White Water

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Books by Robert E. Pinkerton

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The Test of Donald Norton
The Fourth Norwood
White Water

White Water

A Novel

By

Robert E. Pinkerton

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White Water

Chapters

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CHAPTER I

—Bad River

In some places Bad River deserves its name, though it is no worse than many other streams forced to traverse the great, unyielding Laurentian shield. Rivers in the vast, fertile plains of The States invariably are well mannered. There is something placid and conventional in their quiet reaches and graceful bends; in the smooth, strong flow of silent waters.

But Bad River, like its numerous fellow streams, is a shouting, swaggering rowdy. Mad, heedless, boisterous, it expends amazing energy tearing and ripping ineffectually at its granite bed, hissing past great boulders, boiling and seething in countless eddies, hurling itself with rash courage against hills of solid stone.

Yet Bad River conforms with the land through which it finds its tumultuous way. It is rough, savage. No peaceful stream could accord with the frost-splintered rocks, with the jagged outlines of the spruce ridges, with the weird gloom of the thick swamps. Bad River is not only of the north, but a symbol of it.

Something of this passed in a hazy, lazy manner through the mind of the girl who sat beside the stream one summer afternoon. She did not speak of her thoughts to the man and woman just behind her, and she was startled when the woman said:

"It has all the qualities a woman loves in a man."

The girl did not move. She understood perfectly what lay behind the remark and she knew the man would not comment.

"It is as irrepressible as youth," the woman continued, "as unconscious of its real strength. It has moods—fierce and ruthless sometimes. Up there it is gentle, but strong and even-tempered. Around any bend . . . there's its charm! One never knows what to expect, what sudden urge or whim, what tempest, what— Ah!"

The girl, too, started. Upstream a hundred yards the figure of a man had shot into view from behind the wall of rock and spruce around which the river turned. The sudden appearance was doubly startling because the man

seemed to be standing on the surface of the swift water. No craft was visible. Little waves slapped over his white, bare feet.

The sun, low in the northwest, found a crevice in a huge white cloud and shot a shaft up the river, picking out the figure as does a stage spotlight. It was a golden shaft, tinged with red, and along its almost level beams the man came swiftly.

The stream there was strong and deep, its surface unbroken. Bad River sometimes pauses to catch breath, stilling its clamor for a moment, yet even in the straight, silent places it retains a suggestion of its mercurial nature.

"He's on a log!" the girl whispered.

The man was rushing toward them. He was close enough now for the three to note details. His trousers were rolled almost to the bulge of the calf. A gray woolen shirt was buttoned to the neck. Brown hair, wavy, almost curly beneath the brim, seemed to thrust a small felt hat to the back of his head. His face was undisturbed, emotionless. He was too far away for them to see his eyes, which were held by the river.

But it was his body, and its pose, that was as arresting as his sudden appearance. Grace of line, of posture, were the more striking because of complete unconsciousness and marvelous fitness. In the rushing stream, his craft so small it barely showed above the surface, he stood as unconcernedly as if on the granite bank, and as motionless as a bronze cast. The log, which a rabbit's weight would have set spinning, rode as steadily as a great ship.

Straight on along the shaft of red-gold light he rushed. The sun found gold in his hair, the girl imagined, and flecks of reddish-brown in hazel eyes. Still he had not moved. A pole, roughly trimmed, rested on the log in front and hung loosely in one hand. But he was motionless as is a huge cat ready to leap.

The girl was conscious that she had ceased to breathe, and that the woman's breath had suddenly been expelled in an almost soundless rush of rapture.

It was beauty of a startling kind; the beauty of a man's perfect grace in body and outline, of warm colors, swift movement, mystery; a picture in a richly savage setting, a glimpse of the reckless spirit of the wilderness.

Suddenly each sensed a tensing in the other two.

"My God!" the woman whispered hoarsely, and the girl felt strong fingers bite into her shoulder. She wanted to scream and could not.

Directly in front of where they sat—a fact she had forgotten in the beauty of the picture—the smooth flow of the water ceased. Great boulders drove the current to the center and there, with a roar and a snarl, the water leaped out and down into a caldron. Straight toward the brink the man rode his log.

He was only thirty feet away, and still he had not moved. The pole hung loosely in his right hand. The log seemed to leap ahead. In an instant he would be over the falls— —

His spring was as sudden as the snapping of a rubber band, and with as little preparation. In mid-flight the pole was swung over to his left hand and out of the way. He alighted on a great, flat boulder beside the cataract, crouched for a moment of recovery and then sprang out and down, his white feet twinkling over the black rocks on shore.

In the stream his steed had turned end over end, then paused, dived, catapulted above a huge, curling wave, was now rushing through the white water of the rapids. Bad River was making a plaything of the sixteen-foot log.

The man ran on, leaping from boulder to boulder, no two steps alike except in their flashing precision. He still held the long pole and occasionally he glanced at the log racing beside him.

At last the rapids shot the log out into a swirling, foam-cluttered eddy, but as it leaped the man's white feet touched it. For a moment they twinkled while the log spun beneath them, and then suddenly they were still. The man rested one end of the pole on the forward end of his craft, let the other hang loosely from his right hand and, again motionless, startlingly graceful, sped on down stream.

The girl laughed, a laugh with a sobbing catch in it.

"Did you see his shoes?" she asked, in a voice hinting at hysteria.

"Of course," the man answered. "He tied them to his suspenders behind so they would be out of the way. Couldn't ride a log with shoes unless they were corked."

"But they looked so funny, bobbing there when he ran."

Only the woman did not speak. She alone had seen what the girl had suspected, that there were reddish-brown flecks in hazel eyes. She was still staring at the motionless figure down stream.

The girl, too, stared. Her hysteria was gone, but something else had taken its place—a strange, disturbing, unaccountable feeling.

Then Bad River swept the log and its rider around a bend.

CHAPTER II

—"Corporal" Larry Vail

A woodsman would have been startled, puzzled and incensed had he happened unexpectedly on the new headquarters of the Atikwa Forest and Game Preserve. He would have been startled by its appearance, buildings such as he had never seen before; puzzled by their purpose; and incensed that anyone in the bush would have chosen such an inaccessible spot, and one so far from good building timber.

All the axioms, principles and tenets of woodsmanship were violated. "Just a mess," old Hughie Knowles, who had encountered the place on one of his endless prospecting trips, declared after ten seconds of survey. And Hughie, even though he did persist in a fruitless search for gold in a district long before abandoned by the experts, was amazingly clear-headed on anything else pertaining to the bush and the ways of the bush.

There had been a time when Hughie could as easily use words without vowels and sentences without subjects or verbs as speak without swearing. For many years no man, woman or child ever heard him phrase a thought that lacked profane accompaniment. He had tried sincerely enough to avoid profanity, but in those long years alone in the bush the addiction had become an appurtenance, not a vice. He could as easily have escaped from his own appendix.

Finally surgery conquered the unruly addiction and Hughie conquered himself, though through substitution, not excision. Mrs. Wade, owner of the boarding house in Sabawi, had listened to Hughie swear through many years without protest, for it must be said in his behalf that he was never obscene or vulgar. His was plain, ungarnished, rudimentary profanity.

"You're just lazy, Hughie," she remarked one day when he had returned from a long prospecting trip.

He started in amazement.

"I mean in the head," she continued severely. "You're smart. There isn't a man in the bush who reads more or knows so much about what's going on in Europe or Toronto. Why, if I had as much learning as you I'd be ashamed

to use the same half a dozen words over and over again when I wanted to say something stronger than 'Please pass the bread'."

It was a new thought for Hughie, and after a moment Mrs. Wade continued:

"Ever hear an old Indian woman get rid of what's on her mind? And they haven't even got a simple little 'damn' in their language."

"You're *pack-ee-tay-bush-kick-ee-wah-boo* right!" Hughie exclaimed in mingled awe and delight, and to Mrs. Wade's complete amazement, for those eight sizzling, crackling, formidable syllables meant nothing more or less than coffee.

Six months later Hughie's discourse had become a strange and startling thing. Constant watchfulness and much effort had been required, but in the end he triumphed—and admitted to himself that he had acquired a new and amusing diversion that demanded ingenuity and at the same time permitted infinite gradations of expression.

His mood, his state of irritation or elation, could be expressed perfectly, he found, by his pronunciation of *bosh-gee-see-gan*, an otherwise harmless word meaning gun. By prefixing *gee-sheeb* he acquired "shotgun" and more force, and *bee-nay-bosh-gee-see-gan* could be quite ferocious, though it meant only ".22 rifle."

It was thus that Hughie was able to express himself with soul-satisfying inflection and variety as he stepped ashore from his canoe and again surveyed the Atikwa Forest and Game Preserve headquarters.

"Just a *kee-she-pah-kee-she-gan* mess. A two-mile portage to get to the railroad, farthest away from the main part of the reserve, low water with no chance for the wind to drive the flies away and not a stick of timber fit for building within five miles.

"And those shacks! *Ah-nish-tee-nah-sha-bay-zhik* my soul if it don't take a *bay-bom-ee-gee-zhik-way-skung* government to make a muddle of things!"

He paused and stared as the door of one of the cabins opened and a man appeared. He was short and very slight and, to Hughie, most grotesque. Leather puttees only accentuated the amazing reediness of his legs below the knees, while his riding breeches, cut in an extreme English fashion, gave him the appearance of having winged thighs. He wore a jacket of military cut and carried his shoulders in a stiff military manner, but they were so thin they seemed distorted.

The man's head was bare and his hair almost white. He walked with a quick, precise step from his own queer cabin to a larger one a hundred yards away. There, after careful measurement, he tacked a piece of paper in the exact center of the door.

The task completed he turned, saw Hughie and strode quickly down to the water.

"My man," he began briskly, "what are you doing here?"

Hughie coolly surveyed the puttees, the riding breeches and the arrogant face before he replied.

"I been my own *wee-zhko-bah-say-mah* man for most sixty years," he said unheatedly, "and I'm collecting my scattered senses."

"You are—eh—what?" was the amazed query.

"I'm glad I'm poor," Hughie continued. "If I was a taxpayer I'd be so mad I'd bust a blood vessel. Bein' poor, I'll just laugh."

"Get into your canoe and leave at once," the little man snapped.

"That's just what I was going to do. I was afraid I'd have nightmares, camping in such a place, but now that you've offered inducements I guess I'll stay."

Hughie turned calmly to his canoe and lifted a packsack to the shore.

"Flies will be bad, but you can't have everything perfect," he said.

The little man's face became purple with rage.

"For the last time I command you to leave!" he roared.

"Fine," Hughie agreed. "I'll try to make myself comfortable, thank you," and he unbuckled his packsack.

The little man glared at him, turned swiftly and stalked back toward the buildings. A woodsman came out of the brush to the right and moved with a loose, easy stride across the clearing. He was about to enter the largest cabin when the man in the riding breeches hailed him.

"Vail!"

The woodsman turned and waited, even when the other stopped expectantly. The thin shoulders bent farther backward, the purple face was creased by a frown that failed utterly to be ferocious, and then he barked, "Come here!"

The woodsman walked forward slowly, with an easy, gliding step. His hair, slightly curly, seemed to push a small felt hat back on his head. He wore shoepacs, but they were not the sloppy, sprawling, shapeless sort. They fitted like moccasins and were neatly laced and tied. His khaki trousers, a little tight and rolled almost to the bulge of his calves, were cheap and well worn, and yet they and his gray wool shirt failed completely to hide the lines of a startlingly beautiful body.

He appeared to be about twenty-seven. A firmness in his jaw and a certain confidence in the way he carried his head were belied by an expression of careless good nature. Women would have thought of him as handsome, and when he was gone they would have wondered why, remembering the fine mouth, the long lashes, the eyes that were hazel with flecks of red.

Yet few women are sufficiently analytical, or frank enough even with themselves, to admit that it was sheer animal magnetism, coupled with grace and perfection of physical form, that so disturbed them. Sure and uncanny intuition is always accredited to women, yet it is a divination of effect rather than of cause.

"I want that man ejected at once!" the wearer of the riding breeches snapped. "Tell him to get off the reserve."

He wheeled and walked swiftly away, but after a few yards he stopped.

"And Vail! The new mess regulations go into effect to-morrow. You may tell the men."

Vail glanced at the paper tacked on the door and then walked down to the shore, where Hughie Knowles was erecting his tent. The old man looked up, snorted in disgust, and continued his work. Vail sat down and stretched out comfortably with his back to a windfall. At last Hughie wheeled upon him.

"You licking that chipmunk's boots so you can be lying around like this when the rest of the crew's working," he demanded.

"I was the last one to quit," Vail answered. "I just got home first, is all."

Hughie devoted an entire sentence to Ojibwa, the syllables sputtering and cracking as they were spit out by the excess of his emotion.

"You're getting good as an old squaw," Larry Vail commented. "I'd ask you up to mess, but he eats with us."

"What's mess?"

"Breakfast or dinner or supper, whatever time of day it happens to be. It's in the mess hall."

Though his face remained expressionless, Larry's eyes sparkled as he watched Hughie become inarticulate. Then the old man started violently as a sharp roar came from behind him. He wheeled to see Major Tallerday standing in front of his cabin with a shotgun in his hands.

"He wasn't shooting at me?" Hughie gasped.

"That's the sunset gun."

Hughie looked quickly at the sun, half an hour above the horizon.

"He doesn't pay any attention to that," Larry said. "He's got a little book that tells him when. The cook lets off the sunrise gun, when he remembers it. What's the news up at Sabawi?"

"I ain't been there for a month."

"Finding anything?"

There was sincere sympathy in Larry's tone and Hughie, accustomed to veiled sneers because he refused to abandon his fruitless search for gold, understood.

"No," he said in a tired voice. "I've looked every place this side the Seine now. There's nothing. Your crew's coming. How's it happen you quit last and beat 'em home?"

"I don't like to walk."

"Cutting in that patch of Norways on Beaver Lake?"

Larry nodded.

"And you come down the Bad?"

Hughie had ceased his camp making and was looking at the young man.

"Log?" he demanded.

"I told the Maje I could drive 'em out that way, and what's the use of walking when there's a friendly current?"

"Friendly!" Hughie snorted. "You—you're a *de-bick-de-gee-sus* fool, Larry. Takin' chances like——" He broke off, suddenly recalling his own distant youth. "White water lad, ain't you? Go to it, son, while you can. White water. I know. Never portage unless you have to, and then take a chance. Only——"

His tone had become warm, sympathetic. Since their first meeting several years before there had been a bond between these two.

"Only what, Hughie?" Larry asked gently.

"Nothing! Get along or you'll be late to your *shing-gah-bah-boo* mess."

Major Tallerday was waiting outside the mess hall when Larry came up from the shore.

"That man's not leaving!" he exclaimed.

"Of course I could a' thrown him and his dunnage into the canoe and shoved him off," Larry answered slowly, "but Hughie's an old man, and he's crotchety, and he might have got bumped."

"You mean he refused to go?"

"I argued with him, Maje——"

"Major!"

"Major, but arguing with Hughie's hard work. He's cute. And read! He's read everything, even about law. He says he's got a prospector's license that gives him the right to go anywhere on the government domain in Ontario and that as long as he behaves himself and don't do any damage the king himself can't put him out."

"Can't, eh?" the Major fumed. "I'll show him that he can't trifle with an officer in His Majesty's service. I'm in command here and—"

"I'd go easy, Major. He says he's within his rights and if you put him off he'll sue you and the government. When Hughie says that, he knows what he's talking about. He means it, too. A suit wouldn't look good in Toronto right now when the railroad's trying to get tourists in here, and you know how the railroads and the government work together."

"That will do, Corporal Vail," the Major interrupted. "I know my duties and my powers. You are dismissed."

For forty years Major Tallerday had been accustomed, when he uttered those words, to receive a salute, and to return it. Now, instinctively, his right hand rose smartly. Larry, not knowing the iron bonds of this habit, looked at the Major as if in bewilderment before he turned away.

The men were always the first to reach the mess hall and a few minutes later they came streaming out of the largest of the buildings, which served as their sleeping camp. They were scrubbed red, their hair was wet and

combed, and they walked with the determined step of men whose sole thought, after a long day's work, is food.

Pete Gannon, a tall, toil-stooped and toil-soured woodsman, was the first to reach the mess hall door. Though very thin, he was a heavy eater, which in a group of men always accustomed to the hard labor and generous meals of the bush, meant much. As he was about to lift the latch he saw the paper tacked on the door.

While he read the others came up behind him, pushing and crowding that they, too, might read.

"What's that?" Sandy McKeag demanded. "'Rations per day per man. Flour, sixteen oz.' What's that mean?"

"Ounces, you fool," Jack Hinton retorted. "It's about half a pound."

"What!" Sandy roared. "Does he think I'm going to eat with a pair of silly scales hanging from my chin?"

"And look at the rest of it!" Pete Gannon wailed. "Pork, sugar, baking powder, legumes—— What's a legume, Jack?"

"But the end!" shrieked Rene Lacrodaire. "The pepper! One fortieth of an ounce. Who can eat something so small as that?"

"And salt!" Sid Evans chuckled. "Look! He's cutting us down on a thing as cheap as salt."

"What's the row?" Larry asked as he came up behind the group.

He stood on tip-toe and read what was posted on the door, while the men, muttering and growling, worked themselves into a sullen fury. Larry slipped past, opened the door and went in.

A fat man standing beside a big range began to grin as Larry entered the kitchen.

"Read it?" he asked.

"Yes, but I never saw any scales in this outfit."

"The Maje hasn't thought of that. He just decided he was going to run us like an army all the way through. It's uniforms next."

"Uniforms!"

"Yep. He's working on 'em now. I was up to his shack this afternoon and he was making pictures of what he thinks would be good. They're right cute."

"The blooming fool!" Larry muttered. "That gang'll bunch it to-night sure, cook."

"What's it to you?"

"Nothing, only——"

"I know what's the matter with you. You're trying to work in with the Maje and get Jack's job."

Larry grinned; a disarming, appealing, boyish grin that had brought him more quick friendships than most men are granted. Then he turned and walked out of the kitchen into the dining room.

The crew was just coming in, a sullen, inflammable group. Work is work to a real woodsman. He is accustomed to it, and though he grumbles and growls, he seldom quits because of hardship or privation. The cook and the commissary are the center of his interest in a job. If either falls below his standards, he "bunches" it with no other comment than, "Give me my time."

Major Tallerday assumed charge of the new Atikwa Forest and Game Reserve several years before Canada took any interest in military affairs. Had he come a dozen years later, when all the Dominion's young and middle-aged men were accustomed to rations, mess, uniforms, salutes and a somewhat unquestioning obedience, the regulation army ration list he had posted on the door would have caused little comment.

But he was dealing with a class of labor that is skilled, has the hot, reasonless resentments of children, and, above all else, is quick to act with the independence of men who can always find work and who, without home ties, are ever restlessly eager for new surroundings.

The Major's action was solely the result of the cramped and distorted mental vision of one whose whole life has been spent in exalted devotion to the fetish of form and regulation. He believed he was democratic.

His initial democratic step, directed somewhat by the prompt refusal of the cook to prepare and serve an "officers' mess," was to eat with his men. And "mess" ceased instantly to become "a vulgar, wolfish attack upon the food." The Major presided at the head of the table. He "served," served men who had never known anything except huge platters placed in the most accessible spots.

The Major added conversation to the menu, something with which no woodsman has ever seasoned a meal. Talking at table is forbidden in lumber camps and men who toil ten or twelve hours in the cold and wet have no

desire for anything except food. Fifteen minutes after the gong a cook camp is cleared. At Atikwa the evening meal lasted an hour.

As Larry Vail returned to the mess hall after his interview with the cook the crew entered at the front door. Behind them came Major Tallerday.

"Good evening, men," was his greeting as he stalked to the head of the table. There was no response.

He took his seat leisurely while the crew crowded onto the benches on either side. Before him, browned, richly fragrant, was a huge baked ham. Even Major Tallerday's eyes lighted as he grasped carving knife and fork and held them upright in his two small fists.

But there the ham remained, a luscious viand just beyond the reach of six sons of Tantalus. The Major caressed the brittle, crackling skin with his huge blade, tentatively drew the keen edge across one end and then suddenly straightened in his chair.

"This, ah—smells are uncommonly suggestive, you know," he began. "It was in India—my subaltern days—back in the hills one summer. Rare sport, pig-sticking. Jolly good fun. But it wasn't that. Pig-sticking of a different sort I was thinking of."

He paused, again slapped the ham with his knife, and seemed lost in thought. Pete Gannon groaned, unconsciously, despairfully. Rene Lacrodaire muttered a ferocious curse. Six pairs of eyes remained fixed on the ham.

The Major began his story. Each slowly uttered word was like a barb in the raw flesh of his victims. He hesitated often, for his memory was poor, and he endeavored to revive it by stroking the ham with his knife or thrusting the fork into it, thereby releasing jets of savory juice or exposing the red meat beneath the white fat.

The minutes slipped by, ten, fifteen, twenty, and Major Tallerday talked on, wholly unconscious of the murderous impulses seething around him.

CHAPTER III

—Hooking a Wampus

The story never came to end. As usual, Major Tallerday's memory failed him completely. With some exasperation, but no confusion, he began to carve the ham and serve the dinner.

It never entered his mind that he was crewless, that a spontaneous, simultaneous resolution had been reached on the part of the men that they would leave after breakfast in the morning. Nor did the Major realize what that meant, that he would be left alone in the wilderness, that, helpless in a canoe or even to find his way, he would be unable to reach the railroad and secure assistance or engage new rangers for his forest reserve.

The men filed out, sullen and silent. Usually they sat or lay on the ground near the door, smoking and talking, but now they walked *en masse* to the sleeping camp. The moment the door had closed behind them, each, in his individual manner, expressed the wrath that had been boiling within him.

Rene Lacrodaire sputtered weird curses and indulged in one of his rare lapses into patois. Pete Gannon, touched in his most sensitive spot, his stomach, could only moan. Jack Hinton, "sergeant-foreman," went straight to his bunk and began to pack his "turkey." Only two had sufficient control to speak to Hughie Knowles, who sat in the easiest chair in the camp and watched with twinkling eyes.

"Happy outfit you got here, Jack," he commented. "What's the chances of me getting a job?"

"You can have six jobs," Sandy McKeag growled. "We give 'em to you."

"What's the matter? That Major's walking-boss working you too hard?"

"Matter!" Sandy sputtered, but he could only shake his fists.

The others, given an outlet, crowded about the old prospector and began to discover grievances of which they had been wholly ignorant until that moment. Hughie, remembering his own single encounter with Major Tallerday, kept them in fever heat with apparently innocent questions.

In time their wrath was spent. Several began to collect their few belongings preparatory to leaving after breakfast the next morning. One or two suddenly realized that they would soon reach Sabawi and a bar.

"I'm buying the first drink for this gang!" Sid Evans shouted.

"To-morrow's Sunday," Sandy McKeag moaned. "The bar's closed. We'll have to wait till eight o'clock Monday morning."

"That's all right," Jack Hinton said. "It will give us a better start on the day."

"On the week," Hughie corrected, and everyone laughed.

The door was flung open and Larry Vail staggered into the room. His arms hung limply, his body sagged, and he seemed to be in great pain.

"Sid!" he gasped. "Help me!"

Sid Evans and Jack Hinton sprang to his side and lowered him to a bench while the others gathered around, anxious and wondering.

"What's the matter?" Sid asked in dismay.

Larry's body shook as if from convulsions and when he lifted his head the tears were streaming down his face.

"Boys, oh, boys!" he gasped. "Give me air! Give me air! I'm going to bust!"

"He's laughing!" Jack exclaimed, wrath mingling with his relief. "What's eating you, scaring us like that?"

As if with a mighty effort, Larry seemed to get hold of himself.

"You'd be laughing too, if——"

A paroxysm of mirth seized him, and the men, seeking to hide their suddenly aroused sympathies behind a show of anger and disgust, turned away.

"If it's so good, what you hogging it for?" Hughie demanded. "From all these lads is saying, they deserve a little sunshine in their lives."

"Give a fellow time," Larry protested. "You couldn't talk either if you knew what I do. The Maje is going to get up a wampus-hooking party."

"Wampus-hooking!" Pete Gannon exclaimed in bewilderment. "What you——" but the rest was drowned in the laughter of the crew.

"Sure!" Larry said. "After supper I stayed and talked to him about that pig-sticking he was telling of. Got him to explain how it was done and all that. Jolly good sport, you know. Uncommonly so. They do it with spears over in India. You're on a horse and you ride up alongside the wild pig and nail him to the ground. Dangerous, too, you know. Chap's liable to come a cropper any time. But sporty. Extraordinarily so. Only, when I pinned him down he said the pig didn't have much of a chance."

"But this wampus business!" Jack Hinton interrupted. "You didn't spring that on him?"

"Why not? He was begging for it. Beefing because Canada didn't have any sports. Beastly dull here, you know. No polo, no racing. Even the shooting isn't real sport. Just devilish hard work getting a moose or a deer. Need beaters, you know.

"So I says, 'Maje, you're wrong there. We got a sport here in Canada you can't beat anywhere else in the world.' 'What is it?' he asked. 'Wampus-hooking' I tells him. 'Wampus-hooking,' he says, 'What's that?'

"He asked it so quick it had me floored. Usually you got time to walk around and take a think or two with him. 'Why,' I says, 'didn't you ever hear about it? But I guess that's right. It ain't well known. Just fellows that live in the bush has done it. It ain't what you'd call a popular sport. You got to know how, for one thing, and there's so few wampuses, even around here, which is the best place I know of for them'."

Except for Sid, who had been Larry's companion in much youthful deviltry, the faces of the men were expressionless, and even with Sid the idea was just beginning to dawn.

"I saw one at the foot of the lake this noon," Hughie Knowles remarked.

"Did you?" Larry exclaimed enthusiastically. "That's great. I'll tell the Maje. I thought I saw one myself coming down the Bad before supper, but I told him I wasn't sure. They're mighty scarce, I said. But when you do find one—boys, oh boys, that's when you get some jolly good sport."

"Look here," Jack Hinton demanded incredulously. "You mean he swallowed all that without catching on?"

"All that!" Larry repeated indignantly. "That's ain't the half of it."

"Didn't he want to know what a wampus was like?" Hughie asked.

"Sure. The first thing. And say! You never heard of one just like I told him about."

The men were interested now. Some were laughing and all crowded nearer to Larry. It is rare that a lumber camp in the north woods has been without its wampus. The creature's appearance, size, habits and ferocity are dependent entirely on the scope of the describer's imagination. No green hand escapes hearing of this weird beast, and few avoid the pitfalls set for their eager questions. These invariably pertain to the method of capture, or to the creature's physical characteristics, and it was in both these respects that Larry Vail reached new heights in his description to Major Tallerday.

Only Larry had not adopted the usual method of trapping his listener into asking the key question. His thoughts were far deeper, as he explained. He passed on to the stage where the Major had demanded, had ordered, that Larry organize a wampus-hooking party.

"We'll do it to-morrow!" Sid Evans shouted. "Say! This will beat that summer you and me——"

"Can't," Larry said. "I told him the season didn't open for three weeks."

"Three weeks!" Jack Hinton repeated. "If you think I'm going to hang around here for the next three—"

"You don't have to," Larry interrupted shortly. "Who started this, anyhow? Go on and bunch it. Me! I'd stand his cutting me down to a thousandth of an ounce of pepper a day just to see him standing on a rock out there in Bad River some dark night, a birchbark torch in one hand and his wampus hook in the other. And when we let loose that big owl with its wings all rubbed with phosphorus—I know where we can get some from the roots of a dead popple—why, I'd wear one of his funny uniforms for a month just to see it."

"Uniforms?" Sandy asked. "What's he think we——"

"Oh, he's just got to drawing pictures of them," Larry soothed. "They're a long way off. Now to-morrow noon—he never gets up for breakfast—don't you fellows put it on too thick. Just follow along with me. We got to keep him stringing for three weeks."

"Three weeks!" Pete Gannon roared. "If you think I'm going to stand for that list he's tacked on the door for three weeks——"

"Hush!" Larry laughed. "Ain't the cook told you the point of that yet?"

"What point?"

"There ain't any scales in the camp. Never was. And there's no requisition gone out for new supplies."

"You mean there's no chance to weigh anything?" Sandy demanded.

"Course not, and you can trust the cook. Besides, the Maje likes good grub himself, I've noticed. I never had a baked ham like that in a camp before."

"But I most died waiting," Pete wailed. "Every time he drug his knife across it I began to froth at the mouth."

A loud guffaw greeted this and Pete joined good-naturedly.

"Besides," Larry hastened to say, "I can stand for his yarns and waiting for grub if I just keep thinking of how he's going to look out there in Bad River some dark night."

"Where you going to get your owl?" Rene Lacrodaire asked eagerly.

Larry barely suppressed a sigh of relief and plunged into the details of his plans for the wampus-hooking party. Twice he paused as if balked and first Jack Hinton, then Sandy McKeag, proffered the obvious suggestion. In half an hour men were chuckling, punching each other in the ribs and suddenly becoming weak with laughter. Jack Hinton replaced his belongings over his bunk and Pete Gannon dumped out his turkey.

Old Hughie Knowles, who had remained silent, intently watchful, caught Larry's eye. That young man's left lid dropped a small fraction of an inch, but Hughie gave no sign.

Larry rose to his feet, stretched as if he had been cramped by a long strain, and then burst forth in a swaggering song of the white water boys:

Oh, I went up the Eau Claire to drive,
  I thought they'd never begin;
The wind was blowing dead ahead,
  AND Kelly was drunk agin.

The river pigs was lying around
  Just a thinking of their sin,
The logs was waiting on the skids,
  BUT Kelly was drunk agin.

We took the drive down the old St. Croix
  And tied her snug-i-ly in,
But we had hardly hit the bank
  'FORE Kelly was drunk agin.

Larry Vail was still in a singing mood the next morning. As in few other places, Sunday is a day of rest in the bush. Men lie about thoroughly relaxed, smoking and gossiping, shaving, cutting hair, dawdling and yarning over small laundry jobs. Larry had taken a bundle of shirts, underwear and socks down to the lake shore and was boiling them in a fifty-pound lard can. When the fire was going nicely he backed away from the smoke and began another song of the shantymen:

Oh, Jim Pole was a right smart lad
At decking logs on a deacon seat;
He makes the rest of us all look sad
The way he piles 'em up so neat.

'Round the stove he's a moose of a man,
There ain't a thing that he can't do well;
And at top loading I'll swear he can—
But I'll leave that for him to tell.

He stopped and with a short stick poked down the bubbling clothes in the lard can. He had seen the door of Major Tallerday's cabin open. As the Major stepped out a broad grin spread over Larry's face.

"Here's the b r a v e old wampus-hooker," he chuckled. "Just itchin' to be at 'em. Boys, oh boys!"

He had one song which, he knew, offended the Major. It started out innocently enough but, like most ballads of sailors, cowboys and men of the woods, soon unmasked itself. Larry's voice was clear and strong and his high spirits added to the infectious swing of the air.

You can have all the girls with the yellow hair,
The ones with the skin that's pink and fair;
I don't like their ways, I don't like their sass,
The sort for me is a Chippewa lass.

Apparently he was concerned solely with his laundry, but he was watching the Major closely and saw that gentleman stop and look at him. With added glee he plunged into the second verse:

Oh, the Chippewa girl's the girl for me,
Makes her house from the bark of a tree;
Her skin may be brown, her hair may be black,
But she looks fine to a poor lumberjack.

