Ned, it is true, had already vanished into the patch of forest; but Bess seemed to be walking slowly, waiting for him. Doomsdorf was bent, now, unloading the stores and remaining blankets from the canoe; but suddenly, with one motion, he showed Knutsen where he stood.

With one great lurch of his shoulders he turned over the empty boat and shoved it off into the sea. The first wave, catching it, drove it out of reach. "You won't need that again," he said.

With a half-uttered, sobbing gasp that no man had heard from his lips before, Knutsen sprang to rescue it. It was the greatest error of his life. Even he did not realize the full might and remorselessness of the foe that opposed him, or he would never have wasted precious seconds, put himself at a disadvantage by entering the water, in trying to retrieve the boat. He would have struck instantly, in one absolute, desperate attempt to wipe the danger forever from his path. But in the instant of need, his brain did not work true. He could not exclude from his thought the disastrous fallacy that all hope, all chances to escape from hell lay only in this flimsy craft, floating a few feet from him in shallow water.

In an instant he had seized it, and standing hip-deep in the icy water, he turned to face the blond man on the shore. The latter roared once with savage mirth, a sound that carried far abroad the snowy desolation; then he sobered, watching with glittering eyes.

"Let it go," he ordered simply. His right arm lifted slowly, as if in inadvertence, and rested almost limp across his breast. His blond beard hid the contemptuous curl of his lips.

"Damn you, I won't!" Knutsen answered. "You can't keep us here——"

"Let it go, I say. You are the one that's damned. And you fool, you don't know the words that are written over the gates of the hell you've come to —'Abandon hope, ye who enter here!' You and your crowd will never leave this island till you die!"

Knutsen's hand moved toward his hip. In the days of the gun fights, in the old North, it had never moved more swiftly. In this second of need he had remembered his pistol.

But he remembered it too late. And his hand, though fast, was infinitely slow. The great arm that lay across Doomsdorf's breast suddenly flashed out and up. The blue steel of a revolver barrel streaked in the air, and a shot cracked over the sea.

Knutsen was already loosed from the bonds that held him. Deliverance had come quickly. His face, black before with wrath, grew blank; and for a long instant he groped impotently, open hands reaching. But the lead had gone straight home; and there was no need of a second shot. The late captain of the *Charon* swayed, then pitched forward into the gray waters.

## XIV

BESS had followed the trail through the snow clear to the dark edge of the woods when the sound of voices behind her caused her to turn. Neither Doomsdorf nor Knutsen had spoken loudly. Indeed, their tones had been more subdued than usual, as is often the way when men speak in moments of absolute test. Bess had not made out the words: only the deep silence and the movements of the wind from the sea enabled her to hear the voices at all. Thus it was curious that she whirled, face blanching, in knowledge of the impending crisis.

Thereafter the drama on the shore seemed to her as something that could not possibly be true. She saw in the deep silence Doomsdorf overturn and push off the boat, Knutsen's desperate effort to rescue it, the flash of light from the former's upraised pistol. And still immersed in that baffling silence, the brave seaman had groped, swayed, then toppled forward into the shallow water.

It was a long time after that the report of the pistol reached her ears, and even this was not enough to waken her to a sense of reality. It sounded dull, far-off, conveying little of the terrible thing it was, inadequate to account for the unutterable disaster that it had occasioned. Afterward the silence closed down again. The waves rolled in through the harbor mouth with never a pause. The dark shadow that lay for an instant on the face of the waters slowly sank beneath. The boat drifted ever farther out to sea.

Except for the fact that Doomsdorf stood alone on the shore, it might have been all the factless incident of a tragic dream. The blond man walked closer to the water, peering; then the pistol gleamed again as he pocketed it. The wind still brushed by, singing sadly as it went; and the sleet swept out of the clouds. And then, knowing her need, she strove to waken the blunted powers of her will.

She must not yield herself to the horror that encroached upon her. Only impotence, only disaster lay that way. She must hold steady, not break into hopeless sobs, not fall kneeling in impotent appeal. Bess Gilbert was of good metal, but this test that had been put upon her seemed to wrench apart the fibers of her inmost being. But she won the fight at last.

Slowly she stiffened, rallying her faculties, fighting off the apathy of terror. Presently her whole consciousness seemed to sharpen. In an instant of

clear thought she guessed, broadly, the truth of that tragedy beside the sea; that Knutsen had died in a desperate attempt to break free from an unspeakable trap into which he and his charges had fallen. He had preferred to take the chance of death rather than submit to the fate that Doomsdorf had in store for him.

Just what that fate was and how it concerned herself, Bess dared not guess. She had known a deadly fear of Doomsdorf at the first glance; she had instinctively hated him as she had never hated any living creature before; and now she knew that this was the most desperate moment of her life. He had shown himself capable of any depth of crime; and that meant there must be no limit to her own courage. She too must take any chance of freedom that offered, no matter how desperate; for no evil that could befall her seemed as terrible as his continued power over her.

It meant she must work quick. She must not lose a single chance. The odds were desperately long already: she must not increase them. In an instant more he would be glancing about to see if his crime were observed. If she could conceal the fact that she had witnessed it, he would not be so much on guard in the moment of crisis that was to come. Her body and soul seemed to rally to mighty effort.

She was already at the edge of the timber. Stooping down, she made one leap into its shelter. She was none too soon: already Doomsdorf had looked back to see if the coast were clear.

Everything depended on Ned, henceforth. She couldn't work alone. With his aid, perhaps, they could destroy this evil power under which they had fallen before it could prepare to meet them. Doomsdorf's cabin—a long, log structure on the bank of a dark little stream—was only a hundred feet distant in the wood. Now that she was out of sight of the shore, she broke into a frenzied run.

She had no desperate plan as yet. In Ned's manhood alone lay her hope: perhaps in the moment or two before Doomsdorf appeared Ned could conceive of some plan to meet him. Perhaps there was a rifle in the cabin!

She fought back the instinct to scream out her story from the doorway. At the bidding of an instinct so sure and true that it partook of a quality of infallibility, she checked her wild pace before she crossed the threshold. Everything depended on Ned and the cool, strong quality of Ned's nerves. She must not jeopardize his self-control by bursting in upon him in frenzy, perhaps exciting him to such an extent that he would be rendered helpless to aid her. She must keep him cool by being cool herself. She caught her breath in a curious deep gasp, then stepped into the room.

Then that gasp became very nearly a sob. The way of deliverance was not clear. A wrinkled native woman, an Aleut or an Eskimo, who was evidently Doomsdorf's wife, looked up at her with dark inscrutable eyes from the opposite side of the room.

It was a heart-breaking blow to Bess's hopes. The presence of the woman increased, to a dread degree, the odds against her. She was ugly, brown as leather, heavily built; her face gave no sign that human emotion had ever touched her heart, yet she was likely a staunch ally of their foe.

The whole picture went home to her in a glance. Lenore was huddled in a chair before the stove, yielding herself to the blessed warmth, already shaking off the semi-apathy induced by the night's chill. But as yet there was no hope in her. She was shivering, helpless, impotent. Ned bent over her, his arms about her, now and then giving her sips from a cup of hot liquid that he held in his hand. His care, his tender solicitude, struck Bess with a sense of unutterable irony. Evidently he had no suspicion of the real truth.

He looked up as Bess entered. Partly because the light was dim, partly because he was absorbed in the work of caring for Lenore to the exclusion of all other thought, he failed to see the drawn look of horror on Bess's face. "I'll need a little help here, Miss Gilbert," he said. "I want to get this girl to bed. The night seemed to go harder with her than with the rest of us, and rest is the best thing for her."

Bess almost sobbed aloud. The sound caught in her throat, but quickly she forced it back. Ned was already himself again; the danger and stress of the night had seemingly affected him only so far as to enscribe his face with tired lines, to leave him somewhat hollow-eyed and drawn. In reality, he was the man of cities come again. He was on solid earth; food and shelter and warmth were his once more; his old self-confidence was surging through him with the glow from the stove. He had no inkling of the truth. His mind was far from danger.

At that instant she knew she must work alone. She must give no sign of her own desperation before this stolid squaw. And yet she almost screamed with horror when she realized that any second she might hear Doomsdorf's step on the threshold. She glanced about till she located the Russian's rifle, hung on the wall almost in front of the squaw's chair.

"Did you hear a shot?" she asked. With all the powers of her spirit, she kept her voice commonplace, casual.

"Yes," Ned answered. "It wasn't anything—was it?" His tone became cold. "Will you please give me a little help with Miss Hardenworth?"

“It was a bear—Mr. Doomsdorf shot at it with his pistol,” she went on in the same casual way. She thought it incredible that they would not take alarm from the wild beating of her heart. She turned easily to the squaw. “He wants me to bring his rifle so he can shoot at it again,” she said. “That’s it—on the wall?”

She stepped toward the weapon. Even in her own heart she did not know what was her plan of action after that gun was in her hands: she had not yet given thought to the stress and desperate deed that lay before her. She only knew that life, honor, everything that mattered in this world depended on the developments of the next few seconds. Later, perhaps, resistance would be crushed out of her; her cruel master would be constantly on guard: in this little moment lay her one chance. She knew vaguely that if she could procure the weapon, she could start down to the shore and meet Doomsdorf on the way. Perhaps her nerve would break soon; it could not keep up forever under such a strain. Thus her whole universe depended on immediate action. She must not hesitate now. She must go any lengths. Her eyes were cold and remorseless under her straight brows.

“Sure—take him gun,” the squaw answered her.

She was vaguely aware that Ned was watching her in amazement. He was speaking too, his voice coming from infinitely far off. “I’m surprised, Miss Gilbert,” he was saying with grave displeasure. “You don’t seem to realize that Miss Hardenworth is still in a serious condition. Perhaps you will be willing to forget Mr. Doomsdorf’s sport for a moment——”

But Bess hardly heard. Her hands were trembling, waiting for the feel of the steel. Now the Indian was getting up and presently was lifting down the weapon. But she did not put it at once into Bess’s hands. She pushed back the lever, revealing the empty breech. Then Bess saw a slow drawing of her lips—a cruel upturning that was seemingly as near as she could come to a smile.

“Sure—take him gun,” she said. “Got any shells——?”

Bess shook her head. Her heart paused in her breast.

“Maybe him got shells. He took ’em all out when he saw your canoe come in.”



## XV

IF, like her husband, the brown squaw was a devotee of cruelty, she must have received great satisfaction from the sight of that slender, girlish figure standing in the gloom of the cabin. The fact that there were no shells in the rifle—otherwise a desperate agent of escape—seemed nothing less than the death of hope. The strength born of the crisis departed swiftly from her, and her only impulse was to yield to bitter tears. Her erect body seemed to wilt, her sensitive lips, so straight and firm before, drooped like those of a child in some utter, unconsolable tragedy of childhood. It was a curious thing how the light died in her eyes. All at once they seemed to be at some strange, below-zero point of darkness,—like black wounds in the utter whiteness of her face. Yet the squaw gave no sign that she had seen. Her face was impassive, that of an imperturbable Buddha that sits forever in a far temple.

Great terror is nothing more or less than temporary loss of hope. In that moment Bess was finding out what real hopelessness meant, so far as it is ever possible for human beings to know. For that moment she couldn't see a rift in the darkness that enfolded her. In the first place she felt infinitely alone: Knutsen was dead; Lenore still sat yielding to self-pity; Ned still extended to her his solicitous care. The thing went beyond mere fear of death. She could conceive of possibilities now wherein death would be a thing desired and prayed for; a deliverance from a living hell that was infinitely worse. The terror that was upon her was incomparable with any previous experience of her life.

Yet her eyes remained dry. Some way, she was beyond the beneficence of tears; partly because of her terror, partly, perhaps, because the instinct was with her yet to hide the truth from Ned and Lenore so long as possible. Thus she was not, in the last analysis, absolutely bereft of hope. It might be, since Ned was a man and she a woman, he would never become the prey of Doomsdorf to such a degree as she herself. And now there was no time to try to formulate other plans; to seek some other gateway of escape; no time more to listen to Ned's complaints of her inattention to Lenore. She heard Doomsdorf's heavy step at the door.

The man came in, for an instant standing framed by the doorway, the light of morning behind him. Ned looked up, expecting some inquiry as to his own and Lenore's condition, some word of greeting on his lips. It came

about, however, that his thought fell quickly into other channels. Doomsdorf closed the door behind him.

The man turned contemptuously to Ned. "What's the matter?" he asked.

Startled and indignant at the tone, Ned instinctively straightened. "I didn't say anything was the matter. Where's Knutsen?"

"Knutsen—has gone on. Hell didn't suit him. He went against its mandates the first thing. I hope it doesn't happen again—I would hate to lose any more of you. I've other plans in mind."

Ned hardly understood, yet his face went white. Partly it was anger because of the unmistakable insult and contempt in Doomsdorf's tone. Partly it was a vague fear that his good sense would not permit him to credit. "I don't—I don't understand, I'm afraid," he remarked coldly. "We'll talk it over later. At present I want to know where we can put this girl to bed. She's in a serious condition from her last night's experience."

The lips curled under the great blond beard. "I may put her to bed, all right—if I like her looks," he answered evenly. "It won't be your bed, either."

Appalled, unbelieving, yet obeying a racial instinct that goes back to the roots of time, Ned dropped the girl from his arms and leaped to his feet. His eyes blazed with a magnificent burst of fury, and a mighty oath was at his lips. "You——" he began.

Yet no second word came. Doomsdorf's great body lunged across the room with the ferocity and might of a charging bear. His arm went out like a javelin, great fingers extended, and clutched with the effect of a mighty mechanical trap the younger man's throat. He caught him as he might catch a vicious dog he intended to kill, snatching him off his feet. Ned's arm lashed out impotently, and forcing through with his own body, Doomsdorf thrust him into the corner. For a moment he battered him back and forth, hammering his head against the wall, then let him fall to a huddled heap on the floor.

Lenore's voice raised in a piercing scream of terror; but a fiercer instinct took hold of Bess. The impulse that moved her was simply that to fight to the death, now as well as later. A heavy hammer, evidently a tool recently in use by Doomsdorf, lay on the window sill, and she sprang for it with the strength of desperation. But her hand had hardly touched it before she herself was hurled back against the log wall behind her.

The squaw had not sat supine in this stress. With the swiftness and dexterity of an animal, she had sprung to intercept the deadly blow, hurling the girl back by her hand upon the latter's shoulder. If she made any sound

at all, it was a single, chattering sentence that was mostly obliterated in the sound of battle. And already, before seemingly a second was past, Doomsdorf was standing back in his place in the center of the room.

Except for the huddled heap in the blood-spattered corner of the cabin, it was as if it had never happened. The squaw was again stolid, moving slowly back to her chair; Doomsdorf breathed quietly and evenly. The two girls stood staring in speechless horror.

“I hope there won’t be any more of that,” Doomsdorf said quietly. “The sooner we get these little matters straightened out, the better for all concerned. It isn’t pleasant to be hammered to pieces, is it?”

He took one step toward Ned, and Lenore started to scream again. But he inflicted no further punishment. He reached a strong hand, seized Ned’s shoulder, and snatched him to his feet.

“Don’t try it again,” he advised. “Here in this cabin—on this island—I do and say what I like. I don’t stand for any resentment. The next time it won’t be so easy, and that will be too bad for everybody. You wouldn’t be able to do your work.”

Racked by pain but fully conscious, Ned looked into the glittering eyes. It was no longer possible to disbelieve in this hairy giant before him. The agony in his throat muscles was only too real. And the only recourse that occurred to him was one of pitiful inadequacy.

It was a moment of test for Ned, and he knew of no way to meet it except as he met such little crises as sometimes occurred to him in his native city. The only code of life he knew was that he practiced in his old life: now was its time of trial. His own blood on his hands; the grim, wicked face before him should have been enough to convince a man less inured in his own creed of self-sufficiency and conceit; yet Ned would not let himself believe that he had found his master.

As a child has recourse to senseless threats, he tried to take refuge in his old attitude of superiority. “I don’t know what you mean, and I don’t care to,” he said at last. In pity for him Bess’s eyes filled with tears. “I only know we won’t accept the hospitality of such men as you. We’ll go—right now.”

Doomsdorf’s answer was a roaring laugh of scorn. Presently he walked to the door and threw it wide.

But he wasn’t smiling when he turned back to face them, the morning light on his bearded face. The sight of the North through the open door had sobered and awed him, as it awes all men who know its power. Beyond lay only the edge of the forest and the snow-swept barrens, stretching down to a gray and desolate sea.

“It’s snowing a little, isn’t it?” he said. “Just the North—keeping its tail up and letting us know it’s here. Where, my young friend, do you think of going?”

“It doesn’t matter——”

“There’s snow and cold out there.” His voice was deeply sober. “Death too—sure as you’re standing here. A weakling like you can’t live in that, out there. None of your kind can stand it—they’d die like so many sheep. And as a result you have to bow down and serve the man that can!”

Ned had no answer. The greatest fear of his life was clamping down upon him.

“That’s the law up here—that the weak have to serve the strong. I’ve beat the North at its own game, and it serves me, just as you’re going to serve me now. You’re not accepting any hospitality from me. You’re going to pay for the warmth of this fire I’ve grubbed out of these woods—you’ll pay for the food you eat. You can go out there if you like—if you prefer to die. There’s no boat to carry you off. There never will be a boat to carry you off.”

Ned’s breath caught in a gasp. “My God, you don’t mean you’ll hold us here by force!”

“I mean you’re my prisoners here for the rest of your natural lives. And you can abandon hope just as surely as if this island was the real hell it was named for.”

Quietly, coldly he told them their fate, these three who had been cast up by the sea. He didn’t mince words. And for all the strangeness of the scene—the gray light of the dawn and the snow against the window and the noise of the wind without—they knew it was all true, not merely some shadowed vista of an eerie dream.

“You might as well know how you stand, first as last,” he began. “When you once get everything through your heads, maybe we won’t have any more trouble such as we had just now. You ought to be glad that the seaman—Knutsen, you called him?—is sliding around on the sea bottom instead of being here with you; he’d be a source of trouble from beginning to end. He’d have been hard to teach, hard to master—I saw that in the beginning—and he’d never give in short of a fight every morning and every night. None of you, fortunately, are that way. You’ll see how things stack up, and we’ll all get along nicely together.”

He paused, smiling grimly; then with an explosive motion, pulled back the lid of the stove and threw in another log. “Sit down, why don’t you?” he

invited. “I don’t insist on my servants standing up always in my presence. You’ll have to sit down sometime, you know.”

Lenore, wholly despondent, sank back in her seat. To show that he was still her protector, Ned stood behind her, his hands resting on the back of her chair. Bess stole to a little rough seat between them and the squaw.

A single great chair was left vacant, almost in the middle of the circle. Doomsdorf glanced once about the room as if guarding against any possibility of surprise attack by his prisoners, then sat down easily himself. “Excuse me for not making you known to my woman,” he began. “In fact, I haven’t even learned your own names. She is, translating from the vernacular, ‘Owl-That-Never-Sleeps.’ You won’t be expected to call her that, however—although I regret as a general thing that the picturesque native names so often undergo such laceration on the tongues of the whites. When I took her from her village, they gave her to me as ‘Sindy.’ You may call her that. It will do as good as any—every other squaw from Tin City to Ketchikan is called Sindy. It means nothing, as far as I know.

“‘Owl-That-Never-Sleeps,’ however, fits her very well. You might make a point of it. And if you are interested in the occult sciences, perhaps you might explain to me how, when she was a pappoose, her parents could understand her character and nature well enough to give her a name that fits her so perfectly. I notice the same thing happens again and again through these northern tribes. But I’m wandering off the point. Sindy, you must know, speaks English and is second in command. What she says goes. Get up and do it on the jump.

“You’ll be interested to know that you are on one of the supposedly uninhabited islands of the Skopin group. Other islands are grouped all around you, making one big snow field when the ice closes down in winter. I could give you almost your exact longitudinal position, but it wouldn’t be the least good to you. The population consists of we five people—and various bear, caribou, and such like. The principal industry, as you will find out later, is furs.

“There is no need to tell in detail how and why I came here—unlike Caliban, I am not a native of the place. I hope you are not so deficient as to have failed to read ‘Tempest.’ I find quite an analogy to our present condition. Shakespeare is a great delight on wintry nights; he remains real, when most of my other slim stock of authors fades into air. I like ‘Merry Wives’ the best of the comedies, though—because we have such fine fun with Falstaff. Of the tragedies I like Macbeth the best and Lear, by far the worst; and it’s a curious paradox that I didn’t like the ending of the first and

did like the second. Macbeth and his lady shouldn't have fallen. They were people with a purpose, and purpose should be allowed to triumph in art as well as in life. In life, Macbeth would have snipped off Macduff's head and left a distinguished line. Lear, old and foolish, got just what was coming to him—only it shouldn't have been dragged over five acts.

“But I really must get down to essentials. It's so long since I've talked to the outside world that I can't help being garrulous. To begin with—I came here some years ago, not entirely by my own choice. Of course, not even the devil comes to such a hell as this from his own choice. There's always pressure from above.”

He paused again, hardly aware of the horrified gaze with which his hearers regarded him. A startling change had come over him when he spoke again. His eyes looked red as a weasel's in the shadowed room; the tones of his voice were more subdued, yet throbbing with passion.

“I remember gray walls, long ago, in Siberia,” he went on slowly and gravely. “I was not much more than a boy, a student at a great university—and then there were gray walls in a gray, snow-swept land, and gray cells with barred doors, and men standing ever on watch with loaded rifles, and thousands of human cattle in prison garb. It was almost straight west of here, far beyond Bering Sea; and sometimes inspectors would come, stylish people like yourselves, except that they were bearded men of Petrograd, and look at us through the bars as at animals in a zoo, but they never interfered with the way things were run! How I came there doesn't matter; what I did, and what I didn't do. There I found out how much toil the human back can stand without breaking, one day like another, years without end. I knew what it was to have a taskmaster stand over me with a whip—a whip with many tails, with a shot and wire twisted into each. I can show you my back now if you don't believe me. I found out all these things, and right then there came a desire to teach them to some one else. I was an enemy of society, they said—so I became an enemy of society in reality. Right then I learned a hate for such society and a desire to burn out the heart of such weak things as you!”

He turned to them, snarling like a beast. His voice had begun to rumble like lavas in the bowels of the earth. There could be no question as to the reality of this hatred. It was a storm cloud over his face; it filled his gray eyes with searing fire, it drew his muscles till it seemed that the arms of his chair, clutched by his hands, would be torn from the rounds. To his listeners it was the most terribly vivid moment of their lives.

“I swore an oath then, by the devil himself, that if the time ever came that I’d have opportunity, I’d show society just what kind of an enemy I was. Sometime, I thought, that time would come. What made me think so I can’t tell. Sometime I’d pay ’em back for all they had done to me.

“One day the chance came to escape. While more cowardly men would have hesitated, I pushed through and out. On the way I learned a little lesson—that none of the larger creatures of the wild die as easily as men. I found out that there is nothing more to killing a man that is in your way than killing a caribou I want to eat. I didn’t feel any worse about it afterward. After that I decided I would never compromise with a man who was in my way. The other method was too easy. Remember it in all our relations to come.

“I had to come across here. I couldn’t forever escape the hue and cry that was raised. Ultimately I landed on this little island—with Sindy and a few steel traps.

“In this climate we can trap almost the whole year round. We can start putting them out in a few days more—keep them out clear till June. Every year a ship—the *Intrepid* that you’ve likely heard of—touches here to buy my furs—just one trip a year—and it leaves here supplies of all kinds in exchange. But don’t take hope from that. Hope is one thing you want to get out of your systems. The captain of the *Intrepid* and his Japanese crew are the only human beings that know I live here, except yourself—that know there’s a human occupant on this island. On their yearly visit I’ll see to it that none of them get a sight of you.

“Once I was used to working all day from dawn to dark, with an armed master on guard over me. It isn’t going to be that way from now on. I’m going to be the armed master. The next few days you’re going to spend building yourselves a shack and cutting winter fuel. Then each of you will have a trap line—a good stiff one, too. Every day you’ll go out and follow your line of traps—baiting, skinning and fleshing, drying the skins when you get to the cabins. You’ll know what it really is to be cold, then; you’ll know what work means, too. With you three I expect to triple my usual season’s catch, building up three times as fast the fortune I need.

“All my life I’ve looked forward to a chance to give society the same kind of treatment it gave to me—and when that fortune is large enough to work with, there will be a new dynasty arise in Russia. In the meantime, you’re going to get the same treatment I did—hard labor for life! You’re going to have an armed guard over you to shoot you down if you show the least sign of mutiny. You’ll obey every command and lick my boots if I tell

you to. I said then, when the chance came, I'd grind society down—or any representatives of society that came into my power—just as it ground me down. This is the beginning of my triumph. You, you three—represent all I hated. Wealth—constituted authority—softness and ease and luxury. I'll teach you what softness is! You'll know what a heaven a hard bed can be, after a day in the wind off Bering Straits. You'll find out what luxury is, too." His wild laugh blew like a wind through the room. "And incidentally, my fur output will be increased by three, my final dream brought three times nearer.

"What I want from you I'll take. You're in hell if there is such a place—and you'll know it plenty soon." He turned to Ned, his lip curled in scorn. "Your feeble arms over the chair back won't protect that girl if I make up my mind I want her. At present you may be safe from that—simply because some conquests aren't any pleasure if they're made with force. If I want either of you," his gaze flashed toward Bess, "I'm not afraid that I'll have to descend to force to get you.

"When I said to abandon hope I meant it. You have no boat, and I'll give you no chance to make one. The distance is too great across the ice ever to make it through; besides, you won't be given a chance to try. No ships will come here to look for you. No matter what wealth and power you represented down there, you'll be forgotten soon enough. Others will take your place, other girls will reign at the balls, and other men will spend your money. You will be up here, as lost and forgotten as if you were in the real hell you'll go to in the end.

"Even if your doting fathers should send out a search party, they will overlook this little island. It was just a freak of the currents that you landed here—I don't see yet why you weren't blown to Tzar Island, immediately east of here. When they find you aren't there, and pick up any other lifeboats from your ship that in all probability landed there, they'll be glad enough to turn around and go back. Especially if they see your lifeboat floating bottom upward in the water!

"You should never have come to the North, you three! Society should never move from the civilization that has been built to protect it—otherwise it will find forces too big and too cruel to master. You're all weaklings, soft as putty—without the nerve of a ptarmigan. Already I've crushed the resistance out of you. All my life I've dreamed of some such chance as this, and yet you can't fight enough to make it interesting for me. You'll be docile, hopeless slaves until you die."



He paused, scanning their pale, drawn faces. He turned to Ned first, but the latter was too immersed in his own despair ever to return his stare. Lenore didn't raise her golden head to meet his eyes. But before his gaze ever got to her, Bess was on her feet.

"Don't be too sure of yourself," she cautioned quickly. He looked with sudden amazement into her kindling eyes. "Men like you have gone in the face of society before. You're not so far up here that the arm of the law can't reach you."

The blond man smiled into her earnest face. "Go on, my dear," he urged.

"It's got you once, and it'll get you again. And I warn you that if you put one indignity on us, do one thing you've said—you'll pay for it in the end—just as you'll pay for that fiendish crime you committed to-day."

As her eyes met his, straight and unfaltering, the expression of contemptuous amazement died in his face. Presently his interest seemed to quicken. It was as if he had seen her for the first time, searching eyes resting first on hers, then on her lips, dropping down over her athletic form, and again into her eyes. He seemed lost in sinister speculations.

Something seemed strained, ready to break. The four in the little circle made no motion, all of them inert and frozen like characters in a dream. And then, before that speculative, searching gaze—a gaze unlike any that he had bent on Lenore—her eyes faltered from his. Ned felt a wild, impotent fury like live steam in his brain.

Bess's little mutiny was already quelled. Her blue eyes were black with terror.