Larry's grin became impish as he saw the Major start toward him. He poked vigorously at the bubbling clothes and began the third verse:

Her camp by the river's a nice place to find,
Her welcome's simple but always kind;
She ain't got the style nor even the looks,
But she—

Larry never knew just what caused him to stop. Perhaps it was a sensing that he was not alone. Perhaps he had heard the click of a paddle against a gunwhale. He wheeled to see two canoes approaching the beach and only fifty feet away. In the nearer canoe two women were seated comfortably in the middle.

Larry poked again at the foam-covered clothes, bending to hide the hot surge of blood to his face. He heard a low laugh and, thrusting his stick through the wire handle of the lard can, lifted his laundry from the fire and hurried down the beach to a rocky point. There, after dumping out the steaming clothes, he had an opportunity to witness the landing of the strangers.

The women still sat in their canoe, which was paddled by two Indians. From the other, manned by woodsmen who were strangers to Larry, a man was stepping onto the beach, where Major Tallerday had already arrived. There was an exchange of words, the two shook hands and then the Major was presented to the women, who arose and were helped out onto the sand.

Larry had retreated too far to catch voices or words, but he saw that one of the women was tall and moved with easy, flowing and yet indolent movements. The other, most evidently much younger, was shorter and not so slender. There was a sturdiness about her, something solid and dependable.

These things impressed themselves only faintly on Larry.

"Tourists," he muttered. "The railroad's getting them in, all right. First crop. And the Maje comes down and gives them the glad hand while he tells me to throw old Hughie off the place."

In disgust he flopped his clothes into the lake, rinsed them thoroughly and returned to the men's camp where he hung his washing carefully on a line. A painstaking suspension of wet garments can do much to make up for the lack of an iron, and Larry abhorred a wrinkled shirt.

He gave no further heed to the people on the shore. In all his life he had met few city folk, and his skin still tingled at the thought of the verse he

might have sung in the presence of the women. In a vague way he felt that he had been imposed upon. Later, when he entered the camp and found Hughie Knowles just inside the open door, the happy mood of the morning had vanished.

"The man's an old-timer in the bush," the prospector remarked as he watched the strangers. "He's got this place sized up."

Larry did not comment. He went to his bunk, found an old magazine and began to read. He was still reading when the call for dinner sounded, and because he wanted to finish a story he was the last to reach the mess hall.

Even as he stepped across the threshold he never suspected but that he would find the usual gathering of the crew. At first he saw only the familiar backs of his mates. As he pushed forward he heard Major Tallerday's voice.

"Men, we have guests to-day, the first with whom we have been honored. Mr. and Mrs. Franklin and Miss Kerr."

Larry glanced at the table. He saw that extra places had been set, but even at his instinctive step backward he felt the crew close in behind him. He was vaguely aware that the Major was seating the women on either side; that Mr. Franklin was across the table, and that the men were crowding onto the long benches. To his horror he discovered that the one remaining place was next to the older woman.

As he stood there, trying desperately to hold back the red surge that was mounting above his collar, she turned her head and looked up, flashing a smile that appeared so genuine and comradely that Larry found himself responding to it. She tucked her skirts about her, made room on the bench, and he stepped across and sat down.

"I enjoyed your songs," she said in a low voice that only Larry heard because the Major was laughing at one of his own remarks. "I was sorry you stopped."

He blushed furiously. Then he saw that her eyes were laughing.

"But I enjoyed still more your ride down the river last night," she continued quickly.

He started and then said:

"That was just an easy way of getting home."

"But none of the other men did it."

"I'm the only river pig in the outfit, it happens. These boys are Canadians and there hasn't been any driving in this part of the country."

"Oh, you are from the States, a countryman!" she exclaimed. "Then you —Major, please tell me which of your men is the valiant wampus hunter?"

There was a rumble, a splutter, a confused coughing and choking from the lower end of the table, and Larry kicked viciously under the table at Pete Gannon. The Major turned from the girl on his left, smiled and bowed to the woman.

"Vail, who sits next to you, has introduced me to the sport, Mrs. Franklin," he said. "He has promised me a night of it when—ah, when is it the season opens, Vail?"

"But I feel sure I have read that Ontario has no open season," Mrs. Franklin interrupted. "It is such a cruel sport. And for all its ferocious appearance, there is nothing so gentle and inoffensive as a wampus."

"You are dealing with the Canadian wampus, of which you know nothing," Mr. Franklin said calmly but with a cold inflection and a straight glance at his wife that did not escape Larry.

"An imaginary boundary line doesn't change an animal's habits," she retorted. "Besides, Mr. Vail is from the States and he knows there is only one kind of wampus."

Franklin glanced down the table, where the men, red-faced, tight-lipped, were striving valiantly but hopelessly to suppress an explosion.

"Doubtless Vail is thoroughly acquainted with the animal's habits," he said. "By the way, Major, have you been in Canada long enough to hear about your fellow countryman who, upon his arrival in Canada, asked which was warmer, moccasins or snowshoes?"

The explosion came, a roar of shouts and laughter that startled the women and cut short the Major's own mirth.

Larry alone did not laugh. His eyes were twinkling but he had been too tense. Now he looked across the table and his glance met Franklin's for the first time.

In that moment Larry could not have given an accurate description of the other. He only knew he had met the sort of man he most admired—cool, steady and understanding.

As the laughter began to die away Larry became aware of another pair of eyes. His embarrassment upon finding himself thrust next to these strangers, and the absorption of his attention by Mrs. Franklin in her attempt to cause him trouble by bringing up the wampus story, had prevented more than a glance at Miss Kerr. Now, as Franklin looked away, Larry turned to the girl.

She, too, had been laughing, but joyously, with a complete understanding of the situation. As their eyes met he recognized a kindred spirit, a nature as ebullient as his own. Just how far the mutual comprehension of that fact might have carried them he did not know. He was conscious only of a slight irritation when Major Tallerday spoke to Miss Kerr and he heard Mrs. Franklin whisper in his ear:

"It was a very beautiful picture you gave me last evening, there on the river. I wonder, did you know it?"

"I never saw you," he said with an ingenuousness so convincing it brought a quick, strange light to her blue eyes.

"I have been grateful to you ever since," she continued in the same low, soft voice. "I'll never forget it."

Larry felt a blush creep up his neck, one entirely different from the red surge that had mounted to his face when he first sat down beside her. That had been due to his own embarrassment. Now he was aware of a purple tinge, of uneasiness. He attacked his food and did not look up from his plate.

"Don't worry about the wampus," she whispered gaily in his ear. "I won't bother you again. But—it was delicious. If you could have heard the Major tell us!"

There was something comradely in her attitude now and he felt more at ease, but when the meal was over he was quick to join in the unceremonious rush of his five mates to the door.

CHAPTER IV

—Friendly Currents

There were several reasons why Hughie Knowles preferred Mrs. Wade's boarding house to the hotel at Sabawi, and all were, in varying fashion, compliments to Mrs. Wade.

They had known each other long before the coming of the railroad, back in the first days of the Seine River gold rush, when Horace Wade was still alive and an outstanding figure in that mad scramble for claims. Now, after many years, the sole relics of a daring, buoyant past were a few abandoned mines, Hughie's persistent faith and Mrs. Wade's warm heart, given its full expression in those days of wrecked hope and despair.

When Hughie returned from what he declared was his last prospecting trip to the south—"There ain't gold enough between here and the border to fill a hole in a chipmunk's tooth"—he did not stop at the hotel bar or at Dave Connor's store but went on to Mrs. Wade's low, log home and entered through the kitchen door.

The cook, a huge Norwegian woman, stood at the range but Hughie barely acknowledged her greeting.

"Look at that *me-tas-way-sha-bay-zsik* wood box!" he exclaimed. "And the water barrel!"

He dropped his packs and went out. The cook grinned as she heard an ax snapping viciously into a poplar block. An hour later wood box and water barrel were filled.

The fact that Hughie owed a few months' board and several small loans had nothing whatever to do with this phase of his entrance. His relationship to Mrs. Wade was too honest and too thoroughly understood. There was no thought of softening the effects of an empty-handed return with ingratiating acts. His tasks completed, he stormed through the house to the little sitting room in which he knew he would find the mistress of the place.

"What *seeb-wah-gah-nee-sis-ee-bah-kwat* bum you sorry for now?" he demanded accusingly as he dropped his pack and faced her.

Mrs. Wade looked up complacently from her sewing. She was short, thickset, and so firmly corseted that she gave the impression of boundless but controlled energy held in leash for any occasion or task. There was little gray in her red-brown hair, though she was past fifty, but there were wrinkles in the skin of her rather square face; wrinkles of determination and inflexibility of purpose that branched off into smaller creases of good humor, of deep sympathy and of rare understanding.

"Rufus Peters," she answered simply.

The answer was the extent of her greeting. For more than a quarter of a century she had been watching men disappear in the bush as if swallowed by a thick fog, and for weeks and months she had rocked and sewed in her sitting room until, as now, the fog suddenly lifted and the wanderer stood before her.

"Rufus!" Hughie snorted. "The lazy, thieving half-breed!"

"He's been sick."

"Drunk, more likely. You're standing him board and a bed and clothes and here I come home from a long trip and find the wood box and the water barrel empty. You'll be giving the last shirt off your back some day."

Unruffled, Mrs. Wade continued her rocking and sewing.

"That poor Major down on the new reserve has lost another crew," she remarked.

"Serves him right," Hughie grumbled. "He thinks he's running an army."

"But the poor man doesn't know anything else."

"His crew come to Sabawi?"

"On a freight an hour ago."

Hughie was silent for a moment.

"Say!" he suddenly burst forth. "Ever get your money from Pete Gannon for the time he was sick here so long last spring?"

"I will."

"How much does he owe you?"

"A hundred dollars. Pete's all right. He signed over fifty of his seventy-five a month down there. It's fixed so the government will pay me. He's worked two months now."

"How'd he come to do that?"

"Larry Vail talked him into it, I guess."

"Larry!" Hughie cried, and he slapped his thigh. "So that's why!"

"Why what?" she asked.

"He told the Major about wampus-hooking."

The sewing was thrust into her lap and she straightened militantly.

"I'll talk to Larry Vail myself," she declared. "The young scamp! The idea of his fooling that poor old Major with such a story."

Hughie's eyes twinkled and he relaxed in his chair.

"Guess it wasn't right," he agreed. "You ought to go after him. Dress him down good."

He looked out of the window toward Dave Connor's store and his eyes twinkled.

"You can't make the Johnson girls believe he's a scamp," he suggested.

Mrs. Wade turned and looked out the window.

"They're safe with Larry," she said after a moment. "It's that Sid Evans I wouldn't trust. I can't understand what Larry sees in him."

"Maybe he just likes to protect the weak and helpless," Hughie said so carelessly that at any other time she would have been suspicious of a hidden meaning. But now her mind was fastened on something else.

"Weak and helpless!" she scoffed. "Sid Evans is just a plain young no-account, and Larry won't see it. That's another thing I'm going to talk to the young scamp about."

Hughie rose abruptly and left the room. He was well content with the possibilities for amusement in the next twenty-four hours and he wanted to shave, get into a clean shirt and be ready to enjoy himself. Mrs. Wade again glanced out the window, then resumed her sewing. Larry Vail was still talking to the Johnson girls in front of the store.

That young man had, with the rest of the Atikwa crew, gone at once from the freight train to the bar in the Sabawi hotel. But, after buying one round of drinks and participating in a second, he had slipped out and crossed to the store where, his legs swinging from the counter, he had spent an hour talking to Dave Connor. Then Sid Evans appeared on the verandah outside and beckoned to his friend.

"Say," he began in a confidential whisper. "I shook that gang in there and did a little snooping around and I got it all fixed—"

He broke off abruptly when two girls came around the corner of the store and halted beside them. They were, perhaps, nineteen and twenty. Both were pretty, one dark and the other light, but most of all they possessed the charm of youth, of health, of bewitching freshness. Larry's eyes lighted but did not stray from their faces, which at once broke into ingenuous smiles of delight.

Sid's eyes at once followed the curved lines of the simple cotton dresses, that type of gown which still possesses for the average, normal man more allure than any exotic, extravagant creation of the stage or boulevard.

"Hello, Larry!" they cried in chorus, and with shy impulsiveness extended their hands. "When did you get to town?"

"An hour ago," he said. "The first thing I did was to go over to your house but your ma threw a stick of stove wood at me."

They laughed boisterously, for their mother's delight in Larry's company had often been expressed with cakes and pies baked expressly for him.

"Ain't you going to say hello to me?" Sid demanded as he thrust out his hand.

"Of course," said Peggy, the older, as she gave him her limp fingers. "You boys quit the reserve?"

"The Major's hunting for crew No. 3, and God help 'em," Sid answered.

"Oh, the Maje is all right," Larry said. "He'll be almost human after he's been trained by a few more batches of men and forgot about war!"

The girls laughed and linked arms in front of Larry. Their eyes were turned up to his handsome, smiling face. Their attention was all for his remarks, which they stimulated with their own roughly sharpened jibes. They seemed to have forgotten Sid's presence, though they sensed his appraising glances and sometimes ceased giggling and stirred uneasily.

Larry's enjoyment was as sincere as their own. It was so simple he was unaware that he had their entire attention, or that Sid Evans, left virtually an outsider, was frowning at his elbow. There was something of the puppy and the kitten in this rough gamboling of wits in the sight of all Sabawi, something as wholesome and as innocent; a thing of youth and clean conscience, of pure animal spirits, of complete unawareness of that subtle but powerful thing, normal physical magnetism, which was the basis of their enjoyment.

Twice Sid broke petulantly into the conversation and then for a time he lapsed into silence. At last, with a contemptuous tone poorly concealed by an air of jocularity, he interrupted:

"Say! You girls heard the story about the squaw—"

An elbow dug brutally into his ribs and Larry, who had stepped forward to hide his thrust, exclaimed loudly:

"There's old Hughie going up to the station. We got to see him, Sid. B' jou', girls. Tie your mother's hands so she can't heave any more stove wood and I'll be down to see you."

They laughed loudly at his parting sally and as he hurried off, one hand on Sid's elbow, their eyes did not leave his wide shoulders and slender waist. They were wholly unconscious of beauty of line. They did not even know their laughter ceased as they stared, and that it was followed by a sigh.

"Look here," Larry said in gentle reproof as he hurried his friend away. "You don't want to tell stories like that to those girls. They're darned nice, both of them."

"Aw, go on! They know the one about the squaw and a lot we never heard. Girls can act innocent but—" and he broke off significantly.

"Not those girls," Larry insisted. "They're darned nice, both of them, and they got a nice mother. There's enough you can try that sort of stuff on."

"That's what I wanted to tell you about. Hilda Fraser's in town."

"Bet she keeps away from Mrs. Wade," Larry laughed.

"Aw, Mrs. Wade gets too gay with other people's business. But Hilda's here, staying down at Marie Lightner's house. I got it fixed up for us to go down there to-night."

Larry hesitated a moment before he asked:

"Suppose you got Hilda staked out for yourself?"

"Why not? I found her."

"You hadn't ought to do that."

"What's the matter with you?" Sid demanded. "Nobody's going to do Hilda any harm."

"No, but Marie Lightner's married and Ned's away every other night."

"That's just it. He's haulin' No. 2 out this afternoon and he brings No. 1 back to-morrow. No chance of his——"

"You go get somebody else," Larry interrupted. "I ain't an angel, but ——"

"You're a damned hypocrite!" Sid snorted.

"No, I just got my own rules, that's all. There's Hughie. I want to see him. Why don't you get Rene Lacrodaire? He ain't got any rules about anything."

He shoved his friend away good-naturedly and went on in search of the old prospector.

But Hughie had gone out through the rear door of the station and Larry wandered back toward the store. As he passed the boarding house he saw Mrs. Wade at her window and waved to her. She answered with an imperious beckoning and a moment later he entered her sitting room.

"Sit down, you young good-for-nothing," was her only greeting.

Larry grinned but there was no twinkle in his eyes, and though he sprawled comfortably in a chair he was very much alert.

"First, when are you going to quit wasting time on Sid Evans?" Mrs. Wade demanded.

"Sid's all right," he defended quickly. "You just don't know him, is all."

"I've lived in the bush twenty-five years and I don't go wrong on men. I've seen too many of them, drunk, sober, happy and hopeless."

"That's the reason I like Sid. I've seen him all ways and he scales with the rest of them."

Mrs. Wade straightened determinedly in her chair.

"I've never said anything about a person until I've said it right to their face," she began with the formula familiar to everyone who knew her, and a rule, they were well aware, to which she rigidly adhered. "I've told Sid and now I'll tell you. He's just a no-account young squirt that ain't got the makings of a man in him."

"Of course," Larry said slowly, "it's just natural that anybody can't be right all the time. I've gone wrong on folks pretty often, and I never knew you to go wrong—until now. I've been knocking around the bush with Sid for nearly three years now and I know what's the matter with him."

"I'd like to hear it."

"You see, Sid was brought up in a city. His dad died when he was a kid and his mother, having nobody else, sort of spoiled him. That kind of a boy can get wrong ideas about a lot of things in a city."

"The bush don't seem to have knocked them out of him," Mrs. Wade commented.

"Not yet, maybe, but he's just a kid. Only twenty. He thinks getting drunk is smart and that he ought to act real tough when he gets to town. Lots of young fellows think that's being a man."

"Why don't you tell him different?"

"Sid's got to learn for himself just like everybody does. You only see him in town, but I've lived in the bush with him. He'll make a good man some day."

Mrs. Wade did not comment when Larry paused. She had caught a new tone in his voice.

"Besides," he continued after a moment, "I know his mother. She lives in Port Arthur. One of those little women with big eyes like a deer's. She thinks Sid's perfect and—well, she's one of the kind that doesn't know there's anything bad in the world."

"Huh!" Mrs. Wade snorted. "The real reason you like him is because he's always ready to help you in your deviltry."

"He's quick," Larry agreed. "He gets the point, and the fellow that can do that will take a tumble to himself and come out all right."

"Maybe so, but he's going to make a lot of trouble first. He's been talking to Hilda Fraser already. I saw him."

"Why don't you say Hilda Fraser's been talking to him? The trouble is, you tell Sid he's a dirty pup and then you blame him for talking to somebody that don't think he is."

Larry stopped speaking and relaxed. There was no longer need to be on his guard. Mrs. Wade had fired her broadside.

"The trouble is," he said after a moment, and with one of his engaging smiles, "you been measuring Sid by me, and that ain't fair to him."

"By you!" she exploded, but she failed to make her exasperation convincing. "Larry Vail, you need a talking-to. You and your small-boy

tricks! What do you mean, picking on that poor old Major with your wampus stories?"

He started, was tense for a moment as his thoughts leaped nimbly into the past. Then he grinned delightedly.

"You never saw the Maje, did you?"

She shook her head.

"Well, you ought to. And if you'd seen him first you'd have told him about wampus-hooking. Honest, Mrs. Wade, he was just begging for that story. He made me tell it."

He tried to appear innocent and succeeded so well that her frown of disapproval faded into a smile. Larry suddenly became serious and leaned forward confidentially.

"Have you seen Hughie since he got back?" he asked in a low voice.

"Yes."

"Then you've seen the change in him. It's too bad, at his age."

"What do you mean, Larry Vail?"

"It ain't a nice thing to tell, but you know the bush and you've got a lot of influence with Hughie. You ought to talk to him about it."

"For mercy sakes, about what?"

"Maybe I oughtn't to tell, but he respects you. He'll listen to what you say. You know, he claims he's been prospecting all this spring. The old fraud. He ought to be taken out and spanked. For the last month he's been hanging around that Lac La Croix Indian village."

"Larry Vail!" she exclaimed furiously. "That's just another of your——"

"Wait and see. Jump him about it unexpected. The old son-of-a-gun! A man his age!"

Her needle flashed for a moment.

"Leave it to me," was her tight-lipped comment.

"I knew you'd do the right thing," Larry said as he arose. "We got to help him."

He halted suddenly beside her chair, stooped and planted a resounding smack on her cheek.

"You scamp!" she cried.

"I'm sorry," he said with mock contrition, "but you know how it is—a fellow shut up in the bush for months with a lot of men."

"Don't you dare talk to me that way!" Mrs. Wade shouted, but there was a bright light in her eyes and a faint flush in her cheeks.

"Besides," he said as he halted in the door, "you always make me think of my mother."

With astonishing swiftness she jerked off a slipper and hurled it at him. As he went out through the dining room she heard his laughter and she took up her sewing with a smile, a smile that remained until Hughie entered a few minutes later.

He stood appalled by the vehemence of her denunciation, but at last, when her wrath was exhausted, he grinned and took a seat opposite her.

"I ought to a' known better," he began.

"Known better!" she exclaimed contemptuously.

"—than to fool with that lad," he finished imperturably. "He told you this after you gave him a dressing down about the Major, didn't he?"

"What if he did?"

"You see, I knew why he told that wampus story as soon as you told me about Pete Gannon's hundred dollars. You know Pete. He probably intended to pay you when he got well, but after a month down there he'd begin to think he was being done. Working for wages that is signed away don't go down well with a fellow like Pete."

"Hughie Knowles, what are you talking about?" Mrs. Wade demanded.

"The night I hit the reserve Pete had been working only a little more than a month. The whole crew was going to bunch it and leave the Major flat the next morning. Then Larry came in and tells how he's got the Major all worked up for a wampus hunt. I didn't see then what he was driving at, but I knew it was something."

"I don't see yet."

"He set that wampus hunt three weeks off, giving Pete time to work out his hundred that he owed you."

Mrs. Wade's sewing dropped into her lap and she stared at Hughie. Then she picked it up and the needle darted in and out.

"He's a young scamp just the same," she declared, though she could not keep the tenderness from her voice. Then she added firmly, "But he had no right to slander you."

"Yes," Hughie agreed softly, "he's a skunk."

Outside they heard a joyous voice raised in song.

Oh, I went up the Eau Claire to drive,
I thought they'd never begin;
The wind was blowing dead ahead
AND Kelly was drunk agin.

They leaned toward the window and saw Larry passing.

"He's the only one in the Atikwa crew that's sober enough to watch the passenger go through," Mrs. Wade said with what was nothing less than happy pride.

"The *kah-kah-bee-kah* pup don't need to get liquored up to have a good time," Hughie growled.

Their eyes met, eyes fading and wrinkled-circled, but eyes bright with the reflection of another's buoyant youth.

Larry reached the platform just as the long trans-continental train slowed to a stop. He watched the steps of the day coaches curiously, waved to a friend in the smoker, shouted a greeting to a brakeman. It was not until a vague, exotic and yet strangely familiar scent reached his nostrils that he turned toward the Pullmans at the rear.

"Our valiant wampus hunter again," a soft voice said at his elbow, and he found himself looking into Mrs. Franklin's brilliant blue eyes.

They were very close, and very warm, and far back in their depths was a light that he found peculiarly disturbing. Embarrassed and uneasy, he glanced away, only to meet the gray eyes of the girl who had sat across the table from him at Atikwa. As then, they were friendly and understanding —"comfortable" was the way he phrased it to himself.

"I thought you were a forest ranger," Mrs. Franklin said when Larry had jerked off his hat and had shaken their extended hands.

"The Maje got on our nerves a little so we decided to come to town," he explained.

“You mean you have quit the reserve?” the older woman asked quickly, and her eyes became less blue.

“I guess it amounts to that.”

She studied him for an instant and then asked:

“Have you anything in view?”

“A lumberjack never has.”

“But what are you going to do? Haven’t you any plans?”

“I haven’t thought about it,” he answered with a laugh. “It just depends on how I catch the current.”

Mrs. Franklin smiled and then suddenly searched the platform at her feet.

“Oh, Marcia!” she exclaimed. “My gloves! I must have left them in the train. Please, dear.”

Miss Kerr hesitated an instant and then turned away. Larry wondered at the troubled look in her eyes.

“How you catch the current,” Mrs. Franklin, at his elbow, repeated softly. “You—from my first sight of you, I imagine that you prefer swift currents.”

Again he felt vaguely uneasy, but years ago he had discovered the ruse of hiding any slight confusion behind a jest.

“Sure,” he laughed. “I always did like white water.”

CHAPTER V

—Larry Hunts Trouble

The first of April, nearly a year after he had left the Atikwa Reserve, Larry Vail wrote a letter to Howard Franklin.

> Dear Sir: We finished putting up the ice last week and that ends what we can do until break-up. Sid and Hughie will take this into Sabawi in the morning. We need a few things to last us through to canoe time. I'll stay here because I think it's a good idea not to leave the place alone. Rene Lacrodaire got sort of huffy the last time I warned him off, and he and Pete Gannon have their shack only three miles down the lake.
>
> The main building is all done except the fireplace. We'll have to wait for warm weather, so the cement can set without freezing. The two smaller cabins are ready to move right into. As soon as the snow is gone we'll clean up around the place like you said Mrs. Franklin wants. We'll try and have it all neat for her. I think she'll like the furniture Hughie has been making. He's snowed himself in with shavings.
>
> So far this winter I've made fifteen trips around the reserve. Wolves been running, but not much. I think it would be a mistake to waste much time on them, but we can talk that over in the summer. I've angled through quite often and always see quite a bit of sign. You and your partners won't have any trouble next fall in getting a moose. If you say so we can go out and hang labels on their horns this summer. There's a lot of partridge.
>
> I guess that's all to tell about. Rene said a bunch of rich men didn't have any right to fence off a stretch of bush just for themselves and he would trap where he pleased. I told him he'd have to get a lawyer to settle that point and until he did he was only making trouble for himself. But don't worry about him. He won't go to law because what he's really aiming at is shooting moose for Bagnall's lumber camp.

You can tell Mrs. Franklin that I'll have a bunch of moose tamed for her by June so they'll stand pretty for their pictures. And I hope you don't have to go to California. I can show you some fun fishing for lake trout in that land-locked lake over the ridge. We got quite a few through the ice this winter. I think that's all.

Yours very truly,
L. VAIL.

Larry showed the letter to Hughie with the comment, "I guess that's enough."

"Yes," Hughie agreed when he had read it. "It tells that everything is going right and that's all he cares about."

"I never worked for anybody I liked better," Larry said, "and I never worked so long in one place before."

"That's because Franklin's the sort that lets a man go ahead. Slack up on the job once and see what happens."

"Only a crook or a fool would go slack on him. The Major, now—he sort of invited it."

"Funny thing about handling men," Hughie commented. "Some fellows swear and ride you and others just speak gentle and never get excited, and yet——"

"Sure, and you've worked for the swearing kind and the gentle kind when you've slacked all you could and bunched it quick," Larry laughed.

"I know," the old prospector admitted. "It ain't the way a man talks or what he says. It's something else that makes a good boss—something a fellow's born with, like red hair or a knack at playing the fiddle."

He arose abruptly and went out to the kitchen to begin cooking supper. Like many another who has spent much of his life alone in the bush, Hughie was afraid of his own thoughts and reactions, and just now he was on the verge of saying things to Larry which, later, he would regret.

But Hughie's regrets would have been those of one who shrinks from baring his soul more than baring his body. At that moment, which marked the close of a long fall and winter's work, he was dismayed by the surge of affection which had swept over him as he talked to Larry Vail. He realized that his young friend possessed abundantly the qualities they had been

discussing and that it was due to Larry that he himself had been rehabilitated.

During the previous summer Howard Franklin, after two weeks of exploration in which Larry and Sid Evans acted as his canoemen, had finally determined upon the tract he and several friends in Toronto and the United States were to take over as a private game preserve. Franklin had selected Larry, to that young man's complete surprise, to assume charge of the preserve until his return the next summer, outlining exactly what he wanted in the way of buildings, patroling and guarding his interests.

The first thing Larry did was to employ Sid Evans and the second, after adroit approaches, was to complete his crew by engaging Hughie Knowles.

The old prospector was caught at a time when despair had come. He was in debt and, despite the optimism of his kind, he finally had admitted to himself that there was no gold. He faced old age with nothing but blasted dreams, a record of futile search and a spirit crushed by a sense of failure. Larry, knowing this, managed to give the impression that he was asking a favor, and Hughie, knowing that Larry knew, managed to give the impression that he was granting one.

Perhaps the searching and the creative instincts are more closely allied than anyone has surmised. Each, in its highest expression, exacts faith, singleness of purpose and celibacy of spirit. The lone seeker and the lone striver toil and suffer only to find achievement a hollow thing.

"It's not the gold that I wanted
So much as just finding the gold."

And now Hughie, when spring came, found himself strangely at peace with the world. Often, when the other two were absent, he walked slowly through the main building and the two smaller ones, his eyes deriving an unanalyzed pleasure from the many things he had made. He experienced a certain shame, for no woodsman had ever built such things before—chairs and tables and beds hewed from dry cedar—and yet he could find only delight in the lines and in the soft color achieved by the application of a single coat of stain.

In the building of them, in the long hours of patient but comforting toil, the vain years had been forgotten. For the first time since his young manhood he knew a certain peace of spirit and, because he did not clearly understand the reason, his affection for Larry Vail had grown.

Hughie and Sid departed for Sabawi at two o'clock the next morning to get the advantage of the cold hours before the sun was high. At seven o'clock Larry slipped into his snowshoes and swung over the ridge to make a final patrol of the preserve.

There was a certain snap in the way he thrust his webs forward that revealed his high spirits. Only the fact that he was alone in the bush prevented his singing. He wanted to sing, but the woodsman's natural instinct for quiet progress kept him silent.

For Larry was feeling again the subtle stress of those forces ever present in the homeless, kinless, tieless men of the bush.

"I never worked for anybody I liked better," he had said to Hughie, "and I never worked so long in one place before."

He had told the truth and yet the vagabond spirit still prevailed. He had never enjoyed a winter so much. The sense of responsibility and of accomplishment was new and stimulating. He was proud of his work and there had been the pleasant companionship of Hughie and Sid. Yet, though he was still unconscious of the significance of the symptoms, he was getting ready to thrust out again into the current, hoping that it would carry him into white water.

At eight o'clock, as he topped a low ridge, he was halted by a slight movement in the muskeg beneath him. Watching from behind a spruce he saw a man cross a small clearing.

Larry, whose many patrol trips during the winter had given him a knowledge of every bit of ridge and swamp, of every lake, pond and stream, studied the situation for a moment and then slipped back down the slope he had just climbed. A half hour later he stepped out from behind a thick clump of cedars beside a creek just as a man came up on the other side.

"Hello, Rene," Larry said casually. "Just crossing through again?"

The French Canadian did not start or show surprise even in his black eyes. He stood still, staring fixedly, his rifle held across his waist in the crook of his left arm. Larry noted that a small ax hung from his belt and that he did not carry a packsack.

"Moose this time, eh?" he said. "I heard they was getting short of meat over at the camp. Aiming to drive 'em out to Pete?"

Lacrodaire did not speak or move a muscle, but his dark face was becoming blacker and his eyelids were lower.

"Or did your dog hear Sid going by to town this morning and you thought you'd have a clear field to-day?" Larry continued his baiting. "Let's see now. The quickest way out is straight ahead, the way you were going, but I noticed four moose been traveling just in front of you and if you keep on you're liable to drive 'em right into Pete. You stand to lose forty-fifty dollars for the meat, but I guess you'd better hit north. That's toward home anyhow."

Rene's lips parted and his teeth flashed. For an instant he stood there, tense and catlike, and then suddenly his rifle had shifted, was gripped in his two hands and cocked.

Larry laughed.

"It was only Sid that went to town," he said. "Hughie's back here a little ways. He knows I ain't got a gun and he'd come quick if he heard a shot. Besides, even if he wasn't around, you'd be a damned fool, Rene. There's a lot of reasons. You can be tracked—easy. You ain't got a chance. And then, what if you did get away? You know how it is. If I turned and run now and you got me in the back it would be different. But looking at me right in the eye like that—why, you ain't got the nerve to do it."

Lacrodaire's tense muscles relaxed slightly.

"It ain't worth the chance, any way you look at it," Larry continued amiably. "Is it, now?"

Rene suddenly unleashed a torrent of foul abuse, throughout which Larry grinned. He knew the tension had been released, that the hair trigger was no longer set.

"That's fine," he commented when Rene stopped at last. "Go ahead and get it off your chest. It's safer, that way."

"Listen, Vail!" Lacrodaire said in a low tone that managed to express both a terrible fury and perfect control. "This time I be dam' fool. Next time I not. Those rich men, I no care now. But you—I get you and I stop that dam' laugh forever."

"I see. Franklin and his pardners are out of it now and it's just between you and me."

"Yes, you and me!" Rene cried. "And you take my advice you get out of this country quick."

"I like it here."

Rene only glared, then turned back on the trail by which he had come. He did not pause or turn and as Larry watched him go he suddenly realized what had been in the back of his mind that morning—how the faint, insidious melody of change, of new places and new people had found response in an unconscious twitching of his feet.

"And now I've just as good as promised Rene I'll be the last to go," he exclaimed in mock disgust. "First time in my life I couldn't up and bunch it. That's what comes of acting smart."

Because of close association and real interest in their work through the long winter, it would have been natural for Larry to tell Hughie and Sid something of what had happened—not of his discovery of the old restlessness or how a threat bound him, but of his third thwarting of Lacrodaire's poaching excursions. Yet when Sid and Hughie returned at noon the next day Howard Franklin was with them and the French Canadian was forgotten for the time.

"I may not come up in June," Franklin said. "Must go to California. Just ran up for a few days to see how things are and lie around a bit. How many men you had on the job?"

"Just the three of us," Larry told him.

Franklin looked out of a window in the men's cabin, to which he had been taken, and surveyed the group of buildings nesting on the little shelf above the lake.

"H'm!" he muttered. "And the days are short up here in January."

He turned to Hughie and, while he did not wink, there was a flash that Hughie caught and understood, and that Hughie answered before he said:

"And *bom-ee-gee-zhik-wayb* long in June."

Larry and Sid laughed. Hughie started a fire in the cookstove and Franklin unbuckled the straps of a small packsack and drew forth a bottle of Scotch.

"My regards, boys," he said when tin cups had been brought out.

His approval had been expressed. Not again in the four days he remained, even during his tour of inspection, did he voice his satisfaction. Sid growled about it to Hughie.

"No wonder he's got money if he's as tight with it as he is with a good word," was his comment.

Hughie grinned, but said nothing. He understood, as he knew Larry understood, the vanishing type that Franklin represented; the old-time lumberjack whose pride in his work made supervision unnecessary and commendation an object of suspicion if not of resentment.

Even in his expensive outing clothes Howard Franklin was unable to hide the story of his early days. It was something more than the expressions he used, terms and phrases that would be familiar to a wealthy lumberman who has never known the inside of a logging camp. Once at the woodpile Larry and Hughie saw him heft an ax and bite it into the splitting block with a snap of his wrist. They had seen him pick up a canthook, spin it and clap it onto a log.

He did these things unconsciously, with the deft, smooth movements of all skilled workmen and athletes, and when he walked through the woods it was with that trudging step that seems slow and ungainly, but which wastes no effort, never varies and at the end of a long day has covered an astonishing distance.

Larry and Hughie, while they saw these things, made no comment, knowing that if their employer cared to tell anything of his past he would do so. And the third night he did.

"You're not a Canadian, Larry," Franklin said. "None of these fellows around here can birl a log."

"They don't have the rivers to drive we did down in Minnesota and Wisconsin," Larry explained. "Nor the timber. Every kid in my town owned a pick pole and started when he was six."

"What river?"

"The old St. Croix."

"Taylor's Falls, eh?"

"That's where I was born."

"I drove the St. Croix two years," Franklin said. "Once there was a big jam in the Dalles and they ran excursion trains from St. Paul and Minneapolis so people could watch the river pigs at work."

"I remember those drives," Larry nodded. "They had some big crews."

"Not what we used to have on the Chippewa. That was my country when I was working in camps. We went in in September and came out with the drive in June. There were the West and South Forks of the Flambeau, the

Chippewa and others, each with a crew of two hundred men, and they all got together above Chippewa Falls."

"I'll bet you could birl a log yourself," Larry laughed. "They had white water in those rivers."

"And white water *men* in those days," Franklin added.

"There was big timber, and the men matched it."

"They did, but that isn't a rule. I'm cutting logs out in California now that would make the old-timers on the Chippewa think they were handling pulpwood, but the river pig—he's gone."

Hughie asked about the California trees and Franklin described the logging methods, so different from what his listeners had known. His comparisons carried him back to his own youth in Wisconsin. Bit by bit he revealed his origin, his early lumberjack days and his gradual rise to extensive ownership of timber lands and mills.

Larry, listening attentively, pieced in the story from his own experiences and knowledge of the lumber industry. There was no regret, no envy. He understood what it must mean to rise from lumberjack to mill owner, from a few dollars a month for long hours of toil to the employment of several thousand men.

As he listened he studied Franklin. The man was little more than fifty, of medium height, thickset. His dark hair had only begun to turn gray. His face, still retaining a tan despite years in an office, was singularly smooth. Worry and hard work did not seem to have touched him, but Larry saw the reason in the even tone, the steady gray eyes, the slow but certain movements of his hands.

He remembered, too, the sure, quiet method by which Franklin had averted disaster at Major Tallerday's dinner table when Mrs. Franklin had insisted on discussing the nature and habits of the wampus.

"He wears corked shoes all the time," Larry said to Hughie the next morning when they were getting breakfast. "Never get him off a log."

"And all his drives go through," Hughie added. "Bet he never had one hang on him yet."

"Yes," Larry laughed, "but he can't bunch it. He can't go up to the push and say, 'Give me my time,' and just walk out with only his turkey and a hankering for a new place."

Hughie carefully turned the half dozen flapjacks on the griddle.

"Neither can I," he said at last. "We had the same start, him and me, and now—now I got to stick or starve, and at whatever I can get to do."

"Go back to bed and try getting out on the other side," Larry retorted quickly and with a grin, though he was appalled by his friend's despondency. "Here he's been working his head off, shut up in an office, and you—you've gone where you wanted to and done what you wanted to and had the time of your life looking for a gold mine."

"But I never found one."

"Maybe he hasn't, not the one he was looking for. And you'll get yours yet, Hughie. You've got a good stake now. Saved what you made this winter. Don't owe a cent. Why, you're sliding down stream without having to paddle at all."

Larry accompanied Franklin to Sabawi the next morning.

"I don't know how long I'll be in California," Franklin said at the station. "May not get back here in June. But Mrs. Franklin and Marcia will. Everything will be in shape by then so you can take them around. Relda is nutty about moose pictures just now. And the monthly checks, Larry. They will be fifty dollars larger now—twenty more for you and fifteen for each of the other two. You'll need both boys this summer."

"Look here!" Sid exclaimed when Larry returned with the news of increased pay. "Let's go down to Port Arthur and celebrate. None of us been out for a bust since last summer."

Larry hesitated. He knew that, in a way, Sid was right. For nine months they had worked hard, deserved a holiday, and it would be the first time he had refused to join his friends in one of their joyous searches for youthful adventure.

"Can't," he decided. "Got to watch that peasoup. Wouldn't put it past him to burn the place down."

"This job's gone to your head!" Sid exclaimed in disgust. "You ain't responsible for the place. What if Rene should burn it down? That's Franklin's business for having him run out. Come on, Larry."

Larry found it hard to resist the plea; not because he cared particularly about going to Port Arthur, but because it was the first time the responsibility of his position had come between him and his friend. Always they had been

pals, a job to-day, a good time to-morrow, able to go where and when they pleased.

"Sorry," he answered, "but it wouldn't be quite square after the way I stirred up that half-breed."

"All right, then stay!" Sid flared. "You're getting to be a hell of a pardner."

But a week later Sid was back, humble because he had been forced to wire for money, and the old relationship was resumed.

June came and Larry had not seen Lacrodaire again. Work on the preserve was completed. The three found themselves awaiting with mingled feelings the day when Mrs. Franklin and Marcia Kerr would arrive.

"It's going to be a lot different around here with a couple of women bobbing in and out," Hughie said.

"There'll be three," Larry told him. "She's bringing a maid, according to her letter."

"Yes, and we'll be nothing but flunkies," Sid added. "They'll have us running errands and waiting on 'em all day."

"I can think of worse things," Larry laughed. "They didn't seem very uppish at Atikwa a year ago.

"Not with you, maybe. Just grin a couple of times and kid 'em and they'll be hanging around you like the Johnson girls."

CHAPTER VI

—Larry Enlarges His Vocabulary

Sid and Hughie were voicing a dread of the feminine invasion of what they had come to consider their home. For nearly a year they had been absorbed in the preparations for this very event. Now that it was at hand, a sense of proprietorship and content aroused a feeling of resentment.

Larry Vail did not even perceive this; his own vagabond spirit long before had lifted him above the initial interest and enthusiasm in the private hunting reserve. Even the zest he had found in his first executive position was gone. He chafed at restraint and when the June days came, with poplar and birch breaking into sudden verdancy, with lake and sky an intense blue, with all the wide north calling in its most seductive tones, he wanted only to get away, to turn a canoe into some wandering waterway and drift into new scenes and new contacts with life.

Sid's rather contemptuous reference to Larry's possible popularity with Mrs. Franklin and Miss Kerr had failed to make any impression on that young man's consciousness, as had the two women themselves. Except for the dinner at Atikwa and the casual meeting on the station platform at Sabawi, he had never seen them. At the last moment they had decided to return to The States and had not accompanied Franklin on the journey which had resulted in the selection of the private reserve.

It was only when Sid and Hughie discussed their coming, and what they might be like, that Larry gave them consideration. But he disposed of them quickly as two persons whose lives could in no way touch his; people of whom he had only exaggerated glimpses in the pages of magazines and for whom wealth and its use permitted a scale of living, of thought and of emotions of which he could know nothing.

On the journey out from Sabawi and in the first day at "the camp" (as Mrs. Franklin so casually called the result of a long year's work), little happened to change Larry's viewpoint. He had experienced that "comfortable" feeling when his eyes first met Marcia Kerr's, but she had ridden in Hughie's canoe and the impression had not remained.

Nor did he have that vaguely uneasy sensation in Mrs. Franklin's presence. Her greeting at the station had been cordial, but impersonal.

"I hope I'll not be disappointed in the camp," she said. "Howard has led me to expect so much. Can't we hurry? I had one night in this terrible place and I don't want to stop a minute longer than is necessary."

"We're starting now," Larry assured her. "The canoes are at the river and there's only the packing of your baggage down there. Of course," he grinned, "Sabawi looks like quite a town to me. It's the only one I've seen for more than a year."

"In which Sabawi is the gainer," she answered drily. "Please hurry."

Larry turned away with a touch of resentment, and then he laughed.

"Last year I was a specimen, now I'm a flunky," he said to himself. "But Franklin, who earned all the money, he ain't that way at all. I'll just turn that lady over to Hughie," and he chuckled again as he thought of his friend's inability to refrain from picturesque Ojibway.

But down at the river bank, when the canoes were loaded, he found that the decision was taken out of his hands.

"Larry will paddle me, Marcia," Mrs. Franklin said. "You can ride there," and she pointed to Hughie's craft. "Jane, don't be silly. You're not going to drown and there's no other way to get to camp."

It was obvious that the maid was frightened. Larry had scarcely had time to look at her and his impression was of a rather hard, but pretty face. Now the hardness was gone, her cheeks were pale and her lips were trembling. In quick sympathy he hurried to her.

"Come on," he laughed as he took the girl's limp fingers. "Sid's got this green devil trained so it'll start across the ocean if he says so. All you got to do in a canoe is sit on the bottom. Then it can't tip over. Here. I'll hold it while you get it."

Jane looked at him with suspicion and then a faint smile answered his.

"But I'm so afraid," she whispered.

"Look!" Larry commanded as he set the canoe afloat.

He leaped in, ran lightly from one end to the other, then stood up on the gunwales and rocked the craft violently.

"Can't tip it," he explained. "She just won't go over. You sit down and forget all you've heard about canoes."

He held one gunwale firmly, but it was his reassuring smile and not his demonstration that allayed the girl's fears. She looked at him for a moment, then took his hand and stepped into the craft.

As Larry turned back to his own canoe his eyes met Miss Kerr's. They were no longer friendly. Amusement was there, but a question, too, a thing that made him wonder as he shoved off. It was not until the canoes had separated in the river, Larry's shooting ahead of the others, that Mrs. Franklin spoke.

"Women and saw logs—you handle one as easily as the other, Don Juan," she said.

Larry flushed, but his eyes did not waver as he looked at her reclining comfortably in the bow.

"If you mean Jane," he answered evenly, "she was just scared, is all. I showed her it was safe."

"You think your appeal was solely to her intellect?"

"That's what I intended."

She laughed and turned to watch the bank slip past.

"What's that you called me?" he asked. "It sounded foreign."

"Every land has its Don Juans, why not the wilderness. In fact, with enforced propinquity, and isolation, I imagine their success is even greater."

Larry laughed, with such boyishness that she glanced at him quickly.

"You and I ought to get along fine!" he exclaimed. "I can understand every word you say."

"Words have a limited value in most human contacts."

"Don't you believe it. I got knocked cold once with a bunch of words. I was working in a camp down on the border and there was a young lad come in to cook for a week while they were getting a new one from The Fort. We got quite chummy, though I didn't know much about him.

"One day I went into the cook camp while he was making pies. I'd learned three big words, regular twisters, and I sprung them on him, thinking he'd fall in a faint. Well, sir, he turned around slow and looked at me just as a woman looks at her kid when she's caught him in the cooky jar, and he says, 'Larry, in promulgating esoteric opinions or articulating superficial

sentimentalities, it is always well to beware of platitudinous ponderosities.' I think he gave me pretty good advice, don't you?"

Mrs. Franklin was startled for a moment and then she laughed delightedly.

"In other words, you think it would be better if I talked plainly?" she asked.

"It would save trouble," and his eyes were twinkling. "You might be intending to tell me to get a pail of spring water some day and I'd fetch an armful of stove wood. That would be, well——"

"Probably disastrous," she agreed. "But Larry! You learned those words he used."

"Sure. I don't overlook chances like that. I had him write them down, one to a line, and after each just what it meant."

He took a few strokes in silence and then said:

"Just like I'll learn those words you used, and what they mean."

"Would you like to have me write them out?"

"Thanks, but I guess Hughie can fix me up."

Because of the three canoes and the large amount of personal baggage Mrs. Franklin and Miss Kerr had brought, it was dark before the three canoes arrived at the camp. The women were tired and Hughie and Sid were growling because of the awkward suit cases and bags they had been compelled to pack across portages. Only Larry was cheerful.

"Shut up," he laughed when he and his companions were going to bed in the men's building. "With that new cook to get the meals, your snap's begun. It'll be easy from now on."

"Easy as sitting on a keg of powder," Sid retorted. "Jane says Mrs. Franklin will do nothing for a week and then turn the place upside down in five minutes."

"It'll be fun watching her," Larry said. "A mulligan tastes pretty flat without lots of pepper."

A little later when Sid was snoring and Hughie, lying in his bunk, had scratched a match to light his pipe, Larry whispered the question that had been on his mind for some time.

"What's a Don Juan, Hughie?"

"A lady-killer," was the answer.

"Huh!" A long silence and then: "Any particular kind?"

"The best or the worst, depending on what slant you're taking. Why?"

"And pro-pin-qui-ty? What's that mean?"

"Well," Hughie began slowly, "its—mind those two Norways down on the point? Nothing else around? That's it."

"I see. Sort of isolated, too, aren't they? Looks like I'd better send for a dictionary right away."

Hughie's curiosity was aroused, but he was too cautious to ask questions. A moment later he knew Larry was asleep.

At six o'clock the next morning Larry entered the kitchen with three lake trout, which he had just caught in a small lake over the ridge. The cook, a dried-up, surly fellow sent out by an employment agency in Port Arthur the week before, was just starting his fire. He had no reply to Larry's cheerful greeting and Larry deposited his catch on the table and departed. At the corner of the main building he found Jane staring ruefully at the forest beyond the clearing.

"Fine morning," he said.

"Ugh!" and she shrugged her shoulders. "What a terrible place to live!"

"Terrible!" he repeated. "This is about as pretty a spot as I ever saw in the bush."

"But those woods! They are so thick and dark. I wouldn't go into them for anything."

"You'll get used to that," he assured her. "I've lived in 'em all my life and never saw anything yet that would hurt anyone. They're just like the canoe. It didn't bite you."

"No, but I was afraid all the time. I saw the difference—the way you paddle, and the others."

"There wasn't any difference."

"There was!" she protested. "I—I wouldn't be afraid with you."

There was no longer fear in her eyes and the hard expression around her mouth had vanished. Again Larry saw that she was pretty when she smiled.

"You're just as safe with Sid or anyone else in the bush," he said.

Instantly the smile disappeared and she turned on him so furiously that he started.

"You don't want to take me out in a canoe, eh? I'm not good enough because I'm the maid. You think that smile will catch bigger game."

"Sure, I'll take you!" Larry exclaimed in consternation.

"Some evening?" she asked softly, the fury gone. "Oh, that will be fine. Remember! You have promised."

"Sure," Larry repeated as he backed away. "But I've got to get washed up for breakfast now."

As he hurried to the men's camp he met Sid.

"Can't you give anybody else a chance?" his friend complained. "Ever since those women got off the train it's been 'Larry this' and 'Larry that.' What you getting up so early for? Think you can work three shifts?"

Larry stared in amazement and then he grinned.

"Oh, her," he said. "Go ahead, only you want to wear a mask."

"What you mean?" was the suspicious query.

"She'll scratch your face up if you don't. Gosh, she's touchy."

"They're the tamest sort in the end," Sid smiled confidently. "I know that kind."

"I suppose somebody's got to know 'em. But me—I'm too peaceful."

Larry found life still further complicated when, on entering the kitchen a little later, he saw Jane seated at the table. It had never entered his mind that she would not have her meals with Mrs. Franklin and Miss Kerr in the big living room. Foreman, walking boss, or even wealthy lumberman, all eat with the crew in a logging camp. There is a fine democracy in this respect and, while Larry had expected some changes with the coming of the women, he had not anticipated this.

To his relief, Sid monopolized what little conversation there was and Larry retreated as quickly as possible to the men's camp. There he remained until he was summoned at ten o'clock by Mrs. Franklin.

She was seated by a low window, near which a small table had been set with her breakfast. Her slender body appeared even more slender and fluid in the simple negligee of apple green silk, and as Larry entered he thought of pictures he had seen on the covers of magazines.

"Good morning," she said cordially. "I'm lazy to-day, but that was a hard trip—train and canoe without a rest between. I'll promise to be good, though, when we start after the moose. How about it? Will I get some good pictures?"

"The moose are there, and they'll stand a lot of that sort of shooting," he answered.

"In other words, the quality of the pictures is up to me," she laughed. "I have a good machine and I know something about handling it, so I'll match my skill with yours. Sit down."

As Larry drew up a chair Miss Kerr came in from the porch.

"You've missed the best part of the day, Aunt Relda!" she exclaimed. "I'm going to get up at five o'clock to-morrow."

"I dare say Larry will have me up earlier than that," Mrs. Franklin remarked. "Sit down and listen. He is going to tell about our own private moose."

"I saw one swimming in the bay just a little while ago," the girl said.

"That's Lonely Lou," Larry told her. "She's been out there every morning for a week now. Must have lost her calf. She's been acting queer."

"Have you named them?" Miss Kerr laughed.

"A few. In one lake there's Jumbo and Alfred. They're pardners, always feeding and sleeping at the same time. As big moose as I ever saw."

"Have they large antlers?" Mrs. Franklin asked.

"Big as hayracks. Never saw anything like it, though the Deacon's is most as big. Then there's the Sawbill Twins, always traveling side by side like a team of horses hitched up, and Orphan Nellie, a two-year-old that's been chased out by the cows and has to wander around alone, and the Pest. You won't get anything but a picture of his nose, he'll want to stand so close to you."

"He must be half wampus," Miss Kerr suggested.

"I shouldn't wonder," Larry answered soberly. "I've seen quite a lot this spring."

"We should invite Major Tallerday for a few days when the season opens."

"He'd enjoy it. The Maje just naturally takes to such things as wampuses."

Miss Kerr laughed. Larry grinned. For a moment their eyes met, as they had across the table at Atikwa a year before, and there was the same flash of understanding and comradeship.

"Never mind the wampus," Mrs. Franklin said curtly. "And how much truth is there in what you are telling about the moose, Larry?"

"I think," he answered slowly, "that the best way for you to learn that is to go and see for yourself."

"Very well. I'll give you every opportunity to prove your statements. When is the best time?"

"They're all in the water at sun-up. That's about half-past three now."

"I doubt if there is enough light then, though I have a good lens. But we'll try it—to-morrow. You can make the plans. I'll be ready when you call me."

She turned toward the window and, though she had not said it, Larry knew he had been dismissed. He arose at once and went out through the kitchen.

"Hell!" he muttered. "This is no sort of a place. Guess I'll go down to the mill and get a job."

The leash on the vagabond spirit had been unsnapped, for it was no longer a matter of duty to guard the reserve against Rene Lacrodaire. A month before the French Canadian had abandoned his cabin and Larry had heard he was working in the sawmill near Sabawi.

It was this that Larry had in mind. Whatever satisfaction Rene might demand for his humiliation, he would be given an opportunity to exact it.

As never before, the desire to wander possessed Larry. A new railroad was being built far to the north, threading for a thousand miles the vast, empty forest of mid-Canada. Another line, he had heard, was being run to Hudson Bay. He had listened to men talk of Alberta and the Peace River, of great distances and huge lakes and streams that swept on to the Arctic Sea.

To youth the world is a wide, beckoning space, and Larry Vail, though he was twenty-eight, still possessed the romantic viewpoint and keen zest for life of a boy of twenty. Kinless and tieless, accustomed to complete freedom, future meant only to-morrow, and a morrow without a night.

CHAPTER VII

—New Trophies of the Hunt

In the days that followed Larry forgot his suddenly crystallized decision to leave. At once his interest, his woodsmanship and his enthusiasm for something new had been challenged. His waking hours were spent in the pursuit of moose, in discussing the habits of moose, in careful stalking of moose, in an eager, thrilling dark room search for the sudden and magical appearance of moose on oblongs of celluloid.

Through it all Relda Franklin was his constant companion, as tireless, eager and absorbed as himself. At first he could not understand the change. He only knew that the slender figure that emerged from the black doorway of the main building in the last thick darkness of the early morning, that moved so swiftly and so lightly behind him in the long, twisting trail over the ridge and through the muskeg, bore no resemblance whatever to the woman with whom he had talked the previous forenoon, and as the days passed he forgot that there had been a change, forgot that on the station platform a year before he had felt a vague uneasiness in her presence.

One thing disturbed him deeply that first morning. It was not until they reached the shore of the shallow lily pad-covered lake, where the first light of day came, that he discovered that Mrs. Franklin was wearing riding breeches. Never before had he seen a woman in anything except skirts and as he bent over to drag the canoe from its hiding place, where he had placed it the previous afternoon, he felt the hot blood prickling the skin of his neck and cheeks.

No nineteenth century dowager could have been more profoundly shocked. Prudery it may have been, but in Larry it was the perfectly natural reaction of a clean mind, schooled through generations and its own short experience to the acceptance of certain rigid precepts. That his mind was clean was attested by the fact that before the day was finished his enthusiasm for moose photography had wiped out all thought of Mrs. Franklin's clothing and even of her sex.

It became indicative of his entire attitude, this unsuspected crisis of the riding breeches there in the cold swamp mist of a northern dawn. At that moment his presence was only part of a task, but the spirit of this bloodless

method of hunting began to touch him when, a little later, he had silently shoved the canoe out to the center of the lake and there, hidden by the thin layer of white fog, they had listened to the splash of water lifted by huge antlers, to low, throaty rumblings, to the contented munching of lily pad roots, to the swirling eddies caused by the movements of huge bodies.

Her camera on her knees, Relda Franklin sat tensely on the forward seat. It was daylight now. Only the mist hid the splashing monsters. Her head turned quickly with each sound and at last she looked back at Larry, her eyes dancing. She whispered something that he could not hear and he crept silently forward.

"I can't believe it!" she exclaimed in a suppressed tone. "They're all around us."

"Bulls, too," he told her. "It sounds like someone dumping a pail of water into the lake every time they lift their horns."

"But when this mist goes! They'll see us and get out," she said.

"Seeing us won't bother them. It's only our smell that sets them to worrying. We're close to the west side and as soon as the sun shows, a little breeze will set in toward us. That'll carry our scent away from them. Don't worry about their being scared."

He paddled on a little farther, then turned the canoe. In a moment the sun rose above the trees directly in front. The mist hung on doggedly and then suddenly melted, revealing, to Relda Franklin, a startling picture.

Moose were everywhere, walking into the water, swimming, poking their great heads under the water and lifting them again with a swift movement that sent a crashing cascade from the widely palmated antlers.

Relda Franklin gasped and then stared in amazement. The camera on her knees was forgotten. To her right six bulls were splashing about in shallow water, feeding as contentedly and as peaceably as cattle in a pasture. On the opposite side as many cows were similarly engaged, though with a little restlessness because of the calves hidden in the brush on shore. Behind the cows, stepping daintily along the edge of the water, his quick, nervous and graceful movements in sharp contrast with the heavy, unconcerned progress of his huge cousins, a red deer fed on the fresh swamp grass.

Before them the lake stretched for more than a mile and near the farther end were other moose. Relda started to count them, but heads bobbed up and disappeared, and when she reached twenty-five she gave it up.

And then, so startlingly that the canoe trembled from her quick recoil, two great heads were lifted above the surface almost simultaneously and less than fifty feet away. The antlers were enormous, still in the velvet and festooned with long stringers of water weeds.

For a time four great eyes studied the canoe and its occupants, curiously, with a certain dignified interest. There was something majestic and yet something comical in the expressions of the huge beasts. At last, as if they had reached the decision that the motionless thing on the water was a log or a rock, they thrust their heads under again.

"That's Jumbo and Alfred," Larry whispered.

Relda turned, her face aglow with excitement, her eyes flashing the fact that she recognized them.

"It's wonderful! Wonderful!" she said. "I was never so excited in my life."

It had been agreed that there would be no serious attempt to take pictures that first morning. Larry knew nothing of a camera, of the intricacies of light, distance, background and composition. He would have to learn these things, as Mrs. Franklin would have to grow accustomed to the possibilities and to the proximity of the huge, broad-antlered beasts.

For half an hour they sat there, motionless except for Larry's silent paddle holding the canoe in place. They counted thirty-two moose, though Larry insisted later that some had left the water and returned again, and Relda, ready now to believe anything he said about them, accepted his statement.

They verified Larry's prediction that the moose would feed for an hour after sunrise and then repair to the deep swamps for a rest. They noted these places and made plans for pictures. They chuckled and giggled and finally burst into roars of laughter over the antics of a calf that refused to mind its mother.

The long-legged, hump-backed youngster evidently had tired of his nest in the thick alders. He wanted to see the world and came splashing out through the shallow water to join his mother. She turned with a worried expression, led him back to the brush, probably scolded him, and then returned to her feeding, this time going farther out.

In a little while the cow lifted her head to find her incorrigible son swimming at her side. He had scampered about on shore, heedless of the reproving glances of the other cows. Every movement expressed a joy in

life, and his impish perversity set the canoe to trembling with the suppressed laughter of the human watchers of this wilderness comedy.

Again the mother led the willful youngster back to the hiding place. This time her patience was clearly exhausted. She was angry. There was no caressing nudges with her nose. She bustled him out of sight, probably spanked him, Larry thought, and then returned to her feeding, this time swimming far out to the edge of the lily pads.

Ten minutes later the calf reappeared at her side. She looked at him a moment and then turned and started across the lake. She swam swiftly and the little fellow paddled after her. Straight across at the widest part she went, heedless of the calf struggling behind her. It was a mile to the other shore and it was a tired and thoroughly chastened young rebel whose weary, wobbling legs carried him onto dry land.

The lake was almost clear of moose by then and Relda and Larry laughed until the tears came. It was a reaction after the long suspense of quiet watching and this mutual appreciation of the delicious comedy they had witnessed served as a bond. Another came a little later, when they had gone ashore to cook breakfast.

Larry worked the canoe up a small creek to get to drier land. They got out and he was leading the way through some scattered alders when they emerged in an open meadow. In the center stood a huge cow, her shoulders a foot higher than Larry's head.

"Quick!" he whispered. "There's a land picture. Before she runs."

Relda stepped forward, swinging her camera into place, but in her excitement she stepped on a dry branch. At the sharp crack the cow wheeled and looked at them.

"Hurry," Larry whispered again. "She'll run."

But instead the cow trotted a few steps closer, stopped and stared at them. Larry, puzzled by this behavior, strove to find a reason for it. Then he heard a slight movement in the brush near the creek.

"Come on," he said as he started forward. "Her calf's hidden and she won't leave. We'll see what she does."

Relda followed him toward the cow, holding her camera ready. The cow trotted forward, but Larry leaped in front of her, waving his arms and shouting, and she stopped. Relda snapped the huge beast at forty feet.

Again the cow started forward, trying to get around them to the calf, and again Larry sprang in her path and drove her back. Relda snapped her second picture.

The cow was worried now. She circled to the right and Larry headed her off. She wheeled back to the left and he darted across, Relda remaining in the center of the little meadow and getting another picture.

Then, as if suddenly angry or completely panic-stricken, the cow charged straight down the center. Perhaps she did not see the motionless figure with the camera. Perhaps rage or terror carried her to new heights of courage. She trotted swiftly forward with giant strides, her huge, ungainly head lowered.

Relda was bent over the camera, her eyes in the little hooded aperture, one hand on the focusing screw, the other ready to snap the shutter.

Larry, already panting from his exertions, sprang forward with an involuntary cry. Relda snapped a picture of the onrushing moose and then glanced up at his shout, to be held rigid by fear.

Larry reached her just as the cow towered above them, grasped her about the waist and swung her out of the way, placing his own body between her and what he felt certain would be a slashing stroke from a keen-edged hoof. The camera tumbled into the tall grass.

As Relda was jerked to one side she flung out her arm and it fell about Larry's neck, where it clung desperately, as did his about her waist.

The crashing of brush told him the cow had passed on to her calf. His mind was still awhirl with the thought of what might have happened. He was unconscious of the arm about his neck, of his own tight pressure about the slender waist, of the fact that she was clinging to him.

Then he glanced down, saw her upturned face so close, was held for a moment by the soft, deep blue of eyes which he had always considered a little hard. Her warm breath was exhaled from between the full, red, parted lips and it struck his cheek. She had made no movement to free herself.