## XVI

DOOMSDORF had seemingly achieved his purpose, and his prisoners lay crushed in his hands. A fear infinitely worse than that of toil or hardship had evidently killed the fighting spirit in Bess; Lenore had been broken by Doomsdorf's first words. And now all the structure of Ned's life had seemingly toppled about him.

The lesson that Doomsdorf taught had gone deep, not to be forgotten in any happier moment that life might have in store for him. There was no blowing into flame the ashes of his old philosophy. It was dead and cold in his breast; no matter what turn fate should take, his old conceit and self-sufficiency could never come again. He was down to earth at last. The game had been too big for him. The old Ned Cornet was dead, and only a broken, impotent, hopeless thing was left to dwell in his battered body.

He had found the training camp, but it was more bitter than ever his father had hinted that it could be. Indeed Godfrey Cornet, in those brooding prophecies at which his son had laughed, had been all too hopeful regarding it. He had said there was a way through and on, always there was a way through and on; but here the only out-trail was one of infinite shadow to an unknown destination. Death—*that* was the way out. *That* was the only way.

It was curious how easy it was to think of death. Formerly the word had invoked a sense of something infinitely distant, nothing that could seemingly touch him closely, a thought that never came clearly into focus in his brain. All at once it had showed itself as the most real of all realities. It might be his before another night, before the end of the present hour. It had come quick enough to Knutsen. The least resistance to Doomsdorf's will would bring it on himself. Many things were lies, and the false was hard to tell from the true, but in this regard there was no chance for question. Doomsdorf would strike the life from him in an instant at the first hint of revolt.

It was wholly conceivable that such a thing could occur. Ned could endure grinding toil till he died; even such personal abuse as he had received an hour or so before might find him crushed and unresisting, but yet there remained certain offenses that could not be endured. Ned could not forget that both Lenore and Bess were wholly in Doomsdorf's power. A brutal, savage man, it was all too easy to believe that the time would come soon

when he would forget the half-promise he had given them. The smoky gaze that he had bent toward Bess meant, perhaps, that he was already forgetting it. In that case would there be anything for him but to fight and die? No matter how great a weakling he had been, the last mandate of his honor demanded that. And a bitterness ineffable descended upon him when he realized that even such bravery could not in the least help the two girls,—that his death would be as unavailing and impotent as his life.

How false he had been to himself and his birthright! He had been living in a fool's paradise, and he had fallen from it into hell! Esau sold his birthright for a mess of pottage: for less return Ned had sold himself into slavery. He had been a member of a dominant race, the son of a mighty breed that wrested the soil from the wilderness and built strong cities on the desolate plains; but he had wasted his patrimony of strength and manhood. A parlor knight, he had leaned upon his father's sword rather than learning to wield his own; and he had fallen vanquished the instant that he had left its flashing ring of steel.

For in this moment of unspeakable remorse, he found he could blame no one but himself for the disaster. Every year men traversed these desolate waters to buy furs from the Indians; he had been in a staunch boat, and with a little care, a little foresight, the journey could have been made in perfect safety. It was a man's venture, surely; but he could have carried through if he had met it like a man instead of a weakling. He knew perfectly that it was his own recklessness and folly that set the cups of burning liquor before Captain Knutsen as he stood at his wheel. It was his own unpardonable conceit, his own self-sufficiency that made him start out to meet the North half prepared, daring to disturb its ancient silences with the sound of his wild revelry; and to live, in its grim desolation, the same trivial life he lived at home. He hadn't even brought a pistol. Sensing his weakness and his unpreparedness, Doomsdorf hadn't even done him the honor of searching him for one.

Knutsen's death was on his own head: the life of utter wretchedness and hopelessness and insult that lay before Lenore and Bess was his own doing, too. It wouldn't compensate to die in their defense, merely leaving them continued helpless prey to Doomsdorf. He saw now, with this new vision that had come to him, that his only possible course was to live and do what he could in atonement. He mustn't think of himself any more. All his life he had thought of nothing but himself; self-love had been his curse to the end of the chapter,—and now he could not make himself believe but that it had been some way intertwined in his love for Lenore. He would have liked to give himself credit for that, at least—unselfish devotion, these past years, to

Lenore—but even this stuck in his throat. But his love for her would be unbiased by self-love now. He would give all of himself now—holding nothing back.

In spite of his own despair, his own bitter hopelessness, he must do what he could to keep hope alive in Lenore and Bess. It was the only chance he had to pay, even in the most pitiful, slight degree for what he had done to them. He must always try to make their lot easier, doing their work when he could, maintaining an attitude of cheer, living the lie of hope when hope seemed dead in his breast.

Ned Cornet was awake at last. He knew himself, his generation, the full enormity of his own folly, the unredeemed falsehood of his old philosophy. Better still, he knew what lay before him, not only the remorselessness of his punishment but also his atonement: doing willingly and cheerfully the little he could to lighten the burdens of his innocent victims. He could have *that* to live for, at least, doing the feeble little that he could. And that is why, when Doomsdorf looked at him again, he found him in some way straightened, his eyes more steadfast, his lips in a firmer, stronger line.

“Glad to see you’re bucking up,” he commented lightly.

Ned turned soberly. “I *am* bucking up,” he answered. “I see now that you’ve gone into something you can’t get away with. Miss Gilbert was right; in the end you’ll find yourself laid out by the heels.”

It can be said for Ned, for the reality of his resolve, that his words seemed to ring with conviction, giving no sign of the utter despair that was in his heart. Of course he was speaking them for the ears of Lenore and Bess, in order to encourage them.

“You think so, eh?” Doomsdorf yawned and stretched his arms. “Just try something—that’s all. And since you’re feeling so good, I don’t see why you shouldn’t get to work. You can still put in a fairly good morning. And you”—he turned, with the catlike swiftness that marked so many of his movements, toward Bess—“what’s your name?”

“You just heard him say. Miss Gilbert——”

“You can forget you are a ‘Miss.’ You’re a squaw out here—and can do squaw’s work. What’s your first name?”

Bess, in her misery, looked at him with dread. “Bess Gilbert,” she answered quietly.

“Bess it will be. Lenore, I think you call the other—and Ned. Good thing to know first names, since we’ve got an uncertain number of years before us. Well, I suggest that all three of you go out and see what you can do about

wood. You'll have to cut some and split it. I've been lazy about laying in a winter store."

Much to his amazement, Ned stood erect, pulled down his cap over his brown curls, and buttoned his coat. "I'll see what we can do," he answered straightforwardly. "I have, though, one thing to ask."

"What is it——"

"That you let the two girls take it easy to-day—and get warmed through. If you sent them out now, weakened as they are, it might very easily mean pneumonia and death. It's to your interest to keep them alive."

"It's to my interest, surely—but don't rely on that to the extent of showing too much independence. The human body can stand a lot before it gives up the ghost. The human voice can do a lot of screaming. I know, because I've seen. I don't mind running a little risk with human life to get my way, and I know several things, short of actual killing, that go toward enforcing obedience and quelling mutiny."

Lenore, staring wildly at him, caught her breath in a sob. "You don't mean——"

Doomsdorf did not look at her. He still smiled down at Ned. "You've never felt a knout, have you, on the naked back?" he asked sweetly. "I found out what they were like in Siberia, and with the hope of showing some one else, I took one out—in my boot. It's half-killed many a man—but I only know one man that it's completely killed. He was a guard—and I found out just how many blows it takes. You can stop a hundred—fifty—perhaps only ten before that number, and life still lingers." The man yawned again. "But your request is granted—so far as Lenore is concerned. You can leave her here for me to entertain. Bess has spirit enough to talk—she has undoubtedly spirit enough to work."

Ned, deeply appalled and unspeakably revolted, looked to Lenore for directions. Her glorious head was on her arms, and she shook it in utter misery. "I can't go out there now," she said. "I'll just die if I do—I'm so cold still, so weakened. I wish I had died out there in the storm."

Ned turned once more to Doomsdorf. "She's telling the truth—I think she simply can't stand to go," he urged gravely. "But though she's absolutely in your power, there are some things even a beast can't do. You just the same as gave me your word——"

"There are things a beast can't do, but I'm not a beast. There's nothing I can't do that I want to do. I make no promises—just the same, for this time, I don't think you need be afraid. I don't take everything that comes along in the way of a woman. I want a woman of thews!"

Bess dared not look at him, but she felt the insult of his searching gaze. She buttoned her coat tight, then stood waiting. An instant later Doomsdorf was holding the door open for her as she went to her toil.

## XVII

THERE were a number of axes in the little work-room that comprised one end of the long cabin, and Doomsdorf flung three of them over his shoulder. "Right up through here," he urged, pointing to the little hillside behind the cabin. "Of course I can't let you cut fuel from these trees so close to the house. You, as city people, surely know something about house beautifying. You'll have to carry the wood a little farther—but you won't mind, when you know it's for the sake of beauty."

The snow was noticeably deeper in the two hours since they had come. It clung to Ned's trouser legs almost to the knees, soaking through his thin walking shoes; and both he and Bess found it some degree of labor just to push through it. Doomsdorf halted them before one of the half-grown spruce.

"Here's a good one," he commented. "Just beyond is another. You can each take one—cut them down with your axes and then hack them into two-foot lengths for the stove. Better split each length into three pieces—the larger ones, anyway. If you have time, you can carry it down to the cabin."

He swung his axes down from his shoulder. He seemed to be handling them with particular care, but several seconds elapsed before Ned realized that the moment had some slight element of drama. Heretofore he had been unable to observe that Doomsdorf was in the least on guard against his prisoners. He had seemingly taken no obvious precautions in his own defense. It was plain to see, however, that he did not intend to put axes into the hands of these two foes until he had one ready to swing himself.

He took the handle of the largest axe in his right hand; with his left he extended the other two implements, blades up, to Ned and Bess. "I suppose you know we've had no experience——" Ned began.

"It doesn't matter. Just be careful the trees don't fall on you. They sometimes do, you know, on amateur woodsmen. The rest is plain brute strength and awkwardness." He handed them each, from his pocket, a piece of dried substance that looked like bark. "Here's a piece of jerked caribou each—it ought to keep life in your bodies. And the sooner you get your wood cut and split, the sooner you see any more."

Then he turned and left them to their toil.

Thus began a bitter hour for Ned. He found the mere work of biting through the thick trunk with his axe cost him his breath and strained his patience to the limit. It wasn't as easy as it looked. He did not strike true; the blade made irregular white gashes in the bark; his blows seemed to lack power. The great, ragged wound deepened but slowly.

Finally it was half through the trunk, and yet the tree stood seemingly as sturdy as ever. Reckless from fatigue, he chopped on more fiercely than ever. And suddenly, with the grinding noise of breaking wood, the tree started to fall.

And at that instant Ned was face to face with the exigency of leaping for his life. The tree did not fall in the direction planned. An instant before, weary and aching and out of breath, Ned would have believed himself incapable of swift and powerful motion. As that young spruce shattered down toward him, like the club of a giant aimed to strike out his life, a supernatural power seemed to snatch him to one side. Without realization of effort, the needed muscles contracted with startling force, and he sprang like a distance jumper to safety.

But he didn't jump too soon or too far. The branches of the tree lashed at him as it descended, hurling him headlong in the snow. And thereafter there were three things to cause him thought.

One of them was the attitude of Bess,—the girl to whom, in weeks past, he had shown hardly decent courtesy: the same girl whom in childish fury he had cursed the bitter, eventful night just gone. Above the roar of the falling tree he heard her quick, half-strangled gasp of horror.

The sound seemed to have the qualities that made toward a perfect after-image; because in the silence that followed, as he lay in the soft snow, and the crash of the fallen tree echoed into nothingness, it still lingered, every tone perfect and clear, in his mind's ear. There was no denying its tone of ineffable dismay. Evidently Bess was of a forgiving disposition; in spite of his offense of the past night she had evidently no desire to see him crushed into jelly under that giant's blow. Some way, it had never occurred to him that the girl would harbor a kind thought for him again. She had been right and he had been wrong; in an effort to serve him she had received only his curse, and her present desperate position, worse perhaps than either his own or Lenore's, was due wholly to his own folly. She had not taken part in the orgy of the night before, so not the least echo of responsibility could be put on her. Yet she didn't hate him. She had cried out in real agony when she thought he was about to die.



He thought upon this matter as he lay in the soft snow whence the descending branches of the tree had hurled him. He didn't have many seconds to think about it. Further eccentricity on the part of Bess swiftly gave him additional cause for reflection. She had not only cried out, but she ran to him with the speed of a deer. She was by his side almost before he was aware of the scope of the accident.

The sobbing cry he had heard could very likely be attributed merely to that instinctive horror that a sensitive girl would feel at an impending tragedy, wholly apart from personal interest in the victim; but for a few seconds Ned was absolutely at a loss to explain that drawn, white, terrified face above him. In fear for him, Bess was almost at the point of absolute collapse herself. Nor could mere impersonal horror explain her flying leap to reach his side,—like a snowbird over the drifts. It meant more than mere forgiveness for the terrible pass to which he had brought her. In a few seconds of clear thinking he thought he saw the truth: that even after all that was past Bess still looked to him for her hope, that she regarded him still as her defense against Doomsdorf; and that his death would leave her absolutely bereft. He was a man, and she still dreamed that he might save her.

The result was a quick sense of shame of his own inadequacy. It is not good to know oneself a failure in the face of woman's trust. Yet the effect of the little scene was largely good, for it served to strengthen Ned's resolve to spare the girls in every way he could, and by his own feigned hope to keep them from despair. Above all, he found an increased admiration for Bess. Instead of a silly prude, a killjoy for the party, she had shown herself as a sportswoman to the last fiber. She had been a friend when she had every right to be an enemy; she had shown spirit and character when women of lesser metal would have been irremediably crushed. He was far away now from the old barriers of caste. There was no reason, on this barren, dreadful isle, why he shouldn't accept all the friendship she would give him and give his own in return.

But this subject was only one of three that suddenly wakened him to increased mental activity. If he were amazed at Bess, he was no less amazed at himself. He had been tired out, hopeless, out of wind, hardly able to swing his arms, and yet he had managed to leap out of seeming certain death. The unmistakable inference was that the body in which his spirit had dwelt for thirty years had strength and possibilities of which hitherto he had been unaware. In the second of crisis he had shown a perfect coördination of brain and muscle, an accuracy of transmission of the brain-messages that were conducted along his nerves, and a certain sureness of instinct that he

had never dreamed he possessed. It would have been very easy to have jumped the wrong way. Yet he had jumped the right way—the only possible way to avoid death—choosing infallibly the nearest point of safety and hurling himself directly toward it. Perhaps it would have been better to have stayed where he was, to have let the tree crush the life out of him and be done with Hell Isle for good, yet a power beyond himself had carried him out of danger. The point offered interesting possibilities. Could it be that he had had the makings of a man in him all these years and had never been aware of it? Could he dare hope that this side of him might be developed, in the hard years to come, so that he might be better able to endure the grinding toil and hardship? The thought wasn't really *hope*—he didn't believe that *hope* would ever visit him again—it was only an instant's rift, dim as twilight, in the gloom of his despair. The most he could ever hope to do was to fortify himself in order to take more and more of the girl's hardship upon his shoulders.

Thirdly he gave some thought to the matter of felling trees. It was a more complex matter than he had at first supposed. Evidently he had gone about it in the wrong way. It would pay to have more respect for the woodsman's science if he did not wish to come to an early end beneath a falling tree. He might not be so quick to dodge again.

Bess was staring wide-eyed into his face; and he smiled quietly in reassurance. "Not hurt at all," he told her. Quickly he climbed to his feet. "See that you don't do the same thing that I did."

Delighted that he had not been hurt but a little aghast at what heart's secret she might have revealed in running to his aid, she started to go back to her toil. But Ned had already reached some conclusions about tree-felling. He walked with her to her fallen axe, then inspected the deep cut she had already made in her tree.

"You're doing the same thing I did, sure enough," he observed. "The tree will fall your way and crush you. Let me think."

A moment later he took his axe and put in a few more strokes in the same place. It was the danger point, he thought: a deeper cut might fell the tree prematurely. Presently he crossed to the opposite side, signaled Bess out of danger, and began to hack the tree again, making a cut somewhat above that started on the other side of the trunk. He chopped sturdily; and in a moment the tree started to fall, safely and in an opposite direction.

He uttered some small sound of triumph; but it was a real tragedy to have the tree fall against a near-by tree and lodge. Again he had failed to exercise proper foresight.

There was nothing to do but climb into the adjoining tree with his axe and laboriously cut the lodged tree away. In the meantime Bess went to work on the first tree felled, trimming it of its limbs so to cut it into lengths.

Ned joined her at the work, but long before the first tree was cut into fuel, both were at the edge of utter exhaustion. The point of fatigue he had reached that morning in rowing, when he had rested from the sheer inability to take another stroke, was already far past. There had been a point, some time back, when every muscle of his body had throbbed with a burning ache, when pain crept all over him like a slow fire, but that too was largely passed now. His brain was dulled; he felt baffled and estranged as if in a dream. It was more like a nightmare now,—his axe swinging eternally in his arms, the chips flying, one after another.

He seemed to move so slowly. Hours were passing, one after another, and still great lengths of the trees remained to cut and split. But they couldn't stop and rest. They dared not return to the cabin till the work was done: the brute that was their master would be glad of an excuse to lay on the lash. They had been taught what mercy to expect from him. Here was one reality that their fatigue could not blunt: their cruel master waiting in the cabin. As the rest of their conscious world faded and dimmed he was ever more vivid, ever more real. The time soon came when he filled all the space in their thoughts.

For Ned life was suddenly immensely simplified. All the complexities of his old life had suddenly ceased to matter: indeed that had perished from his consciousness. The world was forgotten, he had no energy to waste in remembering how he had come hence, even who he was. From the supreme egoist, knowing no world but that of which his own ego was the orbit, to a faltering child hardly aware of his own identity: thus had Ned changed in a single night. The individual who had been Ned Cornet had almost ceased to be; and in his place was a helpless pawn of a cruel and remorseless fate.

He knew Fate now. Through the mists of this nightmare that was upon him he saw the Jester with his bells. And as he looked, the sharp, ironic face grew savage, brutal, half-covered with blond hair; the motley became a cap of silver fox. But this changed too, as his axe swung in the air. Once more the face was sharp, but still unutterably terrible to see; but it was livid now, as if sulphurous flames were playing upon it. And the foot—he saw the foot plain against the snow. It was unspeakable, filling him with cold horror all his length. It was some way cloven and ghastly.

The vision passed, broken and dissolved by the noise of the axe on the tough wood. He knew Fate now. He had seen him in all his forms. In his

folly he had scorned him, taunted him by his insolence, had dared to dream that he was greater than Fate, immune from his persecution. If this torment ended now, he had paid the price. He had atoned for everything already if he did not lift the axe again. Yet only eternity lay ahead.

Doomsdorf had seemed almost incredible to him at first. It was as if he couldn't possibly be true: a figment of nightmare that would vanish as soon as he wakened. But he was real enough now. Nothing was left to him but the knowledge how real he was.

He must not rest, he must not pause till the work was done. The fact that Bess had fallen, fainting, in the snow, did not affect him; he must swing his axe and hew the wood. Day was dying. Grayness was creeping in from the sea. It was like the essence of the sea itself, all gray, gray like his dreams, gray like the ashes of his hopes. He must finish the two trees before the darkness came down and kept him from seeing where to sink the blade. Otherwise it wouldn't matter—day or night, one year or another. Time had ceased to count; seemingly it had almost ceased to move. But the *knout* would be waiting, hardened and sharp with wire, if he didn't do his work. Cold fear laid hold of him again.

He did not know that this cold that was upon him was not only that of fear. His clothes had been wet through by perspiration and melted snow, and now the bitter winds off the sea were getting to him. Still he swung his axe. It was always harder to strike true; the tough lengths took ever more blows to split. The time soon came when he was no longer aware of the blows against the wood. The axe swung automatically in his arms; even sense of effort was gone from him. The only reality that lived in him now, in that misty twilight, was the knowledge that he must get through.

It was too dark to see, now, how much of the work remained. The night was cheating him, after all. He struck once more at the tough length that lay at his feet—a piece at which he had already struck uncounted blows. He gave all his waning strength to the effort.

The length split open, but the axe slipped out of his bleeding hands, falling somewhere in the shadows beyond. He must crawl after it; he didn't know how many more lengths there were to split. It was strange that he couldn't keep his feet. And how deep and still was the night that dropped over him!

How long he groped for the axe handle in the snow he never knew. But he lay still at last. Twilight deepened about him, and the wind wept like a ghost risen from the sea. The very flame of his life was burning down to embers.

Thus it came about that Doomsdorf missed the sound of his axe against the wood. Swinging a lantern, a titantic figure among the snow-laden trees, he tramped down to investigate. Bess, semi-conscious again, wakened when the lantern light danced into her eyes. But it took him some little time to see Ned's dark form in the snow.

The reason was, it was lying behind a mighty pile of split fuel. The light showed that only green branches, too small to be of value, remained of the two spruce. And Doomsdorf grunted, a wondering oath, deep in his throat.

They had been faithful slaves. Putting his mighty arm around them, each in turn, he half carried, half dragged them into the warmth of the cabin.

## XVIII

NED was spared the misery and despair that overswept Doomsdorf's cabin the first night of his imprisonment. His master dropped him on the floor by the stove, and there he lay, seemingly without life, the whole night through. Even the sound of the wind could not get down into that dim region of half-coma where he was: he heard neither its weird chant on the cabin roof, or that eerie, sobbing song that it made to the sea, seemingly the articulation of the troubled soul of the universe. He did not see the snow piling deeper on the window ledge; nor sit straining in the dreadful, gathering silence of the Arctic night. The promised reward of food was not his because he could not get up to take it.

Yet he was not always deeply insensible. Sometimes he would waken with a knowledge of wracking pain in his muscles, and sometimes cold would creep over him. Once he came to himself with the realization that some one was administering to him. Soft, gentle hands were removing his wet, outer garments, rolling him gently over in order to get at them, slipping off his wet shoes and stockings. A great tenderness swept over him, and he smiled wanly in the lantern light.

Since he was a child, before the world was ever too much with him, no living human being had seen him smile in quite this way. It was a smile of utter simplicity, childishly sweet, and yet brave too,—as if he were trying to hearten some one who was distressed about him. He didn't feel the dropping tears that were the answer to that smile, nor feel the heart's glow, dear beyond all naming, that it wakened. To the girl who, scarcely able herself to stand erect, had crept from her warm cot to serve him, it seemed almost to atone for everything, to compensate for all she had endured.

"Lenore?" the man whispered feebly.

But there was no spoken answer out of the shadow at the edge of the lantern light. Perhaps there was the faint sound, like a gasp, almost as if a terrible truth that was for an instant forgotten had been recalled again; and perhaps the administering hands halted in their work for one part of an instant. But at once they continued to ply about him, so strong and capable, and yet so ineffably gentle. It couldn't be Lenore, of course. No wonder,—Lenore had suffered grievously from the events of the past night. In his half-delirium it occurred to him that it might be his mother. There had been times

in the past, when his mother had come to his bedside in this same way, with this same gentleness, during his boyhood sicknesses. But he couldn't remain awake to think about it. His wet, clinging clothes had been removed, and blankets, already warmed, were being wrapped about him. He fell into deep, restful sleep.

But it ended all too soon. A great hand shook him, snatching him into a sitting position, and a great, bearded face, unspeakably terrible in the weird, yellow light of the lantern, showed close to his own. "Up and out," he was shouting. "It'll be light enough to work by the time you have breakfast. Out before I boot you out."

He meant what he said. Already his cruel boot was drawn back. Ned's conscious world returned to him in one mighty sweep, like a cruel, white light bursting upon tired eyes. The full dreadfulness of his lot, forgotten in his hours of sleep, was recalled more vividly than ever. It wasn't just a dream, to be dispersed on wakening. Even yesterday's blessed murk of unreality, dimming everything and dulling all his perceptions, was gone now that he was refreshed by sleep. His brain worked clear, and he saw all things as they were. And the black wall of hopelessness seemed unbroken.

Yet instantly he remembered Lenore. At least he must continue to try to shelter her—even to make conditions easy as possible for Bess. His love for the former was the one happiness of his past life that he had left; and he didn't forget his obligation to the latter. Bess was already up, building up the fire at Doomsdorf's command, but Lenore, with whom she had slept, still lay sobbing on her cot.

Ned pulled on his clothes, scarcely wondering at the fact that they were hanging, miraculously dry, back of the stove; and immediately hurried to Lenore's side. He forgot his own aching muscles in distress for her; and his arms went about her, drawing her face to his own.

"Oh, my girl, you mustn't cry," he told her, with a world of compassion in his tone. "I'll take care of you. Don't you know I will——?"

But with tragic face Lenore drew back from his arms. "*How* can you take care of me?" she asked with immeasurable bitterness. "Can you stand against that brute——?"

"Hush——!"

"Of course you can't. You're even afraid to speak his name."

"Oh, my dear! Don't draw away." The man's voice was pleading. "I was just afraid he'd take some awful punishment from you. Of course I'm helpless now——"

“Then how can you take care of me?” she demanded again, for a moment forgetting her despair in her anger at him. “Can you make him let me stay in bed, instead of going out to die in this awful snow? Death—that’s all there’s here for me. And the quicker it comes the better.”

She sobbed again, and he tried in vain to comfort her. “We’ll come through,” he whispered. “I’ll make everything as light as I can——”

But she thrust off his caressing hands. “I don’t want you to touch me,” she told him tragically. “You can’t make things light for me, in this living hell. And until you can protect me from that man, and save me, you can keep your kisses. Oh, why did you ever bring me here?”

“I suppose—because I loved you.”

“You showed it, in taking me into this awful land in an unsafe boat. You can keep your love. I wish I’d never seen you.”

Just a moment his hands dropped to his sides, and he showed her the white, drawn visage of utter despair. Yet he must not hold these words against her. Surely she had cause for them; perhaps she would find him some tenderness when she saw how hard he had tried to serve her, to ease her lot. Her last words recalled his own that he had spoken to Bess aboard the *Charon*: if he had railed as he had to Bess for such little cause, at least he must not blame Lenore, even considering the fact of their love, in such a moment as this. He *had* brought her from her home and to this pass. Save for him, she would be safe in her native city, not a slave to an inhuman master on this godless island.

He looked down at her steadfastly. “I can’t keep my love,” he told her earnestly. “I gave it to you long ago, and it’s yours still. That love is the one thing I have left to live for here; the one thing that’s left of my old life. I’m going to continue to watch over you, to help you all I can, to do as much of your work as possible; to stand between you and Doomsdorf with my own life. I’ve learned, in this last day, that love is a spar to cling to when everything else is lost, the most important and the greatest blessing of all. And I’m not going to stop loving you, whether you want me to or not. I’m going to fight for you—to the end.”

“And in the end I’ll die,” she commented bitterly.

Doomsdorf reëntered the room then, gazing at them in amused contempt, and Ned instinctively straightened.

“I trust you’re not hatching mutiny?” the sardonic voice came out.

“Not just now,” Ned answered with some spirit. “There’s not much use to hatch mutiny, things being as they are.”



“You don’t say! There’s a rifle on the wall——”

“Always empty——”

“But the pistol I carry is always loaded. Why don’t you try to take it away from me?” Then his voice changed, surly and rumbling again. “But enough of that nonsense. You know what would happen to you if you tried anything—I’ve told you that already. There’s work to do to-day. There’s got to be another cabin—logs cut, built up, roof put on—a place for the three of you to bunk. That’s the work to-day. The three of you ought to get a big piece of it done to-day——”

“Miss Hardenworth? Is she well enough? Couldn’t she help your wife with the housework to-day?”

“It will take all three of you to do the work I’ll lay out. Lenore can learn to do her stint with the others. And hereafter, when you address me, call me ‘Sir.’ A mere matter of employer’s discipline——”

Because he knew his master, Ned nodded in agreement. “Yes, sir,” he returned simply. “One thing else. I can’t be expected to do real work in this kind of clothes. You’ve laid out furs and skins for the girls; I want to get something too that will keep me warm and dry.”

“I’m not responsible for the clothes you brought with you. You should have had greater respect for the North. Besides, it gives me pleasure, I assure you, to see you dressed as you are. It tones up the whole party.”

Stripped of his late conceit that might otherwise have concealed it from him, Ned caught every vestige of the man’s irony. “Do I get the warm clothes?” he demanded bluntly.

“When you earn them,” was the answer. “In a few days more you’ll be running out your traps, and everything you catch, at first, you can keep. You’ve got to prove yourself smarter than the animals before you get the right to wear their skins.”

## XIX

THE previous day and night had been full of revelation for Ned; and as he started forth from the cabin with his axe, there occurred a little scene that tended even further to illustrate his changing viewpoint. Gloating with triumph at the younger man's subjection, Doomsdorf called sardonically from the cabin doorway.

"I trust I can't help you in any way?" he asked.

Discerning the premeditated insult in his tone, Ned whirled to face him. Then for an instant he stood shivering with wrath.

"Yes," he answered. His promise to say "sir" was forgotten in his rage. "You can at least treat me with the respect deserved by a good workman."

The words came naturally to his lips. It was as if they reflected a thought that he had considered long, instead of the inspiration of the moment. The truth was that, four days before, he had never known that good work and good workmen were entitled to respect. The world's labor had seemed apart from his life; the subject a stupid one not worth his thought and interest. In one terrible day Ned had found out what the word work meant. He had learned what a reality it was. All at once he saw in it a possible answer to life itself.

He stood aghast at the magnitude of his discovery. Why, *work* was the beginning and the end of everything. Reaching back to the beginnings of creation, extending clear until the last soul in heaven had passed on and through the training camp of the last hereafter, it was the thing that counted most. He had never thought about it in particular before. Strangely it had not even occurred to him that the civilization that he worshipped, all the luxury and richness that he loved, had been possible only through the toil of human hands and brains.

Suddenly he knew that his father had been right and he had been wrong. The life of the humblest worker had been worth more than his. It would have been better for him to die, that long-ago night of the automobile accident, than for Bess to lose one of her working hands! He had been contemptuous of work and workers, but had not his own assumption of superiority been chiefly based upon the achievements of working men who had gone before him? What could he claim for himself that could even put him on the par with the great mass of manhood, much less make him their

superior? He had played when there was work to do, shirked his load when the backs of better men were bent.

In his heart Ned had been a little ashamed of his father. He had felt it would have been more to his credit if the wealth that sustained him should have originated several generations farther back, instead of by the sole efforts of Godfrey Cornet. It had made Ned himself feel almost like one of the *nouveaux riches*. The more the blood of success was thinned, it seemed, the bluer it was; and it wasn't easy to confess, especially to certain young English bloods, that the name emblazoned in electric lights across a great house of trade was, but one generation removed, his own. He had particularly deplored his father's tendency to mention, in any company, his own early struggles, the poverty from which he sprung. But how true and genuine was the shame he felt now at that false shame! In this moment of revelation he saw his father plainly and knew him for the sturdy old warrior, the man of prowess, most of all for the sterling aristocrat that he was. He was a good workman: need anything more be said?

Ever since his college days he had snubbed him, patronized him, disregarded his teachings whereby he might have come into his own manhood. He had never respected good work or good workmen; and now it was fitting retribution that he should spend his natural life in the most grinding, bitter work. Even now he was making amends for his folly at the hands of the most cruel, ironical fate that could befall him. His axe was in his arms; his savage taskmaster faced him from the cabin doorway.

All these thoughts coursed through Ned's keenly wakened brain in an instant. They seemed as instantaneous as the flood of wrath that had swept through him at Doomsdorf's irony. And now would he suffer some unspeakable punishment for insolence to his master?

But little, amused lines came about Doomsdorf's fierce eyes. "A good workman, eh?" he echoed. "Yes, you did work fair enough yesterday. Wait just a minute."

He turned into his door, in a moment reappearing with a saw and several iron wedges from among his supplies of tools. He put them in Ned's hands, and the latter received them with a delight never experienced at any favor of fortune in the past. The great penalty of such a life as he had lived, wherein almost every material thing came into his hands at his wish, is that it costs the power to feel delight, the simple joy and gratitude of children; but evidently Ned was learning how again. Just a saw of steel and wedges of iron for splitting! Workmen's tools that he once regarded with contempt. But oh, they would save him many a weary hour of labor. The saw could cut

through the fallen logs in half the time he could hack them with his axe; they could be split in half the number of strokes with the aid of the wedges.

He went to his toil; and he was a little amazed at how quickly he felled the first of the tall spruce. Seemingly his yesterday's toil had bestowed upon him certain valuable knowledge. His strokes seemed to be more true: they even had a greater degree of power for the same amount of effort. There were certain angles by which he could get the best results: he would learn them, too—sooner or later.

As he worked, the stiffness and pain that yesterday's toil had left in his muscles seemed to pass away. The axe swung easily in his arms. When the first tree was chopped down, he set Lenore and Bess at trimming off the branches and sawing twelve-foot logs for the hut.

It came about that he chopped down several trees before the two girls had finished cutting and trimming the first. Seemingly Lenore had not yet recovered from the trying experience of two nights before, for she wholly failed to do any part of the work. What was done at this end of the labor Bess did alone. The unmistakable inference was that Ned would have to double his own speed in order to avoid the lash at night.

Yet he felt no resentment. Lenore was even more inured to luxury and ease than he himself: evidently the grinding physical labor was infinitely beyond her. Bess, however, still toiled bravely with axe and saw.

The day turned out to be not greatly different from the one preceding. Again Ned worked to absolute exhaustion: the only apparent change seemed to be that he accomplished a greater amount of work before he finally fell insensible in the snow. This was the twilight hour, and prone in the snow he lay like a warrior among his fallen. About him was a ring of trees chopped down and, with Bess's aid, trimmed of their limbs, notched and sawed into lengths for the cabin. They had only to be lifted, one upon another, to form the cabin walls.

Bess had collapsed too as the twilight hour drew on; and Lenore alone was able to walk unaided to the shack. Again Ned lay insensible on the floor beside the stove, but to-night, long past the supper hour, he was able to remove his own wet clothes and to devour some of the unsavory left-overs from the meal. Again the night fell over Hell Island, tremulous and throbbing with all the mighty passions of the wild, and again dawn came with its gray light on the snow. And like some insensible, mechanical thing Ned rose to toil again.

The third day was given to lifting the great logs, one upon another, for the walls of the cabin. It was, in reality, the hardest work he had yet done, as

to shift each log into place took every ounce of lifting power the man had. The girls could help him but little here, for both of them together did not seem to be able to handle an end of the great logs. He found he had to lift each end in turn.

Yet he was able to drag to the cabin to-night, and torpid with fatigue, take his place at the crude supper table. He was hardly conscious that he was eating—lifting the food to his mouth as mechanically as he had lifted the great logs into place toward the end of the day—and the faces opposite him were as those seen in a dream, never in the full light, vague and dim like ghosts. Sometimes he tried to smile at one of them—as if by a long-remembered instinct—and sometimes one of the assembled group—a different face than that to which he addressed his smiles—seemed to be smiling at him, deep-blue eyes curiously lustrous as if with tears. Then there was a brown, inscrutable face that just now and then appeared out of the shadow, and a stealing, slipping, silent some one that belonged to it,—some one that now and then brought food and put it on the table.

But none of these faces went home to him like the great, hairy visage of the demon that sat opposite. Ned eyed him covertly throughout the meal, wondering every time he moved in his chair if he were getting up to procure his whip, flinching every time the great arm moved swiftly across the table. He didn't remember getting up from his chair, stripping off part of his wet clothes and falling among the blankets that Doomsdorf had left for his use on the floor. Almost at once it was dawn again.

A new, more vivid consciousness was upon him when he wakened. The stabbing ache in his legs and arms was mostly worn off now; but there was a sharp pain in the small of his back that at first seemed absolutely unendurable. But it wailed, too, as he went to the work of finishing the cabin, laying the roof and hanging the crude door. To-day he was conscious of greater physical power, of more prolonged effort without fatigue. The whole island world was more vivid and clear than ever before.

It was with a certain vague quality of pleasure that he regarded this cabin he had built with his own hands, finished now, except for the chinking of the logs. It was the first creative work he had ever done, and he looked at it and saw that it was good.

He could forget, now, the dreadful, heart-breaking toil he had put into it. It had almost killed him, but he was no worse for it now. Indeed his arms were somewhat stronger, he was even better equipped to meet the next, greater task that Doomsdorf appointed him. It was curious that, slave of a

cruel taskmaster that he was, he experienced a dim echo of something that was akin to a new self-respect.

These logs, laid one upon another, were visible proof that so far he had stood the gaff! He had done killing work, yet he still lived to do more. The fear that his spirit would fly from his exhausted frame at the end of one of these bitter days could soon be discarded; seemingly he could toil from dawn to dark, eat his fill, and in a night's sleep build himself up for another day of toil. More and more of Lenore's work could be laid on his ever-strengthening shoulders.

The cabin itself was roomy and snug: here he could find seclusion from Doomsdorf and his imperturbable squaw. It was blessing enough just to be out of his sight in the long winter nights after supper, no more to watch every movement of his arm! Besides, he was down to realities, and it was a mighty satisfaction to know that here was a lasting shelter from the storm and the cold. The Arctic winter was falling swiftly, and here was his defense.

Doomsdorf gave him a rusted, discarded stove; and it was almost joy to see it standing in its place! With Doomsdorf's permission, he devoted a full day to procuring fuel for it.

Four days more the three of them worked at the task of laying in fuel,—Ned doing the lion's share of the work, of course; Bess toiling to the limit of her fine, young strength; Lenore making the merest pretense. The result of the latter's idleness was, of course, that her two companions had to divide her share of work between them. Every day Doomsdorf allotted them certain duties,—so many trees to cut up into stove wood, or some other, no less arduous duty; and he seemed to have an uncanny ability to drive them just short of actual, complete exhaustion. The fact that Lenore shirked her share meant that at the close of every day, in order to complete the allotment provided, Ned and Bess had to drive themselves beyond that point, practically to the border of utter collapse. The short rests that they might otherwise have allowed themselves, those blessed moments of relaxation wherein the run-down batteries of their energy were recharged, they dared not take. The result was hour upon hour of such sustained toil that it seemed impossible that human frames could bear the strain.

But the seemingly impossible came to pass, and every day found them stronger for their tasks. Evidently the human body has incredible powers of adaptation to new environment. While, at the end of the day's toil, it seemed beyond all possibility that they could ever stagger back to the cabins, when the only wish they had left was to lie still in the snow and let the bitter cold take its toll, yet a few minutes' relaxation in the warmth of the stove always

heartened them and gave them strength to take their places at the supper table. As the days passed, it was no longer necessary to seek their cots the instant they left the table. They took to lingering a little while in the crude chairs about the stove, mostly sitting silent in absolute dejection, but sometimes exchanging a few, primitive thoughts. Very little mattered to them now but food and shelter and sleep. They were down to the absolute essentials. As the days passed, however, they began to take time for primitive, personal toilets. They took to washing their faces and hands: Bess and Lenore even combed out the snarls in their hair with Doomsdorf's broken comb. Then the two girls dressed their tresses into two heavy braids, to be worn Indian fashion in front of the shoulders, the method that required the least degree of care.

They consumed great quantities of food,—particularly Bess and Ned. What would have been a full day's rations in their own home, enough concentrated nutriment to put them in bed with indigestion, did not suffice for a single meal. Never before had Ned really known the love of food—red meat, the fair, good bread, rice grains white and fluffed—but it came upon him quickly enough now. Before, his choice had run toward women's foods, exotic sauces, salads and ices and relishes, foods that tickled the palate but gave no joy to the inner man; but now he wanted inner fuel, plenty of it and unadorned. He cared little how it was cooked, whether or not it had seasoning. The sweet taste of meat was loved by him now,—great, thick, half-done steaks of nutritious caribou. He didn't miss butter on his bread. He would eat till he could hold no more, hardly chewing his food; and as he lay asleep, the inner agents of his body would draw from it the stuff of life with which was built up his shattered tissue.

The physical change was manifest in a few days. His spare flesh went away as if in a single night, and then hard muscle began to take its place. His flesh looked firmer; sagging fat was gone from his face; his skin—pasty white before—was brownish-red from the scourge of the wind. Now the manly hair began to mat about his lips and jowls. A hardening manifested itself in his speech. The few primitive sentences, spoken in the tired-out sessions about the stove, became him more than hours of his former chatter. He no longer gabbled lightly like a girl, his speech full of quirks and affectations: he spoke in blunt, short sentences, with blunt, short words, and his meaning was immediately plain.

He was standing the gaff! Every day found him with greater physical mastery. Yet it was not altogether innate strength, or simple chemical energy derived from the enormous quantities of food he consumed that kept him on his feet. More than once, as the bitter night came down to find him toiling, a

strange, wan figure in the snow, he was all but ready to give up. The physical side of him was conquered; the primitive desire for life no longer manifested itself in his spirit. Just to fall in the snow, to let his tired legs wilt under him, perhaps to creep a little way back into the thicket where Doomsdorf's lantern would fail to reveal him: then he would be free of this dreadful training camp for good! The sleep that would come upon him then would not be cursed with the knowledge of a coming dawn, as gray and hopeless as the twilight just departed! He would be safe then from Doomsdorf's lash! The Arctic wind would convey his wretched spirit far beyond the madman's power to follow; his aching, bleeding hands would heal in some Gentleness far away. The fear of which psychologists speak, that of the leap into darkness that is glibly said to be the last conscious instinct, was absolutely absent. Death was a word to conjure with no more. It was no harder for him to think of than the fall of a tree beneath his axe. The terror that surrounded it was ever only a specter: and in the clear vision that came to him in those terrible twilights, only realities were worth the effort of thought. The physical torture of staggering through the snow back to the cabin was so infinitely worse than any conception that he could retain of death; the life that stretched before him was so absolutely bereft of hope that the elemental dread of what lay beyond would not have restrained him an instant. The thing went deeper than that. The reason why he did not yield to the almost irresistible desire to lie down and let the North take its toll had its fount in the secret places of the man's soul. He was beyond the reach of fear for himself, but his love for Lenore mastered him yet.

He must not leave Lenore. He had given his love to her, and this love was a thousand times more compelling than any fear could possibly be. He must stand up, he must go on through,—for the sake of this dream that counted more than life. Was not her happiness in his whole charge? Did he not constitute her one defense against Doomsdorf's persecutions? He must live on, carrying as many of her burdens as he could.

Bess too knew an urge beyond herself; but she would not have found it so easy to get it into concrete thought. Perhaps women care less about *cause* and more about *effect*, willing to follow impulse and scarcely feeling the need of justifying every action with a laborious thought process. In her own heart Bess knew she must not falter, she must not give up. Whence that knowledge came she had no idea, and she didn't care. There was need of her too on this wretched, windy island. She had her place here; certain obligations had been imposed upon her. She didn't try to puzzle out what these obligations were. Perhaps she was afraid of the heart's secret that might be revealed to her. Her instinct was simply to stay and play her part.



The only one of the three to whom the fear of death was still a reality was Lenore, simply because the full horror of the island had not yet gone home to her. She thought she knew the worst; in reality, she had no inkling of it. So far Ned had succeeded in sheltering her from it.

How long he could continue to do so, in any perceptible degree, he did not know. In the first place he had the girl herself to contend with: now that she was recovering, Lenore would likely enough insist on doing her own share of the work. Besides, the problem was greatly complicated, now that the winter's supply of fuel was laid by, and the real season's activities about to begin. Could he spare her such bitter, terrible hours that he and Bess must endure, following the trap lines over the wild? Must she be cursed and lashed and tortured by the cold, know the torment of worn-out muscles, only to be rewarded by the knout for failing to bring in a sufficient catch of furs? Doomsdorf would be more exacting, rather than more lenient, in these months to come. He had been willing enough for Ned to do Lenore's share in the work of laying in winter fuel; but the size of the fur catch was a matter of greater moment to him. It was unthinkable that Ned could handle to the best advantage both Lenore's trap line and his own. Work as hard as he might, long into the night hours, one man couldn't possibly return two men's catch. For Lenore's sake Ned regarded the beginning of the trapping season with dread, although for himself he had cause to anticipate it.

He hadn't forgotten that the first furs taken would be his, and he needed them sorely enough. Indeed, the matter was beginning to be of paramount importance to his health and life. The clothes he had worn from the *Charon*, flimsy as the life of which they had been a part, were rapidly wearing out. They didn't turn the rain, and they were not nearly warm enough for the bitter weather to come. Ned did not forget that the month was only October; that according to Doomsdorf, real winter would not break over them for a few weeks, at least. The snow flurries, the frost, the bitter nights were just the merest hint of what was to come, he said: the wail of the biting wind at night just the far-off trumpet call of an advancing enemy. A man could go thinly garbed on such days as this and, except for an aching chill throughout his frame, suffer no disagreeable consequences; but such wouldn't hold true in the forty-below-zero weather that impended. Only fur and the thickest woolens could avail in the months to come.

Besides, the trapper's life offered more of interest than that of the woodchopper. It would carry him through those gray valleys and over the rugged hills that now, when he had time to look about him, seemed to invite his exploration. Best of all, the work would largely carry him away from

Doomsdorf's presence. If only he could spare Lenore, not only by permission of Doomsdorf but by the consent of the girl herself.

The matter came up that night while Doomsdorf was sorting out some of his smaller traps. "We'll light out to-morrow," he said. "The sooner we get these things set, the better. The water furs seem to be absolutely prime already—I'm sure the land furs must be too. I wonder if you three have any idea what you're going to do."

Ned saw an opportunity to speak for Lenore, but Doomsdorf's speech ran on before he could take it. "I don't suppose you do," he said. "Of course, I'm going to show you—nevertheless it would help some if any of you knew an otter from a lynx. You may not know it, but this island contains a good many square miles—to trap it systematically requires many lines and hundreds of traps. I've already laid out three lines—sometimes I've trapped one, and sometimes another. Two of 'em are four-day lines, and one a five-day line—that is, they take four and five days respectively to get around. On each one I've built series of huts, or shacks, all of them with a stove and supplies of food, and you put up in them for the night. They are a day's march apart, giving you time to pick up your skins, reset, and so on, as you go. Believe me, you won't have any time to loaf. After you get into the cabins at night, eat your supper and get some of the frost out of your blood, you'll enjoy thawing out and skinning the animals you've caught in your trap. If it's a big animal, dead and frozen and too big to carry, you'll have to make a fire out in the snow and thaw him out there. So you see you'll have varied experience.

"You'll be away from me and this cabin for days at a time, but if you're figuring on any advantage from that, just put it out of your mind, the sooner the better. Maybe you think you can sneak enough time to make a boat, smuggle it down to the water, and cast off. Let me assure you you'll have no time to sneak. Besides, this patch of timber right here is nearer to the shore than any other patch on the island—you'd simply have no chance to get away with it. If you think you could cross the ice to Tzar Island, after winter breaks, you're barking up the wrong tree too. In my daily hunts I'll manage to get up on one of these ridges, and I can keep a pretty fair watch of you over these treeless hills. You'd never get more than a few hours' start; and they wouldn't help you at all on the ice fields! I trust there's no need to mention penalties. You already know about that.

"And maybe you are thinking it will be easy enough to slack—not trying to catch much, so you won't have many skins to flesh and stretch—maybe hiding what you do catch. I'll just say this. I have a pretty good idea how this country runs—just how many skins each line yields with fair trapping.

I'm going to increase that estimate by twenty per cent.—and that's to be your minimum. I won't say what that amount is now. But if at the end of the season you're short—by one skin—look out! It means that you'll have to be about twenty per cent. smarter and more industrious than the average trapper.”

“But man——” Ned protested. “We're not experienced——”

“You'll learn quick enough. Aren't you the dominant race? And I warn you again—you'd better drop bitter tears every time you find where a wolverine has been along and eaten an ermine out of a trap!”

The man was not jesting. They knew him well enough by now; the piercing glitter of his keen, gray eyes, the odd fixation about his pupils that was always manifest when he was most in earnest, was plainly in evidence now. Thus it was with the most profound amazement that Lenore's companions suddenly saw her beautiful mouth curling in a smile.

For themselves they were lost in despair. All too plainly Doomsdorf had merely hinted at the cruel rigors of the trapper's trail. Yet Lenore was smiling.

Then Ned saw, with a queer little tug of his heart, that the smile was not meant for him. It was not a gracious signal of her love, meant to encourage him in his despair. A woman herself, and understanding women, Bess never dreamed for an instant that it was; she knew only too well the thought and the aim behind that sudden, dazzling sunshine in Lenore's face. Yet her only reaction, beyond amazement, was a swift surge of tenderness and pity for Ned.

Lenore was smiling at Doomsdorf. She was looking straight into his gray eyes. Her cheeks were flushed a lovely pink; her eyes were smiling too; she presented an image of ineffable beauty. That was what hurt worse,—the fact that her beauty had never seemed more genuine than now. It was the mask of falsehood, yet her smile was as radiant as any he remembered of their most holy moments together. He had not dreamed that any emotion except her love for him could call such a light into her face. It had been, to him, the lasting proof that she was his, the very symbol of the ideal of integrity and genuineness that he made of her; yet now he saw her use it as a wile to win some favor from this beast in human form. The very sacredness of their relations was somehow questioned. The tower of his faith seemed to be tottering.

Yet he forced away the dismay that seemed to cloud him, then began to watch with keenest interest. Not even this man of iron could wholly resist

her smile. In a single instant she had captured his mood: he was not so fixed in his intent.

“I’m afraid I wouldn’t be much good to you, as a trapper,” she began quietly, her voice of cloying sweetness. “I’m afraid I’d only get in the way and scare the little—ermine, you call them?—out of the country. Mr. Doomsdorf, do you know how well I can keep house?”

Doomsdorf looked at her, grinning in contempt, yet not wholly unresponsive to the call she was making to him. “Can’t say as I do——”

“You don’t know how I can cook, either,—make salads, and desserts, and things like that. You’d better let me stay here and help your wife with the housework. I’d really be of some value, then.”

For an instant the wind seemed to pause on the roof; and all of them sat in startled silence. The only movement was that of Sindy, imperturbable as ever, rocking back and forth in her chair; and the sound she made had a slow and regular cadence, as of a great clock. Ned sat staring at his hands; Bess’s gaze rested first on him, then on the two principals of the little drama who still sat smiling as if in understanding. Ned needn’t have worried about Lenore insisting on doing her share of the rigorous, outdoor work. The difficulty that he had anticipated in persuading her to let him lighten her burdens had not been serious, after all.

And really there was little cause for his own depression. Lenore meant exactly what she said. After all, this was his own plan,—that she should remain and help Sindy with the housework and the caring for such skins as Doomsdorf himself took, thus avoiding the heart-breaking hardship of the trap lines. Nor could he hold against her the lie in her smile. It was her whole right to use it in her own behalf: to use any wile she could to gain her ends. He was a fool to suppose that there was a moral issue involved! The old moral teaching against compromise with the devil didn’t hold here. Perhaps Bess and himself could get farther, make their toil easier, if they also fawned on Doomsdorf. The fact that he would sooner wear his hands to the bone or die beneath the lash did not imply moral superiority. It simply showed that he was of different make-up. The same with Bess; she was simply of a different breed.

And the wile was not without results. The usual scoffing refusal did not come at once to the bearded lips. Perhaps her master was flattered that Lenore was so tamed, perhaps he wished to reward her attitude of friendliness so that Bess might take example. Lenore had never moved him with the same fire as Bess: perhaps by showing leniency now, the latter could be brought to this same pass! Besides, Lenore was the weakest of the

three and he had thus less desire to break what little spirit she had, rather preferring, by complying with her request, to heap fresh burdens of toil and hardship on these two proud-spirited ones before him.

“You want to stay here with Sindy and me, eh?” he commented at last. “Well, Sindy might like some help. I’m willing—but I’ll leave it up to your two friends. They’ll have to work all the harder to make up for it—especially Bess. I was going to have you two girls work together.”

He watched Ned’s face with keenest interest. The younger man flushed in his earnestness, his adoring gaze on Lenore.

“I’m only too glad to make it easier for you,” he said, his crooked, boyish smile dim at his lips. “That’s the one thing that matters—to help you all I can. In this case, though—Bess is the one to say.”

Lenore perceptibly stiffened as Ned’s gaze turned to Bess. It didn’t flatter her that her lover should even take Bess into his consideration. She had grown accustomed to receiving his every duty.

But it came about that Lenore and her little jealousies did not even find a place in Bess’s thought. She returned Ned’s gaze, her eyes lustrous as if with tears, and she understood wholly the prayer that was in his heart.

“Of course she may stay here,” she said. “We’ll make out somehow.”

## XX

DOOMSDORF'S trap lines lay in great circles, coinciding at various points in order to reduce the number of cabins needed to work them, and ultimately swinging back to the home cabin in the thicket beside the sea. They were very simple to follow, he explained—Bess's line running up the river to the mouth of a great tributary that flowed from the south, the camp being known as the Eagle Creek cabin; thence up the tributary to its forks, known as the Forks cabin, up the left-hand forks to its mother springs, the Spring cabin, and then straight down the ridge to the home cabin, four days' journey in all. She couldn't miss any of the three huts, Doomsdorf explained, as all of them were located in the open barrens, on the banks of the creeks she was told to follow. Doomsdorf drew for her guidance a simple map that would remove all danger of going astray.

Ned's route was slightly more complicated, yet nothing that the veriest greenhorn could not follow. It took him first to what Doomsdorf called his Twelve-Mile cabin at the very head of the little stream on which the home cabin was built, thence following a well-blazed trail along an extensive though narrow strip of timber, a favorable country for marten, to the top of the ridge, around the glacier, and down to the hut that Bess occupied the third night out, known as the Forks cabin; thence up the right-hand fork to its mother spring, the Thirty-Mile cabin; over the ridge and down to the sea, the Sea cabin; and thence, trapping salt-water mink and otter, to the home cabin, five days' journey in all. "If you use your head, you can't get off," Doomsdorf explained. "If you don't, no one will ever take the trouble to look you up."

As if smiling upon their venture, nature gave them a clear dawn in which to start forth. The squaw and Bess started up from the river mouth together, the former in the rôle of teacher; Ned and Doomsdorf followed up the little, silvery creek that rippled past the home cabin. And for the first time since his landing on Hell Island Ned had a chance really to look about him.

It was the first time he had been out of sight of the cabin and thus away from the intangible change that the mere presence of man works on the wild. All at once, as the last vestige of the white roof was concealed behind the snow-laden branches of the spruce, he found himself in the very heart of the wilderness. It was as if he had passed from one world to another.

Even the air was different. It stirred and moved and throbbed in a way he couldn't name, as if mighty, unnamable passions seemed about to be wakened. He caught a sense of a resistless power that could crush him to earth at a whim, of vast forces moving by fixed, invisible law; he felt that secret, wondering awe which to the woodsman means the nearing presence of the Red Gods. Only the mighty powers of nature were in dominion here: the lashing snows of winter, the bitter cold, the wind that wept by unheard by human ears. Ned was closer to the heart of nature, and thus to the heart of life, than he had ever been before.

He had no words to express the mood that came upon him. The wind that crept through the stunted spruce trees expressed it better than he; it was in the song that the wolf pack rings to sing on winter nights; in the weird complaint that the wild geese called down from the clouds. What little sound there was, murmuring branches and fallen aspen leaves, fresh on the snow, rustling faintly together and serving only to accentuate the depth of the silence, had this same, eerie motif,—nothing that could be put in words, nothing that ever came vividly into his consciousness, but which laid bare the very soul and spirit of life. Cold and hunger, an ancient persecution whose reason no man knew, a never-to-be-forgotten fear of a just but ruthless God!