In an instant he had flushed crimson and his eyes, startled and afraid, turned away. His arm fell from her waist. The blue eyes searched his face for a moment, closed the least bit in swift calculation, and then she stepped aside.

"Thanks, Larry," she said calmly. "I was too frightened to get out of the way."

"Who'd ever think she'd act like that!" he exclaimed as he picked up the camera. "She just seemed to make up her mind she was going, and she went."

He turned quickly to get the small packsack of food and dishes he had dropped at the edge of the brush and he did not speak again, or look at her, until he had begun the preparations for breakfast.

Relda found a seat on a windfall and watched him. Her eyes were still a deep, soft blue, her lips still slightly parted. She seemed to be drinking in every movement of his strong, graceful body. Then, when she realized that he was still trying to hide embarrassment, that he studiously refrained from looking in her direction, she arose and walked to the little fire he had built.

"I think I got her, that last snap," she said. "It ought to make a corking picture."

"I saw you," he answered with frank admiration. "You had nerve, standing there watching her through that little thing. She must have looked big."

"Big as a house!" Relda laughed. "Look for yourself. See! You turn this thumb screw to adjust the focus. Try it. There. You understand. Now I'll run at you. Keep changing the focus as I get closer."

She retreated twenty feet and then ran toward him as he watched her, his eyes in the little hood.

"Wah!" he exclaimed. "You did have nerve."

"And she was right in focus when I snapped her. I won't get a better picture all summer."

"With all those moose around! Sure you will. Now take Jumbo and Alfred. I can put you up so close to them you can pat their ears."

The fire died down while they talked excitedly of their plans, of what they had seen that morning, of the pictures they would be able to get.

Larry's interest was thoroughly aroused now. He wanted to know about light, lenses, focusing, shutter adjustments. His quick mind grasped the significance rather than the theory and Relda was amazed by the rapidity with which he took the necessary facts and adapted them to his own part of the work.

"I see!" he exclaimed at last. "The closer we get, the bigger the picture. And it's better to keep between them and the sun. And we don't want just

heads. We'll put 'em ashore. They always stop to look when they strike land. Say! You got lots of those films?"

"Plenty," Relda laughed. "But I won't have strength enough to snap a shutter if I don't get something to eat. Build up the fire. Here! Let me make the coffee."

Thus Relda Franklin's wild animal photography became a wholly mutual affair. Never did the question of employer and employee enter into their attitude. Larry's enthusiasm was as great as hers. He did the heavy work, the paddling, portaging and packing; but plans, discussions, preparation of meals and excited dark room searching for results were shared equally.

Larry's interest was genuine. To him it was a new and exciting game, a thing to play with. It furnished adequately the action and basis for enthusiasm which his vagabond spirit and superb energy required.

To him Relda Franklin was only a companion in an absorbing sport. Before that first day ended he had completely forgotten the moment when he had held her so tightly and she had clung to him. Things had happened swiftly then. The big moment had come in his fear of death, in his efforts to avert it. He still shivered at the thought of the great, rushing beast towering over her, at his terror of a slashing hoof.

It came to him again, that fear, when they bent over a tray together in the dark room late in the afternoon. They knew it was the prize picture of the day and had begun the development of the films as soon as they reached home. Larry himself had built the dark room, wondering at the directions but following them carefully, and when the door was closed and he was alone with Relda he awaited curiously what would transpire there.

For a time he remained motionless, listening to the rustle of paper, the snip of shears and the faint splash of water. Sometimes he saw the silhouette of Relda's head in the dim glow from the ruby light.

"I got the wrong roll!" she exclaimed in exasperation as she held up a film. "The cow's in the other. But Larry! Look!" as she examined a second. "Wait!"

She rinsed the film and lifted it for him to see.

"Good gosh!" he cried. "Jumbo and Alfred! Look at 'em stare!"

"And those antlers! They fill the picture. Oh, Larry! Isn't it wonderful?"

He waited eagerly while she developed the other films and then turned to the first roll of the morning.

"There's the old girl!" Larry exclaimed as one was held up to the light.

"But the big one! Oh, I do hope it is good!"

She worked rapidly for a few moments and then Larry heard her gasp as she leaned over the tray. He bent closer. Their shoulders touched. A strand of hair fell across his face, but his thoughts were all for what was so quickly and so miraculously appearing in the tray.

The cow filled the film. The camera having been less than four feet above the ground, the moose appeared to be taller than her real height. Her great head was lowered, her long legs lifted, the hair on her shoulders stood stiffly erect, her eyes seemed to be bulging from her head and they glared fiercely.

The film was snatched from the tray and rinsed and when it was held up to the red light Larry shivered.

"She looks as if she were going to stick her front feet right into the machine!" he said.

"What a film!" Relda exclaimed. "The detail! The focus was perfect. Why, Larry, it can be enlarged to any size! Life size!"

"You won't beat that all summer."

"I know it. Never!"

It was a startling picture. Afterwards, in a big enlargement, the cow seemed to be rushing out of the frame. The grotesqueness of her long, ungainly legs, her high, bristling shoulders and her enormous, ugly head were forgotten in a sense of danger, of brute power and savage fury. Few ever looked at the picture without a shudder.

Day after day Relda and Larry were up before dawn, waiting patiently in mosquito-filled swamps, drifting quietly down swamp rivers, sitting motionless in the canoe in muskeg lakes. They got pictures of calves, cows and bulls, singly, in pairs and in groups. They snapped them swimming, wading and standing on shore, unsuspecting and in flight. They suffered disappointments and had their triumphs, and always their thoughts returned to the picture of the frantic mother.

It was Relda who insisted that they try for another such chance, and it was Relda who, after days of effort, had her opportunity, only to lose it when a foot caught in some tangled grass and she fell heavily against a windfall.

She declared it had only knocked the breath from her lungs, but she was pale when they finally reached home and the next morning she was too stiff and sore to get out of bed.

"Now you will have time to take me for that paddle," Jane told Larry when she had delivered Relda's message to him. "To-night?"

"Wait until I catch up on sleep," he laughed uneasily. "I've been getting up so early I feel as if I hadn't been to bed for a week."

He escaped to the men's camp. Hughie and Sid had departed early in the morning on their weekly trip to Sabawi for mail and supplies. He would have a day of rest, but he had hardly stretched himself out on his bunk and opened a magazine when he heard his name called and went outside to find Marcia Kerr.

"Would you mind paddling me over to Big Falls?" she asked. "The lake trout have stopped biting and I want to try casting for wall-eyed pike."

"Of course," he agreed at once, but he grinned ruefully as he went back for his hat.

CHAPTER VIII

—Earning Her Fish

Larry had seen very little of Marcia Kerr since her arrival. Relda Franklin's photography had occupied his time to the exclusion of all else. Even Sid and Hughie had, to a large extent, dropped out of his life. Larry was seldom in camp at meal time and, as he arose before dawn, he went to bed early.

He knew, however, that Hughie had taken Miss Kerr on a number of fishing excursions and he had sensed, from what the old prospector said, that a sort of intimacy had developed between them. There had been bits of grudging praise, which Larry knew were sincere because they were grudging.

Miss Kerr had often been in the big living room when her aunt and Larry returned. But both were full of the day's events, with exuberant comments on their success, with excited descriptions of failure, with an insistent curiosity that could be satisfied only by immediate dark room activities.

At times Larry had noticed the girl sitting there, listening and watching, and he had felt a vague questioning, a quiet observation. Once he had caught a glint of scorn in her level gray eyes. These things had made but slight impression. The boy in him was rampant. He had found a new and exciting game, something that taxed his ebullient energy and his skill as a woodsman.

Now as he knelt in his place and the canoe leaped forward under their combined strokes, he forgot that he had hoped for a day of rest. Relda Franklin had not touched a paddle since her arrival at the camp. She always sat in the bow, facing the stern when there was no prospect of a picture, falling always into a soft indolence, watching him from beneath heavy lashes. He had taken that for granted, had not expected a woman to paddle. Now, with Marcia bending over a paddle, he found a thrill in their rhythmic co-operation.

"You must have paddled a lot!" he exclaimed in frank admiration.

"Not until this summer," the girl answered without looking around. "Hughie taught me."

"He ought to be a good teacher. Knows enough about it. But that's not all the reason."

"So that's your system," she laughed.

"System," he repeated in genuine perplexity.

She ceased paddling and turned to look at him.

"What did you mean?" he asked bluntly.

She returned his honest and questioning stare for a moment and then faced about and dipped her paddle.

"I may tell you some time," she answered cryptically.

They went on, the canoe leaping with each vigorous stroke. It was five miles to Big Falls and not once did the girl slacken speed or ease up on her paddle. Larry, who knew to an ounce the power she exerted, forgot his perplexity in amazement. It had never occurred to him that a woman could do this.

When they reached the mouth of the river they landed and he led the way up the bank. She had said that she wanted to cast into the water at the very foot of the falls. She carried a small tackle box and strode over the boulders and through the brush with almost as much ease as Larry.

Once there, he did nothing to help her. He knew little of casting or jointed rods and her air of competency told him that assistance was not desired. When her tackle was ready she leaped onto a rock so near the foot of the thundering cataract that the fine spray wet her face. From her insecure footing she made her first cast, far out into the boiling, tumbling water.

Almost instantly Larry heard the screech of the reel above the roar of the falls, and the rod, no longer than a buggy whip, bent in a half circle. Miss Kerr played the fish carefully, wound him in, let him run, and at last led him toward land, past her rock and, with a final flip, onto the gravel bank. She leaped ashore, grasped the pike by the gills and disengaged the hook.

"He put up a fair fight," she said as she looked up to where Larry sat on a boulder. "Maybe they'll be worth the paddle over here."

She returned to her rock, cast again, and as before the reel sang almost instantly. The second pike was landed, then the third. At last, when twelve consecutive casts had resulted in twelve fish, she laid her rod aside and climbed onto the rock beside Larry.

"That's too good," she said. "It's becoming monotonous. I like to feel that I've earned a fish."

"You certainly earned those," he told her, admiration for her skill driving out all thought of the reception of his first frank compliment in the canoe. "I never saw anyone fish with one of those casting rigs before."

"That part of it is easy. The fish are too hungry, or too scrappy. They ought to be coaxed, induced to come out of their hiding places. Then you have a feeling you have accomplished something. That," and her face was distorted by sudden loathing, while her voice, cool until then, was strained by passion as she waved an arm toward the foot of the falls, "that is like everything else. It's too easy. I didn't earn one of those fish and never in my life have I——"

She broke off. The passion was gone and she stared moodily across the whirlpool. After a while she turned to look at him. He had not moved or spoken since her outburst.

"You work," she began abruptly. "You work for wages. Earn your way. How long have you done that?"

"Since I was a kid. My dad died when I was a baby and my mother when I was fifteen."

"And you started right in? Earned your living?"

"It was that or starve," he laughed.

"Then from the middle of your boyhood, right up to this minute, you've toiled and struggled to feed and clothe yourself, fought the world to keep a foothold?"

"Gosh, no!" he exclaimed. "I've never looked at it that way."

Marcia studied him for a moment and then a wry smile displaced her frown.

"No, you wouldn't," she said. "You're a man, which makes all the difference in the world, and then—you haven't always worked in one place, have you?"

"I should say not!" Larry laughed. "There's no fun in that. This job has been a record for me."

"Your staying here so long?"

He nodded.

"Why have you stayed?" she demanded.

"I never intended to," he answered in sudden confusion. "This spring, after the building was done—well, I began to get restless. Wanted to see something new."

"But you didn't go."

"I'm still cashing Mr. Franklin's checks every month," he said with a laugh that was cut short by a sudden expression of scorn in Marcia's eyes.

"Why haven't you gone?" she insisted. "You cash his checks and——"

"Give him an honest month's work for them," he interrupted harshly. "I always have, wherever I've worked. If I didn't like a place, or I felt like moving on, I didn't go slack on the job. I asked for my time and got out."

Despite his most evident anger, she studied him fearlessly for a moment and then slipped from the boulder.

"I'm sorry!" she exclaimed, and held out her hand. "You musn't mind me, Larry. I'm all stirred up. I had no business to talk to you like that. Come on. Let's try the fishing farther down, in the rapids. I'll teach you to cast."

There was something so honest in her apology, so winning in her frank, almost boyish attitude, something so charming in the firm, muscular grasp of her soft, warm hand that Larry crushed the slender fingers and then, to hide his embarrassment for her, exclaimed impetuously:

"That's all right! I ought to a' told you. It's nothing, anyhow, just a——"

"Don't!" she interrupted. "It's none of my affair."

"And it wasn't of enough account to get excited about. You see, I was sort of held here. First time. A fellow I'd run off the reserve a few times—trapping and hunting moose—and he made it a matter just between him and me."

"You mean you were in danger because you were protecting Uncle Howard's property!" she cried. "He wouldn't——"

"Now stop or I'll be sorry I told you. I haven't told anybody else and Mr. Franklin hasn't anything to do with it. This peasoup, he was going to shoot me and I talked him out of it. He felt kind of silly, I guess, and he said he'd get me."

He was overcome with confusion. He felt that his sympathies had been touched and he had divulged more of himself than he should.

"But Larry!" Marcia protested. "What are you going to do about it?"

"Oh, pretty soon I'll go look him up and give him his chance. That I can bunch it—go where I want to."

Her troubled eyes searched his for a moment and then she smiled.

"I think I understand," she said, "though a woman is never supposed to understand. Come on. We'll fish some more."

On the way down stream Marcia went ahead with her rod and tackle box while Larry brought up the rear with the fish. As she scrambled through some brush her skirt caught on the sharp, projecting branch of a Norway windfall.

"Even a short skirt is a nuisance!" she exclaimed as she kicked it free. "Everything possible seems to have been done to hamper a woman in this world."

"I suppose it is a nuisance sometimes," Larry agreed, "but I like it best."

His tone was so ingenuous, the statement so spontaneous, that Marcia turned quickly to look at him.

"Why?" she asked.

"I don't know," he grinned in embarrassment, "unless it's because I can't forget you're a girl."

Again he felt that searching gaze and then there was a bright flash of understanding.

"You mean," she said, "that Aunt Relda—why, Larry! You can't forget that she is a woman!"

"I'm afraid I do," he confessed with a grin. "I never saw a woman dressed like that before, and ever since we've been chasing moose why—I guess I can't get used to it."

Marcia turned quickly and went on and he could not see the dancing light in her eyes or the uncontrollable smile that curved her lips and set a dimple to flashing in her left cheek.

They reached the rapids near the mouth of the river and Marcia pointed to a boulder that stood out of the swift current, the water swirling beneath it.

"Here's what I mean by earning a fish," she said. "I think a big wall-eyed pike makes that spot his home. But I'm not sure and, if he is there, I've got to get him so mad he'll tackle this lure or make him think it's such a

tempting morsel he must have it. To draw the lure across the eddy beneath the rock I have to make a perfect cast. Now watch."

The cast was not perfect. It went a foot too far and the current whirled the lure away. Again she cast, dropped the spoon just where she wished and drew it across the black hole just beneath the rock. After it had passed they saw a swirl and the flash of a dark body.

"He's there!" Marcia cried excitedly. "He's mad! But when he strikes! See! Those other rocks. I've got to play him just right. He could cut the line on a boulder or rub the hook against one and get free."

A second time the lure crossed the black hole. Larry saw it spinning and then it disappeared. Instantly the reel sang. Marcia took a few quick steps up stream, reeling in rapidly, keeping the light rod bent and the line taut. The pike darted away, the line cutting the water like a knife and the reel screeching shrilly.

The girl stood there, her feet braced, her face alight with the joy of the struggle. Out, in, down and up, seeking the swifter currents, flashing toward a sharp-edged boulder, the pike fought with a fury and a strength that amazed Larry.

Suddenly the line went slack. A cry of dismay burst from Marcia's lips, but she turned to Larry with a quick smile.

"See? I didn't earn him. He worked over to that rock. But wasn't it a scrap!"

"He must have weighed six pounds," Larry said. "I've caught 'em that big with a trolling line in the lakes."

"But here, living in fast water, he was twice as strong. When he hooked his tail in that current I couldn't budge him."

She studied the eddy beneath the boulder.

"I'll get him yet," she said determinedly. "Some other day, when he's had a chance to forget. Come on. We'll try another place. You take the rod."

They laughed and joked over his first awkward attempts at casting, but Marcia smiled understandingly when he played and successfully landed his first pike.

"That's fun!" he exclaimed. "I've always hauled 'em in hand over hand with a clothes line. Never knew there was so much fun in fishing. I just wanted 'em to eat."

They had lunch there at the foot of the rapids. Larry built a fire and cleaned some fish. Marcia helped, though not as Relda Franklin did, Larry thought. Sometimes, despite their common interest, he had been vaguely uncomfortable when he caught the older woman looking at him with smouldering, speculative eyes that had become an intense blue, and occasionally he had been puzzled by a sudden gay chatter that somehow was not exactly gay. There was an effect that proved unaccountably disturbing.

His impressions of such moments had been slight. He was genuinely interested in getting good pictures. He had never taken keenly to shooting the huge beasts and the bloodless method of hunting had made a tremendous appeal to the boyish quality in him.

Now, with Marcia Kerr, he found himself almost at once on a pleasant, companionable footing. There were no uncomfortable moments. He sensed that they were having a pleasant day, not because of a common interest in a thing, but because of a common quality in each other.

Gayety and companionableness were a part of Marcia. But there was something more, something deeper; a sturdy, dependable nature that flashed forth occasionally when their bright patter gave way, as it so often does with two young people. Such moments were moments of self-revelation.

After they had finished lunch they got into the canoe and paddled most of the afternoon, wandering into deep bays, threading a maze of islands, often laying aside their paddles to talk and laugh together. Only in the last mile, when they realized that they would be late for supper, did Larry again experience the thrill of that swift, rhythmic sway of flashing blades.

The next day they went again, visiting a small land-locked lake in which, Larry had heard, there were black bass, a rare fish in that part of Ontario. They found them, experienced the joys of a Columbus, and the third day they returned to Big Falls and a fresh attack upon the huge wall-eyed pike.

Marcia hooked him late that afternoon. She played him with a skill and a determination that started Larry to whooping and leaping up and down on the gravel bank. At last she landed him, though she was as gasping and spent as the great, bronze beauty that lay at her feet.

"There!" the girl cried in passionate triumph. "I earned him! For the first time in my life I've earned something."

"Earned him!" Larry repeated. "You sure did. You fought him until he quit. And look here! He's the same one. See that cut where you hooked him last time?"

Larry weighed the pike with the little scales she carried in her tackle box.

"Just a little over eight pounds," he announced. "Big as I ever saw in this country."

They were still elated when they reached the camp and when they saw Relda Franklin on the porch they went in, laughing and excited, to exhibit the prize.

"You should have seen her!" Larry exclaimed admiringly. "She fought him for ten minutes before he let up the least bit."

"It was a perfectly beautiful struggle," Marcia added. "Those fast water fish have such strength and endurance."

She turned to Larry, wide-eyed with excitement, and again they recounted the battle beneath Big Falls. They seemed to have forgotten the older woman, who reclined indolently in one of Hughie's easy chairs. It was Larry who first caught the expression on Relda's face.

"I dare say it was most thrilling," she remarked coldly. "But it hasn't thrilled me to wait dinner for you, Marcia."

"I'm sorry," the girl said.

Larry was startled by a flash in Relda's eyes. It was directed at Marcia and he could not mistake the venom of it, even though it puzzled him. He had seen evidences of this before; a cold, insolent attitude, sometimes contempt. Now, his buoyancy crushed, and with a numb, sick feeling just below his ribs, he picked up the fish and went out.

"Shall we try the bass to-morrow, Larry?" Marcia called in a curiously firm voice.

"Hughie will take you," Relda said. "There are some things I want Larry to do. I'll talk to him in the morning."

The screen door closed and Marcia turned slowly and faced her aunt. The girl's cheeks were flushed, her hands clenched at her sides, her chin thrust slightly forward. For a long moment they stared at each other, Relda's pale blue and vindictive eyes half closed and smouldering; Marcia's wide and fearlessly defiant.

Then Relda's lips curled ever so slightly in the faintest trace of a sneer that managed to be both insolent and triumphant. Never had Marcia shown

defiance before, but if it brought hatred to Relda's eyes it brought satisfaction to her soul.

Marcia did not conform to the rules, however. Economically dependent, supported all her life by the generosity of her dead mother's brother, she should have shown dismay or contrition. Instead she laughed.

"All right," the girl said. "It's not what you think, but that doesn't make any difference."

She turned and walked away to her room.

After he left the two women, Larry was brought face to face with another unpleasant situation. He went down to the lake to clean the big pike and there, a little later, Jane found him.

"You don't keep your word very well, do you?" she said after watching him a few moments.

"You know I haven't had the time," he answered.

"You have time for the others!" she burst forth. "All day! Every day!"

"I'm hired to do it."

"You say that, but it isn't what you think. You think you have a chance there, but you're no better than I am. You're a servant. They wouldn't look at you in the city."

"I haven't asked anyone to."

"Huh!" she exclaimed contemptuously. "I've watched you the last three days, laughing and talking. You think you're getting somewhere, but when Miss Kerr goes back to the city she'll never give you another thought. You don't know her kind. I do. I've worked for enough of them. I know what they think and what they want and you—why, you poor fool, you couldn't keep her in shoes and stockings."

She paused to laugh at the startled expression on Larry's face.

"That got you, didn't it? Never thought of that, had you? Believed she'd live in a tent and eat rabbits with you. You poor fish! You haven't earned enough all your life to buy her clothes for one year. But you go on letting her make a fool of you."

She turned away with a sneer and then she whirled back, a small, dark, fiery bit of passion.

"Those women never love anyone. They're just soft and selfish. They don't care about anything except their clothes and what they eat. I know them. If I were blind and deaf I couldn't help but know all about them. They make me sick, the cheap grafters! They wouldn't lift a finger for you.

"But me! Just try me once! Larry! Don't look at me like that. Don't, I say!"

He had been unable to hide the loathing and disgust that swept over him, but now, seeing the panic and despair which engulfed the girl, he felt only pity.

"You run along up to the house," he said gently. "Maybe we both made a mistake."

As she turned away Sid came swinging down the trail. He saw the tears in Jane's eyes and strode on to where Larry stood.

"Trying to double-cross me again, eh?" he cried furiously.

"Count ten before you say anything like that, Sid," Larry advised quietly. "You ought to know me better."

"You talk nice, but you need watching just the same. It's gone to your head the way the other two have been chasing you around and now you want to hog it all."

Larry did not reply. For the first time he realized what lay back of Sid's attitude, what had been growing for a year, what had found expression in previous outbursts.

In the beginning of their friendship the boy had assumed a certain superiority because he was reared in a city. To Larry it had been only a natural, youthful arrogance, but now he saw it as something bigger and deeper, something productive of resentment and humiliation.

Sid, he knew, had expected to be assigned to the entertainment of either Mrs. Franklin or Miss Kerr. Denied that, he had sought Jane's companionship, only to discover that she, too, preferred Larry. His pride was stung, his jealousy aroused, and Larry saw that a popularity which meant nothing to him was destroying a friendship that meant much.

"Look here, Sid," he began, "you're getting all het up over nothing."

"Nothing! Then what's she crying about?"

"I'm not crying!" Jane flared. "Larry, will you take me out in a canoe tonight?"

“You see how it is,” he replied with an attempt to smile. “Sid’s my friend.”

She glared at him, beside herself with fury, and then whirled and took Sid’s arm.

“Come on,” she said. “Let the big stiff go. They’ll wipe the smile off his pretty face.”

CHAPTER IX

—In the Storm

It wasn't Sid's jealous outburst or Jane's fiery scorn that kept Larry awake for a long time that night. Nor was it Marcia Kerr, nor even Relda Franklin's attitude there on the porch. For the first time in his life he gave serious thought to Larry Vail himself.

He was twenty-eight. For thirteen years he had been earning his own living. Lumber camps and driving camps had been his habitation. Sometimes he had drifted out into the Dakotas for the harvest, then back to the woods for the winter. Once he had shipped out of Superior as a sailor on a lumber schooner. Twice he had tried trapping, only to be forced to seek a job or starve.

Never had his worldly possessions filled more than half his turkey—a seamless grain sack. Never, except in his two trapping shacks, had he known what it was to have a home. Never, until he began working for Howard Franklin, had he held any sort of position with executive responsibilities.

It was these things that he considered, the economic status of Larry Vail, a status pertaining not to the past or present, but to the future. He saw himself going on through the years, haphazard, nomadic, the victim of whim and circumstance, slipping out, wandering on, tasting the cup of life, but never draining it.

Back of it all, back of the dark, silent hours in his bunk, was a woman like Marcia Kerr. Not Marcia herself. Jane's taunts down there at the lake shore had not been revealing. Had anything else directed Larry's thoughts along such channels he would readily have arrived at the same conclusion. He phrased it as Jane had, "Couldn't buy her shoes and stockings," and he knew it was literally true.

It was not Marcia's shoes and stockings that worried him, or any other woman's. He had simply been brought face to face with the fact that some day, somewhere, he would meet a girl like Marcia and that life would be an empty thing without her.

Marcia served only as an example. He liked her better, after three days of companionship, than any girl he had ever seen, but never once had his

thoughts risen above the wall which, he knew, separated them. Larry didn't have Jane's viewpoint. His was the reverse. He knew he could not buy shoes and stockings for Marcia Kerr, but he also knew that, for a girl like her, it would be a desirable thing to do.

Clear as his thinking was along some lines, he was a stranger to self-analysis, and experience did not permit him to work things out in detail. The net result of those hours of wakefulness was summed up in his own muttered reflection:

"I just been making a grinning fool of myself. I've had the chances, and I've turned 'em down. But now—now, by gosh, I'm going to get out of here—British Columbia, I guess—and I'm going to get a job that's got something more to it than so much a day. I'm going to settle down in one place and have men coming to me for jobs. Franklin started as a river pig and did it. I guess I can."

He took all the blame, he who had faced the world with a grin at fifteen, who had never asked a favor, who in thirteen years of the roughest contact with life had retained a curiously clean mind and an unwarped heart, who through that very purposeless and buoyant vagabondage had developed a compelling charm.

He did not suspect that it was the influence of Howard Franklin and of Marcia Kerr, combined with an expression of the whole purpose of existence, that really swayed him. Long ago he had seen the romance in the rise of men from lumber camps to millions, and had been untouched. Now, joined with the actuating impulse of all men's struggles, that romance and achievement became a most desirable thing. Some day, somewhere, there would be a girl, and he wanted to be ready.

It rained the next day and he did not see Marcia. He attended to his long-neglected laundry work, drying his clothes in the men's camp. He swapped haircuts with Hughie and successfully concluded a campaign to re-establish friendly relations with Sid. Late in the afternoon Relda sent for him and announced that she would be ready to go after moose in the morning.

Larry listened in silence as she talked of plans for a certain picture she wanted. He discovered that he now felt a distaste for moose photography. The zest in the game was gone. It seemed trivial, paddling about all day, playing like a boy. He found himself wishing that Franklin would come so that he could ask for his time and be on his way westward.

He also caught himself studying the woman for the first time, and recalling what Jane had said. He did not agree with Jane. There was

something about Mrs. Franklin and Marcia Kerr that marked them as different from the women he had known. Both, he had discovered, possessed minds. They could think. Their remarks were not silly jibes. Accustomed all his life to as democratic an existence as the world knows, he was without Jane's class feeling. He did not resent qualities or advantages that had been denied him.

Yet he saw that Jane may have had some cause for speaking as she had of Relda Franklin. There had been her inexplicable attitude toward Marcia Kerr the day before. Larry had found her pleasant enough on the whole. Just now she was unusually so. Yet he was critical. His mind traveled back over all he had seen of her and, though he could not find a definite reason, he felt a vague distrust.

"When is Mr. Franklin coming?" he broke in once, and then was amazed that he had spoken.

"Why?" she asked, after a moment's hesitation and a sharp glance.

"I was just wondering. He said he wanted to get up in June, but was afraid he'd have to stay in California."

"He was there the last I heard," Relda said. "He might be on his way now. But we won't know anything about it until we see him come paddling up the lake some day."

They started after breakfast the next morning. Because Relda had not felt like a portage, they decided, at Larry's suggestion, to investigate a shallow bay six or seven miles up the lake, a place that could be reached without Relda having to leave the canoe.

As never before, Larry felt like a servant. Relda half reclined in the bottom of the craft, made comfortable by cushions and a blanket. The day was oppressively hot, as Western Ontario days sometimes become. There was no breeze. The sun beat down on a mirror-like lake. Perspiration streamed down Larry's face and his paddle lagged. He remembered the joy of the quick strokes with Marcia. His craft seemed leaden, sluggish.

"The heat and the flies will keep the moose in the water to-day," Relda said.

"Ought to," Larry answered.

She studied him from beneath the brim of her broad hat. There had been no enthusiasm in his reply and she discovered a set expression about his

mouth. She noted, too, that he seldom looked at her. His eyes were down the lake or on the shore.

"How old are you, Larry?" she asked abruptly.

"Twenty-eight."

"How old do you think I am?"

"I don't know," he answered frankly. "I never thought."

"Women don't speak of age when they pass thirty, but it doesn't bother me. I'm thirty-one."

He believed it because he was not sufficiently interested to question her statement. And it was easily believed. Relda knew she was safe in subtracting five years from the truth.

"You're a lot younger than your husband," he remarked.

"Hadn't you thought of that before?"

"Yes, the first time I saw you. All the people I've known—they've been about the same age."

"You think that is better?"

"Of course. It's more natural."

She dropped the subject there and he paddled in silence for a mile.

"We're going to get some nasty weather out of this before night," he commented. "Maybe we'd better go back."

"I'll risk it," she said indifferently. "Larry, why do you bury yourself in the woods?"

"I didn't know I was buried," he laughed.

"You are. With your looks, your personality, your mind, you could go a long way in a city."

"I've been in Minneapolis and St. Paul and I don't like it. And I didn't notice that I got very far. Twice I nearly starved and each time it was a job out of town that saved me."

"But that's not the way to tackle a city. If you had friends, influence, and the right sort of opening, nothing could stop you. And you would like it, too—the hotels, country clubs, dinners. I would like to show you a big city, Larry."

"That's nice of you, Mrs. Franklin," he said with one of his charming smiles, "but I'm afraid I wouldn't fit well. I've always lived in the bush and I couldn't earn my board in a city. Besides, city folks would call me a hayseed."

"They wouldn't!" she exclaimed with sudden heat. "I'd like to have my friends see you, though I'd have to fight to keep them from stealing you."

"That sounds like a fairy tale," he laughed.

"It is a place of fairies," she said earnestly. "I could make it so for you, Larry. I could make you think you had entered an enchanted land. How I would love to do it! Boy, you don't know what it is to live! You don't know what is in store for you, how happy I—how happy you could be. Wouldn't you like to have me show you a city, Larry?"

There was a throaty quality in her voice. She was no longer languid. Her eyes were very blue and he saw in them the same expression he had caught in that moment when she clung to him as he jerked her from the path of the rushing moose.

She wore a skirt, too, and the usual mannish flannel shirt had been replaced with a thin, frilly waist. Larry had told Marcia he had forgotten Relda was a woman in those long days of their mutual enthusiasm for moose pictures, when she had worn riding breeches. Now he was not only aware of her sex, but of a disturbing quality in it. Not once in the three days of delightful intimacy with Marcia had he felt thus.