This was the land untamed. There was not, at first, a blaze on a tree, the least sign that human beings had ever passed that way before. It was the land-that-used-to-be, unchanged seemingly since the dim beginnings of the world. Blessed by the climbing sun of spring, warm and gentle in the summer, moaning its old complaint when the fall winds swept through the branches, lashed by the storms of winter,—thus it had lain a thousand-thousand years. And now, a little way up the stream, there was more tangible sign that this was the kingdom of the wild. Instead of an unpeopled desert, it was shown to be teeming with life. They began to see the trails of the forest creatures in the snow.

Sometimes they paused before the delicate imprint of a fox, like a snow etching made by a master hand; sometimes the double track of marten and his lesser cousin, the ermine; once the great cowlike mark of a caribou, seeking the pale-green reindeer moss that hung like tresses from the trees. Seemingly every kind of northern animal of which Ned had ever heard had immediately preceded them through the glade.

“Where there's timber, there's marten,” Doomsdorf explained. “Marten, I suppose you know, are the most valuable furs we take, outside of silver and blue fox—and one of the easiest taken. The marten's such a ruthless hunter that he doesn't look what he's running into. You won't find them far on the

open barrens, but they are in hundreds in the long, narrow timber belt between Twelve-Mile cabin, to-night's stop, and Forks cabin that you'll hit to-morrow night. And we'll make our first set right here."

He took one of the traps from Ned's shoulder and showed him how to make the set. The bait was placed a few feet above the trap, in this case, on the trunk of the tree, so that to reach it the marten would almost certainly spring the trap.

"Put 'em fairly thick through here," Doomsdorf advised. "Lay more emphasis on fox and lynx in the open barrens." He stepped back from the set. "Do you think you can find this place again?"

Ned looked it over with minute care, marking it in relation to certain dead trees that lay across the creek. "I think I can."

"That's the very essential of trapping, naturally. It will come to be second nature after a while—without marking it by trees or anything. You'll have better than a hundred traps; and it isn't as easy as it looks. Remember, I won't be with you the next time you pass this way."

They tramped on, and Doomsdorf pointed out where a wolverine had come down the glade and crossed the creek. "You'll curse at the very name of wolverine before the season's done," Doomsdorf told him, as Ned paused to study the imprint. "He's the demon of the snow so far as the trapper is concerned. Nevertheless, you'll want to take a skin for your own use. It's the one fur for the hood of a parka—you can wear it over your mouth in fifty below and it doesn't get covered with ice from your breath. But you'll have to be a smarter man than I think you are to catch him."

A few minutes later the timber became to be more noticeably stunted, the trees farther and farther apart, and soon they were in the open. These were the barren lands, deep moss or rich marsh grass already heavy with snow; and the only trees remaining were a few willow, quivering aspen, and birch along the bank of the creek. From time to time the two men stopped to place their traps, Doomsdorf explaining the various "sets", how to conceal the cold steel of which most all creatures have such an instinctive fear, and how to eliminate the human smell that might otherwise keep the more cunning of the fur-bearers from the bait. Once they paused before a great, cruel instrument of iron, seemingly much too large to be a trap, that had been left at the set from the previous trapping season.

"Lift it," Doomsdorf advised. Ned bent, finding the iron itself heavy in his arms.

"No creature's going to walk away with that on his leg, is he?"



“No? That’s all you know about it. I’ll admit that you wouldn’t care to walk with it very far. You would see why I didn’t take it into shelter at the close of the season—although of course it’s easy enough to haul on a sled. You notice it’s attached to a chain, and that chain to a toggle.”

“Toggle” was a word that Ned had never heard before, but which plainly represented a great log, or drag, to which the trap chain was attached. Ned gazed, and another foolish question came to his lips. “You use that because there isn’t a tree handy?” he asked.

“If there was a tree handy, I’d use it just the same,” Doomsdorf explained. “There’s no holding the animal I catch in that trap by chaining him fast. No matter how big the tree or how stout the chain, he’d break loose—or else he’d pull out his foot. You’ve got to give him play. That’s why we use a toggle.”

“You don’t mean he drags that great thing——”

“No, only about halfway across the island before I can possibly overtake him and shoot him, bellowing like a devil every step of the way. Moreover, the toggle has to be chained near the end, rather than in the middle—otherwise he’ll catch the ends back of a couple of tree trunks and break loose. Now set the trap.”

It took nearly all of Ned’s strength to push down the powerful springs and set the great jaws. The fact that he didn’t know just how to go about it impeded him too. And when he stood erect again, he found Doomsdorf watching him with keenest interest.

“I didn’t think you were man enough to do it,” he commented. “You’ll say that’s quite a trap, won’t you?”

“It’s quite a trap,” Ned agreed shortly. “What kind of an elephant do you take in it?”

“No kind of an elephant, but one of the grandest mammals that ever lived, at that. I don’t trap them much, because I hardly get enough for their skins to pay for handling them—you can guess they’re immensely bulky. There’s a fair price for their skulls, too, but the skull alone is a fair load for a weak back. Last year I needed a few hides for the cabin. Did you ever hear of the Kodiak bear?”

“Good Lord! One bear can’t move all that.”

Doomsdorf stood erect, and his eyes gleamed. Evidently the great, savage monarch of the islands of which he spoke was some way close to his own savage heart. “He can move your heart into your throat just to look at him!” he said. “One of the grandest mammals that ever lived—the great,

brown bear of the islands. Of course, you ought to know he's by all odds the biggest bear on earth, he and the polar bear just north of here—and the biggest carnivorous animal on earth, for that matter. Your lions, your tigers wouldn't last a minute under those great hooks of his. He'd tear your whole chest out in one swipe. This seems to be about the northern limit of his range—the big brownies go all the way from Admiralty Islands, in the south, clear up to here, with very little variation as to size and color. There are not many on the Skopins—but going around with just an axe and a hunting knife for weapons, you'll be glad there aren't any more. At this point their range begins to coincide, to some slight degree, with the polar bear—but of course just a stray gets down below the Arctic circle. You've got to have a whole caribou carcass to interest the old devil in the way of bait. And now I'll show you how to outfox him.”

He cut a slender whip, about half an inch in diameter, from a near-by willow, and thrusting both ends into the ground in front of the trap, made an arch. “When the old boy comes along, he'll lift his front foot right over that arch, to avoid stepping on anything that looks so unstable, and then straight down into the trap,” Doomsdorf explained. “If it was heavy wood, he'd rest his foot on it and miss the trap.”

A few minutes later they came to what seemed to Ned a new and interesting geological formation. It seemed to be a noisy waterfall of three or four feet, behind which the creek was dammed to the proportions of a small, narrow lake. Yet the dam itself didn't appear to be a natural formation of rock. It looked more like driftwood, but it was inconceivable that mere drift could be piled in this ordered way.

Keenly interested, he bent to examine it. Farther up the creek some heavy body struck the water with a mighty splash. It was too swift, however, for him to see what it was. There were no power plants or mill wheels here, and thus it was difficult to believe that human hands had gone to the great labor of building such a dam. Only one explanation remained.

“It must be a beaver dam,” he said.

“You're right for once,” Doomsdorf agreed. “Did you ever see better engineering? Even the dam is built in an arch—the strongest formation known to man—to withstand the waters. Sometime I'll tell you how they do it—there isn't as much premeditated cunning in it as you think. Do you know what a beaver looks like?”

“Got big teeth——”

“Correct. It has to have 'em to cut all this wood. Likely enough the little devils go considerable distances up and down this creek to get their

materials. Sometimes they'll dig great canals for floating the sticks they use in their dams.

"A big beaver weighs about fifty pounds—and he's about the handiest boy to trap there is. You'll wonder what the purpose of these dams is. As far as I can make out, simply to keep the water at one level. You know these little streams rise and fall like the tides. They've learned, in a few hundred thousand years of their development, that it doesn't pay to build a nice house and then have the creek come up and wash it away and drown them out. When they put down their winter food, they want to be sure it's going to be there when they want it—neither washed away nor high and dry out of water. The solution was—to build a dam. Now I'll show you how to catch a beaver."

It seemed to Ned that the logical place to lay the trap was on the beaver house itself—a great pile of sticks and mud. But Doomsdorf explained that a trap set on the house itself so alarmed the animals that the entire colony was likely to desert the dam. Instead, the trap was set just below the surface of the water at a landing,—a place where the beaver went in and out of the water in the course of their daily work.

No bait was used this time. The trap was covered with fine mud with the idea that the beaver would blunder into it either on leaving or entering the water. A heavy sack of little stones from the creek bed was attached to the chain, and a long wire, leading from this, was fastened securely to a tree on the creek bank. The arrangement was really a merciful one to the beaver. The instant the trap was sprung, the animal's instinct was to dive into deep water. Of course he dragged the heavy sack with him and was unable to rise again. The beaver, contrary to expectations, can not live in water indefinitely. An air-breathing mammal, he drowns almost as quickly as a human being would under the same circumstances.

They placed a second trap on the dam itself, then encircling the meadow, continued on up the stream. From time to time they made their sets, as this was a favorable region for mink and otter, two of the most beautiful and valuable furs.

Time was passing swiftly for Ned. There was even a quality of enjoyment in his reaction to the day's toil. Now as they mounted to the higher levels, he was ever more impressed by the very magnitude of the wilderness about—stretching for miles in every direction to the shores of the sea. The weary wastes got to him and stirred his imagination as never before. He found, when he paused to make the sets, that a certain measure of excitement was upon him. Evidently there was a tang and flavor in this

snow-swept wilderness through which he moved to make the blood flow swiftly in the veins.

Partly it lay in the constant happening of the unexpected. Every few rods brought its little adventure: perhaps a far-off glimpse of a fox; perhaps a flock of hardy waterfowl, tardy in starting south, flushing up with a thunderous beat of wings from the water; perhaps the swift dive of that dreadful little killer, the mink; possibly the track of a venerable old bear, already drowsy and contemplating hibernation, who had but recently passed that way. But perhaps the greater impulse for excitement lay in the expectation of what the next turn in the trail might bring forth. There were only tracks here, but the old bear himself might launch forth into a deadly charge from the next thicket of birch trees. The fox was only a fleet shadow far away, but any moment they might run into him face to face, in the act of devouring his prey. Ned found that his senses had miraculously sharpened, that many little nerves of which hitherto he had been unaware had wakened into life and were tingling just under the skin. Until fatigue came heavily upon him—only the first hint of it had yet come to his thighs and back—this particular part of his daily duties need never oppress him.

But this dim, faltering hope was forgotten in the travail of the next few hours. The load of heavy traps on his back; the labor of tramping through the snow; most of all the loss of bodily heat through his flimsy, snow-wet clothes soon rewarded him for daring to seek happiness on this desert of despair. As the gray afternoon advanced, his quickened spirit fell again: once more his senses were dulled, and the crooked, boyish half-smile that had begun to manifest itself faded quickly from his lips. Doomsdorf still marched in his easy, swinging gait; and ever it was a harder fight to keep pace. Yet he dared not lag behind. His master's temper was ever uncertain in these long, tired hours of afternoon.

Tired out, weakened, aching in every muscle and not far from the absolute limit of exhaustion, Ned staggered to the cabin door at last. He had put out all the traps he had brought from the home cabin: thence his course lay along a blazed trail that skirted the edge of the narrow timber belt, over the ridge to the Forks cabin. Doomsdorf entered, then in the half-light stood regarding the younger man who had followed him in.

Ned tried to stand erect. He must not yield yet to the almost irresistible impulse to throw himself down on the floor and rest. He dared not risk Doomsdorf's anger; how did he know what instruments of torture the latter's satanic ingenuity might contrive in this lonely cabin! Nor was his mood to be trusted to-night. His gray eyes shone with suppressed excitement; and likely enough he would be glad of an excuse for some diversion to pass the

hours pleasantly. It was very lonely and strange out here, in the open, in the full sweep of the wind over the barren lands.

But Ned wasn't aware of Doomsdorf's plans. The great blond man stretched his arms, yawning, buttoned his coat tighter about him, and turned to go. "I'll see you in about five days," he remarked laconically.

Ned wakened abruptly from his reverie. "You mean—you aren't going to show me anything more?"

"There's nothing more you can't learn by yourself—by hard experience. I've given you your map and your directions for the trap line. A baby couldn't miss it. There's traps on the wall—scatter 'em along between here and the Forks cabin. There you will find another bunch to put between there and Thirty-Mile cabin. So on clear around. Over your head you see the stretchers."

Ned looked up, and over the rafters, among other supplies, were laid a large number of small boards, planed smooth and of different sizes.

"I've shown you how to set your traps, for every kind of an animal," Doomsdorf went on. "You ought to be able to do the rest. By the time you come around, we'll likely have freezing weather—that means you'll have to thaw out your animals before you skin them. If it's a big animal, dead in the trap, too heavy to carry into camp, you'll have to make a fire in the snow and thaw him out there. Otherwise bring 'em in. You saw me skin that otter I shot—skin all the smaller animals the same way. Simply split 'em under the legs and peel 'em out toward the head, as you would a banana. Of course you'll spoil plenty of skins at first, so far as market value is concerned, but they'll be all right for your own use. The closer you can skin them, the less fat you leave on the pelts, the less you'll have to flesh them when you get to your cabin. When you can't strip off any more fat, turn 'em wrong side out on one of those boards—stretching them tight. Use the biggest board you can put in. Then hang 'em up in the cabin to dry. A skin like a beaver, that you slit up the belly and which comes off almost round, nail on the wall. All the little tricks of the trade will come in time.

"Here and here and here"—he paused, to put in Ned's hands a clasp hunting knife, razor sharp, a small pocket hone to whet his tools, and a light axe that had been hanging back of the stove—"are some things you'll need. The time will come when you'll need snowshoes, too. I ought to make you make them yourself, but you'd never get it done and I'd never get any furs. There's a pair on the rafters. Now I'm going to tramp back to the cabin to spend the night—in more agreeable company."

For a moment the two men stood regarding each other in absolute silence. Then Doomsdorf's keen ears, eager for such sounds, caught the whisper of Ned's troubled breathing. Presently a leering smile flashed through the blond beard.

It was as he thought. Ned's mind was no longer on furs. His face had been drawn and dark with fatigue, but now a darker cloud spread across it, like a storm through open skies, as some blood-curdling thought made ghastly progress through his brain. At first it was only startled amazement, then swift disbelief—the manifestation of that strange quirk in human consciousness that ever tries to shield the spirit from the truth—and finally terror, stark and without end. It showed in the tragic loosening of every facial muscle; in the cold drops that came out at the edge of the brown, waving hair; in the slow, fixed light in his eyes.

This was what Doomsdorf loved. He had seen the same look in the faces of prisoners—newly come to a stockade amid the snow and still hopeful that the worst they had heard had been overdrawn—on seeing certain implements of initiation; and it had been a source of considerable amusement to him. This was the thing that his diseased soul craved. As the young man reached imploring hands to his own great forearms, he hurled him away with a ringing laugh.

“You mean—you and Lenore will be alone——” Ned asked.

“You saw the squaw start out with Bess?” was the triumphant answer. “But why should you care? It was Lenore's own wish to stay. She'd take me and comfort any time, sooner than endure the cold with you. Of such stuff, my boy, are women made.”

The hands reached out again, clasping tight upon Doomsdorf's forearms. Ned's face, lifeless and white as a stone, was no longer loose with terror. A desperate fury had brought him to the verge of madness.

“That's a foul lie!” he shouted, reckless of Doomsdorf's retaliation. “She didn't dream that you would do that——”

Doomsdorf struck him off, hurling him against the wall; but it was not with the idea of inflicting punishment. Amused at his impotent rage, his blow was not the driving shoulder blow which, before now, had broken a human jaw to fragments. Nor did he carry through, hammering his victim into insensibility at his leisure.

“That gets you a little, doesn't it?” he taunted. Ned straightened, staring at him as if he were a ghost. “Your sweetheart—that you'd sworn was yours to the last ditch! I don't mean that she'd give herself willingly to me—yet. She's just the kind of girl I'd expect a weakling like yourself to pick out—

the type that would sooner go wrong than endure hardship. And that's why she's more or less safe, for the time being at least, from me. Even if Sindy wasn't coming back home to-night—probably already there—you wouldn't have to fear."

Ned could not speak, but Doomsdorf looked at him with the fire of a zealot in his eyes.

"I don't want anything that's that easy," he said with infinite contempt. "Sometimes the game is harder. I take back something I inferred a moment ago—that *all* women would do the same. The best of them, the most of them, still will go through hell for an idea; and that's the kind whose spirit is worth while to break. Do you know any one who right now, likely enough, is trudging along through this hellish snow with forty pounds of traps over her back?"

Ned shuddered, hurling off his doubt, believing yet in the fidelity of his star. "I don't know, and I don't care," he answered.

"That's what Bess Gilbert is doing, and you know it. There, young man, is a woman worthy of my steel!"

He turned and strode out the door. Ned was left to his thoughts and the still, small voices of the waste places, alone with the wilderness night whose word was the master word of life, and with the wind that sobbed unhappy secrets as it swept his cabin roof. He couldn't help but listen, there in the twilight. Thus the work of training Ned Cornet's soul went on, strengthening him to stand erect when that stern officer, the Truth, looked into his eyes; teaching him the mastery of that bright sword of fortitude and steadfastness whereby he could parry the most pitiless blows of fate.

## XXI

THUS began a week of trial for Ned. For the first time in his life he was thrown wholly upon his own resources, standing or falling by his own worth. Should he fall insensible in the snow there were none to seek him and bring him into shelter. If he should go astray and miss the cabins there was no one to set him on the right path again. He was meeting the wilderness alone, and face to face.

Cooking his meals, cutting the fuel and building the fires that kept him warm, meeting the storm in its fury and fighting a lone fight from the gray of dawn to the day's gray close, Ned made the long circuit of his trap line. The qualities that carried him far in his home city—such things as wealth and position and culture—were as dust here. His reliance now was the axe on his shoulder and the hunting knife at his hip; but most of all his own stamina, his own steadfastness, the cunning of his brain and the strength of his sinews. And every day found him stronger and better able to meet the next.

Certain muscles most used in tugging through the snow, seemingly worn to shreds the first day's march, strengthened under the stress, and he found he did his daily stint with ever greater ease. Ever he handled the little, daily crises with greater skill, and this with less loss of vital energy: the crossing of a swollen stream or a perilous morass; or the climbing of a slippery glacier. Every day the wilderness unrolled its pages to his eyes.

The little daily encounters with the wild life were ever a greater delight. He found pleasure in trying to guess the identity of the lesser, scurrying people he met on the trail: he found a moving beauty in the far-off glimpse of the running pack, in a vivid silhouette on the ridge at twilight; the sight of a bull caribou tossing his far-spreading antlers sent his blood moving fast in his veins. By the grace of the Red Gods he was afforded the excitement of being obliged to backtrack two hundred yards in order gracefully to yield the trail to a great, surly Alaskan bear already seeking a lair for his winter sleep.

He crossed the divide to Forks cabin, followed the springs to Thirty-Mile cabin, descended to the sea, and along the shore to the home cabin, just as he had been told to do. He put out his traps as he went in what seemed to him the most likely places, using every wile Doomsdorf had taught him to increase his chances for a catch. In spite of the fact that he went alone, the



second day was ever so much easier than the first; and he came into the home cabin only painfully tired, but not absolutely exhausted, on the fifth. Of course he didn't forget that, other things being equal, these first five days were his easiest days. Actual trapping had not yet started: he had not been obliged to stop, thaw out and skin such larger animals as would be found dead in his traps; nor yet work late into the night fleshing and stretching the pelts. A greater factor was the moderate weather: light snowfall and temperature above freezing, a considerable variance from the deadly blizzards that would ensue.

All through the five days he had strengthened himself with the thought that Lenore awaited him at the journey's end; and she had never seemed so lovely to him as when, returning in the gray twilight, he saw her standing framed in the lighted doorway of the home cabin. She had suffered no ill-treatment in his absence. The great fear that had been upon his heart was groundless, after all: her face was fresh, her eyes bright, she was not lost in despair. In spite of his aching muscles, his face lighted with hopefulness and relief that was almost happiness.

Doubtless it was his own eagerness that made her seem so slow in coming into his arms; and his own great fire that caused her to seem to lack warmth. He had been boyishly anticipatory, foolishly exultant. Yet it was all sweet enough. The girl fluttered a single instant in his arms, and he felt repaid for everything.

"Let me go," she whispered tensely, when his arms tried to hold her. "Don't let Doomsdorf see. He might kill you——"

But it came about that she didn't finish the warning. Presently she felt his arms turn to steel. She felt herself thrust back until her eyes looked straight into his.

She had never seen Ned in this mood before. Indeed she couldn't ever remember experiencing the sensation that swept her now: secretly appalled at him, burnt with his fire, wavering beneath his will. She didn't know he had arms like that. His face, when she tried to meet it, hardly seemed his own. The flesh was like gray iron, the eyes cold as stones.

"What has Doomsdorf to do with it?" he demanded. "Has he any claim on you?"

"Of course not," she hastened to reply. "He's treated me as well as could be expected. But you know—he makes claims on us all."

The fact could not be denied. Ned turned from her, nestling to the fire for warmth.

The happiness he had expected in this long-awaited night had failed to materialize. He ate his great meal, sat awhile in sporadic conversation with the girl in the snug cabin; then went wearily to his blankets. He hardly knew what was missing. Her beauty was no less; it was enhanced, if anything, by the flush of the wind on her cheeks. Yet she didn't understand what he had been doing, what he had been through. He held her interest but slightly as he told of his adventures on the trail. When in turn she talked to him, it was of her own wrongs; and the old quick, eager sympathy somehow failed to reach his heart. But it was all he could expect on this terrible island. He must thank what gods there were for the one kiss she had given him—and be content. All happiness was clouded here.

Often, in the little hour after supper about the stove, he wakened from his reverie to find that he had been thinking about Bess. She had come in from her line the previous day and had gone out again; and he had not dreamed that her absence could leave such a gap in their little circle. He had hardly regarded her at all, yet he found himself missing her. She was always so high-spirited, encouraging him with her own high heart. Of course the very fact that they were just three, exiled among foes, would make her absence keenly felt. The mere bond of common humanity would do that. Yet he found himself wishing that he had shown greater appreciation of her kindness, her courage, her sweet solicitude for him. On her lonely trap line out in the wastes it was as if she had gone forever. He found himself resenting the fact that Lenore had but cold assent to his praise of her, wholly unappreciative of the fact that her own ease was due largely to Bess's offer to do additional work.

But his blankets gave him slumber, and he rose in the early hours, breakfasted, and started out on his lonely trap line. He was not a little excited as to the results of this morning's tramp. Every skin he took was his, to protect his own body from the bitter, impending cold.

The first few traps had not been sprung. Out-witting the wild creatures was seemingly not the easy thing he had anticipated. The bait had been stolen from a marten trap at the edge of the barrens, but the jaws had failed to go home, and a subsequent light snowfall had concealed the tracks by which he might have identified the thief. Was this the answer to his high hopes? But he had cause to halt when he neared the trap on the beaver dam.

For a moment he couldn't locate the trap. Then he saw that the wire, fastened securely to the bank, had become mysteriously taut. Not daring to hope he began to tug it in.

At the end of the wire he found his trap, and in the trap was a large beaver, drowned and in prime condition.

The moment was really a significant one for Ned. The little traps of steel, placed here and there through the wilderness, had seemed a doubtful project at best; but now they had shown results. The incident gave him added confidence in himself and his ability to battle successfully these perilous wilds. The rich, warm skin would help to clothe him, and he would easily catch others to complete his wardrobe.

The beaver was of course not frozen; and the skin stripped off easily under the little, sawing strokes of his skinning knife. He was rather surprised at its size. It came off nearly round, and it would stretch fully thirty-two inches in diameter. Washing it carefully, he put it over his back and started on.

Other traps yielded pelts in his long day's march. The trap on the beaver landing contained a muskrat; he found several more of the same furred rodents in his traps along the creek; and small skins though they were, he had a place for every one. Once an otter, caught securely by the hind leg, showed fight and had to be dispatched by a blow on the head with a club; and once he was startled when a mink, scarcely larger than his hand, leaped from the snowy weeds, trap and all, straight for his ankle.

There was no more ferocious creature in all the mammalian world than this. "Little Death," was a name for him in an aboriginal tongue; and it was perfectly in accord with his disposition. His eyes were scarlet; he opened his rapacious jaws so wide that they resembled those of a deadly serpent; he screamed again and again in the most appalling fury. This was the demon of the Little People: the snaky Stealth that murdered the nestlings in the dead of night; the cruel and remorseless hunter whose red eyes froze the snowshoe hare with terror.

Tired out, barely able to stand erect, yet wholly content with his day's catch, Ned made the cabin in the twilight, built his fire, and cooked his meager supper. After supper he skinned out such little animals as he had not taken time to skin on the trail, fleshed and stretched his pelts, then hung them up to dry. He was almost too tired to remove his wet garments when the work was done. He hardly remembered drawing the blankets over him.

Thus ended the first of a long series of arduous days. The hardship was incomparably greater than that endured by the great run of those hardy men, the northern trappers, not only because of his inadequate clothes, but because the line had been laid out by a giant's rule. Doomsdorf had spaced his cabins according to his own idea of a full day's work, and that meant

they were nearly twice as far apart as those of the average trap line. Bess had been given the line he had laid out for his squaw, hardly half so rigorous, yet all the average man would care to attempt.

But in spite of the hardship, the wrack of cold, the fatigue that crept upon him like a dreadful sickness, Ned had many moments of comparative pleasure. One of these moments, seemingly yielding him much more delight than the occasion warranted, occurred at the end of the second day of actual trapping.

This day's march had taken him to the Forks cabin; and there, as twilight drew about him, he was amazed to hear the nearing sound of footsteps in the snow. Some one was coming laboriously toward him, with the slow, dragging tread of deep fatigue.

The thing made no sense at all. Human companionship, in these gray and melancholy wastes, was beyond the scope of the imagination. For a moment he stared in dumb bewilderment like a man at the first seizure of madness. Then he sprang through the door and out on the snowy slope.

It was not just a whim of the fancy. A dim form moved toward him out of the grayness, hastening, now that his lantern light gleamed on the snow. Presently Ned saw the truth.

It was Bess, of course. At this point their lines coincided. It was her third stop, and since she had left the home cabin a day ahead of him, she was perfectly on schedule. He could hardly explain the delight that flashed through him at the sight of her. In this loneliness and silence mere human companionship was blessing enough.

His appearance in the doorway was not a surprise to Bess. She had counted the days carefully, and she knew his schedule would bring him here. But now she was too near dead with fatigue to give him more than a smile.

The night that ensued was one of revelation to Ned. His first cause of wonder was the well of reserve strength that suddenly manifested itself in the hour of need. He had not dreamed but that he was at the edge of collapse from the long day's toil; his brain had been dull with fatigue, and he was almost too tired to build his fire, yet he found himself a tower of strength in caring for the exhausted girl. It was as if his own fatigue had mysteriously vanished when he became aware of hers.

With scarcely a word he lifted her to the cot, covered her with a blanket, and in spite of her protests, went speedily about the work of cooking her supper. It was a strange thing what pleasure it gave him to see the warm glow of the life stream flow back into her blanched cheeks, and her deep, blue eyes fill again with light. Heretofore this twilight hour, at the end of a

bitter day, had been the worst hour of all; but to-night it was the best. He hadn't dreamed that so much pleasure could be gained simply by serving others. In addition to some of the simple staples that he found among the cabin's supplies, he served her, as a great surprise, the plump, white breast of a ptarmigan that he had found in one of his ermine traps; and it was somehow a deep delight to see her little, white teeth stripping the flesh from the bone. He warmed her up with hot coffee; then sat beside her while the night deepened at the window.

They had a quiet hour of talk before he drew the blankets about her shoulders and left her to drift away in sleep. He was unexplainably exultant; light-hearted for all this drear waste that surrounded him. This little hut of logs was home, to-night. The cold could not come in; the wind would clamor at the roof in vain.

He did her work for her to-night. He skinned the smaller animals she had brought in, then fleshed and stretched all the pelts she had taken. After preparing his own skins, he made a hard bed for himself on the floor of the hut.