"I'll save up a few months' wages and go see you some time," he said facetiously. "I guess I could earn enough in a year to stay a week."

"Don't laugh!" she exclaimed passionately. "And don't worry——"

She stopped as Larry held up a warning finger.

"Get your camera ready," he whispered. "I see two bulls."

"Will you come?" she insisted impatiently. "Soon? This fall?"

"Maybe I could," he temporized. "But look! That's the biggest bull I ever saw. Turn around. We'll get right up on top of him."

He had worked the canoe over to the shelter of a point and now started driving it ahead with great, rushing leaps. Relda watched him for a moment, eyes smouldering, full red lips parted, throat throbbing. Then she turned slowly and picked up her camera.

It was late when they reached the bay but it proved, in some respects, their most successful day of wild game photography. Larry had never visited the place before and he found a small creek leading to a muskeg pond that seemed filled with moose. The great beasts had not been disturbed all summer and often moved out of the way of the canoe and returned at once to their feeding.

The stream led on to another lake in which they found a bear swimming. Relda snapped him in the water, and again as he climbed out on shore and stared at them with amazement, and a third time when he turned with a loud "woof" and lumbered into the brush.

Larry put the bow of the canoe onto a sand beach and Relda sat within ten feet of a big red deer that was keeping a nervous watch for land enemies and never suspecting their approach on water. At last he turned and saw them and, as they were motionless, he stared for a long time. Then Relda, unable to contain herself longer, burst into laughter at his expression of amazement and wonder. Even then the deer took but two or three jumps and wheeled to stare again.

They found a beaver dam and lay waiting for a long time without success. When they started back down the little stream they saw a calf moose playing in the shallow water ahead and drifted down beside him while he stood, first on his front legs, then on his rear, and pawed and kicked the water. Relda was so close she was drenched before he discovered their presence, and then he only stared with a friendly, baby expression as they floated past.

Their success and their adventures brought a return of the absorbing interest in wild game photography. They talked excitedly of the day's events, laughing in recollection of the buck's amazement and the calf's small-boy antics, exulting in the assurance that one picture of a huge bull would not be excelled by anything in their big collection of films.

So engrossed had they been, so far had they traveled while exploring this new waterway, they were both startled when Larry discovered that it was seven o'clock. They were ten miles from home, had eaten all their lunch, and he settled at once to the long paddle.

For a time Relda sat in the bow talking of the day's events. She was no longer languid. Stimulated by continued excitement, she was as he had known her during the two weeks they had pursued moose so incessantly. Again they were two people drawn together by a common interest.

After a few miles she noticed that Larry was not talking. He no longer smiled and she could feel the canoe tremble beneath his powerful thrusts.

"What is it?" she asked softly. "Were you thinking of what we were — —"

"I'm thinking we won't get home before that breaks," he interrupted, his voice hardened by his exertions. "It's going to be a bad one."

She turned and looked over her shoulder at the western sky. The sun was low, but beneath it was a thick bank of clouds. The terrific heat continued. There was no breeze and water was running down Larry's face in streams.

"It doesn't look bad," she said.

"It will be. A canoe couldn't live in the wind that's coming. It's lucky we're on the west side of the lake."

He toiled on, his teeth clenched, his arms and shoulders swinging with a beautiful, perfect rhythm, the cords in his neck stiff from strain.

"Don't worry," Relda said. "There's nothing to be afraid of."

"We haven't any grub, tent, nothing," he answered shortly. "And no telling how long it will last. There's over three miles to go."

She did not say anything more, but sat there watching him, abandoning herself to a new and nameless thrill. They were skirting the rough, boulder-cluttered shore of a long point. The forest above was black and threatening. There was something savage in the forward thrusts of the canoe, something primitive in this purely physical contest between a man and the elements. She crouched there, exultant in his strength, confident of his success.

The canoe shot out past the point, disclosing a little bay.

"Good God!" Larry cried as he caught his first glimpse of the western sky, hidden for the last five minutes by the point.

He dug in his paddle so deeply, swung against it so powerfully, that the canoe almost leaped from the water as it darted toward the shore of the bay. Relda turned to see a black curtain a mile away. It was rushing toward them with appalling speed and for the first time fear came to her.

"Regular cyclone!" Larry gasped between strokes. "Got to make shore! Got to! Cabin there. Rene Lacrodaire's. Sit still."

Despite his command, Relda turned to watch that terrible black curtain. There were shades of a sinister green in it, but it was impenetrable, and as it

swept over a distant ridge she had a feeling that it was engulfing, obliterating. She found herself measuring its speed and that of the canoe, estimating the chances of their reaching shore.

The canoe leaped ahead, its rushing wash alone breaking a silence that was as threatening as the black curtain. There was not a rustle of a leaf, a cheep of a bird. The whole world seemed hushed by terror, a terror that was communicated to Relda now.

Suddenly she was aware of a low roar. The black curtain was almost upon them. A breeze struck her face, gentle as a zephyr and yet carrying the impression of a resistless force. The roar grew. She heard the rush of wind high above her and her body seemed turned to liquid.

"Grab your camera and jump!" Larry commanded.

The canoe struck and she was thrown headlong. A strong arm set her on her feet, the handle of the camera was placed in her hand and she was shoved forward.

"Straight ahead!" Larry shouted as the jackpines above them bowed low before a terrific blast.

He jerked the canoe into the brush, lifted a windfall and laid it across the craft and plunged after her. Together they reached the little log shack and as trees crashed to the ground behind them they were engulfed in the blackness of a tropic night. Larry burst the flimsy latch with a thrust of his shoulder and they tumbled across the threshold.

The blackness was complete, even before Larry had forced the door against the wind and dropped a bar into a slot his fumbling fingers found. Then he turned, panting from his exertions, to hear a low, despairing cry.

"Larry! Larry! Where are you?"

"We're all right," he answered. "No timber close. Shack will stand it."

He scarcely heard his own words. The rush of wind, the crashing of trees, had increased to a terrifying tumult. He knew they were safe; common sense and experience told him so. Yet he was touched, as humans always have been, by the ruthless might of the elements when their fury is unleashed.

He thought of the lake, flat beneath the pressure of that first tremendous blast, then leaping into high, smashing waves the moment the force lessened. He thought of great trees, adamant through two centuries of storm, now cracking like saplings. He thought of his own puny strength, and the

terror of savage ancestors came. This terror lasted until he had steeled himself, and then passed on, leaving something of that primitive fear from which men will never escape.

"Larry!" a voice wailed above the roar. "Larry! Where are you?"

He took a quick step forward and his outstretched hands struck Relda's. The next instant her arms were about his neck and she was clinging fiercely to him. Instinctively he held her close. To him her terror was like that of a child and, because he himself had just felt it, his sympathy was aroused.

"We're all right," he said.

His chest was still heaving from the exertion of that final sprint in the canoe. His breath blew a strand of her hair across his face and he became conscious of that subtle scent that had come to him on the station platform at Sabawi a year before. He was suddenly aware, too, that her face was buried in his neck, that her body was marvelously soft and clinging. Then that body trembled. Fear, he thought, and held it more tightly.

The head was lifted from his shoulder. He was about to speak, to assure her, when upon his parted lips two soft, warm lips were pressed. The clinging body pressed closer. The arms around his neck loosened and he felt long fingers caressing his face, his neck, pulling his head forward.

Madness seized him. His body trembled. Something was throbbing inside his head. He forgot the storm, forgot everything, forgot that this was Relda Franklin.

CHAPTER X

—Swift Currents

Rene Lacrodaire had built his trapping cabin as best he could with the materials at hand and the time at his disposal. The walls were of logs from which the bark had been removed, the roof of poles covered with moss. A roll of tar paper furnished the waterproof material and the strips were held down by other poles laid on top.

A summer's sun had dried and stiffened the tar paper. The terrific blast had torn it and now, when the first fury of the storm had passed and rain came down in torrents, the moss directly over Larry's head was soaked. In a moment a thin stream started floorward and it struck him squarely on the back of the neck.

Larry had never heard the story of the Roman geese or of the Scotch thistle, and even now he did not pause to give to that which is trivial and insignificant its proper place in the scheme of things. His head snapped up, his lips were torn from Relda's and he jerked to one side so quickly her clasp was loosened. Her feet stumbled on the rough pole floor and Larry heard her fall against a bench.

"I'll strike a match," he said. "There's probably a candle here."

"No! No!" she exclaimed. "Not a light, boy! Here! I've found a seat."

She reached forward, found his hand.

"We ought to have a light," he insisted. "We can't— —"

She was at his side. He heard a quick exhalation of breath, a low laugh of excitement and ecstacy.

"No! No! Don't spoil it all with a light. Don't drive away the blackness of that storm. Think what it has done for us."

Somehow she was in his arms again.

"Hold me tight," she whispered in his ear. "Hold me safe. That wind! It terrifies me. Don't let it touch me."

The storm had paused as if to catch its breath. The quiet was startling, ominous. Larry could hear the throb of blood in his neck and believed he

heard her heart beating against his breast.

Then, roaring more terrifically than at first, the wind swept through the forest with such force that the stout-walled cabin trembled. Screaming, Relda clung to Larry and again, almost in instinctive answer to the elemental fury that engulfed them, he held her tightly.

He stood there, his body rigid, his mind shaken. Something of her fear was communicated to him. Mortal ears cannot close themselves to the appalling reverberations of nature in her insane moods. His arms were tight and stiff about her and he did not move for a long time. At last he became aware of a steady dripping and suddenly realized that the storm had so spent itself he could hear water falling from the hole in the roof.

"I shall always love a storm," a soft voice sounded in his ear. "I'll never hear the wind without becoming madder about you. And Larry," she laughed softly, "let us go to the tropics where there are terrible storms, where the tops of the palms dip into the huge surf and the beaches crash and roar. And we'll sit in a grass hut and shiver and listen—and remember, Larry."

His arms dropped. He felt soft fingers in his hair and on his face.

"Oh, boy!" she cried with fierce exultation. "There's something strongly elemental about us. We're very, very close to nature, you and I, and it affects us, thrills us. It called us and we answered.

"It was like I first saw you. You didn't know it. You never were aware of my presence. Yet you must have been. You must have felt me, Larry, for I felt you. I knew then, that instant, that this time would come."

"You mean——?" he began in bewilderment.

"Don't!" she interrupted. "Let me tell it. It was a June evening a year ago. On Bad River. I was sitting on the bank, near a falls—alone. I think I must have been waiting for you. I thought you would come in the roar of the water, just as we found each other in the roar of the storm.

"And you came, Larry! You came! You would say you rode a log. But you didn't. It was down a shaft of golden sunshine that you floated, floated straight into my heart, Larry. On a shaft of sunshine.

"Boy! Boy! Have you any idea how beautiful you were? Do you know you looked like a god? Do you know that since that day I have never seen a level shaft of sunshine without seeing you astride it?"

Larry was appalled, and by no more than a dim realization of what was happening. He had seen women's eyes alight with invitation, but nothing in

his experience prepared him for the unmasking of Relda Franklin's fiercely possessive passion. Again the soft fingers crept up through his hair, lingered over his face, and then with amazing strength they gripped his shoulders.

"Larry! Larry!" she whispered hoarsely. "It's all before us—life, love, rapture. Do you know now what I meant this morning when I said I would like to take you to a city? And I will! To cities! To distant places, boy! It'll be all the world for us. Oh, there are such wonderful lands for us to see together. Lands made for loving. The South Seas. Sunshine and peace and quiet. And storms! How I love storms now! And a storm with you, Larry! You to hold me. Hold me now, boy! And kiss me. Kiss me!"

He jerked back his head when her lips found his, but she clung to him.

"I love you, Larry. Tell me you love me."

"I don't!" burst sharply from between clenched teeth.

"But you will. You are only stunned by what has happened to us."

She laughed confidently, exultantly.

"You will. Didn't I feel your kiss? Didn't you tremble, Larry? Oh, I'm not afraid."

He stepped back quickly. His feet overturned a bench and the crash of it there in the darkness seemed an expression of his mood.

"You haven't any right to talk like that!" he exclaimed. "You're—you're ——"

"I'm in love with you," she finished quickly. "What could give me a better right?"

"You're *married*!"

A laugh, clear and indulgent, confident, but to him hideously cold and ruthless, came out of the darkness.

"That's only a detail, boy, a technical detail, and it won't bother us long. Don't leave me, Larry. Where are you?"

He was fumbling on a shelf which he had found on the wall behind him. He wanted a light. There was something about the black darkness that gave him a feeling of helplessness.

His groping fingers found the stub of a candle and he quickly took a match from a pocket and lighted it. He saw her in the center of the room and

as he bent to place the candle on a rough table at his side she moved toward him.

"Larry, Larry!" came in that throaty voice. "Don't think. Just accept what life has given to you."

He stared down at the face just beneath his own. Full, red lips, flushed cheeks and throat, eyes so intensely blue, beauty heightened. . . . For a moment it dazzled him and then with a swift motion he reached up, grasped her wrists, tore her arms from his neck and held her from him.

It was an instinctive revulsion. When a man does possess rectitude it is an inherent quality, something very rare and very fine, sourceless, genuine. Woman has nothing quite like it. No matter how sincere or passionate her integrity, it falls short of man's heights when man does soar, for it is tarnished always by a protective impulse.

Just what had lighted this clear, pure flame in Larry's nature would be a matter of futile conjecture. The fact remains that it was there, something that had weathered the roughness and coarseness of a purely masculine existence; that had survived the bald obscenity of lumber camps in which men leading starved, distorted lives were herded for months; that had risen above the foul bawdry of north woods bar rooms; that had descended into unspeakable wanton dens and had emerged with its essential purity untouched.

The Johnson girls had sensed something of this in Larry. Mrs. Wade knew it. But nothing in Relda Franklin's experience or attitude toward life permitted her to perceive or understand. She thrilled to the pain of steel fingers biting into the flesh of her soft forearms. To her it was another storm, one of the unheralded bursts of passion essential to those who revel in the feverish swing of heights and depths.

For a moment he studied her, holding her at arm's length.

"You're married," he said coldly.

"I love you!" she burst forth. "That is all that counts."

"Mr. Franklin counts."

"Such funny, boyish principles," she laughed. "He hasn't counted for years. I don't love him. Never have—never as I love you."

He stared, still holding her away from him. Their long days together had not been devoted entirely to the pursuit and discussion of moose. It was inevitable that she should have revealed some of the details of her life, and

from Jane, through Sid Evans, Larry had learned more—frequent trips to New York and to Europe, a beautiful home, servants, jewels, the luxury which he had glimpsed in magazines and books. And he had learned, too, through Jane and Sid, that she had once been a stenographer in Franklin's office.

"You'd look well, living in the bush with a river pig," he said.

He meant it as a taunt. She took it as an objection that indicated a last struggle with that incomprehensible thing men were accustomed to term their self-respect.

"Silly!" she laughed. "I have plenty in my own name now. And there'll be lots more—a settlement. Leave that to me. Howard won't know, won't suspect, until it is too late."

Under ordinary circumstances Relda was too clever a woman to make such a statement. Now she was exultant, confident of the bait she dangled before him. Larry stared at her in amazement and then the scorn he felt showed in his eyes and at the corners of his mouth.

"So that's the kind of a skunk you think I am!" he exclaimed.

"Larry!" she cried in sudden consternation. "You don't understand."

"I've never stolen anything," he told her.

"You mean——?" she demanded, then faltered when the color left her face.

"And I don't intend to begin now."

He turned abruptly, lifted the bar, opened the door and stepped into the black darkness. After a moment he returned.

"We can start on," he said quietly. "The rain's stopped, it's pretty clear and we can follow the west shore."

Relda had not moved from the middle of the little cabin. All the softness, the allure and the assurance were gone. The full lips were compressed in a cruel line. The eyes were cold and hard and without a touch of azure.

"You beast!" she cried in a low, strained voice. "You bully! You lumber camp scum! Talking to me like that! I know where you get your high and mighty notions. Marcia! The little sneak! Ran off with you when I was helpless in bed. I knew I couldn't trust her. Always have known it. But if she thinks——"

Her voice had become shrill with fury. Her face was distorted. Larry thought of Jane and her wild outburst, and the same loathing possessed him. Only at the mention of Marcia's name did he stiffen.

"Maybe I ought to feel sorry for you," he said quietly. "You can't see things right. You think everyone's like yourself. But you've guessed wrong about me and about Miss Kerr."

"You sanctimonious fool!" she interrupted furiously. "Don't you suppose I know? Haven't I seen what was happening? She didn't deceive me. Fishing! A lot of fishing you two did together. But I'll fix her. I'll fix both of you. If you think——"

She broke off in a scream of hysterical laughter. There was something horrible about it to Larry, something indecent, a shameless unmasking of an intimate self. Again he thought of Jane and marveled that mistress and maid should be so much alike.

He could not repress his disgust and loathing. It was stamped so plainly on his face no words would have added to the impression his features conveyed. Relda saw it and the heat of her anger waned. Hatred, cold now, blazed from her eyes.

"I see," she sneered. "You want to get home so that you can catch a fish for her breakfast."

"No," he grinned. "I guess you'll always guess wrong about me. I want to get back to-night because——"

"So you can tell Marcia how true you were."

The grin left Larry's face.

"Come on," he said roughly. "I'm starting. If you want to stay all night ——"

He picked up the camera, pushed the bench from between her and the door and blew out the candle. After a moment he heard her moving and when she was outside he followed and closed the door. In silence they went down to the shore together. He found the canoe, set it afloat and held it while she stepped in. Then he got into his place and shoved off.

The storm had passed as quickly as it had come. Most of the sky was free of clouds and stars were shining with a new brilliancy. The air was sweet and cool, purged by the wind and the rain, a virginal, refreshing thing.

Larry's lungs filled with it. The stars soothed his eyes as he looked up at them. The paddle became a toy in an outburst of physical energy. The canoe leaped ahead as if with joyful eagerness. It was the north, clean and open, its hazards known, its threats honest and, after the darkness and the madness in Rene Lacrodaire's crowded, evil-smelling little cabin, it seemed a land of pure enchantment.

Neither spoke as they traveled the three miles. When they rounded the last point and entered the little bay in front of the camp Larry heard voices on the porch of the main building. Mosquitoes forbade lights, but he caught the glow of a cigar and as they climbed the hill he was not surprised when he heard Marcia call:

"Hello! Uncle Howard is here."

CHAPTER XI

—The Song of Vagabondage

Marcia, rambling along the ridge at the head of the bay, saw the canoe bringing Howard Franklin from Sabawi when it rounded the point. She ran down and reached the dock just as he landed.

"'Lo, Marcia," he said quietly, but his eyes, usually so steady and calm, were alight.

She hugged and kissed him impulsively and received a strong, steady pressure of his arm and a kiss on her glowing cheek.

"You don't know how glad I am to see you!" she cried as she linked an arm in one of his and started up the trail. "Can you stay long?"

"A few days. How is everything?"

"All right," she said after an instant's hesitation that did not escape him. "Aunt Relda has taken some perfectly marvelous pictures."

"How about you?"

"I've caught some perfectly marvelous fish," she laughed. "You'll go fishing with me, won't you?"

"Of course. Great place here, isn't it? Boys made a good job of it."

"It's beautiful. Hughie's furniture is quite remarkable. You know, he never made any before."

"Hughie's a character."

"He's a dear!"

"You must have learned a lot of Ojibwa," Franklin commented.

"Isn't that the most wonderful system he has!" she laughed. "Larry told me that a few years ago Hughie couldn't say a sentence without swearing. If he were talking to a woman he would swear, and then apologize, and then swear again. And now— —"

"He lets you know exactly how he feels even if you don't understand the language."

Marcia laughed delightedly.

"The first time I heard him we were going fishing," she said. "He couldn't find his pet paddle and he stood there at the shore, looking around, and suddenly there came from his lips the most terrible sounds I have ever heard. I had never known speech to be so expressive or to convey so much, and, of course, I was simply dying of curiosity."

"Did you ask him what it meant?"

"I simply had to, and he said, 'I don't like to think what it means.' 'I knew it must be awful,' I told him, and then he grinned sheepishly, and after a little more urging he translated the words. They meant twenty-one cents. I've learned it myself. *Ah-nish-tee-nah-sha-bay-zhik-bee-sow-bahk-oonce*. Isn't that wonderful?"

"You could put a lot in it," Franklin agreed.

"That's what Hughie says. 'Pure as spring water, don't hurt your soul or any lady's ears and does the trick.' Oh, Hughie's a dear, and we've had some wonderful times fishing."

"Larry's been taking Relda after the moose, then?"

"Every day until she got hurt dodging a cow. They're out now. First time she's been able to. The pictures are wonderful. They have hundreds of them."

"Then Larry will be able to pick out a good head for me this fall."

Marcia was silent for a moment. They had reached the porch and were seated in two of Hughie's comfortable chairs.

"Perhaps I ought to let him tell you," she said, "but I don't think Larry will be here then."

Franklin waited in silence.

"He didn't intend to tell me about it. It just slipped out. He wanted to quit last spring. Said he has never worked in one place so long."

"Wants to start drifting, eh? What kept him?"

Her uncle smiled when she had told about Rene.

"Rather a joke on Larry, isn't it?" he commented. "Probably the first time in his life he couldn't up and ask for his time."

"But he was in danger! And because he was protecting your interests."

"I imagine he poked the Frenchman up a bit on his own account," Franklin laughed.

"He said it was a personal matter between them."

"But Lacrodaire got out first, so that leaves Larry free."

"No, the man's working at the saw mill. Larry says he'll have to look him up before he goes."

"It will be good. I'd like to see it."

Franklin smiled. He had not forgotten his own river days, when such differences were usually settled with corked shoes.

"So would I," Marcia said impulsively. "That sounds silly, or brutal, but I'm glad Larry feels as he does about it."

"How long is Relda thinking of staying?"

"She hasn't mentioned leaving."

They were silent for a time and then Marcia said quietly:

"I'd like to go back with you when you leave, Uncle Howard."

He took three leisurely puffs at his pipe and did not look at her.

"You remember last winter when Aunt Relda was away," she continued. "I went to a business college. Took stenography and bookkeeping. I'm ready for a job."

"Bad as that?" he asked in a low, strained voice.

"Please don't think I'm ungrateful or over-sensitive!" she burst forth passionately.

"I don't. Just what's happened?"

"Nothing," she said, but again there was that instant of hesitation which did not escape him. "I want to go to work. I want to earn my own way. I can't go on like this any longer."

Franklin continued to stare across the bay and to puff mechanically at his pipe. His jaw muscles were knotted, his eyes hard. Marcia, watching him, understood, as she knew he understood, and she was not surprised when, with characteristic directness, he discarded everything except the point directly at issue.

"All right," he said. "And when you get a job? What then?"

"I want to be wholly self-supporting."

"I'll let you pay me for board and room."

He had weakened. She understood that it was because he would miss her so in the house where she had lived since childhood, knew that he would lose the last intimate touch in his life, would be abandoned to loneliness. She started toward him, urged by a passionate tenderness, ready to forsake everything, but he raised a hand quickly.

"No," he said, "you've worked it out. You've hit the only way."

She threw herself into his lap, buried her face in his neck. He felt her body tremble. A tear burned his skin.

"There, there," he soothed. "The knot couldn't be untied. You're very wise and very brave. I'm proud of you."

Later, when she was alone, Marcia gave way to a burst of anger.

"I wish she were dead!" the girl cried, the more fiercely because of the impotency of her wish.

In mid-afternoon Hughie Knowles warned them of the storm, but when it broke even he was amazed.

"Never saw one like it before," he shouted as he and Marcia and Howard Franklin watched from the porch. "One of those prairie cyclones over in Manitoba or the Dakotas jumped the reserve, I guess."

"Will the roof hold?" Franklin asked.

"Maybe."

"But Aunt Relda and Larry!" Marcia cried. "They'll have no shelter."

"Wettin's the worst they'll get," Hughie said. "That lad won't be caught napping."

Hughie's confidence and that of her uncle served to allay the girl's fears, but it was with relief that she caught the sound of Larry's paddle. That passionately expressed wish had become a terrifying thing in the face of possible reality.

Larry came to the porch door with Relda and there turned away. Franklin called him and he came in just as Relda was greeting her husband.

"Been expecting you," she said casually.

Larry had a silhouette of her against the star-studded sky, offering her cheek for a perfunctory kiss.

"Understand you have been getting some fine pictures," Franklin said as they found seats.

"Wonderful. Never imagined such pictures would be possible."

"Larry had 'em tagged and tamed for you, eh?"

"And named," she laughed. "Did Marcia show you the films?"

"I thought you would like to do it," Marcia said.

"I'm sorry there are no prints. I don't dare trust them to the mails. I'll have you take them out when you go, Howard. I'll want enlargements of a number. You people don't show the least concern for our safety in the storm."

"We knew you would be all right with Larry," her husband said. "You're not wet. Get under the canoe?"

"Fortunately we were near a trapper's cabin when it struck," Relda replied. "Got to shore just in time. As soon as it was over we started on. Terrible storm, wasn't it?"

"Rene's shack?" Hughie asked.

"Yes," Larry answered. "I was hugging that point above him and didn't see how fast it was coming until I got into the bay. First time I ever saw a storm like that in the bush. But we got some good pictures to-day."

"Oh, yes!" Relda exclaimed. "A calf standing on his front legs kicking in the water, and three wonderful snaps of a bear swimming and on land. And a deer! Fine, big buck standing on shore. We paddled right up to him and he stared and stared. Wasn't his expression excruciating, Larry?"

"We laughed so hard he finally got scared," Larry answered.

They talked for half an hour, disconnectedly, normally, so normally that Larry sometimes rubbed his eyes as he leaned back in a dark corner. There was a touch of admiration for Relda. Her coolness was amazing. He even wondered if there had not been some sort of nightmare.

But when he lay in his bed later and thought of what had happened, he knew it was real; and he knew, too, that in the morning he would ask Howard Franklin for his time. There could be no more moose photography.

At breakfast Larry learned from the cook that Franklin was eating alone in the living room. A little later, when Franklin strolled outside with a cigar, Larry overtook him down near the lake.

"I'm quitting," he began at once.

Franklin glanced at him and then puffed smoke into the gentle morning breeze. There were several things in the lumberman's mind. One was a brief bit of dialogue of the night before when he and his wife were alone.

"I'm glad you have been successful with the pictures," he had remarked to her.

"It's been interesting."

"Vail's a good, all-round man."

Fire had flashed in Relda's eyes, only for an instant.

"Nice, clean cheap, too. I like him," he continued.

"Perhaps," was Relda's comment. "You're usually near-sighted in that respect, however. I'm not so ready with my decisions."

"Anything happened?"

"No," was the slow response, "but I don't believe I am unduly sensitive to certain qualities in a man, especially a handsome one."

The subject had been dropped there, but now it was again in Franklin's mind, with other things.

"Legs twitching, eh?" he commented.

"Sort of."

"When do you want to go?"

"I could get to Sabawi this morning with the men who brought you out."

"All right," Franklin said after a moment's consideration. "Figure out what you've coming and I'll give you a check."

"It's eighteen days."

"You won't get as big a check for eighteen days anywhere else."

"I know it. In a way, that's why I'm quitting."

"I've no complaint."

"I have," Larry laughed.

Franklin turned from his contemplation of the bay.

"How's that?" he asked.

Larry had forgotten that this was the husband of the woman with whom he had found shelter in Rene Lacrodaire's cabin. He had put that incident behind him.

"There's no future in it."

Franklin smiled. "When did you discover that?" he asked.

"I've been thinking about it for quite a bit. I want to get where I'm working by the year, not by the day."

"Ready to settle down, eh?"

"No, to work up."

"Must be thinking of getting married."

"No, but I might get to thinking that way."

Again Franklin studied the bay, puffing smoke into the gentle breeze.

"How long you been working in the woods?" he asked at last.

"Since I was fifteen."

"Tried everything?"

"Just about."

"Ever look timber?"

"I've run compass quite a bit."

"How about saw mills?"

"A few summers."

"Ever work for this Bagnall outfit near Sabawi?"

"Two weeks," Larry grinned.

Franklin had seated himself on a boulder and was whittling a piece of alder. He glanced up.

"What was the matter?" he asked.

"There's no satisfaction doing things in a crazy way."

"What they been doing?"

Larry told him at some length. His disgust of two years before returned as he described the slipshod methods employed at the little saw mill and in the camp back in the bush.

"They've always run at a loss," Franklin remarked when he had finished.

"There's no need of it," Larry told him.

"What's wrong?"

The young man went into details of waste, mismanagement, poor judgment, inefficiency and lack of common logging sense. Like all intelligent lumberjacks, Larry knew his trade thoroughly and had participated in many a deacon seat discussion of a walking boss's mistakes and failings. Now, as he talked, he displayed not only a knowledge but, as Franklin was quick to notice, an originality of conception.

"You think that mill could be made to pay, then?" Franklin asked at last.

"Of course."

"You know the limit?"

"Ran compass in it."

"All right. Go down to Sabawi this morning. Get a canoe and look through that limit. Don't say a word to anyone but be back at the mill a week from to-day. I take the outfit over then."

"Take it over!" Larry repeated. "You don't mean you bought it?"

"In a way. Loaned Bagnall some money once. He knows logging but not business. Has too many small outfits like this. He's close to the wall and I had to act. As it is, I'll lose. Naturally, though, I want to save what I can."

"And you want me to estimate the timber?"

"Only roughly. Most of all I want you to tell me how to log that limit to advantage. It's a steam haul, you know."

"Over a height o' land," Larry added significantly. "They cut the logs, but they don't get 'em out to the mill. Never enough to run all summer, though there's plenty on the rollways getting worm eaten to keep the saws busy a whole season."

"Bad as that, eh? Well, look it over. I'll see you at the mill a week from to-day. Noon. That doesn't give you much time, but do the best you can."

"All right," Larry grinned after a moment's hesitation. "I can spare a week."

The two men who had brought Franklin from Sabawi were coming down to the lake and Larry arose.

"About Hughie," he said. "You can't do any better."

"I'd already decided that."

"And Sid. I'm going to send for him later, when I get fixed some place. He sort o'—well, Sid does better when I'm looking after him."

"You're wasting your time, Larry," Franklin advised gently.

"That's what everyone tells me, but Sid's all right. He'll make a good man."

"Very well. And if you run across anyone in town, send him out. Good timber, though."

"Jack Hinton's the man you want. I can get him."

Larry started up the trail, whistling. For the first time in a year he was free again; not only free but catching the current with a purpose, no longer drifting but guiding his course.

"Gosh!" he muttered with a grin. "Franklin started out as a river pig and look where he is now. The worst I can do is to start."

Exuberance and youth and optimism possessed him. As he neared the men's building he began to sing:

"Oh, I went up the Eau Claire to drive,
I thought they'd never begin;
The wind was blowing dead ahead
AND Kelly was drunk agin."

His clear voice carried to everyone in the camp, to Marcia at the breakfast table, to Hughie mending a shoepac beside his bunk, to Jane carrying a tray to her mistress, to Relda Franklin, still drowsy beneath the soft down quilts. To each it carried the same message—Larry was on his way again, shoving out into the current.

Marcia smiled happily and, because she was a woman, exultantly. Hughie swore, vehemently but tenderly. Jane's hands trembled so that the dishes rattled on the tray, and she winked back the tears from her hard little eyes.