It was with real regret that they took different ways in the dawn. Ned's last office was to prepare kindling for her use on her next visit to the cabin four days hence—hardly realizing that he was learning a little trick of the woodsman's trade that would stand him in good stead in many a dreadful twilight to come. Only the veriest tenderfoot plans on cutting his kindling when he finishes his day's toil. The tried woodsman, traveling wilderness trails, does such work in the morning, before fatigue lays hold of him. The thing goes farther: even when he does not expect to pass that way again he is careful to leave the kindling pile for the next comer. Like all the traditions of the North, it is founded on necessity: the few seconds thus saved in striking the flame have more than once, at the end of a bitter day, saved the flame of a sturdy life. This is the hour when seconds count. The hands are sometimes too cold to hold the knife: the tired spirit despairs at this labor of cutting fuel. It is very easy, then, to lie still and rest and let the cold take its toll.

The trails of these two trappers often crossed, in the weeks to come. They kept close track of each other's schedules, and they soon worked out a system whereby they could meet at the Forks cabin at almost every circuit. They arranged it wholly without embarrassment, each of them appreciating the other's need for companionship. By running a few traps toward the interior from the forks, Bess made an excuse to take five days to her route; and for once Doomsdorf seemed to fail to see her real motive. Perhaps he thought she was merely trying to increase her catch, thus hoping to avoid the penalties he had threatened.

Ned found to his amazement that they had many common interests. They were drawn together not only by their toil, and by their mutual fear of Doomsdorf's lash; but they also shared a deep and growing interest in the wilderness about them. The wild life was an absorbing study in itself. They taught each other little tricks of the trapper's trade, narrated the minor adventures of their daily toil; they were of mutual service in a hundred different ways. No longer did Ned go about his work in the flimsy clothes of the city. Out of the pelts he had dried she helped to make him garments and moccasins as warm and serviceable as her own, supplied through an unexpected burst of generosity on Doomsdorf's part soon after their arrival on the island. They brought their hardest problems to the Forks cabin and solved them together.

As the winter advanced upon them, they found an increasing need of mutual help. The very problem of living began to demand their best coöperation. The winter was more rigorous than they had ever dreamed in their most despairing moments, so that coöperation was no longer a matter of pleasure, but the stark issue of life itself. The spirit, alone and friendless, yielded quickly in such times as these.

It got to be a mystery with them after while, why they hadn't given up long since, instead of playing this dreadful, nightmare game to its ultimate end of horror and death. Why were they such fools as to keep up the hopeless fight, day after day through the intense cold, bending their backs to the killing labor, when at any moment they might find rest and peace? They did not have to look far. Freedom was just at their feet. Just to fall, to lie still; and the frost would creep swiftly enough into their veins. Sleep would come soon, the delusion of warmth, and then Doomsdorf's lash could never threaten them again. But they found no answer to the question. It was as if a power beyond themselves was holding them up. It was as if there was a debt to pay before they could find rest.

Day after day the snow sifted down, ever laying a deeper covering over the island, bending down the limbs of the strong trees, obscuring all things under this cold infinity of white. The traps had to be laboriously dug out and reset, again and again. These were the days when the old "sourdough" on the mainland remained within his cabin, merely venturing to the door after fuel; but Ned and Bess knew no such mercy. Their fate was to struggle on through those ever-deepening drifts until they died. Driven by a cruel master they dared not rest even a day. Walking was no longer possible without snowshoes; and even these sank deep in the soft drifts, the webs filling with snow, so that to walk a mile was the most bitter, heart-breaking labor. Yet their fate was to plow on, one day upon another,—strange, dim figures in the

gray, whirling flakes—the full, bitter distances between their cabins. To try to lay out meant death, certain and very soon. Moreover they could not even move with their old leisure. The days were constantly shorter, just a ray of light between great curtains of darkness; and only by mushing at the fastest possible walking pace were they able to make it through.

When the skies cleared, an undreamed degree of cold took possession of the land. Seemingly every trickle of moving water was already frozen hard, the sea sheltered by the island chain was an infinity of ice, snow-swept as was the rest of the weary landscape, but now the breath froze on the beard, and the eyelids one upon another. The fingers froze in the instant that the fur gloves were removed, and the hottest fires could hardly warm the cabins. And on these clear, bitter nights the Northern Lights were an ineffable glory in the sky.

A strange atmosphere of unreality began to cloud their familiar world. They found it increasingly hard to believe in their own consciousnesses; to convince themselves they were still struggling onward instead of lying lifeless in the snow. It was all dim like a dream,—snow and silence and emptiness, and the Northern Lights lambent in the sky. And for a time this was the only mercy that remained. Their perceptions were blunted: they were hardly aware of the messages of pain and torture that the nerves brought to the brain. And then, as ever, there came a certain measure of readjustment.

Their bodies built up to endure even such hardship as this. The fact that the snow at last packed was a factor too: they were able to skim over the white crust at a pace even faster than the best time they had made in early fall. They mastered the trapper's craft, learning how to skin a beaver with the fewest number of strokes, and in such a manner that the minimum amount of painstaking fleshing was required; and how to bait and set the traps in the fastest possible time. They learned their own country, and thus the best, easiest, and quickest routes from cabin to cabin.

The result was that at last the companionship between Bess and Ned, forgotten in the drear horror of the early winter months, was revived. Again they had pleasant hours about the stove at the Forks cabin, sometimes working at pelts, sometimes even enjoying the unheard-of luxury of a few minutes of idleness. While before they had come in almost too tired to be aware of each other's existence, now they were fresh enough to exchange a few, simple friendly words—even, on rare occasions, to enjoy a laugh together over some little disaster of the trail. The time came when they knew each other extremely well. In their hours of talk they plumbed each other's

most secret views and philosophies, and helped to solve each other's spiritual problems.

Very naturally, and scarcely aware of the fact themselves, they had come to be the best of companions. As Ned once said, when a night of particular beauty stirred his imagination and loosened his stern lips, they had been "through hell" together; and the finest, most enduring companionship was only to have been expected. But it went farther than a quiet sort of satisfaction in each other's presence. Each had got to know approximately what the other would do in any given case; and that meant that they afforded mutual security. They had mutual trust and confidence, which was no little satisfaction on this island of peril. Blunted and dulled before, their whole consciousness now seemed to sharpen and waken; they not only regarded each other with greater confidence: their whole outlook had undergone significant change. During the first few months of early winter they had moved over their terrible trails like mechanical machines, doing all they had to do by instinct, whether eating, sleeping, or working; self-consciousness had been almost forgotten, self-identity nearly lost. But now they were themselves again, looking forward keenly to their little meetings, their interests ever reaching farther, the first beginnings of a new poise and self-confidence upon them. They had stood the gaff! They had come through.

Ned's hours with Lenore, however, gave him less satisfaction than they had at first. She somehow failed to understand what he had been through. He had found out what real hardship meant, and he couldn't help but resent, considering her own comparative comfort, her attitude of self-pity. Always she wept for deliverance from the island, never letting Ned forget that his own folly had brought her hither; always expecting solicitude instead of giving it; always willing to receive all the help that Ned could give her, but never willing to sacrifice one whit of her own comfort to ease his lot. Because he had done man's work, and stood up under it, he found himself expecting more and more from her,—and failing to receive it. Her lack of sportsmanship was particularly distressing to him at a time when sobbing and complaints could only tear down his own hard-fought-for spirit to endure. Most of all he resented her attitude toward Bess. She had no sympathy for what the girl had been through, even refusing to listen to Ned's tales of her. And she seemed to resent all of Ned's kindnesses to her.

Slowly, by the school of hardship and conquest over hardship, Ned Cornet was winning a new self-mastery, a new self-confidence to take the place of the self-conceit that had brought him to disaster. But the first real moment of wakening was also one of peril,—on the trapping trail one clear afternoon toward the bitter close of January.



He had been quietly following that portion of his trap line that followed the timber belt between the Twelve-Mile cabin and Forks cabin, and the blazed trail had led him into the depths of a heavy thicket of young spruce. He had never felt more secure. The midwinter silence lay over the land; the cold and fearful beauty of a snow-swept wilderness had hold of his spirit; the specter of terror and death that haunted these wintry wastes was nowhere manifest to his sight. The only hint of danger that the Red Gods afforded him did not half penetrate his consciousness and did not in the least call him from his pleasant fancies. It was only a glimpse of green where the snow had been shaken from a compact little group of sapling spruce just beside one of his sets. Likely the wind had caught the little trees just right; perhaps some unfortunate little fur-bearer, a marten perhaps, or a fisher, had sprung back and forth among the little trees in an effort to free himself from the trap. He walked up quietly, located the tree to which the trap chain was attached, bent and started to draw the trap from the small, dense thicket whence some creature had dragged it. He was only casually interested in what manner of poor, frozen creature would be revealed between the steel jaws. The beauty of the day had wholly taken his mind from his work.

One moment, and the forest was asleep about him; the little trees looked sadly burdened with their loads of snow. The next, and the man was hurled to the ground by a savage, snarling thing that leaped from the covert like the snow demon it was; and white, gleaming fangs were flashing toward his throat.

## XXII

EXCEPT for the impediment of the trap on the creature's foot, there would have been but one blow to that battle in the snow. White fangs would have gone home where they were aimed, and all of Ned Cornet's problems would have been simply and promptly solved. There would have been a few grotesque sounds, carrying out among the impassive trees,—such sounds as a savage hound utters over his bone, and perhaps, a strange motif carrying through, a few weird whisperings, ever growing fainter, from a torn throat that could no longer convey the full tones of speech; and perhaps certain further motion, perhaps a wild moment of odd, frenzied leaping back and forth, fangs flashing here and there over a form that still shivered as if with bitter cold. But these things would not have endured long: the sounds, like wakeful children, speedily hiding and losing themselves in the great curtains of silence and the wilderness itself swiftly returning to its slumber. Drifting snow dust, under the wind, would have soon paled and finally obliterated the crimson stain among the little trees.

Ned would have been removed from Doomsdorf's power in one swiftly passing instant, the wilderness forgetting the sound of his snowshoes in its silent places. All things would be, so far as mortal eyes can discern, as if his soul had never found lodging in his body.

This was not some little fur-bearer, helpless in the trap. It was no less a creature than that great terror of the snow, a full-grown Arctic wolf, almost as white as the drifts he hunted through. Only the spruce trees knew how this fierce and cunning hunter came to snare his foot in the jaws of a marten trap. Nor could any sensible explanation be made why the great wolf did not break the chain with one lunge of his powerful body, instead of slinking into the coverts and waiting developments. The ways of the wild creatures quite often fail of any kind of an explanation; and it is a bold woodsman who will say what any particular creature will do under any particular condition. When he saw Ned's body within leaping range, he knew the desperate impulse to fight.

None of the lower creatures are introspective in regard to their impulses. They follow them without regard to consequences. The wolf leaped with incredible speed and ferocity. The human body is not built to stand erect under such a blow: the mighty, full-antlered caribou would have gone down the same way.

The chain of the trap broke like a spring as he leaped. The steel leash that is often used to restrain a savage dog would have broken no less quickly. There was no visible recoil: what little resistance there was seemingly did not in the least retard the blow. It did, however, affect its accuracy. That fact alone saved Ned from instant death.

But as the wolf lunged toward him to complete his work—after the manner of some of the beasts of prey when they fail to kill at the first leap—an inner man of might seemed to waken in Ned's prone body. A great force came to life within him. He lunged upward and met the wolf in the teeth.

Months before, when a falling tree had lashed down at him, he had seen a hint of this same, innate power. It was nothing peculiar to him: most men, sooner or later, see it manifested in some hour of crisis. But since that long-ago day it had been immeasurably enhanced and increased. While his outer, physical body had been developing, it had been strengthening too. Otherwise it would have been of little avail against that slashing, leaping, frenzied demon of the snow.

This inner power hurled him into a position of defense; but it would have saved him only an instant if it had not been for its staunch allies of muscles of tempered steel. For months they had been in training for just such a test as this; but Ned himself had never realized anything of their true power. He hadn't known that his nerves were as finely keyed as a delicate electrical instrument, so that they might convey the commands of his brain with precision and dispatch. He suddenly awakened to find himself a marvelous fighting machine, with certain powers of resistance against even such a foe as this.

A great surge of strength, seemingly without physical limitation, poured through him. In one great bound he overcame the deadly handicap of his own prone position, springing up with terrible, reaching, snatching hands and claspng arms. Some way, he did not know how, he hurled that hundred pounds of living steel from his body before the white fangs could go home.

But there was not an instant's pause. Desperate with fury, the wolf sprang in again,—a long, white streak almost too fast for the eye to follow. But he did not find Ned at a disadvantage now. The man had wrenched to one side to hurl the creature away, but he had already caught his balance and had braced to meet the second onslaught. A white-hot fury had descended upon him, too—obliterating all sense of terror, yielding him wholly to such fighting instincts as might be innate within him. Nor did they betray him, these inner voices. They directed the frightful power of his muscles in the one way that served him best.

Ned did not wait to catch the full force of that blow. His powerful thighs, made iron hard in these last bitter weeks, drove him out and up in an offensive assault. His long body seemed to meet that of the wolf full in the air. Then they rolled together into the drifts.

Ned landed full on top of the body of the wolf; and with a mighty surge of his whole frame he tried to strengthen his own advantageous position. His mighty knee clasped at the animal's breast, pressing with all his strength with the deadly intention of crushing the ribs upon the wild heart. And he gave no heed to the clawing feet. His instincts told him surely that in the white fangs alone lay his danger. With one arm he encircled the shaggy neck; with the other he tried to turn the great muzzle from his flesh.

The wolf wriggled free, sending home one vicious bite into the flesh just under the arm; and for a breath both contestants seemed to be playing some weird, pinwheel game in the snow. The silence of the everlasting wild was torn to shreds by the noise of battle,—the frantic snarling of the wolf, the wild shouts of this madman who had just found his strength. No moment of Ned's life had ever been fraught with such passion; none had ever been of such lightning vividness. He fought as he had never dreamed he could fight; and the glory of battle was upon him.

It might be that Doomsdorf could have picked up the great white creature by the scruff of the neck and beat his brains out against a tree. Yet Ned knew, in some cool, back part of his mind, that this was a foe worthy of the best steel of any man, however powerful. Even men of unusually great strength would have been helpless in an instant before those slashing fangs. Yet never for an instant did he lose hope. Bracing himself, he clamped down again with mighty knees on the wolf's breast.

Again the slashing fangs caught him, but he was wholly unaware of the pain. The muscles of his arms snapped tight against the skin, the great tendons drew, and he jerked the mighty head around and back.

Then for a moment both contestants seemed to lie motionless in the snow. The wolf lay like a great hound before the fireside,—fore legs stretched in front, body at full length. Ned lay at one side, the animal's body between his knees, one arm around his neck, the other thrusting back the great head. The whole issue of life or death, victory or defeat, was suddenly immensely simplified. It depended solely on whether or not Ned had the physical might to push back the shaggy head and shatter the vertebræ.

There was no sense of motion. Rather they were like figures in metal, a great artist's theme of incredible stress. Ned's face was drawn and black from congested blood. His lips were drawn back, the tendons of his hand,

free of the glove, seemed about to break through the skin. For that long moment Ned called on every ounce of strength of his body and soul. Only his body's purely physical might could force back the fierce head the ghastly inch that was needed; only the high-born spirit of strength, the mighty urge by which man holds dominion over earth and sea, could give him resolution to stand the incredible strain.

Time stood still. A thousand half-crazed fancies flew through his mind. His life blood seemed to be starting from his pores, and his heart was tearing itself to shreds in his breast. But the wolf was quivering now. Its eyes were full of strange, unworldly fire. And then Ned gave a last, terrific wrench.

A bone broke with a distinct crack in the utter silence. And as he fell forward, spent, the great white form slacked down and went limp in his arms.

Like a man who had been asleep Ned regained his feet. The familiar world of snow and forest rushed back to him, deep in the enchantment of the winter silence; and it was as if the battle had never occurred. Such warlike sounds as had been uttered were smothered in the stillness.

Yet the sleeve of his fur coat was torn, and dark red drops were dripping from his fingers. They made crimson spots in the immaculate snow. And just at his feet a white wolf lay impotent, never again to strike terror into his heart by its wild, unearthly chant on the ridge. The two had met, here in the wolf's own snows; and now one lay dead at his conqueror's feet.

Whose was the strength that had laid him low! Whose mighty muscles had broken that powerful neck! Vivid consciousness swept back to Ned; and with it a deep and growing exultation that thrilled the inmost chords of his being. It was an ancient madness, the heritage of savage days when man and beast fought for dominance in the open places; but it had not weakened and dimmed in the centuries. His eye kindled, and he stood shivering with excitement over his dead.

He had conquered. He had fought his way to victory. And was there any reason in heaven or earth why he should not fight on to freedom—out of Doomsdorf's power? The moving spirit of inspiration seemed to bear him aloft.

Drunk with his own triumph, Ned could not immediately focus his attention on any definite train of thought. At first he merely gave himself up to dreams, a luxury that since the first day on the island he had never permitted himself. For many moments after the exultation of his victory had begun to pass away, he was still so entranced by dreams of freedom that he could not consider ways and means.

The word freedom had come to have a tangible meaning for him in these last dreadful months; its very idea was dear beyond any power of his to tell. It was so beloved a thing that at first his cold logic could not take hold of it: its very thought brought a luster as of tears to his eyes and a warm glow, as in the first drifting of sleep, to his brain. He had found out what freedom meant and how unspeakably beautiful it was. In his native city, however, he had taken it as a matter of course. Because it was everywhere around him he was no more conscious of it than the air he breathed; and he felt secret scorn of much of the sentimental eloquence concerning it. It had failed to get home to him, and many of his generation had forgotten it, just as they had forgotten the Author of their lives. It was merely something that feeble old men, amusing in their earnestness and their badges of the Grand Army so proudly worn on their tattered clothes, spoke of with a curious, deep solemnity, which a scattered few of his friends, from certain hard-fighting divisions, had learned on battlefields in France; but which was of little importance in his own life. When he did think of it at all he was very likely to confuse it with license. Now and then, when heady liquor had hold of him, he had amused his friends with quite a lecture concerning freedom,—particularly in its relation to the Volstead act. But the old urge and devotion that was the life theme of hundreds of generations that had preceded him had seemed cold in his spirit.

He had learned the truth up here. He had found out it was the outer gate to all happiness; and everything else worth while was wholly dependent upon it. As he stood in this little snowy copse beside the dead wolf, even clearer vision came to him concerning it. Was it not the dream of the ages? Was not all struggle upward toward this one star,—not only economic and religious freedom, but freedom from the tyranny of the elements, from the scourge of disease, from the soiling hand of ignorance and want? And what quality made for dominance as much as love of freedom?

It was a familiar truth that no race was great without this love. Suddenly he saw that this was the first quality of greatness, whether in nations or individuals. The degree of this love was the degree of worth itself; and only the fawning weakling, the soul lost to honor and self-respect, was content to live beneath a master's lash when there was a fighting chance for liberty!

A fighting chance! The phrase meant nothing less than the chance of death. But all through the loner roll of the centuries the bravest men had defied this chance; and they would not lift their helmets to those that eschewed it. But now he knew the truth of that stern old law of tribes and nations,—a law sometimes forgotten yet graven on the everlasting stone—

that he who will not risk his life for liberty does not deserve to live it. The thing held good with him now. *It held good with Bess and Lenore as well.*

*That was the test!* It was the last, cruel trial in the Training Camp of Life.

Deeply moved and exalted, he lifted his face to the cold, blue skies as if for strength. For the instant he stood almost motionless, oblivious to his wounds and his torn clothes, a figure of unmistakable dignity in those desolate drifts. He knew what he must do. He too must stand trial, bravely and without flinching. For Ned Cornet had come into his manhood.

## XXIII

IN a little while Ned stripped the pelt from the warm body of the wolf and continued down his line of traps. He was able to think more coherently now and consider methods and details. And by the same token of clear thought, he was brought face to face with the fact of the almost insuperable obstacles in his path.

For all he could see now, Doomsdorf had surrounded them with a stone wall. He had seemingly thought of everything, prepared for every contingency, and left them not the slightest gateway to hope.

Plans for freedom first of all seemingly had to include Doomsdorf's death. That was the first essential, and the last. Could they succeed in striking the life from their master, they could wait in the cabin until the trader *Intrepid* should touch their island in the spring. It can be said for Ned that he conjectured upon the plan without the slightest whisper of remorse, the least degree of false sentiment. The fact that their master was, more or less, a human being did not change the course of his thought whatever. He would hurl that wicked soul out of the world with never an instant's pity, and his only prayer would be that it might fall into the real hell that he had tried to imitate on earth. There could be no question about that. If, through some mercy, the brute lay helpless for a single second at his feet, it would be time enough for the deed Ned had in mind. His arm would never falter, his cruel axe would shatter down as pitilessly as upon some savage beast of the forest. He had not forgotten what the three of them had endured.

The difficulty lay in finding an opening of attack. Doomsdorf's rifle was never loaded except when it was in his arms, and he wore his pistol in his belt, day and night. For all his hopelessness, Ned had noticed, half inadvertently, that he always took precautions against a night attack. The squaw slept on the outside of their cot and would be as difficult to pass without arousing as a sleeping dog. The cabin itself was bolted, not to be entered without waking both occupants; and the three prisoners of course slept in the newer cabin.

Bess had told him of Doomsdorf's encounter with Knutsen, describing with particular emphasis the speed with which the murderer had whipped out his pistol. He could get it into action long before Ned could lay bare his clasp knife. Indeed, mighty man that he was, he could crush Ned to earth



with one bound at the latter's first offensive movement. And Doomsdorf was always particularly watchful when Ned carried his axe.

Yet the fact remained that in his axe alone lay the only possible hope of success. Some time Ned might see an opportunity to swing it down: perhaps he could think of some wile to put Doomsdorf at a disadvantage. It was inconceivable that they should try to escape without first rendering Doomsdorf helpless to follow them. They could attempt neither to conceal themselves on the island, or cross the ice straight to Tzar Island without the absolute certainty of being hunted down and punished. What form that punishment would take Ned dared not guess.

It was true that Doomsdorf kept but a perfunctory watch over Ned and Bess while they plied their trap lines. But long ago he had explained to them the hopelessness of attempting to load their backs with food and strike off across the ice on the slim chance of encountering some inhabited island. The plan, he had said, had not been worth a thought, and even now, in spite of his new courage, Ned found that it promised little. In the first place, to venture out into that infinity of ice, where there was not a stick of fuel and the polar wind was an icy demon day and night, meant simply to die without great question or any considerable delay. The islands were many, but the gray ice between them insuperably broad and rough. As Doomsdorf had said, they could not get much of a start; scarcely a day went by but that Doomsdorf, from some point of vantage where his daily hunting excursions carried him, discerned the distant forms of one or both of his two trappers across the snowy barrens; and he would be quick to investigate if they were missing. His powerful legs and mighty strength would enable him to overtake the runaways in the course of a few hours. But lastly, settling the matter once and for all, there was the subject of Lenore. He could neither smuggle her out nor leave her to Doomsdorf's vengeance.

The plan might be worth considering, except for her. Of course, the odds would be tragically long on the side of failure; but all he dared pray for was a fighting chance. As matters lay, it was wholly out of the question.

Seemingly the only course was to lie low, always to be on the watch for the moment of opportunity. Some time, perhaps, their master's vigilance would relax. Just one little instant of carelessness on his part might show the way. Perhaps the chance would come when the *Intrepid* put into the island to buy the season's furs, if indeed life dwelt in his own body until that time. Ned didn't forget that long, weary months of winter still lay between.

He concluded that he would not take Lenore into his confidence at once. That would come later,—when he had something definite to propose. Lately

she had not shown great confidence in him, scorning his ability to shelter her and serve her; and of course she would have only contempt for any such vague hope as this. He had nothing to offer now but the assurance of his own growing sense of power. As yet his hope lay wholly in the realization of the late growth and development of his own character. So far as material facts went, the barriers between her and her liberty were as insuperable as ever. He would not be able to encourage her: more likely, by her contempt, she would jeopardize his own belief in himself. Besides, for all his great love for her, he could not make himself believe that she was of fighting metal. He found, in this moment of analysis of her soul, that he could not look to her for aid. She was his morning star, all that he could ask in woman, and he had chosen her for her worth and beauty, rather than for a helpmate, a fortress at his side. Yes, coöperation with her might injure, rather than increase, his chances for success.

He dismissed in an instant the idea of telling Bess. His loyalty to Lenore demanded that, at least. She must not go where his own betrothed was excluded. If the thought came that Bess, by light of courage and fortitude, had already gone where in weakness and self-pity Lenore could not possibly follow—the windy snow fields and the bitter crests of the rugged hills—he pushed it sternly from him. The whole thing was a matter of instinct with him, perhaps a wish to shield himself from invidious comparisons of the two girls. He would have liked to convince himself that Lenore could be his ally, but he was wholly unable to do so. Realizing that, he preferred to believe that Bess was likewise incompetent. But he knew he must not let his mind dwell to any great length upon the subject. He might be forced to change his mind.

He must make a lone fight. He must follow a lone trail—like the old gray pack leader whose sluts cannot keep pace.

Thereafter, day and night, Ned watched his chances. Never he climbed to the top of the ridge but that he searched, with straining eyes, for the glimpse of a dog-sledge on the horizon, or perhaps the faint line of a distant island. On the nights that he spent at the home cabin, he made an intense study of Doomsdorf's most minor habits, trying to uncover some little failing, some trifling carelessness that might give him his opportunity. He made it a point to leave his axe in easy reaching distance; his clasp knife, in a holster of fur, was always open in his pocket, always ready to his hand. All day, down the weary length of his trap line, he considered ways and means.

Simply because the wild continued to train him, he was ever stronger for this great, ultimate trial. Not only his intent was stronger, his courage greater, but his body also continued its marvelous development. His muscles

were like those of a grizzly: great bunches of tendons, hard as stone, moving under his white skin. Every motion was lithe and strong; his energy was a never-failing fountain; his eyes were vivid and clear against the old-leather hue of his face.

There was no longer an unpleasant discoloration in the whites of his eyes. They were a cold, hard, pale blue; and the little network of lines that had once shown faintly at his cheek bones had completely faded. His hands had killing strength; his neck was a brown pillar of muscle. Health was upon him, in its full glory, to the full meaning of the word.

He found, to his great amazement, that his mental powers had similarly developed. His thought was more clear, and it flowed in deeper channels. It was no effort for him now to follow one line of thought to its conclusion. The tendency to veer off in the direction of least resistance had been entirely overcome. He could be of some aid, now, in the fur house of Godfrey Cornet. He felt he would like to match wits with his father's competitors.

He would need not only this great physical strength, but also his enhanced mental powers in the trial and stress that were to come. Doomsdorf's tyranny could not be endured forever; they were being borne along toward a crisis as if on an ocean current. And for all his growth, Ned never made the fatal mistake of considering himself a physical match for Doomsdorf. Over and above the fact that the latter was armed with rifle and pistol, Ned was still a child in his hands. It was simply a case of intrinsic limitations. It was as if the wolf, chain-lightning savagery that he is, should try to lay low the venerable grizzly bear.

Sooner or later the crisis would fall upon them,—a fit of savage anger on Doomsdorf's part, or a wrong that could not be endured, even if death were the penalty for rebellion. Moreover, Ned could not escape the haunting fear that such a crisis was actually imminent. Doomsdorf's mood was an uncertain thing at best; and lately it had taken a turn for the worse. He was not getting the satisfaction that he had anticipated out of Ned's slavery; the situation had lost its novelty, and he was open to any Satanic form of diversion that might occur to him. Ned had mastered his trap lines, had stood the gaff and was a better man on account of it; and it was time his master provided additional entertainment for him. In these dark, winter days he remembered the Siberian prison with particular vividness, and at such times the steely glitter was more pronounced in his eyes, and certain things that he had seen lingered ever in his mind. He kept remembering strange ghosts of men, toiling in the snow till they died, and souls that went out screaming under the lash; and such remembrances moved him with a dark, unspeakable lust. He thought he would like to bring these memory-pictures

to life. Besides, his attitude toward Bess was ever more sinister. He followed her motions with a queer, searching, speculative gaze; and now and then he offered her little favors.