But Relda sat up in bed, threw off the covers and began to dress quickly.

"I'll eat breakfast later," she snapped as Jane entered.

After he had packed his turkey and said good-by to Sid and Hughie, Larry swung off down to the lake. As he passed the main building he heard his name called in a low voice and saw Relda on the porch.

"Boy," she whispered as he came closer, "you've thought it over? You'd feel better about it if you weren't taking Howard's money? Is that what your leaving means?"

There was a pleading, desperate quality in her questions that made Larry forget how he had last seen her in the light of the candle in Rene's cabin.

"No," he said gently. "For quite a bit I've been wanting to hit the current."

"But Larry! You'll let me know? Tell me—where? You can't drop out like this."

His motive was sincere. He wanted to end this thing, leave it behind him, but he found it hard to say and his voice became a little harsh.

"You'll never guess me right," he said.

"Guess you right!" and the need of speaking softly made her tone even more vengeful. "I've done that. You and that little cat! You're not fooling me. And by God, Larry Vail, she'll not have you either! I'll attend to that."

He had never seen such fury or hate, but to him the threat was so absurd he could not refrain from smiling. She glared for an instant and then turned quickly away.

At the dock Marcia stood beside her uncle. The Sabawi men were in the canoe.

"Good-by, Larry, and good luck, wherever you go," the girl said as she held out her hand.

Larry took it awkwardly. Woodsmen seldom shake hands, and yet his embarrassment was due to something other than the firm pressure of her slim fingers. Her frank smile, as honest as her words of farewell, added to his confusion and to a sudden, unaccountable sense of loss. There was something so different here than what he had just encountered at the porch.

For the first time, too, he realized that she was passing out of his life, that he would never see her again.

"Good-by," he said warmly. "You've been awful nice to me. I hope you're always satisfied with your fishing."

"Thanks," she laughed gaily. "And I hope you never stop singing."

"I wonder where he'll go, what he'll do," she said to her uncle as they slowly climbed the trail a little later.

"Larry'll always take care of himself," her uncle answered.

"You said you would see him again in a week."

"Just a little job I want him to do for me."

Marcia, knowing his habit of never speaking of business at home, turned to other things. Her own thoughts were on the emancipation so close at hand and her eyes were bright when, a little later, she found Relda breakfasting in the big living room.

"Where is Larry going?" the older woman asked after a moment's close scrutiny.

"I haven't the least idea."

"You have. He has told you."

Marcia returned the blaze of hatred with a steady stare.

"As I remarked once before, Aunt Relda," she said calmly, "it is not at all what you think. I had no idea Larry was going. I saw him only at the dock as he left. Uncle Howard was there."

She went on to her room.

It was mid-afternoon before Relda was able to bring up the subject of Larry's departure with her husband. She did it with her usual cleverness.

"Where's he going?" Franklin repeated. "Where any lumberjack goes when he gets his time. Hang around some town until his money's gone and then get another job."

"He has too good a mind to be wasted that way," Relda protested.

"Huh!" Franklin grunted indifferently. "Maybe. But he's a drifter."

"I should think," she blazed forth with sudden heat, "that after a year he would have had more loyalty than to quit like that."

"Loyalty? Why should you expect it of a man when you offer him no future—nothing but a job? Where are those moose films. I'd like to have a look."

When Relda went inside to get them Franklin sat staring across the bay. His pipe was in his mouth, but he was not puffing it. The muscles in his jaws were knotted.

CHAPTER XII

—Larry "Leaves His Mouth Open"

For years Larry Vail had worked in lumber camps and on log drives, for big companies and jobbers. He had watched failures and successes, had judged men, methods and means and, though he had always handled an ax, a saw, a canthook, a pickpole or a skidding chain, few of the details, large or small, of a complicated, highly technical industry had escaped him.

In the short task Franklin had set for him this fund of experience and observation was given something upon which it could function. For the first time in his life he was not a cog in a machine, but one surveying the machine as a whole, studying its operation, seeking defects and planning improvements, and there blossomed forth not only a suppressed executive ability, but an absorbing interest.

To anyone not familiar with logging, his activities for five days would have seemed only a mad, purposeless scramble through swamps, over ridges, around lakes and along brush-grown aisles in the forest. Sometimes he would wander slowly through a stretch of tall white pines and Norways, gazing at the tops, glancing at the trunks, then stroll on, then stop again and repeat the operation.

Once he spent several hours on a brush-covered ridge, searching the sides and surveying the surrounding country from the top. He also found logs lying on skids, hundreds and thousands of them. They were in a clearing near the edge of a spruce swamp and already the lower tiers in the great piles were hidden by fresh shoots of new growth. With a small ax he removed slabs of bark from several logs and examined it. He counted the logs in two huge skidways and estimated the total number.

All this was done with complete concentration. He had disregarded Franklin's suggestion of a canoe and at Sabawi had made up a pack of food and a blanket and walked to the lumber camp twenty miles south of the railroad. He slept in the little office, cooking his meals in the open, was up at four o'clock in the morning, away before five, and he did not return until dark.

Larry left the camp at dawn the day he was to meet Franklin and followed a wide, level roadway that wound around ridges, stretched straight

across swamps and managed, apparently, to keep a gradeless course. It was a peculiar road, grubbed clean of roots and stumps, made smooth as a floor, and yet there were no marks of the heavy traffic that had passed over it. Snow plows and sprinkling tanks provided an ice track in the winter for the steam haulers and their long train of sleighs.

Three times he left this broad, level road and plunged into the brush and swamps for excursions that covered several miles of difficult travel. At last when the road entered a big swamp he turned aside along the base of a ridge. After a mile he came to a "tote" road, which he followed rapidly until, just at noon, he came to the mill beside the railroad track.

Howard Franklin was sitting on the narrow porch of the two-story building which served as office, warehouse and sleeping quarters for some of the men.

"Better get dinner," he said as Larry put down his pack. "The passenger train will stop for me here this afternoon."

Larry went into the cook camp, where the mill crew had just sat down. There several old friends greeted him hilariously, and as he found a place he saw Rene Lacrodaire at the other end of the long table.

When Larry had finished he went outside. Franklin was seated on a pile of lumber across the track and beckoned to him.

"Well," the lumberman asked when the younger man had filled his pipe.

"How much you got to clear to come out of this on top?" Larry countered.

"That's out of the question," Franklin laughed. "I figure I'm going into it fifty thousand dollars in the hole. I want to save as much as I can."

Larry produced a pencil and some notes from his pack and began to scribble.

"You ought to get that back and nearly as much more," he said at last.

Franklin's eyes twinkled, but he did not smile.

"There's three years' cut left," he remarked, "and in the five years the mill's been running it hasn't broken even."

"There's five years' cut left," Larry interrupted. "Thirty-five million feet."

"The books show they've cut twenty-two million in five years and that there's only eighteen left. How are you going to get thirty-five million more and how are you going to cut it in five years when the best the mill ever did was five million in a season?"

"The timber's there," Larry retorted. "I saw it. Something funny somewhere. And this mill can cut better than seven million a season."

"It will cut only four this summer."

Larry climbed to the top of the lumber pile and looked out over the bay, in which lay the logs brought down the previous winter.

"Half cut now," he said disgustedly when he had returned. "You been over the office?"

"Pretty thoroughly. They cut close to eight million last winter and got half of it to the mill. You can't beat that game very much. There's a height of land between here and the timber. Altogether, it's about as expensive a logging proposition as I ever saw."

"It shouldn't be!" the young man exclaimed eagerly. "A week's work with a good crew and a ton of dynamite can knock out that height o' land. I found a place ten miles back. And look here! There's four million feet there you can have for the cost of rossin' the logs. Get a crew in there to-morrow and you'll save it. Next winter it won't be worth kindling unless you stop the worms by getting the bark off."

"But next winter we'll get out only four million again, maybe five, and the mill will have to shut down before the season's over."

"Buy another steam hauler and get out eight million," Larry answered. "What's the reason they haven't done it before? In five years they've had three men running this mill. Bagnall never comes near the place. Two of his managers tried to see how much Scotch they could kill and the other had a girl in Port Arthur and spent half his time there."

"The whole thing's a dinky proposition," Franklin mused. "Mill's small. Can't average more than fifty thousand a day. I've got three mills, each of which can do ten times that."

"There's nothing dinky about fifty thousand dollars," Larry laughed.

Franklin was silent for a moment, kicking his heels against the side of the lumber pile. He started to speak and then the blast of the one o'clock whistle stopped him.

“How could this mill be made to pay?” he asked at last, just as the band saw began to screech through the first log of the afternoon.

“How?” Larry repeated.

He hesitated a moment. That new, warm, entrancing fervor which had possessed him through the five long days spent in the timber limit again surged over him. All his boyish enthusiasm for a new game, the quality which grew out of and added to his boundless energy, awoke.

“How?” he said again, and plunged into a description of what he had found, what he had seen. He went into minute detail, pointing out blunders, recounting opportunities that had been overlooked. For half an hour he talked rapidly, with scorn and contempt for laziness and inefficiency, with enthusiasm for possible improvements.

Franklin continued to tap his heels gently against the lumber pile. Not once did an expression of interest cross his face.

Of themselves, the details into which Larry went at such length made little impression. It was their significance that Franklin caught, a double significance, for they indicated not only that Larry had crowded ten days’ work into five, but that he was thoroughly alive to every possibility in the situation, that his keen, open mind was unhampered by precedent.

Further, as Franklin began to perceive, the young man’s facts were well ordered. Franklin knew from his own countless worries and problems of the past that this well-ordered array of facts had come not because Larry necessarily had a well-ordered mind, but because consciously and subconsciously during those five crowded days he had dwelt exclusively with this one subject and had devoted himself to it with fervor and enthusiasm. Franklin’s business experience had taught him that not only is accumulated wisdom best for conducting a well-oiled machine, but that youth and enthusiasm and courage are to be desired in an uphill fight.

“All right,” the lumberman said shortly the moment Larry finished. “If you think it can be done, go ahead and do it.”

Through Larry’s complete astonishment there penetrated a thought that grew, that persisted despite his reasoning to the contrary. Franklin had spoken as if he had reached a sudden decision, as if he might be weary of the subject and were seeking the easiest, quickest way out of a bad situation, and yet Larry felt certain this had been planned at the camp, that Franklin had decided a week before to place him in charge.

Nevertheless, he was stunned. His words of a moment before became suddenly glib, inane, boastful, and he smiled as he thought:

"Good gosh! I'm in white water now."

"Another thing," Franklin continued before Larry had answered. "As I said, this is a small outfit. I'm pretty well cleaned out in the Middle West now. One mill in Minnesota. The rest is on the coast. I won't have time to get up here. You'll have to go ahead with things. I can't be bothered with details. Take anything up with my general manager in Chicago."

"All you care about is results, eh?" Larry asked in a tone that struck him as being glaringly casual.

"Yes."

Again Larry was silent for a moment and then he arose.

"All right," he said. "You'd better come over and tell these people about it."

They crossed the track to the office. Scammon, Bagnall's latest manager, was sorting papers at a desk. The timekeeper, a large, unhealthy looking man of fifty, whose face told instantly that the purchase of Scotch was always a full month ahead of pay day, was about to leave for his afternoon round of the mill.

Both knew Larry and looked at him speculatively, and with a quick understanding of the situation.

"Vail's going to take charge here for me," Franklin said.

"I'd wish him luck if it would do any good," Scammon laughed shortly. "I'll be out of the way in ten minutes."

"How about me?" the timekeeper asked sullenly and yet with a suggestion of the dipsomaniac's fear of being cut off from his supply.

"That's up to you," Larry answered. "Get through the mill and hurry back. I want you to take a message to Sabawi."

He took a pad and pencil on the counter and began writing. When he had finished he handed the telegram to Franklin, who read:

"Get me twenty real lumberjacks quick. No Galicians. Five dollars a month over scale."

Scammon arose and went upstairs to pack his personal belongings.

"I know the fellow who runs that employment agency," Larry said. "He'll hustle 'em. The worms are getting into those logs."

Franklin nodded. Then he took the pencil and began writing.

"Here's the name and address of my general manager in Chicago," he said. "He's in charge. Here's the bank in Port Arthur where I've opened an account. Send down your signature this afternoon. You'll be signing all the checks. Burson, the general manager, will handle the sales. You'll have to look after your own supplies up here in Canada. I guess that's all."

"Can you take my signature to the bank to-morrow morning before you leave Port Arthur?" Larry asked.

"Expect to be signing a few checks to-night, eh?" Franklin grinned.

Before Larry could reply the screeching of saws and the rumble of machinery in the mill began to die.

"I will," he said as he started toward the door. "That what's happening here all the time. Something always going wrong or breaking. We need pretty close to a whole new crew."

He dashed across the track to the mill. From a window Franklin saw him running through the lumber yard to the door of the engine room.

The mill owner turned away, stretched himself out comfortably in a chair and placed his feet on the littered desk. Slowly and carefully he clipped and lighted a cigar and puffed smoke toward the ceiling. In a few minutes Scammon came down the outside stairway and looked in through the office door.

"Say," he burst forth, "you know Vail never handled anything bigger'n a canthook before?"

"So he has told me," was the even reply.

"Well, it's none of my business, but how'd you happen to pick on him?"

"We used to drive logs on the same river."

"Oh, you've known him before."

"No, but I'm fairly well acquainted with the breed. He's what we call a white water man down in The States."

"Huh!" Scammon snorted as he turned away. "He'll think he's a hot water lad before he gets through here."

An hour passed. The big band saw resumed its song, but Larry did not return to the office immediately. When he did Franklin looked at his watch and arose.

"Time for that train," he said. "Don't know when I'll be back. Want to get a moose this fall if I can. Don't be afraid to ask questions of Burson."

"I won't bother him any more'n I have to," Larry said.

"There's one thing I want you to watch out for. I think there's been something funny about the way Bagnall got this timber limit. The government scaler's been fixed or Bagnall's got a pull higher up. Anyhow, if an inspector comes around, find out what you can. And remember that we don't want any logs we don't pay for."

"I understand," Larry said. "They don't like Yankees awfully well up here."

"That's what I'm thinking of. Here she comes."

The train had appeared around the end of a low ridge and was slowing to a stop. Franklin thrust out his hand for a quick grip and ran down to the track. He swung aboard and went into the car without looking back.

Larry turned away from the door and sat down at the desk. For a moment he stared at the litter of papers and then threw back his head and laughed.

"Boys, oh, boys!" he exclaimed. "I sure went away and left my mouth open. Talked myself into as fine a jackpot as I ever saw. The next time anybody asks me anything about anything I'll tell 'em I don't know."

But, though he laughed, he was aware of a heavy, numbing sensation just below his ribs. Jackpot, in the lumberjack's vernacular, means an apparently inextricable tangle of logs or wind-leveled timber, and Larry felt as if he were pinned beneath such a mass.

The moment was appalling, because it was new in his experience. He could give only a wry smile to the recollection that it was with this very thing in view he had left the camp only a week before.

"But I never figured on starting a drive without corked shoes," was the thought that accompanied the smile. "And on a river that's all white water. If I go off this log——"

He jumped to his feet and the sight of the telegram he had written afforded something on which he could snub his whirling thoughts. He

picked it up and went in search of the timekeeper.

With the sending of the message Larry knew he must prepare for the coming of the crew and he hurried to the warehouse. There, in sorting out a mass of wall tents, blankets and miscellaneous camp paraphernalia, he began to force the events of the afternoon into their true perspective. When he returned to the office he found Hughie Knowles seated at his desk.

"How things going at the camp?" Larry asked.

"Fine mess you left me in," the old prospector growled. "I'll be the one that has to paddle the camera around now."

"But Miss Kerr will want to go fishing."

"If she was there I wouldn't mind, but she's gone back to The States."

"When did she leave?" Larry asked in astonishment.

"This afternoon. I brought her out yesterday with Franklin. She stayed at Sabawi and caught the train there. Been some sort of a ruckus, I guess."

"Ruckus—how?"

"I don't know. The girl and her aunt didn't have much to say to each other after you left and yesterday, when Marcia told how she was going to Chicago with her uncle, why Mrs. Franklin flew off the handle. From the sounds I heard, and what Jane lets me know, she lit into the girl pretty savage and Franklin had to call her off."

Larry made no comment. He did not understand and he felt sorry for Marcia.

"I don't know what it was about," Hughie continued, "but I'm with the girl whatever it was. She runs a lot to the ton, she does, and her aunt—well, I wouldn't trust her far's I can kick a ten-stamp mill. There's just two kinds of married women in the world, those like Mrs. Wade and like Marie Lightner. I'll leave the gradin' of Mrs. Franklin to you."

Again Larry was silent. He knew Hughie to be a shrewd old man and he recognized in his last statement a possible invitation to confidences.

"Franklin set you to running this outfit?" Hughie asked after a pause.

"About an hour ago."

"I suspected something like that. He's talked to me about you quite a bit."

Once more Larry had no comment to make and Hughie glanced at him sharply.

"Ought to be easy," he said.

"Three of them's been backed up by the current."

"Two soaks and a skirt-chaser!" Hughie snorted contemptuously. "This job's no different'n any other. There's something to be done and you go and do it. If one of those Galicians out there quit shoving boards for a minute you'd give him his time, wouldn't you?"

Larry grinned.

"Well, you're shoving men instead of boards, is all."

Larry turned to the window. The hour spent in the warehouse, pawing over musty camp equipment in preparation for the crew he intended to start rossing the logs that lay in the swamp, had brought no peace of spirit. Franklin had gone. He was alone, and the magnitude of the task had mounted far higher than his enthusiasm out there on the lumber pile.

He wondered if Hughie understood something of this, if that was why he had stopped at the mill, why he had spoken as he did. He was aware of Hughie's kindness and of his wisdom and he knew that with the old man's words his mind had cleared. It was simply a case of "shoving boards," all the time, vigorously and with intelligence.

"Yes," he laughed, "and I never hear a whistle blow."

"Only fellows with callouses on their hands ever do," Hughie retorted gruffly. "What's the chances for supper and breakfast and a bed?"

"As long as you live, old-timer."

CHAPTER XIII

—Partners

Larry Vail took charge of the mill on the twelfth of July. The season had begun early in May and in more than two months only two million feet had been cut, an average of less than thirty-five thousand a day. The mill had a capacity of a little better than fifty thousand and Larry determined first of all that he would keep it up to this mark and finish the cut before September.

When his rossing crew began to straggle in at the end of the second day, he had already established a tent camp close to the huge skidways more than fifteen miles south of the mill and three days after he assumed command the bark had been removed from the first log.

But his efforts to save the four million feet lying in the swamp occupied little of his time in those first two days. From whistle to whistle he was in the mill, prowling about, watching, studying, and it was the men, rather than saws and machinery, that occupied his attention. At the end of those two days he caught a night freight for Port Arthur. The next evening he brought back an engineer, a head sawyer, a millwright, a filer and a dozen millmen.

"Probably not one of 'em's any better," he told the timekeeper, "but that old crew got into a bad way of doing things. Nobody else cared whether the mill paid or not and there wasn't any reason why they should. This new outfit will give us some ginger."

The next day the cut ran a little better than fifty thousand. There were no shut-downs. The increased stream of lumber from mill to yard found the Galician laborers unable to handle it. Larry wired to Port Arthur for more men, preferably Russians, and this new crew, numerically the same, had no trouble in keeping things moving.

Thus, in a week, he had accomplished the two things necessary—started the work of salvaging the four million feet of logs in the swamp and reorganized the mill on an efficient basis. Those men he had not replaced caught the idea quickly and the old hit-or-miss attitude was gone.

Absorbed in this task, Larry had given little heed to an incident that occurred the morning after he took charge. He was alone in the office before

the gong sounded for breakfast. The door opened and Rene Lacrodaire walked up to the counter.

"You'll want to be giving me my time," he said.

"Why?" Larry asked.

"I'm not going to wait and let you hand it to me before the whole crew," was the surly retort.

"I hadn't thought of doing that," Larry answered simply.

There was no idea of baiting Rene. The boyish spirit of unrest that had prompted his taunts that late winter day was gone. His mind was occupied wholly with his new task. There was no depression now, for that brief talk with Hughie had served to steady him. He was buoyant, eager to begin work.

"Then what have you thought of doing?" Rene demanded.

"I haven't had time to think about you at all," Larry answered with a grin.

He realized instantly that he was on the wrong tack. For a moment the impish twist in his nature had forced itself to the front.

"Look here, Lacrodaire," he continued, his tone harsh. "I don't know how you're feeling or what you're thinking—and I don't care. You had a job here before I came and anything you've got against me personal don't make any difference. We're both working for Franklin and all he cares about is getting things done.

"Now you're driving team and I've seen you working with horses enough to know you're a good man. If you want your time you can have it, and if you want to stick along you can. How about it?"

There was something so impersonal in his statement that Lacrodaire was startled. He had been prepared for almost anything else.

"Well, which you going to do?" Larry insisted.

"I guess I stick," the man said.

"All right. Hook up to the tote wagon after breakfast and bring it to the warehouse. I'm going to put out a crew rossin' those logs Bagnall left on the skidways last winter, twenty men. Pick out a good helper, load on the tents, blankets and a cook outfit and fix up a camp in a good place. You can do it and get back to-morrow night."

Larry turned to find a list of supplies he had made and did not see the swift change of expression in Lacrodaire's face. Nor, after Rene had taken the list and departed, did he realize what he had done. Actually, the effect of the scene in the swamp had been repeated. Once more the French Canadian's will had bowed to a stronger, again revealing to Rene the extent of his own cowardice.

The timekeeper was retained because he was familiar with the office work, but after a week his sudden increase of energy waned. He went to Sabawi one morning to get the mail and send a telegram and when night came he had not returned.

Hughie Knowles, making his weekly trip to Sabawi, stopped at the mill for supper and an evening with Larry. He spoke of having seen the timekeeper in the bar and then added:

"Jack Hinton and I can handle things now all right."

"What's Sid been doing?" Larry demanded.

"Nothing. Only he's good at figures and there's one thing I'm sure of. If that boy ever grows a beard it'll be you that pushes the hair out."

"I didn't intend to leave him there."

"All right. I'll send him up in a day or two. There's this about it. He likes you. Best thing about him, and the only thing that stands between him and hell. I'm willing to help, but I never did have the right disposition for a wet nurse."

Like any youth of twenty-one, Sid Evans was sufficiently gregarious to welcome the change in employment. He could get to Sabawi every day, mingle with the mill crew and, with a position in the office, stand a little aloof. Also, he was genuinely glad to be with Larry again.

"You're a lucky stiff!" he exclaimed as he looked around the office. "I knew you could get the women, but I don't see how you fooled a man like Franklin."

"I don't either, but it's helped us both," Larry grinned. "You were always wanting a chance to let your hands get soft and now I can throw it your way. Grab hold of that time book and I'll take you through and show you how its done."

Sid fitted into the job quickly and well. He looked after and checked supplies for the mill and the rossing camp, wrote orders, made out time checks and relieved Larry of all routine office duties. Larry was gratified. He

was even a little in awe of Sid's speed with figures and his nonchalant manner of writing business letters.

And it was pleasant to share the room above the office, to have again a partner, to eat their meals together in the cook camp, to be able to fall into the free banter of their bootless days, sure of a quick understanding and an answering spirit of mischief.

Nowhere is that relationship more important than among tieless, kinless men shut off from the normal expression of social instincts, driven to manifest through faith in and loyalty to one another that part of their natures which under other circumstances would be absorbed by a family. Often the recipient of such devotion may be unworthy, as a woman may be unworthy, but the spirit which maintains it makes of that friendship a beautiful thing.

"The lad's a moose at the job," Larry boasted to Hughie.

"Huh!" the old prospector grunted. "Say! Did Mrs. Franklin ever tell you how long she's going to stay?"

"No."

"I don't see what she hangs on there for. Sits around reading most of the time. Got a grouch like a ten-year-old tabby cat."

"Doesn't she take any more pictures?" Larry asked.

"Narry a picture since you left. I wish she'd up and leave so we'd have some peace again."

"When are those other men in with Franklin on the camp coming up?"

"That's more trouble. Two of them will be here with their wives this week. Got a letter to-day. Walker Trant and Landis Brooks. Then there's another one, from Toronto, Jefferson Shand. He hasn't got a wife."

"Sid's still buzzing around Jane," Larry laughed. "Last two Saturday afternoons he's beat it in a canoe."

"Jane won't speak to him," Hughie said.

"But what's Sid so crazy to get away for?"

"There's just one other female on the place," Hughie said, significantly.

Larry stared, but he made no comment.

"There's one thing about a woman when she gets to be thirty-five and hasn't got anything else to do," Hughie continued. "They like 'em young, too, and Sid's just enough of a fool kid to think it means he grades a lot."

Again Larry remained silent. He was troubled and angry.

"I was afraid for a while you'd make a fool of yourself there," Hughie said. "Marcia was worrying about it, too, though it was her aunt she worried about, not you."

"You mean she talked to you about it?" Larry demanded.

"No, she's not that sort. But I was with her quite a bit, fishing and paddling around, and there's some things you don't have to say or you can't keep hid. But you—I told her a few things and she quit worrying."

Larry gave no thought to Hughie's last remark. He was disturbed by what he had learned of Sid. He remembered having talked to Relda Franklin about his friend and that she had expressed a dislike for him. Now, in Sid's visits to the camp, he saw a thrust at himself and for the first time he felt resentment toward her.

He did not have to wait long to see the effects. Already Sid had lost the first interest in his new job. His morning trips to Sabawi for mail began to require more and more time. Larry suspected, and soon learned, that he was hanging over the hotel bar. Once or twice he was not entirely sober upon his return.

Their personal relations also suffered through this change in Sid's attitude. Gradually a caustic note crept into Sid's banter and there were flares of the jealousy Larry had seen at the camp.

"Stick around and talk to yourself if you want to," Sid called back one evening as he flung himself out of the office when Larry refused to accompany him to Sabawi. "Who do you think cares? Franklin's forgotten he ever owned this dinky outfit. Did you suppose if he'd thought he had a chance to make money here he'd ever——"

"Put me in charge," Larry finished for him.

"Sure," Sid grinned. "All I'm kicking about is that you don't seem to get the joke. Any man that would talk pretty to him and be able to read his letters could have had the job."

Any natural resentment of Sid's words was killed in Larry by the knowledge that this was Relda Franklin's interpretation of the situation. Once he would have made an effort to overcome this childish petulancy, but now he was too busy. His time and energies were devoted to the mill. It was running smoothly, but the driving force came from him.

Each morning he stood beside the giant fly wheel as it made its first slow revolutions. During the day he was everywhere. Not a detail in the operation of the mill escaped him and in addition to keeping the crew to record work he was scheming constantly for the coming winter. Every few days he made flying trips to the rossing camp with a team of light harness horses hitched to a buggy. He watched the logs carefully and the progress of the work convinced him that the four million feet would be saved.

His Sundays were the longest, hardest days of the week. The mill was idle and he was up at dawn, spending the day along the logging road, devising ways of eliminating the almost imperceptible grade over the low height o' land. It was when on one of these excursions that he decided to speak to Sid.

"The fellow here before you was nearly three times as old as you and his bar bill was a month ahead of his pay check?" he began the next afternoon when Sid returned from Sabawi several hours late.

"Ain't I doing the work?" Sid flared. "You ain't got any kick coming. Want me to hang around and watch the wheels go 'round all day like you do?"

"You know what I mean. When did you send money to your mother last?"

"None of your damned business."

"Don't be a fool, Sid. It ain't my business in a way, but we've been chummin' up for quite a while now and you ought to know by this time how I feel."

"I don't know how you feel, but you *act* like an old hen with one chick. This job's going to your head. There won't be any living with you before long. Here's the mail. Letter from Burson. Maybe that'll take your mind off me for a while."

He took his time book and went out. He did not have the courage to say more, to reveal the resentment that had begun to flare, a resentment of Larry's popularity, of his success, of his ability to do things.

Larry absently sorted the mail. His thoughts were still on Sid as he began to read Burson's letter. Suddenly he sat up with a jerk.

"Mr. Franklin has disposed of his Minnesota holdings," the general manager wrote, "and in the future will confine his attention to his coast mills. This office is being moved at once to San Francisco. Because of the

distance, it has been decided that the entire management of the Ontario property will be turned over to you. This will entail no additional responsibility other than the disposal of the product, although matters of policy will be left more completely in your hands, while practically all decisions will have to be made by you rather than referred to this office."

Burson continued with a list of possible markets and suggestions as to keeping in touch with prices. He also said that all accounting would have to be done at the mill and that this overhead would no longer be charged against the Ontario property in the head office. There were other suggestions, some of which Larry did not clearly understand. He read the letter again and again, but only the principal fact remained in his mind—from growing tree to city lumber yard, the progress of logs and boards was now wholly in his hands.

He was still staring at the letter when Sid came in from checking his time book. Sid was sober now and he did not wish a resumption of the discussion from which he had fled.

"Ten days more and that saw won't be screeching," he said. "The boom's close to empty."

Larry did not seem to hear. He stared at his friend for a moment and then reached for a telegraph blank.

"Have a little pity," he wrote. "Send me a good bookkeeper, some fellow that can run an office, that knows your ways and is honest enough not to try to fool me. If he can run a typewriter, it's better."

"Here," he said when he had finished. "Get this off quick as you can. And try to come back without taking a drink, too."

There was something in Larry's tone and manner that warned Sid of the importance of the telegram. He looked at it as soon as he was out of sight of the office and determined to read Burson's letter. But that evening, when Larry was in the mill, a search of the desk failed to disclose it.

This was not entirely idle curiosity. Until the last few petulant outbursts, Larry had shared the details of the work with his friend. Sid knew, too, that he had presumed on Larry's forbearance in the manner in which he had discharged his duties. Like all weaklings, he found relief from his own conscience in a sense of injury because an important change, possibly one affecting his own position, was being kept from him.

"The big stiff!" he muttered. "The job's going to his head. There'll be no living with him pretty soon."

Larry was too busy to notice Sid's increased surliness. With a quick end of the season's cut assured, he drove harder than ever. To him, those logs in the boom were a heritage of the Bagnall days. He wanted them out of the way, wanted to start the winter's work with a clean slate.

The logging road, too, was a Bagnall heritage, one of the reasons for repeated failures to get logs from the limit to the mill. The two steam haulers had been unable to cope with the grade and, inefficiently managed, had always fallen down at crucial moments. For a time Larry had considered driving the logs down Moose Creek, which emptied into the bay in front of the mill. It would have been a sure and cheap method and his own river days made him scornful of the steam haulers. But Moose Creek, he knew, was out of the question. It drained a big swamp and there was no head of water for a drive.

The moment the last log was stripped of bark, Larry moved the rossing camp and crew to the point where he had decided to change the logging road. The Sundays spent in searching for a way around or through that height o' land had not changed his first quick survey. He would have to build two miles of new road and tear off the shoulder of a hill with dynamite, but it would eliminate the grade.

He now divided his time between the mill and the road camp. He gave no thought whatever to his new duties, to the marketing of the lumber that was piling up at the rate of more than fifty thousand feet a day. That, he knew, could wait until he had made the big preparations for the winter.

It became his habit to remain at the mill during the forenoon and then drive down to the road camp, where he watched and directed the work until supper, driving home after dark.