If he could only be held in restraint a few months more. Ned knew perfectly that the longer the crisis could be averted, the better his chance for life and liberty. He would have more opportunity to make preparations, to lay plans. Besides, every day that he followed his trap line he was better trained—in character and mind and body—for the test to come. The work of bringing out Ned Cornet's manhood had never ceased.

Every day he had learned more of those savage natural forces that find clearest expression in the North. He knew the wind and the cold, snow-slide and blizzard, but also he knew hunger and fear and travail and pain. All these things taught him what they had to teach, and all of them served to shape him into the man he had grown to be. And one still, clear afternoon the North sent home a new realization of its power.

He was working that part of the line from his Twelve-Mile cabin over the ridge toward the Forks cabin,—his old rendezvous with Bess. He was somewhat late in crossing the range to-day. He had taken several of the larger fur-bearers and had been obliged to skin them laboriously, first thawing them out over a fire in the snow, so that midafternoon found him just emerging from the thick copse where he had killed the white wolf. The blazed trail took him around the shoulder of the ridge, clear to the edge of a little, deeply seamed glacier such as crowns so many of the larger hills in the far North.

Few were the wild creatures that traversed this icy desolation, so his trap line had been laid out around the glacier, following the blazed trail in the scrub timber. But to-day the long way round was particularly grievous to his spirit. More than a mile could be saved by leaving the timber and climbing across the ice, and only a few sets, none of which had ever proved especially productive, would be missed. In his first few weeks the danger of going astray had kept him close to his line, but he was not obliged to take it into consideration now. He knew his country end to end.

Without an instant's hesitation he turned from the trail straight over the snowy summit toward the cabin. The cut-off would save him the annoyance of making camp after dark. And since he had climbed it once before, he scarcely felt the need of extra caution.

The crossing, however, was not quite the same as on the previous occasion. Before the ice had been covered, completely across, with a heavy snowfall, no harder to walk on than the open barrens. He soon found now

that the snow prevailed only to the summit of the glacier, and the descent beyond the summit had been swept clean by the winds.

Below him stretched a half-mile of glare ice, ivory white like the fangs of some fabulous beast-of-prey. Here and there it was gashed with crevices,—those deep glacier chasms into which a stone falls in silence. For a moment Ned regarded it with considerable displeasure:

He was not equipped for ice scaling. Perhaps it was best not to try to go on. But as he waited, the long way down and around seemed to grow in his imagination. It was that deadly hour of late afternoon when the founts of energy run low and the thought-mechanism is dulled by fatigue;—and some way, he felt his powers of resistance slipping away from him. He forget, for the moment, the *Fear* that is the very soul of wisdom.

He decided to take a chance. He removed his snowshoes and ventured carefully out upon the ice.

It was easier than it looked. His moccasins clung very well. Steadily gaining confidence, he walked at a faster pace. The slope was not much on this side, the glacier ending in an abrupt cliff many hundred feet in height, so he felt little need of especial precaution. It was, in fact, the easiest walking that he had had since his arrival upon the island, so he decided not to turn off clear until he reached the high ground just to one side of the ice cliff. He crawled down a series of shelves, picked his way about a jagged promontory, and fetched up at last at the edge of a dark crevice scarcely fifty feet from the edge of the snow.

The crevice was not much over five feet wide at this point, and looking along, he saw that a hundred yards to his right it ended in a snowbank. But there was no need of following it down. He could leap it at a standing jump: with a running start he could bound ten feet beyond.

He was tired, eager to get to camp,—and this was the zero hour. He drew back three paces, preparatory to making the leap.

As he halted he was somewhat amazed at the incredible depth of silence that enthralled this icy realm. It seemed to him, except for the beat of his own heart, the absolute zero of silence,—not a whimper of wind or the faintest rustle of whisking snow dust. All the wilderness world seemed to be straining—listening. The man leaped forward.

At that instant the North gave him some sign of its power. His first running step was firm, but at the second his moccasin failed to hold, slipping straight back. He pitched forward on his hands and knees, grasping at the hard, slippery ice.

But he had not realized his momentum. He experienced a strange instant of hovering, of infinite suspense; and then the realization, like a flash of lightning, of complete and immutable disaster. There was no sense of fast motion. He slid rather slowly, with that sickening helplessness that so often characterizes the events of a tragic dream; and the wilderness seemed still to be waiting, watching, in unutterable indifference. Then he pitched forward into the crevice.

To Ned it seemed beyond the least, last possibility of hope that he should ever know another conscious second. The glacier crevices were all incredibly deep, and he would fall as a stone falls, crushed at last on the lightless floor of the glacier so far below that no sound might rise to disturb this strange immensity of silence. It was always thus with wilderness deaths. There is no sign that the Red Gods ever see. All things remain as they were,—the eternal silence, the wild creatures absorbed in their occupations; the trees never lifting their bowed heads from their burdens of snow. Ned did not dream that mortal eyes would ever rest upon his form again, vanishing without trace except for the axe that had fallen at the edge of the crevice and the imprint of his snowshoes on the trail behind. There was no reason in heaven or earth for doubting but that this ivory glacier would be his sepulcher forever.

In that little instant the scope of his mind was incredibly vast. His thought was more clear and true than ever before in his life, and it was faster than the lightning in the sky. It reached back throughout his years; it encompassed in full his most subtle and intricate relations with life. There was no sense of one thought coming after another. The focus of his attention had been immeasurably extended; and all that he knew, and all that he was and had been, was before his eyes in one great, infinite vista.

He still had time in plenty to observe the immensity of the silence; the fact that his falling had not disturbed, to the least fraction of a degree, the vast imperturbability of the stretching snow fields about him. In that same instant, because of the seeming certainty of his end, he really escaped from fear. Fear in its true sense is a relation that living things have with the uncertainties of the future: a device of nature by which the species are warned of danger, but it can serve no purpose when judgment is signed and sealed. This was not danger but seeming certainty; and the mind was too busy with other subjects to give place to such a useless thing as fear.

By the same token he could not truly be said to hope. Hope also is the handmaiden of uncertainty. Glancing back, there was no great sense of regret. Seemingly dispatched irrevocably out of the world, in that flash of an instant he was suddenly almost indifferent toward it. He remembered Lenore

clearly, seeing her more vividly than he had ever seen her before, but she was like an old photograph found buried in a forgotten drawer,—recalling something that was of greatest moment once, but which no longer mattered. Perhaps, seemingly facing certain death, he was as one of the dead, seeing everything in the world from an indifferent and detached viewpoint.

All these thoughts swept him in a single fraction of an instant as he plunged into darkness. And all of them were unavailing. The uncertainty that shadows the lives of men held sway once more; and with it a ghastly and boundless terror.

He was not to die at once. There was still hope of life. He fetched up, as if by a miracle, on an icy shelf ten feet below the mouth of the crevice,—with sheer walls rising on each side.

## XXIV

NED knew what fear was, well enough, as he lay in the darkened chasm, staring up at the white line of the crevice above him. The old love of life welled back, sweeping his spirit as in a flood, and with it all the hopes and fears of which life is made. He remembered Lenore, now. Her image was not just a lovely photograph of a past day,—a silvery daguerreotype of a happiness forgotten. He remembered again his debt of service to her, his dear companionship for Bess, his dreams of escape from the island. Rallying his scattered faculties, he tried to analyze his desperate position.

The shelf on which he had fallen was scarcely wider than his body, and only because it projected at an upward incline from the sheer wall had he come to rest upon it. It was perhaps fifty feet long, practically on a level all the way. The wall was sheer for ten feet above him; beyond the shelf was only the impenetrable darkness of the crevice, extending apparently into the bowels of the earth.

Could he climb the wall? There was no other conceivable possibility of rescue. No one knew where he was; no one would come to look for him. Moreover, his escape must be immediate,—within a few hours at most. There was no waiting for Doomsdorf to come to look for him in the morning light. He was dressed in the warmest clothes, but even these could not repel the frightful cold of the glaciers.

Cool-headed, with perfect self-mastery, he shifted himself on the ledge to determine if he had been injured in the fall. He was drawn and shuddering with pain, but that alone was not an index. Often the more serious injuries result in a temporary paralysis that precludes pain. If any bones were broken he was beaten at the start. But his arms and legs moved in obedience to his will, and there seemed nothing to fear from this.

Very cautiously, in imminent danger of pitching backward into the abyss, he climbed to his feet. He was a tall man, but his hands, reaching up, did not come within two feet of the ledge. And there was nothing whatever for his hands to cling to.

If only there were irregularities in the ice. With a surge of hope he thought of his axe.

This tool, however, had either fallen into the crevice or had dropped from his shoulder and lay on the ice above. But there remained his clasp



knife. He drew it carefully from his pocket.

Already he felt the icy chill of the glacier stealing through him, the cold fingers of death itself. He must lose no time in going to work. He began to cut, two feet above the ledge, a sharp-edged hole in the ice.

Brittle ice is not easy to cut with a knife. It was a slow, painful process. He knew at once that he must work with care,—any irregular cut would not give him foothold. But Ned was working for his life; and his hand was facile as never before.

He finished the cut at last, then started on another a foot above. He hewed out a foothold with great care.

In spite of his warm gloves and the hard exercise of cutting, the numbing, biting frost was getting to his fingers. But he mustn't let his hand grow stiff and awkward. He did not forget that the handholds, to which his fingers must cling, were yet to be made. They had to be finished with even greater skill than the footholds. Very wisely, he turned to them next.

He made the first of them as high as he could reach. Then he put one in about a foot below. Three more footholds were put in at about twelve-inch intervals between.

At that point he found it necessary to stop and spend a few of his precious moments in rest. He must not let fatigue dull him and take the cunning from his hand. But the first stage of the work was done;—deliverance looked already immeasurably nearer. If he could climb up, then cling on and cut a new hold! Placing the knife between his teeth, he put his moccasin into the first foothold and pulled himself up.

It did not take long, however, to convince him that the remaining work bordered practically on the impossible. These holes in the ice were not like irregularities in stone. The fingers slipped over them: it was almost impossible to cling on with both hands, much less one. But clinging with all his might, he tried to free his right hand to procure his knife.

He made it at last, and at a frightful cost of nervous energy succeeded in cutting some sort of a gash in the icy wall above his head. Standing so close he could not look up, it was impossible to do more than hack out a ragged hole. And because life lay this way and no other, he put the blade once more between his teeth, reached his right hand into the hole, and tried to pull himself up again.

But disaster, bitter and complete, followed that attempt. His numbing hands failed to hold under the strain, and he slipped all the way back to his shelf. Something rang sharply against the ice wall, far below him.

He did not hear it again; but the truth went home to him in one despairing instant. Try as hard as he could, his jaws had released their hold upon the knife, and it had fallen into the depths of the crevice below. He was not in the least aware of the vicious wound its blade had cut in his shoulder, of the warm blood that was trickling down under his furs. He only knew, with that cold fatalism with which the woodsman regards life, that he had fought a good fight,—and he had lost.

There was no use of trying any more. He had no other knife or axe, no tool that could hack a hole in the icy wall. What other things he carried about him—the furs on his back, his box of safety matches, and other minor implements of his trade—could not help him in the least. And soon it became increasingly difficult to think either upon the fight he had made or the fate that awaited him.

It was hard to remember anything but the growing cold.

It hurt worst in his hands. So he took to rubbing his hands together, hard as he could. He felt the blood surge back into them, and soon they were fairly warm in the great mittens of fur.

Directly he settled back on his icy shelf and drew the pelts he had taken that day over his shoulders. There was but one hope left; and such as it was, it was curiously allied with despair. He hoped that he had heard true that when frost steals into the veins it comes with gentleness and ease. Perhaps he would simply go to sleep.

It wouldn't be a long time. In fact, a great drowsiness, not unpleasant but rather peaceful, was already settling upon him. The cold of the glacier was deadly. Not many moments remained of his time on earth. The death that dwells in the Arctic ice is mercifully swift.

He had counted on hours, at least. He had even anticipated lingering far into the night. But this was only *moments*! The cleft above him was still distinctly gray.

The ice was creeping again into his fingers. But he wouldn't try to shake it out again. And now, little, stabbing blades of cold were beginning to pierce his heart.

But likely he would go to sleep before they really began to trouble him. The northern night deepened around him. The wind sprang up and moved softly over the pale ice above him. The day was done.

## XXV

BESS had made good time along her line that day. She had not forgotten that this was the day of her rendezvous with Ned, and by walking swiftly, eschewing even short rests, carrying her larger trophies into the cabin to skin rather than halting and thawing them out over a fire, she arrived at the Forks hut at midafternoon. She began at once to make preparations for Ned's coming.

She built a roaring fire in the little, rusted stove, knowing well the blessing it would be to the tired trapper, coming in with his load of furs. She started supper so that the hot meal would be ready upon his arrival. Then she began to watch the hillside for his coming.

It always gave her a pleasant glow to see the little, moving spot of black at the edge of the timber. Because of a vague depression that she had been unable all day to shake off, she anticipated it especially now. They always had such cheery times together, perched on opposite sides of the little stove. To Bess they redeemed the whole, weary week of toil. It was true that their relations were of companionship only; but this was dear enough. If, long ago, her dreams had gone out to him with deeper meaning, surely she had conquered them by now,—never to set her heart leaping at a friendly word, never to carry her, at the edge of slumber, into a warm, beloved realm of exquisite fancy. Bess had undergone training too. These days in the snow had strengthened her and steeled her to face the truth; and even, in a measure, to reconcile herself to the truth. She had tried to make her heart content with what she had, and surely she was beginning to succeed.

Ned was a little past his usual time to-night. Her depression deepened, and she couldn't fight it off. This North was so remorseless and so cruel, laying so many pitfalls for the unsuspecting. It was strange what blind terror swept through her at just the thought of disaster befalling Ned. It made her doubt herself, her own mastery of her heart. She never considered the dangers that lay in her own path, only those in his. At the end of a miserable hour she straightened, scarcely able to believe her eyes.

On the glare ice of the glacier, a mile straight up the ridge from the cabin, she saw the figure of a man. Far as it was, one glance told her it was not merely a creature of the wild, a bear disturbed in his winter sleep or a caribou standing facing her. It was Ned, of course, taking the perilous path

over the ice, instead of keeping to the blazed trail of his trap line. On the slight downward slope toward her, clearly outlined against the white ice, she could see every step he took.

He was walking boldly over the glassy surface. Didn't he know its terrors, the danger of slipping on the icy shelves and falling to his death, the deep crevices shunned by the wild creatures? She watched every step with anxious gaze. When he was almost to safety she saw him stop, draw back a few paces, and then come forward at a leaping pace.

What happened thereafter came too fast for her eyes to follow. One instant she saw his form distinctly as he ran. The next, and the ice lay white and bare in the wan light, and Ned had disappeared as if by a magician's magic.

For one moment she gazed in growing horror. There was no ice promontory behind which he was hidden, nor did he reappear again. And peering closely, she made out a faint, dark line, like a pencil mark on the ice, just where Ned had disappeared.

The truth went home in a flash. The dark line indicated a crevice, to the bottom of which no living thing may fall and live. Yet to such little wild creatures, red-eyed ermine and his fellows that might have been watching her from the snow in front, Bess gave no outward sign that she had seen or that she understood.

She stood almost motionless at first. Her eyes were toneless, lightless holes in her white face; the face itself seemed utterly blank. She seemed to be drawing within herself, into an eerie dream world of her own, as if seeking shelter from some dire, unthinkable thing that lay without. She was hardly conscious, as far as the usual outward consciousness is concerned; unaware of herself, unaware of the snow fields about her and the deepening cold; unaware of the onward march of time. She seemed like a child, hovering between life and death in the scourge of some dread, childhood malady.

Slowly her lips drew in a smile; a smile ineffably sweet, tender as the watch of angels. It was as if the dying child had smiled to reassure its sobbing mother, to tell her that all was well, that she must dry her tears. "It isn't true," she whispered, there in the stillness. "It couldn't be true—not to Ned. There is some way out—some mistake."

She turned into the cabin, bent, and added fresh fuel to the stove. Its heat scorched her face, and she put up her hand to shield it. The cabin should be warm, when she brought Ned home. She mustn't let the cold creep in. She must not forget the *cold*, always watching for every little opening. Perhaps

he would want food too: she glanced into the iron pot on the stove. Then, acting more by instinct than by conscious thought, she began to look about for such tools as she would need in the work to follow.

There was a piece of rope, used once on a hand sled, hanging on the wall; but it was only about eight feet in length. Surely it was not long enough to aid her, yet it was all she had. Next, she removed a blanket from her cot and threw it over her shoulder. There might be need of this too,—further protection against the cold.

Heretofore she had moved slowly, hardly aware of her own acts; but now she was beginning to master herself again. She mustn't linger here. She must make her spirit waken to life, her muscles spring to action. Carrying her rope and her blanket, she went out the door, closed it behind her, and started up toward the glacier.

Only one thing was real in that long mile; and all things else were vague and shadowy as faces in a remembered dream. The one reality was the dark line, ever broader and more distinct, that lay across the ice where Ned had disappeared. The hope she had clung to all the way, that it was merely a shallow hollow in the ice and not one of the dread crevices that seem to go to the bowels of the earth, was evidently without the foundation of fact.

Weary lifetimes passed away before ever she reached the first, steep cliff of the glacier. She had to follow along its base, on to the high ground toward which Ned had been heading, finally crossing back to the smooth table of the glacier itself. There was no chance for a mistake now. The gash in the ice was all too plain.

At last she stood at the very edge of the yawning seam, staring down into the unutterable blackness below. Not even *light* could exist in the murky depths of the crevice, much less fragile human life. The day was not yet dead, twilight was still gray about her; but the crevice itself seemed full of ink clear to its mouth. And Ned's axe, lying just at the edge of the chasm, showed where he had fallen.

There was no use of seeking farther; of calling into the lightless depths. The story was all too plain. Very quietly, she lay down on the ice, trying to peer into the blackness below; but it was with no hope of bringing the fallen back to her again. Ned was lost to her, as a falling star is lost to the star clusters in the sky.

It never occurred to her that she would ever get upon her feet again. The game had been played and lost. There was no need of braving the snow again, of fighting her way down the trap line in the bitter dawns. The star she had followed had fallen; the flame of her altar had burned out.

She knew now why she had ever fought the fight at all. It was not through any love of life, or any hope of deliverance in the end. It had all been for Ned. She had denied it before, but the truth was plain enough now. It was her love for Ned that had kept her shoulders straight under the killing labor, had sheltered her spirit from the curse of cold and storm, that had borne her aloft out of the power of this savage land to harm. She knew now why she had not given up long since.

Was that the way of woman's heart, to sustain her through a thousand unutterable miseries only that she might be crushed in the end? Was life no more than this? She had been content to live on, to endure all, just to be near him and watch over him to the end; but there was no need of lingering now. The fire in the cabin could burn down, and the fire of her spirit could flicker out in the ever-deepening cold.

She had tried to blind herself to the truth, yet always, in the secret places of her soul, she had known. It was not that she ever had hope of Ned's love. Lenore would get that: Ned's devotion to her had never faltered yet. But it was enough just to be near, to work beside him, to care for him to the full limit of her mortal power. She knew now that all the tears she had shed had been for him: not for the lash of cold on her own body, but on his; not for her own miseries, but those that had so often brought Ned clear into the shadow of death. And now the final blow had fallen. She could lie still on the ice and let the wind cry by in triumph above her.

She had loved every little moment with him, on the nights of their rendezvous. She had loved him even at first, before ever his manhood came upon him, but her love had been an infinite, an ineffable thing in these last few weeks of his greatness. She had watched his slow growth; every one of his victories had been a victory to her; and she had loved every fresh manifestation of his new strength. But oh, she had loved his boyishness too. His queer, crooked smile, his brown hair curling over his brow, his laugh and his eyes,—all had moved her and glorified her beyond any power of hers to tell.

She called his name into the chasm depths, and some measure of self-control returned to her when she heard the weird, rolling echo. Perhaps she shouldn't give up yet. It wouldn't be Ned's way to yield to despair until the last, faint flame of hope had burned out. Perhaps the crevice was not of such vast depth as she had been taught to believe. Perhaps even now the man she loved was lying, shattered but not dead, only a few feet below her in the darkness. She had come swiftly; perhaps the deadly cold had not yet had time to claim him. She called again, loudly as she could.

And that cry did not go unheard. Ned had given up but a few moments before Bess had come, and her full voice carried clearly into the strange, misty realm of semi-consciousness into which he had drifted. And this manhood that had lately grown upon him would not let him shut his ears to this sobbing appeal. His own voice, sounding weird and hollow as the voice of the dead in that immeasurable abyss, came back in answer.

“Here I am, Bess,” he said. “You’ll have to work quick.”

## XXVI

IT was bitter hard for Ned to fight his way back through death's twilight. The cold had hold of him, its triumph was near, and it would not let him go without a savage battle that seemed to wrack the man in twain. So far as his own wishes went, he only wanted to drift on, farther and farther into the twilight ocean, and never return to the cursed island again. But Bess was calling him, and he couldn't deny her. Perhaps in a distant cabin Lenore called him too.

Indeed, the call upon him was more urgent than ever before. Before, his thought had always been for Lenore, but Bess too was a factor now. In that utter darkness Ned saw more clearly than ever before in his life, and while his eyes searched only for Lenore, he kept seeing Bess too. Bess with her never-failing smile of encouragement, her soft beauty that had held him, in spite of himself, on their nights at Forks cabin. Her need of him was real, threatened by Doomsdorf as she was, and he mustn't leave her sobbing so forlornly on the ice above. Lenore was first, of course,—his duty to her reason enough for making a mighty fight. But Bess's pleading moved him deeply.

He summoned every ounce of courage and determination that he had and tried to shake the frost from his brain. "You'll have to work quick," he warned again. His voice was stronger now, but softened with a tenderness beyond her most reckless dreams. "Don't be too hopeful—I haven't much left in me. What can you do?"

The girl who answered him was in no way the lost and hopeless mortal that had lain sobbing on the ice. Her scattered, weakened faculties had swept back to her in all their strength, at the first sound of his voice. *He was alive*, and it is the code of the North, learned in these dreadful months, that so long as a spark still glows the battle must not be given over. There was something to fight for now. The fighting side of her that Ned had seen so often swept swiftly into dominance. At once she was a cold blade, true and sure; brain and body in perfect discipline.

"How far are you?" she asked. "I can't see——"

"About ten feet—but I can't get up without help."

"Can you stand up?"



“Yes.” Forcing himself to the last ounce of his nerve and courage, he drew himself erect. Reaching upward, his hands were less than a yard from the top of the crevice.

Bess did not make the mistake of trying to reach down to him. She conquered the impulse at once, realizing that any weight at all, unsupported as she was, would draw her into the ravine. Even the rope would be of no use until she had something firm to which to attach it.

“I’ve dug holes most of the way up,” he told her. “I might try to climb ’em, with a little help——”

“Are you at the bottom of the crevice?”

“The bottom is hundreds of feet below me. I’m on a ledge about three feet wide.”

“Then stand still till I can really help you. I can’t pull you now without being pulled in myself, and if you’d fall back you’d probably roll off the ledge. The ice is like glass. Ned, are you good for ten minutes more——”

“I don’t know——”

“It’s the only chance.” Again her tone was pleading. “Keep the blood moving for ten minutes more, Ned. Oh, tell me you’ll try——”

Deep in the gloom she thought she heard him laugh—only a few, little syllables, wan and strange in the silence—and it was all the answer she needed. He would fight on for ten minutes more. He would struggle against the cold until she could rescue him.

“Here’s a blanket,” she told him swiftly. “Put it around you, if you can, without danger of rolling off.”

She dropped him the great covering she had brought; then in a single, deerlike motion, she leaped the narrow crevice. On the opposite side she procured Ned’s axe; then she turned, and half running, half gliding on the ice, sped toward the nearest timber,—a number of stunted spruce two hundred yards distant at the far edge of the glacier.

Bess had need of her woodsman’s knowledge now. Never before had her blows been so true, so telling on the tough wood. Before, in the fuel cutting of months before, she had wielded the axe in fear of the lash, but to-day she worked for Ned’s life, for the one dream that mattered yet. Almost at once she had done her work and was started back with a tough pole, eight feet long and four inches in diameter, balanced on her sturdy shoulder.

Ned was still strong enough to answer her call when she returned, and the dim light still permitted him to see her lay the pole she had cut as a

bridge across the crevice, cutting notches in the ice to hold it firm. Swiftly she tied one end of her rope to the pole and dropped the other to him.

“Can you climb up?” she asked him. Everything had centered down to this—whether he still had strength to climb the rope.

“Just watch me,” was the answer.

From that instant, she knew that she had won. The spirit behind his words would never falter, with victory so near. He dug his moccasins into the holes he had hacked in the ice, meanwhile working upward, hand over hand. To fall meant to die,—but Ned didn't fall.

It was a hard fight, weakened as he was, but soon the girl's reaching hands caught his sleeve, then his coat; finally they were fastened firmly, lifting with all the girl's strength, under the great arms. His hand seized the pole, and he gave a great upward lunge. And then he was lying on the ice beside her, fighting for breath, not daring to believe that he was safe.

But the usual cool, half-mirthful remark that, in many little crises, Ned had learned to expect from Bess was not forthcoming to-night. Nor were the sounds in the twilight merely those of heavy breathing. The strain was over, and Bess had given way to the urge of her heart at last. Her tears flowed unchecked, whether of sorrow or happiness even she did not know.

The man crawled toward her, moved by an urge beyond him, and for a single moment his strong arms pressed her close. “Don't cry, little pal,” he told her. He smiled, a strangely boyish, happy smile, into her eyes. Very softly, reverently he kissed her wet eyelids, then stilled her trembling lips with his own. He smiled again, a great good-humor taking hold of him. “You're too big a girl to cry!”

It was he, to-night, who had to relieve with humor a situation that would have soon been out of bounds. Yet all at once he saw that the little sentence had meaning far beyond what he had intended. She *had* shown bigness to-night,—a greatness of spirit and strength that left him wondering and reverent. The battle she had fought to save his life was no less than his own waged with the white wolf, weeks before.

Here was another who had stood the gaff! She too knew what it was to take the fighting chance. Presently he knew, by light of this adventure on the ice, that Bess was more than mere companion in toil and hardship, some one to shelter and protect. She was a *comrade-at-arms*,—such a fortress of strength as the best of women have always been to the men they loved.

He did not know whether or not she loved him. It didn't affect the point that, in a crisis, she had shown the temper of her steel! He did not stand

alone henceforth. In the struggle for freedom that was to come here was an ally on whom, to the very gates of death, he could implicitly rely.

## XXVII

WHEN food and warmth had brought complete recovery, Ned took up with Bess the problem of deliverance from the island. He found that for weeks she had been thinking along the same line, and like him, she had as yet failed to hit upon any plan that offered the least chance for success. The subject held them late into the night.

There was no need of a formal pact between them. Each of them realized that if ever the matter came to the crisis, the other could be relied upon to the last ditch. They stood together on that. Whatever the one attempted, the other would carry through. And because of their mutual trust, both felt more certain than ever of their ultimate triumph.

They took different trails in the dawn, following the long circle of their trap lines. All the way they pondered on this same problem, conceiving a plan only to reject it because of some unsurmountable obstacle to its success; dwelling upon the project every hour and dreaming about it at night. But Ned was far as ever from a conclusion when, three days later, he followed the beach on the way to the home cabin.

He had watched with deadened interest the drama of the wild things about him these last days; but when he was less than a mile from home he had cause to remember it again. To his great amazement he found at the edge of the ice the fresh track of one of the large island bears.