One night he returned later than usual, having waited to watch the effects of the blast that was to tear the end off a ridge, and it was after nine o'clock when he turned his team over to the stableman. There was a light in the office and he expected to find Sid there, but when he entered he stopped short. Marcia Kerr was sitting at his desk.

"Hello," she said. "I've been waiting for hours."

"What's the matter?" he asked, his amazement preventing even a return of her greeting. "Hughie forget to meet you?"

"No, I'm not going to the camp."

She paused a moment and he caught that whimsical light in her eyes.

"You see," she continued, "I'm the fellow that's honest enough not to try to fool you, and I can run a typewriter."

CHAPTER XIV

—Marcia Gets the Job

The realization that Marcia Kerr had been sent to be bookkeeper at the mill was sufficiently astounding to steady Larry's thoughts and his mind leaped at once to the possible consequences. These were mostly personal and dealt with Marcia alone, and he did not like the idea. Not only had he never met women in industry, but a small saw mill in the wilderness was, he knew, a rather rough proposition, especially for a girl like Howard Franklin's niece.

He was still standing outside the counter and his eyes clouded as the immediate situation occurred to him. There was no place for her to sleep. It was late. The girl should never have been allowed to come.

"Why did your uncle send you?" he demanded with some irritation.

"Uncle Howard didn't want me to come," she answered. "He wanted me to stay in Chicago or go to San Francisco. But I didn't want that. You can't start fresh in an old place or with people you've always known."

"Start fresh!" Larry repeated, and then he recalled what Hughie had related of the trouble between Marcia and her aunt. He made a quick effort to get away from what he felt was a delicate subject.

"You wait here!" he exclaimed. "I'll get the team before it's unharnessed. You'll have to go to Sabawi to-night."

He ran out the door and down to the stable. When he returned he drove the light buggy used in his trips down the tote road. Marcia came to the door.

"I'll take you up to Mrs. Wade's," he said. "There's no place here for you. To-morrow we can decide what to do. You're sure you want to stay?" he ended hesitantly.

"I not only want to, but I must," she answered decisively. "I've taken the job. What's the matter? You don't seem to want me here."

Larry had helped her into the buggy and got in beside her.

"I wasn't thinking of what I wanted," he said as the horses started. "It doesn't seem like a place for a woman, is all, with just a lot of men. A saw mill isn't a Sunday school."

"I don't expect it to be," Marcia answered. "The only thing I'm interested in is conducting the office efficiently."

Larry was silent as he drove past the stables and blacksmith shop and turned into the road to town. He could not reconcile himself to the idea of a woman in the office. It was not only incongruous but, to him, appalling.

"I—I don't like it," he said. "It don't seem right."

"Look here, Mr. Vail," she said severely, "you're in charge of this mill and you're my boss. If you don't want me here, you can fire me. That's up to you entirely. The last thing I want is to hold onto a job because I'm Howard Franklin's niece. My relationship to the owner of the mill has nothing whatever to do with the situation."

"Fire you! Why, I couldn't do that!"

"You can. You have the right, and I know Uncle Howard well enough to realize that he'd never interfere or let it influence his opinion of you or your work. I'll quit right now and go back to Chicago if you are going to let my relationship to the owner affect you in any way. Are you?"

"Good gosh!" Larry exclaimed, but his attempt to be facetious did not hide his confusion. "I don't know whether you're any good or not."

"Then you ought to give me a fair trial," she said quickly. "That's only right, isn't it?"

"But that isn't what's worrying me."

"What's worrying you is my own personal affair."

Larry drove on in silence for a time and then he laughed.

"We ain't going to have a very peaceful office if we start off fighting like this," he said. "I won't dare go near it."

"I'm only fighting to get into it," she answered, still unmollified. "I'll be just an adding machine and a typewriter to-morrow. But isn't there a place for me to live? I can't come to Sabawi every night."

"There's Mrs. Osland, the filer's wife. He gets twenty dollars a day and they're both fine people. They live in a little shack, but they've got an extra

room and maybe you can live there. It's the only place. I'll speak to Ed in the morning."

Mrs. Wade had only a formal greeting for Marcia and characteristically began at once to scold Larry.

"You're the last person I ever thought would get stuck up over a good job," she began. "Have you forgotten all your old friends? It's a month since you've been here, and the mill only three miles away."

"I've got to be careful who I associate with," Larry told her. "There's a lot of men working down there and I've got to set 'em a good example. I can't go calling on single ladies or widows."

"Just married ones!" she snorted. "I've heard about your goings-on with Mrs. Osland but you needn't think you're making such a hit. She says you're getting to be a regular pest the way you hang around meal times."

"She certainly can cook. Next to your place, I'd rather eat there than anywhere I know. But I always remember some of the times Hughie and I've got in late and you set out a lunch for us."

"I can't get around that hint," Mrs. Wade snapped. "Run over to the bar before it closes and get a couple of bottles of beer. I'll have it ready in no time."

Marcia was alone in the sitting room when Larry returned.

"There's the finest woman that ever ironed a shirt," he whispered.

"Hughie used to tell me about her," the girl said. "Only he described her as the finest that ever peeped into an oven."

"Don't make any mistake about her though," Larry laughed. "They don't come any finer. If you have her for a friend you're safe in this country."

"I like her immensely," Marcia insisted. "Only I don't think she likes me."

"Give her time."

Marcia was astounded by the magnitude of the "lunch" Mrs. Wade placed on the table in the dining room. At the camp, where she and her aunt had eaten alone, she had not come in contact with the real north woods appetite, and she marveled, too, at the amount Larry ate. Her own hunger was slight and Larry saw how little food she took.

"She'll get over that," he laughed. "After she's spent a winter here she won't be so dainty with her grub."

"A winter!" Mrs. Wade exclaimed in frank amazement. "You're not going to spend the winter at that camp?"

"I had been expecting to be sent back to Chicago to-morrow," Marcia answered demurely, "but now Mr. Vail seems to think I can stay."

"*Mister* Vail!" Mrs. Wade sniffed. "What has he to say about it?"

"You see, he's my boss. I came to work at the mill, only he doesn't want me there."

Mrs. Wade turned and cooly surveyed Marcia. Until then she had been only civil to the girl. Now her eyes were wide with interest.

"You mean you came up to work in the office?" she demanded.

"Yes."

"Larry, why can't she work there if she wants to?"

Larry stammered and blushed.

"He thinks it's not a fit place for a woman," Marcia said.

"Not a fit place! Doesn't Mrs. Osland live there? Aren't there half a dozen mill men living there with their wives?"

"Galicians," Larry interposed.

"Galicians or not, if it isn't a fit place for a girl, whose fault is it, Larry Vail? You're boss, and if you can't make it decent you ought to be ashamed."

She reached over and patted Marcia's shoulder reassuringly.

"Not fit! I've lived in every sort of place in the bush and they can all be made fit. You let me know the moment anything happens and I'll get after this young scoundrel."

Larry was now left out of the conversation. Marcia was taken under Mrs. Wade's protecting wing. The girl responded at once to this sympathetic interest, even as she wondered if the fact that she was a wage earner and not an idler had been responsible for the quick change.

"You go home now," the landlady said to Larry. "And remember what I told you."

"All right," he said. "I'll be up in the morning."

"Don't come too early," Mrs. Wade commanded. "That's a long, hard trip from Chicago and this girl is tired. She's going to have a late breakfast."

She shooed Larry out of the house and as his horses' hoofs sounded on the road she was conducting Marcia to her room.

"Now you sleep as late as you feel like," she said. "Don't get up until I call you. I'll bring some warm water and a cup of tea. Will you be warm enough? I'll get another blanket. The young scamp! Not a fit place for a girl! It'll be his fault if it isn't. I've lived among these 'rough' men all my life and there's none safer. Don't let him worry you."

"I'm not," Marcia laughed. "I only hope I can do the work. It's my first job, you know."

"Of course you can do it. Larry wouldn't be able to tell if you didn't. All he knows is logs."

"How long has he been running the mill?" Marcia asked.

"How long? Didn't you know he took hold the day you and your uncle left?"

"Uncle never talks about his business. I didn't know until the day before I started that Larry was to be my—my boss."

Mrs. Wade looked at the girl and smiled.

"Quick switch from last summer, isn't it?" she said. "Larry will be giving the orders, not taking them. It won't do him any harm, though. But here I am chattering away like a red squirrel when you ought to be in bed. A person can't get any rest in those sleeping cars."

She stopped with an awkward little gesture and a tentative step forward and then turned to the door. Marcia, knowing that here was something very genuine, and feeling suddenly much alone and not a little afraid of all that lay before her, darted forward impulsively and placed an arm around the older woman.

"You're a dear!" she exclaimed, and kissed Mrs. Wade on the cheek.

"Bless your heart! I'm just a rough old woman. Good night."

When Larry arrived the next morning Mrs. Wade met him at the door.

"Now listen to me," she began. "If any man down at that mill even looks at Marcia in a funny way, or says 'damn' in front of her, you'll answer to me for it."

"Yes, ma'am," Larry said meekly. "But Hughie stops there every week."

She struck at his face with her open palm but he had expected that very thing. He darted inside the blow, seized her about the waist, lifted her through the door and began waltzing her around the room.

"Boys, oh boys!" he exclaimed after he had dropped her, panting, into a chair. "I wish I'd been fifty years older. Horace Wade never'd had a chance."

"Fifty!" she cried, and she threw so quickly that the heel of her slipper caught him on the forehead and cut the skin. "There! That serves you proper. What did Mrs. Osland say?"

"It's all right."

"That's a worry off my mind. Now you run over to the store and wait a while. Marcia is getting up."

"But I'm not going to take her down to-day. I've got to fix up an office for her and Mrs. Osland wants a couple of days to get in shape. Besides, I'm busy. There's only two days' cut at the mill and I'm away most of the time on the logging road."

Before he left that morning Larry had put the millwright and another man to work on a small room back of the office. He had already sent a telegram to Port Arthur, ordering a desk, chairs, typewriter and other office fittings to be forwarded immediately by express and he was commissioned by Mrs. Osland to buy certain things of Dave Conner.

The afternoon of the second day after her arrival, Marcia and Mrs. Wade walked down the track to the mill. Marcia met Mrs. Osland, a quiet but friendly middle-aged woman who accepted her coming as a most ordinary event.

"We're just camping out here," she explained, "and you'll have to put up with what we do."

"How wonderful!" the girl exclaimed when she saw her room. It was bright with the new curtains and counterpane, the flowered coverings of the dressing table, made of a packing case, and the hangings of the shelves. "I hope you didn't go to any trouble for me."

"Not a bit. We have to do with what we can get in the bush. I hope you'll be comfortable."

"I know I will be," Marcia said. "I think I am very fortunate."

A little later she left Mrs. Wade and Mrs. Osland and walked over to the office. Sid was there, checking up his time book. Marcia offered her hand when she greeted him and he took it awkwardly.

"Your office is ready," he said as he pointed to the room at the rear. "The furniture came to-day."

Marcia went to the door and stopped in surprise.

"Mr. Vail shouldn't have done this!" she exclaimed.

"He never fixed up any place for me." Sid said.

Marcia looked around at the clean walls.

"Has this been your office?" she asked.

"We've used the front room."

She asked about Hughie and the camp but did not speak of her aunt. Sid noticed this and after a moment he said abruptly:

"I suppose you're going out to see Mrs. Franklin Sunday?"

"I don't believe I'll have time," Marcia answered evenly. "Will Mr. Vail be in this afternoon?"

"He generally stays with the road crew for supper. I'm going down to the camp Saturday night and if you want to—"

A blast of the mill whistle stopped him. It became a series of blasts, then a prolonged screech. Sid ran out the door and across the track. After inspecting the new furniture, Marcia went back to Mrs. Osland's. The mill whistle was still blowing and Mrs. Osland and Mrs. Wade had come outside.

"The last log's sawed," Marcia's new landlady said. "Quickest cut they ever had here."

"Larry's made things hum," Mrs. Wade agreed, "though from what I hear that man of yours had something to do with it."

"Ed's been filing for twenty years and he's never had a weld break on him yet," Mrs. Osland said in a quiet tone that gave dignity to the pride it expressed. "I think it would most kill him if one did."

Marcia glanced quickly at her new landlady. Life had trained the girl to see drama only in executive achievement and responsibility. Now she suddenly realized how that achievement and responsibility are shared by the man who works with his hands, and who works efficiently because his self-respect demands it.

Her uncle had once been of that class. It was the humanizing tie between him and Larry and now the same thing bound Larry to these people and made his triumph theirs. She found herself possessed of a desire to tell the women she understood, but Mrs. Wade was speaking.

"And now the twenty dollars a day stops?"

"Yes," Mrs. Osland said. "Ed will get only four and a half until spring—machinist. But I'm glad for Larry's sake the season's over. Ed says he never saw so much ginger around a mill before. And if Larry get's the logs out this winter we'll have a long season next year."

"Don't you fret!" Mrs. Wade exclaimed. "Larry'll get the logs out if he has to carry them on his back. Come, Marcia. We've got to be going. Once was I didn't think anything of three miles but now it seems like a hundred."

On the way back to Sabawi, Marcia was silent for a time. Two things were responsible, and Sid was the cause of one. She had caught his obvious hint in speaking of her aunt and a visit to the camp. He undoubtedly knew something of what had happened the morning of her departure with her uncle.

The others, she realized, Mrs. Wade, Larry and Mrs. Osland, must have wondered at her reappearance in the role of bookkeeper and stenographer. They had known her only as the indolent niece of a wealthy man. Yet not once, by suggestion or by cleverly worded question, had they attempted to learn what lay back of her action.

It had been no easy task for Marcia to leave her uncle and, when she had started northward, when cities and farms had given way to small, ugly settlements and desolate expanses of forests, her courage had been sapped. Not only did she fear the dreariness of the life she faced, but there came grave doubts of her ability to handle the office work.

Now, instead of dreariness, she had found kindness and consideration of a type she had never known, and in Larry, Mrs. Wade and Mrs. Osland, she saw possibilities of friendship that could be very precious. The thought not only dispelled her fears, but it wrung an expression of gratitude from her lonely heart.

"You know," she exclaimed, "I'm going to be very happy here!"

"Of course you will, child."

"And I want to explain something," Marcia rushed on impulsively, "because you have been so kind, so—so considerate. It's about my coming. I

know it seems mysterious, but it isn't. I came— —"

"Better wait a while," Mrs. Wade interrupted. "I'd rather travel the roughest trail in the bush than these ties. I don't see why they couldn't put 'em just a little farther apart."

"It's not serious," Marcia insisted. "Uncle Howard has taken care of me ever since my mother died when I was a little girl. That was just before he was married. He has given me everything. He's been wonderful, but—I couldn't go on that way. I wanted to earn my own living, to be independent. I had to!"

The last was said with sudden fierceness, and Mrs. Wade, who had seen Relda Franklin and had talked to Hughie, believed she understood.

"They all say it's the only way to be happy in this world," the older woman said quickly, "but it's nothing to get excited about. Most everybody works."

"But it's unusual for me," Marcia laughed, "and you've been so kind I wanted to tell you about it. It was just by chance that I came here and I'm so glad I did. You've all been so nice. But a city is— —"

"Nonsense! We're no different than city folks. Books try to make us out different, but we're just ordinary humans. There's fewer of us, is all, and we take time to help a neighbor because a neighbor's a neighbor and not just somebody living next door."

Marcia slipped an arm through Mrs. Wade's and squeezed it.

"Hughie once told me you were a fraud," she said, "and now I believe it."

CHAPTER XV

—"*Same Little Devil*"

Marcia and Mrs. Wade had walked to the mill on Friday. The next morning all the men who would not be needed were paid off and at noon Sid Evans' work was finished for the day. Marcia had already been established in her office and immediately after dinner Larry drove off to the road camp. Sid walked down the railroad track a few miles and then turned off south to where he had a canoe hidden near a lake. Before supper time he had reached the camp.

From the porch Relda Franklin saw him paddle into the bay and she walked down to the shore, arriving there as he was pulling his canoe up beside the dock.

"You look tired," she said softly. "But you are going to be rewarded for your long paddle. See how I greet you."

She held out a small silver flask, smiling as she looked at him but her eyes were not an intense blue. They were gray—cold, too, as Sid tipped back his head and drank.

"Well," he began abruptly, "I've got a surprise for you to-day."

"Surprise," she repeated. "You're very nice to me."

"You won't think so. Marcia's back."

Relda gasped and her face went white.

"She'll not come out here!" she exclaimed fiercely.

"She don't intend to. She's staying at the mill. Got a room at Mrs. Osland's."

"The little cat!" Relda muttered. "I might have known it."

"What's that?" Sid asked.

"Nothing. I was surprised, of course, though I don't know why I should have been. How long does she intend to stay?"

"Until she gets fired, I guess."

"Fired! What do you mean?"

"She's going to work there. Larry's fixed up an office for her. Sent to Port Arthur for new desk and things. Had the millwright and another—"

"Work there!" Relda interrupted. "At what?"

"Search me. Maybe she's going to have my job. There's nothing else. I been handling all the office work so far and now the mill's shut down till spring."

Relda stared across the bay. Her face was hard, but her eyes were brilliant.

"Listen!" she began abruptly. "You get the mail every day. Has she been writing to him before she came?"

"That's the funny part of it. Larry hasn't had a letter from anybody except the office in Chicago."

"But she could have used that stationery and a typewriter."

"No chance. I know what was in every letter he got, except one. He answered that by wire, asking Burson for a bookkeeper, and then in a few days she comes."

"Just as I thought," Relda said. "She's done it. She can wind her uncle around her finger. Knew it wouldn't do her any good to stay here with me, so she schemed around and got him to give her the excuse of a job at the mill."

Again she stared across the bay for a long time. Sid took another drink and slipped the flask into his pocket.

"I'll see you on the verandah after dinner," Relda said abruptly, and she turned and hurried up the trail.

Sid found Hughie in the men's camp and learned that Jack Hinton, who had taken Larry's place, was in Sabawi but was expected back that night with one of the club members.

"Thank God it's one without a wife," Hughie growled. "Nobody but a bachelor ought to start a place like this."

Sid told of Marcia's arrival, watching the old prospector closely as he did so, but Hughie smoked in silence. At the end he arose and went out to supper.

Later, in the dusk, Sid joined Relda on the porch. Previous experience had told him they would not be disturbed and he drew a chair close to hers.

But even in the darkness he sensed a hardness, a coldness. There was none of that soft, entrancing allure that had completely turned his head a month earlier, that had made him forget Jane and had driven him to long hours at the paddle each week.

"Sid," she began abruptly, "what are you going to do now that the mill is shut down?"

"That's just it. With Marcia there I don't see what there is for me unless I keep time in the camp this winter."

"In the camp!" she exclaimed. "You mean you'll let Larry send you out to a filthy logging camp for the winter?"

"He's the boss," and Sid shrugged his shoulders.

"Boss, yes! And you—" she broke off and when she resumed speaking her tone was more normal. "When will he start the camp?"

"Not until late, probably. It'll be a small outfit this winter because he's got the four million feet that he rossed. He'll cut only as much more."

"And the road you told me about? Is that finished?"

"Just about."

"And you say the mill has closed?"

"Yesterday. Quickest cut ever made there. Oh, Larry's sitting pretty with Franklin, all right. He's turned the trick."

"You mean he has really succeeded?"

"There's no stopping him now."

Sid felt her stiffen in her chair. For a long time she was silent. When she began to speak again there was suppressed anger in her voice.

"Of course he's sitting pretty with Franklin. He's always sitting pretty because he's always watching out for himself. He doesn't care what happens to anyone else, so he gets what he wants. And you! You let him fool you, use you. He pretends to watch out for you, to help you. But do you know what he's doing to you all the time?"

The question came with such explosive force that Sid did not comment.

"You had an equal start, didn't you?" she continued. "You had the advantage, really, for you have a better education. But look where Larry is now, and where you are. He pretends to watch out for you, tells everyone

how he has to do it. What are people going to think of you? They'll think you need a guardian, that you're not fit to do things by yourself.

"Listen to me, boy!" and she leaned closer in the darkness. "You're too clever to be fooled by a man like that. Larry is selfish and he is ruthless. See what's happened now. Marcia was crazy about him last summer. She left here as quickly as she could after he did. And now what has she done? She comes back to be a *bookkeeper*. Larry makes it possible, and how? By kicking you out of a job you've proved you can handle. Instead of going up, you go down—back to a filthy lumber camp."

Sid did not comment. It was not an entirely new thought. His discontent, aroused by her clever innuendoes, had prepared him for such a suggestion and he was ready to accept it. Relda arose and stood over him.

"He has never fooled me," she said. "I saw enough of him this summer and I can't have any respect for a man who lets Larry Vail use him as a dupe."

"He hasn't fooled me!" Sid exclaimed.

"You've never shown he hasn't. That's what counts. I like you, boy, and I can do a lot for those I like, but—" she paused significantly,—"you'll have to show me you're worth the liking."

She turned away, then said:

"Run along now. I'm tired. I'll see you before you go back to-morrow."

Relda watched him disappear in the darkness and then turned quickly toward the lake. Her own cool senses had caught something Sid's dulled ears had missed and now she heard voices at the dock. In a moment she saw the dim outline of two figures coming up the trail. She drew back into a dark corner and remained motionless as they passed through the wide porch to the living room. There were voices inside and then someone went on through the kitchen and out the back door.

She moved toward the door of the living room, from which a light now streamed. A man appeared there, tall, thickset, wide-shouldered.

"Good evening, Mr. Shand," she said softly.

He started, then came quickly forward into the darkness.

"Hello!" he called. "How's the girl? Was afraid you wouldn't be up."

He could not see, having just come from the lighted room, and walked with arms outstretched. Relda slipped between them and they closed about

her.

"Same little devil," he chuckled. "I'm going to pick you up and run away with you some day if you don't stop this."

"That would be wonderful," she whispered.

"Yes, wonderful while the money lasts. You and I are too old and too wise—I'm the old one—to believe in that love-in-a-cottage stuff. Cupid can dazzle the young ones but with you and me—we want too many fancy trimmings. Our tastes have been so intensively cultivated."

"That isn't true!" she protested passionately. "Women aren't that way. Only one thing counts with them."

"Yes, I now. How long since you've washed a dish or darned a sock? Oh, I remember you showed me some paddle blisters one day, but a broom handle—that's different. You could squeeze along on love and fifty thousand a year, or even on the fifty thousand."

"Then why don't you go out and get the fifty thousand?" she demanded. "Other men have done it."

"Yes. Howard, for instance. By the way, did you find out if he is still in California and if there's any chance of his getting back before the hunting season?"

"He writes that he can't."

"Probably true. I've got it pretty straight that he has sold out in Minnesota and is going to confine his attention to his coast properties."

"Then he'll sell out here, too?" Relda asked quickly.

"It's a dinky thing. I don't know why he should hang onto it." Shand paused a moment and then added: "He might be urged to let loose."

"How do you mean?"

He leaned forward and spoke in a whisper.

"Look here, Relda! You're planning a raid—settlement and alimony and all that. I could spoil your little game."

"But Jefferson! You wouldn't!"

"Why not? I'm a pirate. Always have been. I have all the instincts of a pirate. Women, money, saw mills—they're all the same to me, in a way. I like 'em better when I've stolen 'em."

"You mean you have planned to steal the mill?"

"Didn't you give me the idea? And if you do anything to queer my raid I'll queer yours."

"But how can you steal it?" Relda demanded.

"What about it? You going to play square?"

"I have to. You know too much already."

Her voice trembled. She displayed every evidence of fear.

"I thought so," he chuckled. "You and I ought to make a good pair, Relda. Too bad we didn't meet before. When I came up here last month I didn't have an idea of anything beyond a week of back-to-nature stuff, and here I've plunked right into you and—and fortune."

He leaned forward and spoke confidentially, without the freebooters accent and manner.

"A good pair! You're one of the very few women I ever saw that had the looks *and* brains. I don't know yet which you have the most of. And we're not puppy and kitten any longer—just chasing the soft yarn ball of love around the floor. We've got to have more. That first kick, it comes only once. After that—you've got to find something else—dope it up. And you and I—we can do that. Can't we, old girl?"

"I wish you wouldn't call me 'old girl'."

"You ought to be glad I do. It shows I'm absolutely honest with you. I'm forty, the best age for a man, the time he really begins to live. And you—I've got you beat about five years, and you're right where I am, at the best age for a woman."

"But I'm—"

"Hush! I've checked up. And I'll say this—my first guess was thirty-two."

She reached across and patted his hand.

"You're wrong, Jefferson," she said in a soft voice. "I don't believe I have passed the kitten stage, as you call it, with you. I think you could make me do most anything."

"I don't want to!" he exclaimed with a laugh that failed to hide his exultation. "I want to give you both. And when I've put through this deal I think I can."

"You mean you might fail?"

"Fail! Do you know why these fellows, Knox and Brooks and Trant and Franklin, took me into this camp? It was because I could put through the deal at Toronto, get the grant for them. And Franklin's timber limit that he took over with Bagnall's mill—I got that for Bagnall and I know how it was done."

"Then you are only going to have the government take it away from him?" Relda asked quickly.

"Practically that, though I don't think he'll suspect. In any event, he'll never suspect me. Oh, it's a smooth proposition. In fact, he'll think Toronto is being very generous with him until—until he wakes up."

"And without the timber he'll have to sell the mill," Relda said.

"As scrap—to me."

"Are you sure it will go through?"

"The whole thing's fixed at Toronto. I have only to give the word and the mighty power of British justice will be set in motion. There's just one little thing I have to fix, and maybe you can help me."

"What is that?" Relda asked listlessly.

Her mind was already busy with other things. She had taken on none of Shand's exuberance. The carefully worked out campaign of weeks was ending in victory for another. The machinery she had set in motion to crush Larry Vail had been turned against her husband and would pass Larry by.

Coming on the heels of the news that Marcia was at the mill, it was galling. In the beginning she had been so confident. The age-old methods had ensnared Sid, then Shand, whose appearance and possibilities, so wholly unexpected, seemed to have been a propitious omen.

Relda had quickly divined Shand's type and usefulness in her campaign. With the cold cleverness of which she was capable, she had stimulated his cupidity with the thought of Larry's inexperience and the wholly unjustifiable trust of her husband in the young man.

"Just like giving a baby a mill to play with," she had laughed. "And Howard won't see it until it's been broken."

But the seeds of the scheme she had planted so carefully had blossomed in quite different form. Larry would now be discharged from all

responsibility in the disaster and Shand, of whom she had thought only as a dupe, would be the only gainer.

She did not resent his profits. Hatred of Larry and of Marcia left little room for other emotions. The solitary weeks there at the camp, brooding, scheming, had resulted in singleness of thought and of purpose. She was scarcely aware that Shand was answering her question.

"This fellow Vail," he whispered. "He used to work here. Paddled you around when you got those moose pictures, didn't he? You must know something about him. Can he be reached?"

Relda believed her heart had stopped beating. She did not answer for a moment and then she said casually:

"You can find him at the mill."

"I don't mean that way. What's his price? My scheme depends largely on him."

"Price?" she repeated.

"Sure. Every man has a price—or a weakness. You must know him pretty well. What's he want most? Money, women, or a soft job?"

Shame, anger and hatred swept over Relda in successive waves of numbing cold and fierce heat as she remembered her own attempt to "reach" Larry Vail. Then she became very calm with a surpassing joy. She had only to leave it to this man. In the end her plotting and brooding had resulted in victory.

"Why don't you try him with all three?" she suggested. "Or money and the soft job. They would permit the other."

"Wise girl!" Shand exclaimed. "It's easy to work the woman business in a city, but up here—By George! Why don't you try a little of the seductive stuff? You could make a lumberjack's head spin at a thousand revolutions a minute."

The darkness veiled Relda's expression but it could not stifle the little gasp or prevent a sensing of the stiffening of her body. It did hide Jefferson Shand's quick smile. The man was an artist in his nefarious methods, as sensitive as a woman to the most delicate impressions, as keen as a scientist for any clue or fact and as avaricious as a squirrel in sorting these away for future use.

"Handsome brute, they say," he continued casually. "Might amuse you."

"No!" she exclaimed so fiercely her own passion startled her into awareness of what she had done and she hurried on. "How can you ask such a thing Jefferson? I won't do it! Why—why, I couldn't."

"Don't boil over. I only thought it would provide a little entertainment. Jack Hinton told me on the way out that this is the first real job Vail ever had. Guess the money would reach him. They talk about the effect of gold on a man but it doesn't touch a big, fat roll of yellow boys. I've seen more'n one of 'em shed principles so fast it was funny."

"I have an idea," Relda said slowly. "I heard to-day that my niece is at the mill. Just arrived. Has some sort of job there. She was here this summer and she's crazy about Larry. Had Howard give her a job so she could see him. If she hasn't snared him already she soon will."

"I see," Shand added. "Girl raised in luxury. Poor young fellow with a case of puppy love. Wants to give her what she's been used to. They're easy, that kind, and the funniest. Try to hang onto their principles with one hand and reach for the money with the other. And lord, how they squirm! I'd like to be able to do this myself, just for the fun of watching him, but I've got to keep under cover. I hate to miss the fun."

Shand arose.

"Me to bed," he said. "I've got to get up in the morning and go fishing. Told Hinton that's why I came. How I hate it! Crazy over these lake trout that are just beginning to bite again, I am, and if there's anything I detest it's angling for the sort of fish that live in water."

He paced up and down for a moment and then sat down again beside Relda.

"I ought to get off a wire," he said, "but it would look queer if I sent Hughie or Jack with it just after arriving. They won't be going in for a week and I've got to start the wheels of justice to turning because Howard will be back here next month."

"There is a man here—was one of the guides," Relda told him. "He works at the mill now and he'll go back to-morrow."

"Fine! I'll go in and write it now as I may not be back from fishing in time. Ten dollars ought to keep his mouth shut."

Relda was not to be seen the next forenoon and Sid sulked alone in the men's camp. When he found her on the porch after luncheon he did not hesitate to voice his resentment.

"There's no fun in paddling thirty miles to be ditched for another fellow," he said.

Relda surveyed him coolly before she answered.

"In the first place, you were not ditched for another. In the second, what I said last night should have begun to percolate."

"You mean about Larry?"

"I mean about you. You're a nice boy and I like you, but you can't expect a very great appreciation of your manhood when you let Larry Vail walk over you rough shod or let him get away with his pretentious righteousness."

"What do you want me to do?" Sid grumbled. "Dig out and get a job somewhere else?"

"What would you gain by that?" she sneered. "Use your head. Wake up and be a man. You've been working for Howard Franklin a year, here and at the mill. He's a good man to work for. There's always room further up. Make a hit with him and there's no telling how far he will carry you. Ever think of that?"

"I've got a fine chance making a hit with him just keeping time in a lumber camp."

"Listen, simpleton!" she exclaimed derisively. "Haven't I tipped off Larry Vail to you. Haven't I shown you how he always puts himself first? Hasn't he shoved you down to make room for Marcia? Wouldn't he shove anyone down to get what he wants? If he'll do that to you, what will he do to his employer if he gets the opportunity? You ought to know that a man running a mill like that has more than one chance to benefit himself."

Sid looked up with a quick smile.

"I get you!" he exclaimed. "He'll have a hard time putting anything over that I'm not wise to, and if he does—"

"Well, well!" Relda laughed. "If he hasn't caught it at last."