There was nothing to tell for sure what had awakened the great creature prematurely from its winter sleep. The expected date of awakening was still many weeks off. But the grizzly is notoriously irregular in his habits; and experienced naturalists have long since ceased to be surprised at whatever he may do. Ned reasoned at once that the present mild weather had merely beguiled the old veteran from his lair (the size of the track indicated a patriarch among the bears) and he was simply enjoying the late winter sunlight until a cold spell should drive him in again.

The sight of the great imprint was a welcome one to Ned, not alone because the wakening forecasted, perhaps, an early spring, but because he was in immediate need of bear fur. His own coat was worn; besides, he was planning a suit of cold-proof garments for Lenore, to be used perhaps in their final flight across the ice. And he saw at once that conditions were favorable for trapping the great creature.

Scarcely a quarter of a mile ahead, in a little pass that led through the shore crags down to the beach, Doomsdorf had left one of his most powerful bear traps. Ned had seen it many times as he had clambered through on a short cut to the cabin. Because it lay in a natural runway for game—one of the few spots where the shore crags could be easily surmounted—it was at least possible that the huge bear might fall into it, on his return to his lair in the hills.

Ned hurried on, and in a few moments had dug out the great trap from its covering of snow. For a moment he actually doubted his power to set it. It was of obsolete type, mighty-springed, and its jaws were of a width forbidden by all laws of trapping in civilized lands, yet Ned did not doubt its efficiency. Its mighty irons had rusted; but not even a bear's incalculable might could shatter them.

This was not to be a bait set, so his success depended upon the skill with which he concealed the trap. First he carefully refilled the excavation he had made in digging out the trap; then he dug a shallow hole in the snow in the narrowest part of the pass. Here he set the trap, utilizing all the power of his mighty muscles, and spread a light covering of snow above.

It was a delicate piece of work. Ned had no wish for the cruel jaws to snap shut as he was working above them. But his heart was in the venture, for all his hatred of the cruelty of the device; and he covered up his tracks with veteran's skill. Then he quietly withdrew, retracing his steps and following the shore line toward the home cabin.

Surely the mighty strength that had set the powerful spring and the skill that covered up all traces of his work could succeed at last in freeing him from slavery.

Bess had reached the shelter first, and she was particularly relieved to see Ned's tall form swinging toward her along the shore. Doomsdorf was in a particularly ominous mood to-night. The curious glitter in his magnetic eyes was more pronounced than she had ever seen it,—catlike in the shadows, steely in the lantern light; and his cruel savagery was just at the surface, ready to be wakened. Worst of all, the gaze he bent toward her was especially eager to-night, horrible to her as the cold touch of a reptile.

Every time she glanced up she found him regarding her, and he followed her with his eyes when she moved. Yet she dared not seek shelter in the new cabin, for the simple reason that she was afraid Doomsdorf would follow her there. Until Ned came, her defense was solely the presence of Lenore and the squaw.

There was no particular warmth in her meeting with Ned. Doomsdorf's eyes were still upon her, and she was careful to keep any hint of the new understanding out of her face and eyes. Ned's weather-beaten countenance was as expressionless as Sindy's own.

He refused to be depressed, at once, by the air of suspense and impending disaster that hung over the cabin. Thus was the day of his home-coming—looked forward to throughout the bitter days of his trap line—and was not Lenore waiting, beautiful in the lantern light, for him to speak to her? Yet the old exultation was somehow missing to-night. His thoughts kept turning back to the pact he had made with Bess—to their dream of deliverance. What was more curious, Lenore's lack of warmth that had come to be a matter of course in their weekly meetings almost failed to hurt. His mind was so busy with the problem of their freedom that he escaped the usual despondency that had crept upon him so many times before.

It was a peculiar paradox that while this was his day of days, the one day in five that seemed to justify his continued life, it was always the most hopeless and miserable, simply because of Lenore's attitude toward him. It wasn't entirely her failure to respond to his own ardor. The inevitable disappointment lay as much in his own attitude toward her. It was as much the things she did as those she failed to do that depressed him; the questions she asked, her patronage of Bess, her self-pitying complaints. Always he experienced a sense of some great omission,—perhaps only his failure to feel the old delight and exultation that the mere fact of her presence used to impart to him. He found it increasingly hard to give full attention to her; to let his eyes dwell always on her beauty and his ears give heed to her wrongs.

She found him preoccupied, and as a result increased her complaints. But they left him cold to-night. Her lot was happiness itself compared to that of Bess, and yet Bess's spirit of good sportsmanship and courage was entirely absent in her. But he must not keep comparing her with Bess. Destruction lay that way! He must continue to adore her for her beauty, the charm that used to hold him entranced.

She was all he had asked for in his old life. If they ever gained freedom, he would, in all probability, find in her all that he could desire in the future. They could take up their old love anew, and doubtless she would give him all the happiness he had a right to expect—more than he deserved. Likely enough, if the test ever came, she would show that her metal too was the finest, tempered steel! At least he could continue to believe in her until he had cause to lose faith.

And the test was not far distant now. He was not blind to the gathering storm; at any moment there might ensue a crisis that would embroil all three of them in a struggle to the death. Not one of them could escape, Lenore no more than himself or Bess. She was one of the triumvirate,—and surely she would stand with them to the last.

If the crisis could only be postponed until they had made full preparations for it! Yet in one glance, in which he traced down Doomsdorf's fiery gaze and found it centered upon Bess, he knew that any instant might bring the storm!

He felt his own anger rising. A dark fury, scarcely controllable, swept over him at the insult of that creeping, serpent gaze upon Bess's beauty. But he mustn't give way to it yet. He must hold himself for the last, dread instant of need.

The four of them gathered about the little, rough table, and again the squaw served them, from the shadows. It was a strange picture, there in the lantern light,—the imperturbable face of the squaw, always half in shadow; the lurid wild-beast eyes of Doomsdorf gleaming under his shaggy brows; Lenore's beauty a thing to hold the eyes; and Bess horrified and fearful at what the next moment might bring. Hardly a word was exchanged from the meal's beginning to its end. Bess tried to talk, so as to divert Doomsdorf's sinister thoughts, but the words would not come to her lips. The man seemed eager to finish the meal.

As soon as they had moved from the table toward the little stove, and the squaw had begun the work of clearing away the dishes, Doomsdorf halted at Bess's side. For a moment he gazed down at her, a great hand resting on her chair.

"You're a pretty little hell-cat," he told her, in curiously muffled tones. "What makes you such a fighter?"

She tried to meet his eyes. "I have to be, in this climate," she answered. "Where would you get your furs——"

He uttered one great hoarse syllable, as if in the beginning of laughter. "That's not what I mean, and you know it. You'd sooner walk ten miles through the snow than give an inch, wouldn't you?" His hand reached, closing gently upon her arm, and a shiver of repulsion passed over her. "That's a fine little muscle—but you don't want to work it off. Why don't you show a little friendship?"

The girl looked with difficulty into his great, drawn face. Ned stiffened, wondering if the moment of crisis were at hand at last. Lenore watched appalled, but the native went on about her tasks as if she hadn't heard.

“You can’t expect—much friendship—from a prisoner,” Bess told him brokenly. Her face, so white in the yellow lantern light, her trembling lips, most of all the appeal for mercy in her child’s eyes—raised to this beast compared with whom even the North was merciful—wakened surging, desperate anger in Ned. The room turned red before his eyes, his muscles quivered, and he was rapidly reaching that point wherein his self-control, on which life itself depended, was jeopardized. Yet he must hold himself with an iron hand. He must wait to the last instant of need. Everything depended on that, in avoiding the crisis until he had made some measure of preparation.

The loss of his long-bladed skinning knife increased the odds against him. He had put considerable reliance in its hair-splitting blade; and since he had perfected the sheath of caribou leather whereby he could keep it open in his pocket, he had hoped that it might be the means of freedom. In the three days since its loss he had been obliged to carry one of the butcher knives from the supplies at Forks cabin,—a sharp enough implement, but without the dagger point that would be so deadly in close work. However, he moved his arm so that he could reach the hilt of the knife in one motion.

But with the uncanny watchfulness of a cat Doomsdorf saw the movement. For one breath Ned’s life was suspended by a hair: Doomsdorf’s first impulse was to seize his pistol and bore the younger man through and through with lead. It was a mere madman’s whim that he refrained: he had a more entertaining fate in store for Ned when affairs finally reached a crisis. He leered down in contempt.

“Your little friend seems to be getting nervous,” he remarked easily to Bess. “So not to disturb him further, let’s you and I go to the new cabin. I’ve taken some fine pelts lately—I want you to see them. You need a new coat.”

He seemed to be aware of the gathering suspense, and it thrilled his diseased nerves with exultation. But there was, from his listeners, but one significant response at first to the evil suggestion that he made with such iniquitous fires in his wild eyes and such a strange, suppressed tone in his voice. Bess’s expression did not change. It had already revealed the uttermost depths of dread. Ned still held himself, cold, now, as a serpent, waiting for his chance. But the squaw paused a single instant in her work. For one breath they failed to hear the clatter of her pans. But seemingly indifferent, she immediately went back to her toil.

Bess shook her head in desperate appeal. “Wait till morning,” she pleaded. “I’m tired now——”



Ned saw by the gathering fury of their master's face that her refusal would only bring on the crisis, so he leaped swiftly into the breach. "Sure, Bess, let's go to look at them," he said. "I'm anxious to see 'em too——"

Doomsdorf whirled to him, and his gaze was as a trial of fire to Ned. Yet the latter did not flinch. For a long second they regarded each other in implacable hatred, and then Doomsdorf's sudden start told that he had been visited by inspiration. His leering look of contempt was almost a smile. "Sure, come along," he said. "I've got something to say to you too. To spare Lenore's feelings—we'll go to the other cabin."

Ned was not in the least deceived by this reference to Lenore. Doomsdorf had further cause, other than regard for Lenore's sensibilities, for continuing their conversation in the other cabin. What it was Ned did not know, and he dared not think. And he had a vague impression that while he and Doomsdorf had waged their battle of eyes, Bess had mysteriously moved from her position. He had left her just at Doomsdorf's right; when he saw her again she was fully ten feet distant, within a few feet of the cupboards where the squaw kept many of the food supplies, and now was busy with her parka of caribou skin.

She led the way out into the clear, icy night. It was one of those still, clear, late winter evenings, not so cold as it had been, when the frozen, snow-swept world gave no image of reality to the senses. The snow wastes and the velvet depths of the sky were lurid, flashing with a thousand ever-changing hues from the giant kaleidoscope of the Northern Lights. Moved and held by this wonder that never grows old to the northern man, Doomsdorf halted them just without the cabin door.

As they watched, the procession of colors suddenly ceased, leaving world and sky an incredible monochrome in red. It was wanly red at first, but the warm hue slowly deepened until one could imagine that the spirits of all the dead, aroused for some cosmic holiday, were lighting flares of red fire. It was a strange sight even for these latitudes; but this lambent mystery is ever beyond the ken of man. The name that Doomsdorf had given his island had never seemed so fitting as now. In the carmine glow the bearded face of the master of the isle was suddenly the red-hued visage of Satan.

But the light died away at last, and the falling darkness called them back to themselves. The lust that fired Doomsdorf's blood, the fear like the Arctic cold in the veins of Ned and Bess was all worldly enough. For a moment he studied their pale, tense faces.

"There's no need of going farther," he said in his deep, rumbling voice. "There was no need of even coming here. You seem to be forgetting, you

two, where you are—all the things I told you at first.”

He paused, and his voice had dropped, and the tone was strange and even, dreadful to hear, when he spoke again. “I’ve evidently been too easy with you,” he went on. “I’ll see that I correct that fault in the future. You, Ned, made a serious mistake when you interfered in this matter to-night. I’ll see if I can’t teach you to keep your place. And Bess—long ago I told you that your body and your soul were mine—to do with what I liked. You seemed to have forgotten—but I intend that you will call it to mind—again.”

But Ned still faced him when he paused, eyes steadfast, his face an iron gray in the wan light. His training had been hard and true, and he still found strength to stand erect.

“I want to tell you this—in reply,” he answered in the clear, firm voice of one who has mastered fear. “We know well enough what you can do to us. But that doesn’t mean that we’re going to yield to you—to every one of your evil wishes. Life isn’t so pleasant to either of us that we’ll submit to everything in order to live. No matter what you do to me—I know what I’ll do to you if you try to carry out your wicked designs by force.”

Doomsdorf eyed him calmly, but the smile of contempt was wholly gone from his lips. “You’ll show fight?” he asked.

“With every ounce I’ve got! You may master me—with every advantage of weapons and physical strength—but you’ll have to kill me first. Bess will kill herself before she’ll yield to you. You won’t be better off—you’ll simply have no one to do your trapping for you. It isn’t worth it, Doomsdorf.”

He eyed them a moment, coolly and casually. “When I want anything, Ned, I want it bad enough to pay all I’ve got for it,” he said in a remarkably even tone. “Don’t presume that I value your lives so much that I’ll turn one step from my course. Besides, Ned—you won’t be here!”

Ned’s eyes widened, as he tried to read his meaning. Doomsdorf laughed softly in the silence. “You won’t be here!” he repeated. “You fool—do you think I’d let you get in my way? It will rest as it is to-night. To-morrow morning you start out to tend your traps—and you will tend Bess’s lines as well as your own. She will stay here—with me—from now on.”

Ned felt his muscles hardening to steel. “I won’t leave her to you——”

“You won’t? Don’t make any mistake on that point. If you are not on your way by sun-up, you get a hundred—from the *knout*. You won’t be able to leave for some time after that—but neither will you be able to interfere with what doesn’t concern you. I’ll give you a few in the dawn—just as a sample to show what they’re like. Nor am I afraid of Bess killing herself. It’s

cold and dark here, but it's colder and darker—There. She'll stand a lot before she'll do that."

"That's definite?" Ned asked.

"The truest words I ever spoke. I've never gone back on a promise yet."

"And believe me, I won't go back on mine. If that's all you have to say \_\_\_\_\_"

"That's quite all. Think it over—you'll find it isn't so bad. And now—good night."

He bowed to them, in mock politeness. Then he turned back into his cabin.

For a moment his two prisoners stood inert, utterly motionless in the wan light. Ned started to turn to her, still held by his own dark thoughts, but at the first glance of her white, set face he whirled in the most breathless amazement. It was in no way the stricken, terrified countenance that he had seen a few moments before. The lips were firm, the eyes deep and strange; even in the half-light he could see her look of inexorable purpose.

Some great resolve had come to her,—some sweeping emotion that might even be akin to hope. Was she planning suicide? Was *that* the meaning of this new look of iron resolution in her face? He could conceive of no other explanation; in self-inflicted death alone lay deliverance from Doomsdorf's lust. He dared not hope for any happier freedom.

He reached groping hands to hers. "You don't mean"—he gasped, hardly able to make his lips move in speech—"you don't intend——?"

"To kill myself? Not yet, by a long way." The girl's hand slipped cautiously out from the pocket of her jacket, showing him what seemed to be a small, square box of tin. But the light was too dim for him to make out the words on the paper label. "I got this from the shelf—just as we left the cabin."

The hopeful tones in her voice was the happiest sound Ned had heard since he had come to the island.

"What is it?" he whispered.

"Nothing very much—but yet—a chance for freedom. Come into the cabin where we can scratch a match."

They moved into the newer hut of logs, and there Bess showed him the humble article in which lay her hopes. It was merely a tin of fine snuff from among Doomsdorf's personal supplies.

## XXVIII

TALKING in an undertone, not to be heard through the log walls, Bess and Ned made their hasty plans for deliverance. They gave no sign of the excitement under which they worked. Seemingly they were unshaken by the fact that life or death was the issue of the next hour,—the realization that the absolute crisis was upon them at last. Bess did not recall, in word or look, the trying experience just passed through. Like Ned she was wholly self-disciplined, her mind moving cool and sure. Never had their wilderness training stood them in better stead.

Here, in the cabin they occupied, the assault must be made. The reason was simply that their plan was defeated at the outset if they attempted to master Doomsdorf in the squaw's presence. For all her seeming impassiveness, she would be like a panther in her lord's defense: Bess had had full evidence of that fact the first day in the cabin. And it was easier to decoy Doomsdorf here than to attempt to entice the squaw away from her own house.

The fact that their two enemies must be handled singly required the united efforts of not only Ned and Bess, but Lenore. Two must wait here, as in ambush, and the third must make some pretext to entice Doomsdorf from his cabin. This, the easiest part of the work, could fall to Lenore. Both Ned and Bess realized that in their own hands must lie the success or failure of the actual assault.

The plan, on perfection, was really very simple. As soon as Lenore came, she would be sent back to the cabin to bring Doomsdorf. She would need no further excuse than that Bess had asked to see him: Ned's knowledge of the brute's psychology told him that. The scene just past would be fresh in his mind, and it would be wholly characteristic of his measureless arrogance that he would at once assume that Bess had come to terms. He would read in the request a vindication of his own philosophy, the triumph of his own ruthless methods; and it would be balm to his tainted soul to come and hear her beg forgiveness. Likely he would anticipate complete surrender.

Neither of the two conspirators could do this part of the work so well as Lenore. For Bess to summon Doomsdorf herself was of course out of the question; he might easily demand to hear her surrender on the spot. If Ned

went, inviting Doomsdorf to a secret conference with Bess, he would invite suspicion if he reentered the newer cabin with him; his obvious course would be to remain outside and leave the two together. Besides, Lenore was the natural emissary: a woman herself and thus more likely chosen for woman's delicate missions, she was also closer to Doomsdorf than any other of the three, the one most likely to act as a confidential agent. Doomsdorf would certainly comply with Bess's request to meet him in her cabin. The fact of the squaw's presence would be sufficient explanation to him why she would not care to confer with him in his own.

Ned would be waiting in the newer cabin when Lenore and Doomsdorf returned. He would immediately excuse himself and pass out the door, at the same instant that Bess extended a chair for Doomsdorf. And the instant that he was seated Bess would dash a handful of the blinding snuff into his eyes.

Ned's axe leaned just without the cabin door. Doomsdorf would notice it as he went in: otherwise his suspicions might be aroused. And in his first instant of agony and blindness, Ned would seize the weapon, dash back through the door, and make the assault.

The plan was more than a mere fighting chance. It would take Doomsdorf off his guard. Ned had full trust in Bess's ability to do her part of the work; as to his own, he would strike the life from their brute master with less compassion than he would slay a wolf. He could find no break, no weak link in the project.

They had scarcely perfected the plan before Lenore appeared, on the way to her cot. Just an instant she halted, her face and golden head a glory in the soft light, as she regarded their glittering eyes.

Their eyes alone, luridly bright, told the story. Perhaps Ned was slightly pale; nothing that could not be explained by the inroads made upon him in the critical hour just passed. Perhaps Bess was faintly flushed at the cheek bones. But those cold, shining eyes held her and appalled her. "What is it?" she demanded.

Ned moved toward her, reaching for her hands. For a breath he gazed into her lovely face. "Bess wants you to go—and tell Doomsdorf—to come here," he told her. His voice was wholly steady, every word clearly enunciated; if anything, he spoke somewhat more softly and evenly than usual. "Just tell him that she wants to see him."

She took her eyes from his, glancing about with unmistakable apprehension.

"Why?" she demanded. "He doesn't like to be disturbed."

“He *will* be disturbed, before we’re done,” Ned told her grimly. “Just say that—that she wants to see him. He’ll come—he’ll merely think it has to do with some business we’ve just been talking over. Go at once, Lenore—before he goes to bed. That’s your part—to bring him here. You can leave him at the door if you like—you can even stay at the other cabin while he comes.”

Her searching eyes suddenly turned in fascinated horror to Bess. Standing near the open door, so that the room might not be filled with the dust of the snuff and thus convey a warning to Doomsdorf, she was emptying the contents of the snuff-box into her handkerchief. Her eyes gleamed under her brows, and her hands were wholly steady. Lenore shivered a little, her hands pressing Ned’s.

“What does it mean——?”

“Liberty! *That’s* what it means, if the plan goes through.” For the first time Ned’s voice revealed suppressed emotion. Liberty! He spoke the word as a devout man speaks of God. “It’s the only chance—now or never,” he went on with perfect coldness. “You’ve got to hold up and do your share—I know you can. If we succeed—and we’ve got every chance—it’s freedom, escape from this island and Doomsdorf. If we fail, it’s likely death—but death couldn’t be any worse than this. So we’ve nothing to lose—and everything to gain.”

Was it not true? Have not the greatest of all peoples always known that it is better to die than to live as slaves? It was the very slogan of the ages—the great inspiration without which human beings are not fit to live. Overswept by their ardor Lenore turned back through the door.

Her instructions were simple. The easiest task of the three was hers. Bess took one of the crude chairs, her handkerchief—clutched as if she had been weeping—in her lap. Ned sat down in one of the other chairs, intending to arise and excuse himself the instant Doomsdorf appeared. His muscles burned under his skin.

It was only about fifty yards to the cabin. If Doomsdorf came at all, it would be in the space of a few seconds. Lenore started out bravely: her part of the task would be over in a moment. Just a few steps in the glare of the Northern Lights, just a few listless words to Doomsdorf, and liberty might easily be her reward. All the triumphs she had once known might be hers again; luxury instead of hardship, flattery instead of scorn—freedom instead of slavery. But what if the plan failed? Ned had spoken bluntly, but beyond all shadow of doubt he had told the truth. *Death* would be the answer to all failure. Destruction for all three.

The door of the cabin closed behind her, and Lenore was alone with the night. The night was rather temperate, for these latitudes, yet her first sensation was one of cold. It seemed to be creeping into her spirit, laying its blasting hand upon her heart. The stars appalled her, the Northern Lights were unutterably dreadful. She tried to walk faster, but instead she found herself walking more slowly.

The wind stirred through the little spruce, whispering, whimpering, trying to reach her ear with messages to which she dared not listen, chilling her to the core, appalling her with its hushed, half-articulate song of woe and death. There was nothing but Death on these snowy hills. It walked them alone. It was Death that looked into her eyes now, so close she could feel its icy hand on hers, its hollow visage leering close to her own. Life might be hateful, its persecutions never done, but Death was darkness, oblivion, a mystery and a terror beyond the reach of thought.

So faint that it seemed some secret voice within her own being, the long-drawn singsong cry of a starving wolf trembled down to her from a distant ridge. Here was another who knew about Death. He knew the woe and the travail that is life, utter subservience to the raw forces of the North; and yet he dared not die. This was the basic instinct. Compared to it freedom was a feeble urge that was soon forgotten. This whole wintry world was peopled with living creatures who hated life and yet who dared not leave it. The forces of the North were near and commanding to-night: they were showing her up, stripping her of her delusions, laying bare the secret places of her heart and soul, testing her as she had never been tested before.

Could she too take the fighting chance? Could she too rise above this awful first fear: master it, scorn it, go her brave way in the face of it?

But before ever she found her answer, she found herself at the cabin door. It seemed to her that she had crossed the intervening distance on the wings of the wind. In as short a time more Doomsdorf could reach the newer cabin,—and the issue would be decided. Either they would be free, or under the immutable sentence of death; not just Bess and Ned, but herself too. She would pay the price with the rest. The wind would sweep over the island and never hear her voice mingling with its own. For her, the world would cease to be. The fire was warm and kindly in the hearth, but she was renouncing it, for she knew not what of cold and terror. Not just Ned and Bess would pay the price, but she too. Listless, terrified almost to the verge of collapse, she turned the knob and opened the door. Doomsdorf had not yet gone to his blankets; otherwise the great bolt of iron would be in place. He was still sitting before the great, glowing stove, dreaming his savage dreams. The girl halted before him, leaning against a chair.

At first her tongue could hardly shape the words. Her throat filled, her heart faltered in her breast. “Bess—asked to see you,” she told him at last. “She says for you to come—to her cabin.”

The man regarded her with quickening interest, yet without the slightest trace of suspicion. It seemed almost incredible that he did not see the withering terror behind those blanched cheeks and starting eyes and immediately guess its cause: only his own colossal arrogance saved the plot at the outset. He was simply so triumphant by what seemed to be Bess’s surrender, so drunk with his success in handling a problem that at first had seemed so difficult, that the idea of conspiracy could not even occur to him. He hardly saw the girl before him; if he had noticed her at first, she was forgotten at once in his exultation. Even the lifeless tone in which she spoke made no impression upon him: he only heard her words.

He got up at once. Lenore stared at him as if in a nightmare. She had hoped in her deepest heart that he would refuse to come, that the great test of her soul could be avoided, but already he was starting out the door. She had done her part; she could wait here, if she liked, till the thing was settled. In a few seconds more she would know her fate.

Yet she couldn’t stay here and wait. To Doomsdorf’s surprise, she followed him through the door, into the glare of the Northern Lights. She did not know what impulse moved her; she was only aware of the growing cold of terror. Not only Ned and Bess would pay the price if the plan failed. She must pay too. The thought haunted her, every step, every wild beat of her heart.

All her life her philosophy had been of Self. And now, that Self was once more in the forefront of her consciousness, she found her wild excitement passed away, her brain working clear and sure. The night itself terrified her no more. She was beyond such imaginative fears as that: remembrance of *Self*, her *own* danger and destiny, was making a woman of her again. Only a fool forgot *Self* for a dream. Only a madman risked dear life for an ideal. Once more she was down to realities: she was steadied and calmed, able to balance one thing with another. And now she had at her command a superlative craft, even a degree of cunning.

She must not forget that lately her position had been one of comparative comfort. She was a slave, fawning upon a brute in human form, but the cold had mostly spared her; and she knew nothing of the terrible hardships that had been the share of Ned and Bess. Yet she was taking equal risks with them. It is better to live and hate life than to die; it is better to be a living slave than a dead freeman. Besides, lately she had been awarded even



greater comforts, won by fawning upon her master. Her privileges would be taken swiftly from her if the plan failed. She would not be able to persuade Doomsdorf that she was guiltless of the plot; she had been the agent in decoying him to the cabin, and likely enough, since her work took her among the various cabin stores, he would attribute to her the finding and smuggling out of the tin of snuff. If the plot failed, Doomsdorf would punish her part with death,—or else with pain and hardship hardly less than death. If Bess failed to reach his eyes with the blinding snuff, if Ned’s axe missed its mark, *she as well as they would be utterly lost.*

Doomsdorf was walking swiftly; already he was halfway from the door. The desperate fight for freedom was almost at hand. But what was freedom compared to the fear and darkness that is death?

The ideal sustained her no more. It brought no fire to her frozen heart. It was an empty word, nothing that could thrill and move one of her kind and creed. Its meaning flickered out for her, and terror, infinite and irresistible, seized her like a storm.

There were no depths of ignominy beyond her now. She cried out shrilly and incoherently, then stumbling through the snow, caught Doomsdorf’s arm. “No, no,” she cried, fawning with lips and hands. “Don’t go in there—they’re going to try to kill you. I didn’t have anything to do with it—I swear I didn’t—and don’t make me suffer when I’ve saved you——”

He shook her roughly, until the torrent of her words had ceased, and she was silenced beneath his lurid gaze.

“You say—they’ve got a trap laid for me?” he demanded.

Her hands clasped before him. “Yes, but I say I’m not guilty——”

He pushed her contemptuously from him, and she fell in the snow. Then, with a half-animal snarl that revealed all too plainly his murderous rage, he drew his pistol from his holster and started on.

## XXIX

WATCHING through the crack in the door Ned saw the girl's act; and her treason was immediately evident to him. Whatever darkness engrossed him at the sight of the ignoble girl, begging for her little life even at the cost of her lover's, showed not at all in his white, set face. Whatever unspeakable despair came upon him at this ruin of his ideals, this destruction of all his hopes, it was evidenced neither in his actions nor in the clear, cool quality of his thought.

No other crisis had ever found him better disciplined. His mind seemed to circumscribe the whole, dread situation in an instant. He turned, met Bess's straightforward gaze, saw her half-smile of complete understanding. As she leaped toward him, he snatched up their two hooded outer coats, and his arm half encircling her, he guided her through the door.

Whether or not she realized what had occurred he did not know, but there was no time to tell her now. Nor were explanations necessary; trusting him to the last she would follow where he led. "We'll have to run for it," he whispered simply. "Fast as you can."

Ned had taken in the situation, made his decision, seized the parkas, and guided Bess through the door all in one breath: the drama of Lenore's tragic dishonor was still in progress in the glare of the Northern Lights. Doomsdorf, standing back to them, did not see the two slip out the door, snatch up their snowshoes and fly. Otherwise his pistol would have been quick to halt them. Almost at once they were concealed, except for their strange flickering shadows in the snow, behind the first fringe of stunted spruce.

Ned led her straight toward the ice-bound sea. He realized at once that their least shadow of hope lay in fast flight that might take them to some inhabited island before Doomsdorf could overtake them; never in giving him a chase across his own tundras. Even this chance was tragically small, but it was all they had. To stay, to linger but a moment, meant death from Doomsdorf's pistol—or perhaps from some more ingenious engine that his half-mad cunning might devise.

Only the miles of empty ice stretched before them, covered deep with snow and unworldly in the glimmer of the Northern Lights that still flickered wanly in the sky; yet no other path was open. They halted a single

instant in the shelter of the thickets, slipped on their snowshoes, then munched as fast as they could on to the beach. In scarcely a moment they were venturing out on the ice-bound wastes.

Doomsdorf encountered their tracks as he reached the cabin door, and guessing their intent, raced for the higher ground just above the cabin. But when he caught sight of the fugitives, they were already out of effective pistol range. He fired impotently until the hammer clicked down against an empty breach, and then, still senseless with fury, darted down to the cabin for his rifle.

But he halted before he reached the door. After all, there was no particular hurry. He knew how many miles of ice—some of it almost impassable—lay between his island and Tzar Island, far to the east. It was not the journey for a man and woman, traveling without supplies. There was no need of sending his singing lead after them. Cold and hunger, if he gave them play, would stop them soon enough.

He had, however, other plans. He turned through the cabin door, spoke to the sullen squaw, then began to make preparations for a journey. He took a cold-proof wolf-hide robe, wrapped in it a great sack of pemmican, and made it into a convenient pack for his back. Then he reloaded his pistol, took the rifle down from the wall, and started forth down the trail that Ned and Bess had made.

It was likely true that the cold, though not particularly intense to-night, would master them before ever they could reach Tzar Island. They had no food, and inner fuel is simply a matter of life and death while traveling Arctic ice. They had no guns to procure a fox, or any other living creatures that they might encounter on the ice fields. But yet Doomsdorf was not content. Death of cold was hardly less merciful than that of a bullet. Just destruction would not satisfy the fury in his heart; the strange, dark lust that raced through his veins like poison demanded a more direct vengeance. Particularly he did not want Bess to die on the ice. He would simply follow them, overtake them, and bring them back; then some really diverting thing would likely occur to him.

It would be easy to do. There was no man in the North who could compete with him in a fair race. The two had less than a mile start of him, and to overtake them was but a matter of hours. On the other hand long days of travel, one after another past all endurance, would be necessary before they could ever hope to cross the ice ranges to reach the settlements on Tzar Island.

To Bess first came the realization of the utter hopelessness of their flight. She could not blind herself to this fact. Nor did she try to hide from herself the truth: in these last, bitter months she had found that the way of wisdom was to look truth in the face, struggling against it to the limit of her strength, but yielding herself neither to vain hope nor untoward despair. The reason why the flight was hopeless was because she herself could not stand the pace. She did not have the beginning of Ned's strength. Soon he would have to hold back so that she could follow with greater ease, and that meant their remorseless hunter would catch up. The venture had got down simply to a trial of speed between Doomsdorf, whose mighty strength gave him every advantage, and Ned, who braved the ice with neither blankets nor food supplies. Her presence, slowing down Ned's speed, increased the odds against him beyond the last frontier of hope.

Tired though she was from the day's toil, she moved freshly and easily at first. Ned broke trail, she mushed a few feet behind. She had no sensation of cold; hardened to steel, her muscles moved like the sliding parts of a wonderful machine. The ice was wonderfully smooth as yet, almost like the first, thin, bay ice frozen to the depth of safety. But already the killing pace had begun to tell. She couldn't keep it up forever without food and rest. And the brute behind her was tireless, remorseless as death itself.

The Northern Lights died at last in the sky, and the two hastened on in the wan light of a little moon that was already falling toward the west. And now she was made aware that the night was bitter cold. It was getting to her, in spite of her furs. But as yet she gave no sign of distress to Ned. A great bravery had come into her heart, and already she could see the dawn—the first aurora of ineffable beauty—of her far-off and glorious purpose. She would not let herself stop to rest. She would not ask Ned to slacken his pace. She was tired to the point of anguish already; soon she would know the last stages of fatigue; but even then she would not give sign. Out of her love for him a new strength was born—that sublime and unnamable strength of women that is nearest to divinity of anything upon this lowly earth—and she knew that it would hold her up beyond the last limits of physical exhaustion. She would not give way to unconsciousness, thus causing Ned to stop and wait beside her till she died. None of these things would she do. Her spirit soared with the wings of her resolve. Instead, her plan was simply to hasten on—to keep up the pace—until she toppled forward lifeless on the ice. She would master herself until death mastered her. Then Ned, halting but an instant to learn the truth, could speed on alone. Thus he would have no cause to wait for her.

He travels the fastest who travels alone. Out of his chivalry he would never leave her so long as a spark of life remained in her body: her course was simply to stand the pace until the last spark went out. She could fight away unconsciousness. She knew she could; as her physical strength ebbed, she felt this new, wondrous power sweeping through her.

He travels the fastest who travels alone. Without her, his mighty strength of body and spirit might carry him to safety. It was a long chance at best, over the ice mountains; but this man who mushed before her was not of ordinary mold. The terrible training camp through which he had passed had made of him a man of steel, giving him the lungs of a wolf and a lion's heart, and it was conceivable that, after unimagined hardship, he might make Tzar Island. There he could get together a party to rescue Lenore, and though his love for the ignoble girl was dead, his destiny would come out right after all. It was all she dared pray for now,—that he might find life and safety. But he was beaten at the start if he had to wait for her.

On and on through the night they sped, over that wonderfully smooth ice, never daring to halt: strange, wandering figures in the moonlit snow. But Bess was not to carry her brave intent through to the end. She had not counted on Ned's power of observation. He suddenly halted, turned and looked into her face.

It was wan and dim in the pale light; and yet something about its deepening lines quickened his interest. She saw him start; and with a single syllable of an oath, reached his hand under her hood to the track of the artery at her throat. He needed to listen but an instant to the fevered pulse to know the truth.

“We're going too fast,” he told her shortly.

“No—no!” Her tone was desperate, and his eyes narrowed with suspicion. Wrenching back her self-control she tried to speak casually. “I can keep up easily,” she told him. “I don't feel it yet—I'll tell you when I do. We can't ever make it if we slow up.”

He shook his head, wholly unconvinced. “I don't know what's got into you, Bess. You can't fool me. I know I feel it, good and plenty, and you're just running yourself to death. Doomsdorf himself can't do any more than kill us——”

“But he can——”

“We're going to hit an easier pace. Believe me, he's not running his heart out. He's planning on endurance, rather than speed. I was a fool not to think about you until it began to get me.”

It was true that the killing pace had been using up the vital nervous forces of both their bodies. Ned was suffering scarcely not at all as yet, but he had caught the first danger signals. Bess was already approaching the danger point of fatigue. When Ned started on again he took a quick but fairly easy walking pace.

Yet Bess's only impulse was to give way to tears. If their first gait had been too fast, this was far too slow. While it was the absolute maximum that she could endure—indeed she could not stand it without regular rests that would ultimately put them in Doomsdorf's hands—it was considerably below Ned's limit. He could not make it through at such a pace as this. Because of her, he was destroying his own chance for life and freedom.

They mushed on in silence, not even glancing back to keep track of Doomsdorf. And it came about, in the last hours of the night, that the rest both of them so direly needed was forced upon them by the powers of nature. The moon set; and generally smooth though the ice was, they could not go on by starlight. There was nothing to do but rest till dawn.

“Lie down on the ice,” Ned advised, “and don't worry about waking up.” His voice moved her and thrilled her in the darkness. “I'll set myself to wake up at the first ray; that's one thing I can always do.” She let her tired body slip down on the snow, relying only on her warm fur garments to protect her from it. Ned quickly settled beside her. “And you'd better lie as close to me as you can.”

He was prompted only by the expedience of cold. Yet as she drew near, pressing her body against his, it was as if some dream that she had dared not admit, even to herself, had come true. Nothing could harm her now. The east wind could mock at her in vain, the starry darkness had no terror for her. The warmth of his body sped through her, dear beyond all naming; and such a ghost as but rarely walks those empty ice fields came and enfolded her with loving arms.

It was the Ghost of Happiness. Of course it was not real happiness,—only its shadow, only its dim image built of the unsubstantial stuff of dreams, yet it was an ineffable glory to her aching heart. It was just an apparition that was born of her own vain hopes, yet it was kindly, yielding one hour of unspeakable loveliness in this night of woe and terror. Lying breast to breast, she could pretend that he was hers, to-night. Of course real happiness could not come to her; the heart that beat so steadily close to hers was never hers; yet for this little hour she was one with him, and the ghost seemed very, very near. She could forget the weary wastes of ice, the cold northern stars, their ruthless enemy ever drawing nearer.

Instinctively Ned's arms went about her, pressing her close; and tremulous with this ghost of happiness, the high-born strength of woman's love surged through her again, more compelling than ever before. Once more her purpose flamed, wan and dim at first, then slowly brightening until its ineffable beauty filled her eyes with tears. Once more she saw a course of action whereby Ned might have a fighting chance for life. Her first plan, denied her because of Ned's refusal to lead faster than she could follow, had embodied her own unhappy death from the simple burning up of her life forces from over-exertion; but this that occurred to her now was not so merciful. It might easily preclude a fate that was ten times worse than death. Yet she was only glad that she had thought of it. She suddenly lifted her face, trying to pierce the pressing gloom and behold Ned's.

"I want you to promise me something, Ned," she told him quietly.

He answered her clearly, from full wakefulness. "What is it?"

"I want you to promise—that if you see there's no hope for me—that you'll go on—without me. Suppose Doomsdorf almost overtook us—and you saw that he could seize me—but you could escape—I want you to promise that you won't wait."

"To run off and desert you——"

"Listen, Ned. Use your good sense. Say I was in a place where I couldn't get away, and you could. Suppose we became separated somehow on the ice, and he should be overtaking me, but you'd have a good chance to go to safety. Oh, you would go on, wouldn't you?" Her tone was one of infinite pleading. "Would there be any use of your returning—and getting killed yourself—when you couldn't possibly save me? Don't you see the thing to do would be to keep on—with the hope of coming out at last—and then getting up an expedition to rescue me? Promise me you won't destroy what little hope we have by doing such a foolish thing as that——"

Wondering, mystified by her earnestness, half inclined to believe that she was at the verge of delirium from cold and exertion, his arms tightened about her and he gave her his promise so that she might rest. "Of course I'll do the wise thing," he told her. "The only thing!"

Her strong little arms responded to the embrace, and slowly, joyously she drew his face toward hers. "Then kiss me, Ned," she told him, soberly yet happily, as a child might beg a kiss at bedtime. Her love for him welled in her heart. "I want you to kiss me good night."

Slowly, with all the tenderness of his noble manhood, he pressed his lips to hers. "Good night, Bess," he told her simply. For an instant, night and cold and danger were forgotten. "Good night, little girl."

Their lips met again, but now they did not fall away so that he could speak. There was no need for words. His arm about her held her lips to his, and thus they lay, forgetting the wastes of ice about them, for the moment secure from the cruel forces that had hounded them so long. The wind swept by unheard. The fine snow drifted before it, as if it meant to cover them and never yield them up again. The dimmer stars faded and vanished into the recesses of the sky.

The cold's scourge was impotent now. The hour was like some dream of childhood: calm, wondrous, ineffably sweet. The ghost of happiness seemed no longer just a shadow. For the moment Bess's fancy believed it real.

Sleep drifted over Ned. Still with her lips on his, Bess listened till his slow, quiet breathing told her that he was no longer conscious. She waited an instant more, her arms trembling as she pressed him close as she could.

"I love you, Ned," she whispered. "Whatever I do—it's all for love of you."

Then, very softly so as not to waken him, she slipped out of his embrace and got to her feet. She started away straight north,—at right angles to the direction that they had gone before.



## XXX

NED'S instincts had been trained like the rest of him, and they watched over him while he slept. They aroused him from sleep as soon as it was light enough to pick his way over the rough ice that lay in front, yet as if in realization of his physical need of rest, not an instant sooner. He sprang up to find the dawn, gray over the ice-bound sea.

But the miracle of the morning, even the possibility that Doomsdorf had made time while he slept and was now almost upon him did not hold his thought an instant. His mind could not reach beyond the tragic fact that he was alone. Bess was gone, vanished like a spirit that had never been in the gray dawn.

The moment was one of cruel but wonderful revelation to Ned. It was as if some unspeakable blessing had come to one who was blind, but before ever sight came to him, it was snatched away. As sleep had fallen over him, he had suddenly been close to the most profound discovery, the greatest truth yet of his earthly life; but now only its image remained. Bess had been in his arms, her lips against his, but now his arms were empty and his lips were cold.

She had gone. Her tracks led straight north through the snow. The most glorious hour life had ever given him had faded like a dream. Whence lay this glory, the source of his wonder as well as the crushing despair that now was upon him he might have seen in one more glance; in one moment's scrutiny of his soul he might have laid bare a heart's secret that had eluded him for all these past weary weeks. But there was no time for such now. Bess had gone, and he must follow her. This was the one truth left in an incredible heaven and earth.

Her last words swept through his memory. They gave him the key: his deductions followed swift and sure by the process of remorseless logic. In a single moment he knew the dreadful truth: Bess had not gone on in the expectation of Ned overtaking her, thus saving a few moments of his precious time. She had not gone east at all. She knew the stars as well as he did: she would have never, except by some secret purpose, turned north instead of east. He saw the truth all too plain.

"Say we became separated somehow on the ice," she had told him before he slept, "and he should be overtaking me but you'd have a chance to go on

to safety!" To quiet her, he had given her his promise to go on and leave her to her fate; and now she had *purposely separated* herself from him. She had gone to decoy Doomsdorf from his trail.

She had chosen the direction that would give Doomsdorf the longest chase and take him farthest from Ned's trail. He couldn't follow them both. The morning light would show him that his two fugitives had separated; and she had reasoned soundly in thinking that their enemy would pursue her, rather than Ned. His lust for her was too commanding for him to take any other course. While he pursued her, Ned would have every chance to hurry on eastward to the safety of Tzar Island.

Had he not promised that if he found he could not aid her, he would go on alone? Realizing that she was holding him back, had she not put herself where it would be impossible for him to give her further aid. It would only mean capture and death, certain as the brightening dawn, for him to follow and attempt to come between her and Doomsdorf. On the other hand, this was his chance: while their savage foe ran north in pursuit of Bess, Ned himself could put a distance between them that could hardly be overtaken. There was nothing to gain by following her—her capture at Doomsdorf's hands was an ultimate certainty—only his own life to lose.

She had reasoned true. Together their flight was hopeless. Alone, he had a chance. By leading Doomsdorf from his trail she had increased mightily that chance. The affair was all one sided. Yet, not knowing why, he took the side of folly.

Never for a moment did he even consider going on and leaving her to her fate. He could not aid her, and yet in one moment more he had launched forth on her trail, faster than he had ever mused before. He had no inward battle, no sense of sacrifice. There was not even a temptation to take the way of safety. In these last months he had been lifted far beyond the reach of any such feeble voice as that.

He sped as fast as he could along the dim trail she had made. The dawn, icy-breathed, soon out-distanced him, permitting him to see Bess's fleeing form before he had scarcely begun to overtake her. She was just a dark shadow at first against the stretching fields of white; but he never lost sight of her after that. With the brightening dawn he saw her ever more distinctly.

And in the middle distance, west of both of them, he saw the huge, dark form of Doomsdorf bearing down upon her.

She had guessed right as to Doomsdorf. Catching sight of her, he had left their double trail to overtake her. Hoping and believing that Ned had taken

his chance of safety and was fleeing eastward, she was leading his enemy ever farther and farther north, away from him.

He was a strong man, this Cornet who had fought the North, but the bitter, scalding tears shot into his eyes at the sight of that strange, hopeless drama on the ice. But not one of them was in self-pity. They were all for the slight figure of the girl, trying still to save him, running so hopelessly from the brute who was even now upon her. To Ned, the scene had lost its quality of horror. It was only unspeakably tragic there behind the rising curtains of the dawn.

She was trying to dodge him now, cutting back and forth as a mouse might try to dodge the talons of a cat,—still trying to save a few little seconds for Ned. She wasn't aware yet that her trial was all in vain. In an attempt to hold Doomsdorf off as long as possible, she had not paused one instant to assure herself that Ned had gone on east. He had given her his word; likely she trusted him implicitly. The man's heart seemed to swell, ready to break, in pity for her.

A moment later he saw her slip on the ice, and in dread silence, Doomsdorf's arms went about her. Neither of them had apparently observed Ned. They only became aware of him as his great shout, half in rage, half in defiance, reached them across the ice.

It was really an instinctive cry. Partly the impulse behind it was to warn Doomsdorf of his presence, hoping thus to call his attention from Bess and thus save the girl immediate insult at his hands. And kneeling upon the girl's form, like a great bear upon its living prey, Doomsdorf looked up and saw him.

Even at the distance that separated them the startled movement of his head revealed his unutterable amazement. Doubtless he thought that Ned was miles to the east by now. The amazement gave way to boundless triumph as Ned walked calmly toward him. Then while he held the girl prone on the ice with his great knee, Doomsdorf's rifle made blue lightning in the air.

Ned's response was to throw his arms immediately into the air in token of complete surrender. He was thinking coolly, his faculties in perfect control; and he knew he must not attempt resistance now. Only death lay that way; at that range Doomsdorf could shatter him lifeless to the ice with one shot from the heavy rifle. It wasn't enough just to die, thus taking a quick road out of Doomsdorf's power. Such a course would not aid Bess. And to Bess he owed his duty—to aid Bess, in every way he could, was his last dream.

At first he had had to play the cruel game for the sake of Lenore. That obligation was past now; but it had never, at its greatest, moved him with one-half the ardor as this he bore to Bess. He must not go this route to freedom, or any other, until Bess could go with him. He must not leave her in Doomsdorf's power.

That much was sure. Self-inflicted death did not come into the Russian's calculations—he was too close to the beasts for that—so he would not be on guard. Whatever befell, this gate was always open. Ned would play the game through to the end, at her side.

Doomsdorf watched him approach in silence. The triumphant gloating that Ned expected did not come to pass; evidently their brute master was in too savage a mood even for this. "Wait where you are," he ordered simply, "or I'll blow your head off. I'll be ready for you in a minute."

He bent, and with one motion jerked Bess to her feet. Then in silence, still guarding them with his rifle, he pointed them their way,—back to his cabin on the island.

It was a long and bitter march across that desolate ice. Except for a share of his pemmican that Doomsdorf distributed, for expedience rather than through any impulse of mercy, Bess could have hardly lasted out. They walked almost in silence, Ned in front, then Bess, their captor bringing up the rear; a strange death march over those frozen seas.

This was the end. The fight was done; there was no thought or dream but that the last, fighting chance was lost. Ned knew he was going to his death: any other possibility was utterly beyond hope. The only wonder he had left was what form his death would take. There was no shadow of mercy on the evil face of his captor.

Bess knew that her portion was also death, simply because the white, pure flame that was her life could not abide in the body that was prey to Doomsdorf. Death itself would cheat those terrible, ravishing hands: this was as certain a conviction as any she had ever known in all the brief dream of her life. Whether it would be brought about by her own hand, by the merciful, caressing touch of her lover's knife, or whether simply by outraged nature, snatching her out of Doomsdorf's power, she neither knew nor cared.

The file trudged on. Ned led the way unguided. The hours passed. The dim shadow of the shore crags strengthened. And another twilight was laying its first shadows on the snow as they stepped upon the snowy beach.

It was at this point that Bess suddenly experienced an inexplicable quickening of her pulse, an untraced but breathless excitement that was wholly apart from the fact that she was nearing the cabin of her destiny. The

air itself seemed curiously hushed, electric, as if a great storm were gathering; the moment was poignant with a breathless suspense. She could not have told why. Warning of impending, great events had been transmitted to her through some unguessed under-consciousness; some way, somehow, she knew that it had reached her from the mind of the man who walked in front. Fiery thoughts were leaping through Ned's brain, and some way they had passed their flame to her.

A moment later Ned turned to her, ostensibly to help her up the steep slope of the beach. She saw with amazement that his face was stark white and that his eyes glowed like live coals. Yet no message was conveyed to Doomsdorf, tramping behind. It was only her own closeness to him, her love that brought her soul to his, that told her of some far-reaching and terrific crisis that was at hand at last.

*"Walk exactly in my steps!"* he whispered under his breath. It was only the faintest wisp of sound, no louder than his own breathing; yet Bess caught every word. She did not have to be told that there was infinite urgency behind the command. Her nerves seemed to leap and twitch; yet outwardly there was no visible sign that a message had been passed between them.

Now Ned was leading up toward the shore crags, into a little pass between the rocks that was the natural egress from the beach on to the hills behind. He walked easily, one step after another in regular cadence: only his glowing eyes could have told that this instant had, by light of circumstances beyond Bess's ken, become the most crucial in his life. And it was a strange and ironic thing that the knowledge he relied on now, the facility that might turn defeat into victory, was not some finesse gained in his years of civilized living, no cultural growth from some great university far to the south, but merely one of the basic tricks of a humble trade.

Doomsdorf had told him, once, that a good trapper must learn to mark his sets. Any square yard of territory must be so identified, in the mind's eye, that the trapper can return, days later, walk straight to it and know its every detail. Ned Cornet had learned his trade. He was a trapper; and he knew this snowy pass as an artist knows his canvas. He stepped boldly through.

Bess walked just behind, stepping exactly in his tracks. Her heart raced. It was not merely because the full truth was hidden from her that she walked straight and unafraid. She would always follow bravely where Ned led. Now both of them had passed through the little, narrow gap between lofty, snow-swept crags. Doomsdorf trudged just behind.

Then something sharp and calamitous as a lightning bolt seemed to strike the pass. There was a loud ring and clang of metal, the sharp crack of a snowshoe frame broken to kindling, and then, obliterating both, a wild bellow of human agony like that of a mighty grizzly wounded to the death. Ned and Bess had passed in safety, but Doomsdorf had stepped squarely into the great bear trap that Ned had set the evening before.

The cruel jaws snapped with a clang of iron and the crunch of flesh. The shock, more than any human frame could endure, hurled Doomsdorf to his knees; yet so mighty was his physical stamina that he was able to retain his grip on his rifle. And the instant that he went down Ned turned, leaping with savage fury to strike out his hated life before he could rise again.

He was upon him before Doomsdorf could raise his rifle. As he sprang he drew his knife from its sheath, and it cut a white path through the gathering dusk. And now their arms went about each other in a final struggle for mastery.

Caught though he was in the trap, Doomsdorf was not beaten yet. He met that attack with incredible power. His great hairy hand caught Ned's arm as it descended, and though he could not hold it, he forced him to drop the blade. With the other he reached for his enemy's throat.

This was the final conflict; yet of such might were these contestants, so terrible the fury of their onslaughts, that both knew at once that the fight was one of seconds. These two mighty men gave all they had. The fingers clutched and closed at Ned's throat. The right hand of the latter, from which the blade had fallen, tugged at the pistol butt at Doomsdorf's holster.

Bess leaped in, like a she-wolf in defense of her cubs, but one great sweep of Doomsdorf's arm hurled her unconscious in the snow. There were to be no outside forces influencing this battle. The trap at Doomsdorf's foot was Ned's only advantage; and he had decoyed his enemy into it by his own cunning. It was man to man at last: a cruel war settled for good and all.

It could endure but an instant more. Already those iron fingers were crushing out Ned's life. So closely matched were the two foes, so terrible their strength, that their bodies scarcely moved at all; each held the other in an iron embrace, Ned tugging with his left hand at the fingers that clutched his throat, Doomsdorf trying to prevent his foe from drawing the pistol that he wore at his belt and turning it against him.

It was the last war; and now it had become merely a question of which would break first. They lay together in the snow, utterly silent, motionless, for all human eyes could see, their faces white with agony, every muscle exerting its full, terrific pressure. Ever Doomsdorf's fingers closed more

tightly at Ned's throat; ever Ned's right hand drew slowly at the pistol at Doomsdorf's belt.

Neither the gun nor the strangling fingers would be needed in a moment more. The strain itself would soon shatter and destroy their mortal hearts. The night seemed to be falling before Ned's eyes; his familiar, snowy world was dark with the nearing shadow of death. But the pistol was free of the holster now, and he was trying to turn it in his hand.

It took all the strength of his remaining consciousness to exert a last, vital ounce of pressure. Then there was a curious low sound, muffled and dull as sounds heard in a dream. And dreams passed over him, like waves over water, as he relaxed at last, breathing in great sobs, in the reddened drifts.

Bess, emerging into consciousness, crawled slowly toward him. He felt the blessing of her nearing presence even in his half-sleep. But Doomsdorf, their late master, lay curiously inert, his foot still held by the cruel jaws of iron. A great beast-of-prey had fallen in the trap; and the killer-gun had sped a bullet, ranging upward and shattering his wild heart.

All this was just a page in Hell Island's history. She had had one dynasty a thousand-thousand years before ever Doomsdorf made his first track in her spotless snows; and all that had been done and endured was not more than a ripple in the tides that beat upon her shores. With a new spring she came into her own again. Spring brought the *Intrepid*, sputtering through the new passages between the floes; and the old island kings returned to rule before ever the masts of the little craft had faded and vanished in the haze.

The *Intrepid* had taken cargo other than the usual bales of furs. The sounds of human voices were no more to be heard in the silences, and the wolf was no longer startled, fear and wonder at his heart, by the sight of a tall living form on the game trails. The traps were moss-covered and lost, and the wind might rage the night through at the cabin window, and no one would hear and no one would be afraid.

The savage powers of the wild held undisputed sway once more, not again to be set at naught by these self-knowing mortals with a law unto themselves. Henceforth all law was that of the wild, never to be questioned or disobeyed.

It may have been that sometimes, on winter nights, the wolf pack would meet a strange, great shadow on the snow fields: but if so, it was only the one-time master of the island, uneasy in his cold bed; and it was nothing

they need fear or to turn them from the trail. It was just a shadow that hurried by, a wan figure buffeted by the wind, in the eerie flare of the Northern Lights. And even this would pass in time. He would be content to sleep, and let the snow drift deeper over his head.

Even the squaw had gone on the *Intrepid* to join her people in a distant tribe. But there is no need to follow her, or the three that had taken ship with her. On the headlong journey south to spread the word of their rescue, of their halting at the first port to send word and to learn that the occupants of the second lifeboat had been rescued from Tzar Island months before, of Godfrey Cornet's glory at the sight of his son's face and the knowledge of the choice he had made, of the light and shadow of their life trails in the cities of men, there is nothing that need be further scrutinized. To Hell Island they were forgotten. The windy snow fields knew them no more.

Yet for all they were bitterly cruel, the wilds had been kind too. They had shown the gold from the dross. They had revealed to Ned the way of happiness,—and it led him straight into Bess's arms. There he could rest at the end of his day's toil, there he found not only love and life, but the sustenance of his spirit, the soul of strength by which he might stand erect and face the light.

Thus they had found a safe harbor where the Arctic wind might never chill them; a hearth where such terror as dwelt in the dark outside could not come in.

THE END

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### **Transcriber's Note:**

A few obvious punctuation errors have been corrected without note.

[The end of *The Isle of Retribution* by Edison Marshall]