She overreached herself there. Sid's vanity did not permit quite so much ridicule. She had implanted the desired thought cleverly enough. Sid's suspicions of Larry were aroused and he would be on the watch for the very thing Relda hoped would happen.

But Sid would not report to her as she had hoped. In arousing suspicion of Larry she had aroused the doubts of a weaker nature in all people, and he

felt, rather than saw, himself the dupe of the woman as well.

This thought did not take definite shape, however, until he was paddling back to the railroad. He believed he had been only a plaything, to be dropped with the coming of Shand. Suddenly he saw himself as a fool in his frequent visits to the camp.

His anger vented itself on Shand. He took the telegram from his pocket with the intention of tearing it up. The envelope was sealed.

" 'Fraid I'd read it!" he sneered, and tore it open.

He read the message twice without comprehension and at last thrust it back into a pocket. He had accepted the ten dollars and there might be trouble, but as he paddled on toward the railroad he wondered what it meant. The telegram was signed "Jeff" and was addressed to George Williams, in a Toronto office building. It read:

"*Heave the anchor and unfurl all the sails*."

CHAPTER XVI

—Submerged Rocks

Whatever ideas Larry may have had relative to the inadvisability, for personal reasons, of having Marcia Kerr employed at the mill, he was quickly forced to admit that otherwise her coming was an immeasurable benefaction. Spending all his time with the road crew, he saw little of her the first few days after she was established at Mrs. Osland's.

When that work was completed, a week after Marcia's arrival, he turned with considerable misgivings to the new task which had been given him.

Larry had never sold a thing in his life and there was a million and a half feet of lumber in the yard which must be disposed of. He had visions of himself going to Port Arthur and to Winnipeg, visiting lumber yards, diffidently asking hard-shelled business men if they wouldn't please buy a few boards. A million and a half feet, which to him was only a rollway in logs, became stupendous as the manufactured product.

One noon, after the road crew had received time checks and departed in the morning, Larry entered Marcia's office and sat down beside her desk.

"I suppose the next big job for me is to find something that will keep you busy," he began.

"I have been busy," she answered crisply. "In addition to the information Mr. Burson gave you in his letter, he outlined a number of things to me before I left. Also, the books for the Sabawi mill have arrived from Chicago and I have brought them up to date. We're now pretty well established as an independent concern, ready to do business."

"Which means selling lumber."

"Yes, and I've already prepared for that. First I went through the Bagnall books and our own and estimated what the lumber cost."

"It cost plenty," Larry laughed.

"It did. Luckily, prices have advanced in the last month or it would have been necessary to dispose of the cut at a loss. However, I believe we can show a small profit."

Larry did not comment. He was amazed by her industry, by her grasp of the situation, by her knowledge of conditions; but he also felt that her last statement had placed the matter up to him, that now he must act. Never in his life had he felt so helpless as he watched her quick fingers sorting papers on the desk.

"I have here," she continued as she held up a typewritten sheet, "a tally of what is now in the yard. Before leaving Chicago I ordered some trade journals and also daily papers from Winnipeg and Port Arthur to be sent here. In these I have gotten track of a couple of big construction jobs and have prepared bids. The telegrams are written. You had better look them over."

She handed him several sheets of paper. He read them through without getting more than a bare outline of their contents. He went through them again, slowly, forcing himself to grasp figures, but more than ever his mind was filled with thoughts of Marcia's efficiency.

"I checked through the books three times and I know the cost figures are right," she said when he made no comment. "I have the market price because I know you want to get things cleared up for a fresh start all around."

"But you've fixed the price of the stuff in the yard by Bagnall's cost," Larry said. "We didn't have to pay for getting out those logs."

"I know," Marcia agreed in the same crisp tone she had used from the beginning, "but you must remember, Mr. Vail, that we have to start somewhere. Those logs in the boom, when you assumed charge, didn't cost us a cent, in one respect, and in another they cost us fifty thousand dollars—the loss at which Uncle Howard took over the property."

They talked on for two hours. Larry's quick mind began to grasp business essentials. He became acquainted with interest charges, depreciation, overhead, market conditions, the nightmare of freight rates, "f. o. b. mill." He realized that the lumber industry offered a far bigger and more intricate problem than the mere getting of logs from the woods through the mill. Boyishly, and in the same manner in which he had tackled moose photography and that "one-week" job for Franklin, he became imbued with a zest for this greater and more absorbing game. The fear with which he had begun the day was gone.

"I think," he said at last, "that we had better not send these telegrams just yet. The lumber's not going to get away and maybe, if we go slow, we can get a better price. Every punch we can take at that fifty thousand will help."

He was silent for a moment and then he exclaimed impulsively:

"I want to take back all I said about your coming. I don't know what I'd a' done if you hadn't. When I came in here this afternoon I was scared to death. I didn't know any more about this end of the business than a rabbit, but now—well, you've shown you know all about it."

"Nonsense," Marcia said, and for the first time the formal, crisp tone was absent. "I know only the patter of business. The decisions, they are up to you."

"Just the same, I wouldn't know what to decide if you hadn't showed me how to go about it," he insisted.

Without comment she began to put away papers. Her uncle had told her that Larry would know nothing about the selling end of the business, that he would be ignorant even of ordinary business terms and procedure, and she had wondered that so much would be intrusted to him. But in that afternoon's talk she had begun to understand what Howard Franklin had meant, and why he had been confident when he had said:

"He won't be hampered by precedent. He'll be thinking about one thing only—results."

Marcia, despite her own quick mind and manner of straight thinking, and in the face of her uncle's apparent confidence, had been a little scornful of Larry's ignorance of many things. She was still fresh from her own entry into the business world and had not escaped that inevitable cocksureness of the beginner who has yet to come a cropper.

"I'll have to take back some of the things I've been thinking," she said with an impulsiveness equal to his own. "I begin to see that it isn't knowledge of business terms so much as a possession of the business spirit that counts."

"I don't know a canthook from a clevis pin in this game," he admitted readily. "And you—why, I never guessed there was so much to know."

"I think," Marcia said seriously, but with a smile for his boyish frankness, "that between us we ought to be able to handle things. And it's going to be great fun."

"You bet!" he agreed warmly. "We can team it together in fine shape."

Marcia turned quickly away. She had been swayed by the emotion of the moment, by enthusiasm for her work and for what, she was beginning to see, was Larry's peculiar ability. She had experienced, as had Larry, the thrill of

co-ordinated effort. Suddenly confronted with a big responsibility for which, in a way, neither was prepared, they were meeting it shoulder to shoulder.

Yet even from this, delightful as she found it, Marcia retreated. Among the many things she had acquired upon her entry into the business world was an idea of the necessity of an impersonal relation with employers and co-workers. She had pictured herself as a cog in a machine, a cog with a brain but not with a heart.

"There is one thing we should have," she said, reverting to her formal, crisp manner of speech, "and that is a safe. There is no fire protection here and all the books and papers should be locked up each night. For instance, here is one thing that has worried me and I want you to take charge of it until the safe arrives."

She handed him several sheets of paper sealed and stamped by a notary and bearing signatures.

"Gosh!" he said as he opened one. "It's all fixed up like a Christmas tree."

"They are powers of attorney Uncle Howard made out for you," she said. "I should have given them to you before but there was no necessity."

Larry had never heard of a power of attorney and he began to read it. The legal phrasing was confusing and he was half way through before he even began to glimpse what it was about.

"Uncle Howard has given you power to conduct certain transactions because he will be so far away," Marcia explained when she saw a troubled look on his face.

"I see," Larry said quietly. "Then you have read them."

"I only glanced at one. They are all the same. For instance, you can sell the lumber, buy new machinery, even new timber grants. It is a matter of form, proof that Uncle Howard permits you to do such things for him."

Again Larry read certain parts of the document. One phrase had caught his attention, had caused the troubled expression, and now he satisfied himself as to what it meant. "The said Howard Franklin, acting as trustee for Relda Franklin, owner of the property in question."

His lips parted in a slow smile as he folded the paper.

"Yes," he said, "we ought to have a safe. You see about getting one. I'll take care of these until it comes."

"There is another matter, Mr. Vail," Marcia began.

"That's one thing I'd like to understand," Larry interrupted. "Long's I've lived, you're the first person ever called me Mister."

"And except for two months in Chicago, you are the first person I ever worked for," she answered promptly.

"That's the way it goes. This summer I was working for you folks at the camp and I was Larry. Now you're working for me and I'm 'Mister' Vail. That makes you Marcia."

She flushed, though she could not refrain from smiling, but she answered seriously:

"A certain formality is required in any office."

"I don't know anything about your uncle's city office," Larry said, "but I do know something about the logging business. I've seen men that owned ten big camps and they were 'Tom' and 'George' to every jack that worked for them. What does Burson call your uncle?"

"He calls him 'Say, Howdy,'" Marcia laughed. "But they've known each other ever since they were young in the business."

"Well, *we're* both sort of young and you knew me when I was only a river pig and I knew you before you thought of having anything to do with logging."

Before Marcia could reply there came the thump of heavy feet in the outer office.

"Hey, Larry!" a rough voice shouted. "Where's them horseshoes you ordered last week?"

Marcia looked through the door and saw the sooty face of the blacksmith above the counter.

"They're at Sabawi and the tote team will bring them down in the morning," she answered.

"You tell that pretty boy I'll be straddle his neck if they ain't."

Larry, seated in a corner, looked at Marcia as the heavy feet thumped through the door. His eyes were twinkling but there was no response for a moment. Then in hers he saw that understanding light that had first attracted him.

“All right, Larry,” she laughed. “Now to get back to the matter I was about to speak of. Who is the tote teamster?”

“That’s Rene Lacrodaire.”

“Lacrodaire!” she repeated incredulously. “Not the man you told me about last summer? When we were fishing? You aren’t going to keep him, surely?”

“Why not?” he asked, surprised by her sudden vehemence.

“Why did you ever hire him?” she countered.

“I didn’t. He was working here when I came and he’s a good man.”

“But you can’t tell what he’ll do. I’ve watched him. That first day he was outside the window as you went by and his expression was actually murderous. I am afraid he’ll do something terrible some day.”

“Rene doesn’t like me none too well,” Larry said, “but giving him his time wouldn’t change things.”

“He’s dangerous,” she insisted. “You should get rid of him at once.”

“Don’t you see?” Larry protested. “I can’t do that. He’s always on the job, he’s good with horses, and it’s your uncle’s money, not mine, he’s earning. It wouldn’t be right to kick him out just because he don’t like me.”

As when Larry had first told her of Lacrodaire, Marcia understood. That understanding of the male attitude toward certain things formed part of the basis upon which her relations with Howard Franklin had been built, and it had proved an infinite source of comfort to her uncle.

Yet Marcia was a woman and, though she recognized the peculiar male viewpoint, she did not always agree with it. She, and all her sex, would have been ruthless in Lacrodaire’s case. To her he was a menace.

“I don’t think you have the right now to take that stand,” she said. “He might strike at you through the mill in some way.”

“When I come to that stretch of bad ice I’ll get across somehow,” Larry answered. “You see, I’ve had a couple of quite serious talks with Rene and I know him fairly well. Why, if it was as bad as you think I’d be dead of fright by now.”

The next morning a man appeared at the mill and asked to see Larry. Sid, in the outer room, showed him into Marcia’s office, where she and Larry had

resumed work on their sales campaign. The stranger was about fifty years old, small, quick in his movements, and with a cold, steady, searching stare.

"My name's Harris," he began abruptly. "With the Northern Construction Company. We need fourteen hundred thousand feet in a hurry. What you got?"

Larry recognized the company as one of those to which Marcia had addressed telegrams. To hide his eagerness he arose and placed a chair for Harris. When he had resumed his own, Marcia turned and handed the newcomer a sheet of paper.

"This is the tally of what we have in the yard," she said.

Larry experienced a comfortable feeling as he recognized this prompt efficiency. Harris glanced over the sheet and then drew a small notebook from his pocket.

"Will you check this, please?" he asked as he returned the paper to Marcia.

He began reading figures rapidly and the girl's pencil darted about the tally.

"We can do it," she announced when he had finished.

"All right," Harris said. "I'll pay market price, f. o. b. mill. But I want immediate delivery."

"The lumber's sawed," Larry said.

Harris looked at him keenly for an instant.

"But it's not loaded," he retorted sharply. "We're in a big hurry for this. That's why we came to you. Thought you could get it out. You willing to forfeit a dollar and a half a thousand if the shipment isn't loaded in fifteen days?"

Larry was about to agree. He knew it could be done, but before the words formed a freight train roared past the mill. Fifty or sixty times in the twenty-four hours this occurred. The annual transportation of wheat from the vast prairies of western Canada was at its height. The yards at Sabawi, a division point, were crowded with cars, wheat-laden for the great lakes, and returning empty.

"We can load the lumber," he said, "but I don't know whether we can get the cars."

"That's up to you," Harris retorted as he arose. "I'll be in Sabawi until the afternoon train. The contract will be drawn up. Here's a memo of the prices I'll pay. You will find me at Mrs. Wade's."

He bowed stiffly to Marcia and went out. Larry looked at the girl and grinned.

"This selling begins to look like the easiest part of it," he said.

"But can you get the cars?" she asked eagerly.

"I'll bet I can. Sid," he called through the door, "hurry up to the stable and tell 'em to hook up the drivers. You see," and he turned to Marcia, "the railroad owns this construction company, or the same men do, and if they're in a hurry for the stuff they'll see we get the cars fast as we can load 'em. I'm going to Sabawi and wire to make sure. Better come along."

She accepted the invitation as readily and as unconsciously as Larry had given it, but as she hurried to Mrs. Osland's house to get a coat she realized how she would have been hurt had he gone alone. It was their fight, the sale of the lumber, and she wanted to be in every bit of it.

They talked excitedly as they went to town. There, after a word with the station agent, Larry sent a telegram to the freight department in Toronto. A little after noon he received an answer to the effect that cars would be furnished as fast as he could load them.

"Guess that settles it," he said as he showed the telegram to Marcia.

Her eyes danced as she read it.

"Don't you suppose we could get him to take that other hundred thousand?" she asked breathlessly. "Uncle Howard and Mr. Burson would be so surprised if we had sold every stick."

"We'll try," Larry said, and each was entirely unconscious of their use of "we."

Harris frowned when Larry made the suggestion and then suddenly agreed. He made the necessary changes in the contract, which he had prepared in duplicate. Larry was left gasping by the speed and ease, the entire casualness, with which one disposed of a million and a half feet of lumber.

Once he had left Harris he plunged into action. He had a few men at the mill, but he wired to Port Arthur for more and also wired for cars, urging

that half a dozen empties be sent down from Sabawi at once. The next morning three were there and the work began.

That afternoon, when Larry and Marcia were in the office, they heard a freight train slow to a stop.

"Come on!" the girl cried as she started to her feet. "We must watch it! This is an epoch, Larry."

"Freight trains have stopped here before," he said without rising.

He pretended an ignorance of her meaning, for, though he had been the first to recognize the significance of that stop, he had dreaded an expression of his own elation.

"But never to pick up a car of Franklin lumber that we have sold," Marcia retorted, "Come and see it."

While Larry stood outside the office with Marcia that afternoon something entirely new happened to him. As a job had always been only a job with him, so had a log been merely a log, a board merely a board. Now, as he watched the cars of lumber being shunted onto the main track, lumber for whose manufacture he had been largely responsible, as he saw it passing out of his life to begin a long period of usefulness, he caught something of the significance of labor, of manufacture, of the vast, intricate web of life and the part played by each individual strand.

Larry's was not a clear conception of the idea. It was an emotion rather than a thought, and an emotion compounded from various sources. He was more aware of Marcia's bright eyes and glowing face, of the comradely glance that became a searching, then an understanding gaze, and as a result of which neither spoke as they turned back to their work.

For a week the loading progressed rapidly and smoothly. As quickly as a set of cars was filled an east-bound train stopped and took them away. The next west-bound train dropped empties in their place.

This rapid progress toward the successful completion of their contract found expression in the attitude of Larry and Marcia toward each other. Each morning when they met in the office they exulted afresh. The girl, in her exuberance and enthusiasm, began to make rough estimates of the profits the mill had made since Larry took charge.

Then, with startling unexpectedness, two things happened. Cars ceased to come. Larry sent telegram after telegram without result. At last one car was dropped and a message came from Toronto that there was a shortage,

that he must, with other clamoring shippers, await his turn, be content with his pro rata assignment.

The day he received this telegram four men appeared at the mill. One, who alone was not dressed like a woodsman, presented credentials showing that he was a duly appointed inspector from Toronto with instructions to look over the books of the Franklin Lumber Company and also those of the Bagnall concern.

The other three were timber estimator, compassman and cook instructed to determine the amount of timber still standing in the Bagnall limit. They asked for a team to carry them and their camp equipment to the lumber camp and as soon as Larry provided it they departed. The inspector established himself in Marcia's office.

Larry gave little heed to him. He not only had nothing to fear, but he was concerned with cars and their loading. His yard crew was sitting idle most of the time, and drawing wages.

Only four of the fifteen days remained and Larry knew he must have cars or lose the forfeit.

He boarded a wheat train for Port Arthur, but failed to get any satisfaction from railroad officials there. Even then he was not suspicious, but when he returned to Sabawi on another freight he was forced to walk nearly half a mile through the yards to get to the station. When he reached the platform he stood on one leg and kicked viciously at it with the other. Then he went on to the mill.

Marcia was in her office and as he entered she looked up with a beaten, guilty look.

"Larry, there was a general advance of a dollar and a half a thousand just when Harris was here!" she exclaimed. "It's all my fault. We should have gotten later information. It's in the papers, but I haven't been watching them since we sold the lumber."

Larry stared for a moment, and then he grinned.

"A dollar and a half, eh?" he said. "That makes three dollars. Let's see," and he picked up a pencil and jotted down some figures.

"It's cost your uncle just four thousand five hundred dollars and the loafing wages of those loaders because he set me to running this mill," he said. "I've been the easiest sucker Harris ever hooked."

"But Larry!" Marcia protested. "I'm to blame for this."

"It's not always the man who starts across a portage with a heavy load who gets it to the other end," he told her. "I'm just like some fellows I've seen, piling on a lot of stuff and starting out chipper as could be—and never getting across. I'd better go back to running a canthook. It's about my size."

"You musn't talk that way. There's still time to load those cars."

"There aren't going to be any cars. But first about that raise in price. That's not your fault. It's mine. When Harris came down here in such a hurry for that stuff I'd have smelled a rat if I hadn't been all excited over having a customer. He knew the price was going up. I should have known it, too.

"Now about those cars. The freight I just came on from Port Arthur stopped at the east end of the yards and I had to walk to the station. There was a lot of empties and I felt like stealing a few and shoving 'em down here by hand. And then what do you think I found, up at the other end of that long siding? Every last car we've loaded here."

"You mean——" Marcia began as she comprehended.

"I told you the railroad owned that construction company. They were in a big hurry for that stuff all right. A dollar and a half a thousand forfeit is two thousand two hundred and fifty dollars. That, and as much more on getting it under the market, was worth Harris's time coming down here."

He stated it bravely enough, but Marcia could easily read his humiliation.

"Uncle Howard will understand," she said quickly. "He'll not blame you."

"That don't make me feel any different about myself," he answered. "I'm like the pup that tackled a skunk. Nobody'd ever told him about skunks and he wasn't expected to know, but it was a long time before his nose quit telling him what a fool he'd been."

Later that afternoon the government inspector finished his work in the office. He bade Marcia a formal good-by and then turned to Larry.

"I would advise you to hold yourself in readiness for a summons to appear in Toronto," he said.

"What's the matter?" Larry demanded. "Wasn't everything all right?"

"I am not at liberty to divulge my findings. I can only suggest that you be not surprised to hear from my department shortly."

CHAPTER XVII

—In New Waters

The inspector's statement served one purpose. It took Marcia's mind off the loss in the Harris sale, the more completely because Larry followed the inspector out, making it impossible for her to receive an immediate explanation. All evening Marcia hoped for a few moments alone with Larry, but it was not until the next morning that she had an opportunity to ask the question that had been in her mind all night.

"What could he have meant?"

"Nothing that can hurt us," Larry answered. "There's been a lot of crooked work here, but it was all done before we took hold."

"But what could have been crooked?"

"It's this way. The timber land belongs to the government. A logger gets the right to cut off a certain piece, paying so much a thousand. A government scaler is on the job and his tally goes. He's supposed to be at the camp and scale the logs on the skidways. But I've found out that he stayed at the mill and scaled the logs dumped on the ice. In that way Bagnall didn't have to pay for any of those he cut, but didn't get out."

"Then those four million feet you saved, they haven't been scaled or paid for?" Marcia asked.

"Not with the scaler staying at the mill. And another thing. I don't think the scaler even got all the logs hauled in. That's why the inspector went through the books, checking up on lumber sawed against the scaler's tally. I don't know whether Bagnall took the trouble to fix things and I don't see why he left his books here."

"But Bagnall is responsible!" Marcia protested.

"Of course. Your uncle thought there was something queer and told me he didn't want a log he didn't pay for. As soon as I took hold I wrote to the government and told them about the logs I was rossing and asked whether Bagnall had paid for them or whether we would have to. They wrote they had received my letter and would give it their attention, but that's the last I ever heard of it."

"Then they can't do anything!" Marcia exclaimed in relief. "They haven't a thing against us."

"They've got the biggest thing of all against us. Your uncle's a Yankee and I'm a Yankee. We're foreigners. But we'll write a letter to your uncle telling all about this. If we go to Toronto and fight it out we can win. Whoever gave Bagnall his graft don't want anything stirred up."

They got the letter off that afternoon. As they started to Sabawi to catch the first outgoing mail a freight dropped three cars on the mill siding. Larry looked at Marcia and grinned.

"We need five," he said. "To-morrow night the forfeit is due."

For a moment Marcia was about to flare up in protest. The arrival of the cars was a taunt to her and she could imagine the thin, shrewd face of Harris displaying the ghost of a smile as he deducted two thousand two hundred and fifty dollars from the price to be paid for the lumber.

"Go ahead and say it," Larry laughed. "You ought to be able to after fishing with Hughie so much last summer."

"You don't seem to show any concern whatever!" she declared angrily.

"There never was a portage that didn't have the two ends, a beginning and a finish," he answered good-naturedly. "We've only started and if Harris isn't at the other end there's someone else who'll pay his bills. You know, you're going to ruin your face and your disposition if you don't begin to smile again. As for working or fighting, you can't do either one very well when you're the sort of mad you are now. You can shoot straighter if you ain't excited."

Marcia was about to make an angry retort when she saw by his eyes that he had forgotten completely what he had said, that his thoughts had flown elsewhere.

"By gum, I'll do it!" he exclaimed.

"Do what?" she demanded.

"You'll find out," and he would tell her no more, though he gave the impression that it was something of vast importance.

That evening he appeared at Mrs. Osland's.

"How'd you like a nice meal of partridge to-morrow night?" he asked.

"I'd like nothing better, but the men folks around this mill are too lazy to go after them," the filer's wife retorted.

"I understand she's a pretty good shot," and Larry jerked his head toward Marcia. "Don't you think she ought to get out? Looking kind o' peaked, sticking in that office all the time."

"You going to take her?" Mrs. Osland beamed. "Now that's fine. Just what she needs. You'd think she owns the mill—the way she worries about it."

"I'm glad to hear you say that!" Larry exclaimed. Then, as if it were an afterthought: "Of course, we'd be gone through lunch time."

Mrs. Osland laughed.

"All right. I'll put up something for you."

"Doesn't he ever come right out and ask for anything, Mrs. Osland?" demanded Marcia, who had not spoken since Larry's entrance.

"Not if he can 'beat the bush around,' as the Swede says. I suppose this is the first you knew about going after partridge."

"That was all settled when we went to town this afternoon," Larry hastened to say.

"I told Mrs. Wade you and I would walk up to see her to-morrow afternoon," Marcia remarked.

"Don't bother to make a cake for us or anything like that," Larry said. "I went hunting with a blueberry pie once, a real squashy one, and I had to sit down after a mile and eat it. Just had my breakfast, too. It ought to be a good day for partridge. Want to ride up town with me, Ed?"

Osland arose and the two men departed. Marcia laughed, but the next morning when she and Larry drove off down the tote road immediately after breakfast she burst forth indignantly:

"After this when you wish to invite me to go somewhere, do so directly, please."

"I sure got you away from that mill just in time," he said without the least perturbation. "If you stuck around and worried much more you'd be just about as sociable as a band saw."

"There has been something to worry about," she retorted.

"Now look here. I been on this job three months and this is the first day off I've taken. You going to spoil it for me? Whoa!"

He drew up the horses suddenly and got out. After tying them to a cedar windfall beside the road he drew two .22 rifles from beneath the seat and handed one to Marcia.

"Come on," he said, "and let's see how well you can shoot."

He led the way up a slope and then stopped and pointed.

"Get him in the head," he whispered, "else you'll wreck him."

Marcia took careful aim and fired at a partridge that sat on a jackpine limb. Some feathers flew from his neck and he jerked his head and began to scold.

"Try it again," Larry urged. "Draw down close."

Feathers disappeared from the other side of the bird's neck, but still he did not fly. Larry grinned at the emphatic click of the rifle as Marcia pumped a fresh shell into the barrel. He saw her mouth straighten. At the third shot the bird dropped.

"Now the next one," Larry said.

"Next!" Marcia exclaimed.

"Sure. There's four more. Take the lowest one."

Marcia fired and a second bird dropped. One by one she got all five with a total of nine shots. Her eyes were bright and her face was flushed as she went forward to help pick up the birds.

"Think you earned them?" Larry asked soberly.

She laughed gaily and he saw the old comradely expression in her eyes.

"This is the most fun I've had since we got that big wall-eyed pike below the falls!" she exclaimed impulsively. "Do you think we can find some more?"

"More! You can go straight south for a hundred miles and not find anyone except a few stray Indians, and there's a hundred partridge to every mile. It all depends on how many shells you got and—how you shoot."

"You needn't scold any more."

"There's nothing to scold about—now."

Marcia laughed. It was impossible not to respond to Larry's whimsical mood, so natural and resistantly infectious.

"Then I've recovered under your treatment."

"Don't know what you're talking about," he protested. "I just thought so long as Mrs. Osland's mouth was watering every time she heard a partridge clucking it was up to you and me to get them for her."

"You're a fraud, Larry, just as much of a fraud as Mrs. Wade. Whenever she does anything nice for one she scolds for fear she'll be thanked for it. I was beastly yesterday, and so you brought me out and showed me this."

"There's nothing like the woods in the fall to take the kinks out of a disposition. When I was a kid I always used to run away from school and go hunting."

"That was in Wisconsin, wasn't it?" she asked. "You know, Larry, you've never told me much about your boyhood."

"I guess no man wants to think about how he got to be a wandering fool."

There was a trace of bitterness in his voice and Marcia was silent as they drove on to the place where the road crew had camped.

"We'll leave the horses here," Larry said, "and mosey around. It's more fun than hunting from a buggy."

All forenoon they wandered through spruce swamps, over brush-covered ridges, beneath jackpine and Norway growth. The heavy frost had stripped poplar and birch of their foliage and the north presented one of its most entrancing aspects. The sky was intensely blue, the air crisp and filled with the new fragrance of freshly fallen leaves, and the hunting instinct was forced to vie with a desire to travel, to walk on endlessly, for one could not imagine becoming tired.

The game bag grew heavier and toward noon the pursuit of a covey took them up a high ridge. From the crest they could see far to the south, across swamps and lower ridges.

"That's our timber," Larry said, indicating a dark blue line. "It stretches from there—" pointing—"as far as it goes to the right. You can see our logging road crossing that big swamp."

"And we have to haul from there to the mill!" Marcia exclaimed. "That is a big job."

"I know. Bagnall always fell down on it."

Marcia looked across to the distant timber.

"It's too bad we can't get out fifteen million a year," she said. "Put in another band saw and clean this up."

"This is Sunday," Larry reminded her.

"You started it. But it could be done."

"I've thought of it, but it wouldn't pay. Figured it out before you came."

"But that other timber, to the east," Marcia insisted. "Why can't we get that from the government. Then it would pay, and we could do it all in five years. How much is there?"

"Forty million."

"Forty!" she repeated in amazement. "Then why——"

She stopped when she saw the twinkle in his eyes.

"You're not the first logger that's had a hankering for it," he laughed. "It's been looked."

"Won't the government sell it?"

"Sure, only nobody'll buy it. See that ridge between here and there? Cutting off to the southwest past the east end of our stuff? That's the crest of a big height o' land, and that forty million is on the other side of it."

"You mean it can't be gotten out?"

"I was running compass once with an outfit that looked it and we spent days trying to find a way round that ridge. It just can't be done."

Marcia continued to stare at the distant blue line. A partridge started clucking down the slope, but she did not hear it.

"Hey!" Larry shouted. "This is Sunday, the only day a logger can have any fun. You going to let that bird get away from you?"

She arose, laughing good-naturedly.

"I'll be good. Which way did he go?"

"He hasn't gone yet. There! Hear him? Let's see you get that one alone."

Marcia got it while Larry sat and watched and then they worked their way back to the road camp, where four of the birds were dressed and fried for lunch. After they had eaten they sat in the sun for a long while and

talked. For the first time since those days when they had fished and paddled together at the camp, their conversation became light and irresponsible.

The very peace and perfection of the moment turned Larry's thoughts into entirely new and disturbing channels. In his nomadic life there had been a number of pleasurable incidents that stood out above the ruck of existence. In most cases he could have returned, but always a careless appraisal of the wealth of life had allowed him to wander on.

One of these, and the brightest, he now realized, had been the three days spent fishing with Marcia. Yet he had dropped that, had turned his back upon it as carelessly as upon the others.

Thus it had been when he sang his song of happy vagabondage that morning he left the Franklin camp. But now there entered his stirring consciousness the knowledge that back of the decision to work a way out of his wandering, aimless life, back of the concentration upon his new task, back of the burning wish to succeed, there had always been Marcia Kerr.

He stole a glance at her as she sat opposite him, her back to a windfall, her arms thrown out upon it. He was conscious of the brown hair that tumbled in slight disarray above her face, of the clear, warm softness of her gray eyes. Most of all he was aware of the spirit of the girl, a spirit rich in courage and understanding.

With the numbing knowledge of her desirability came the thought of his own unworthiness. Encouraged by the history of Howard Franklin, he had started blindly up the ladder. Now the financial significance of his ambition became unimportant before the differences between Marcia and himself, differences which their association at the mill had bared. Those differences, he saw, went back past the point where any effort of his might wipe them out, differences of education, of training, of viewpoint and of knowledge. She was of another world.

"You must get lonesome up here, homesick for your sort of folks?"

The question was forced from him by the sudden agony his thoughts had caused and he was startled as if by an explosion. He found relief only in the fact that she did not look at him.

Marcia was gazing down the twisting, placid course of the small stream beside which they sat. Larry wondered if she had heard. Her expression did not indicate it and then, without turning her head, she said softly:

"You must have been reading my thoughts."

"Then I guessed right?"

"No, wrong," and she smiled at him. "I was thinking that for the first time in my life I've been completely happy. *You* don't know what it means. All your life you've had independence, friendships. Now I'm finding both—for the first time."

"That's just because everything's new."

"Not exactly. Living with Aunt Relda, my life wasn't exactly barren of sudden change. But this is real."

"How long you going to think so?"

"Until I'm fired."

"That means when the last log's sawed."

"Don't make any rash promises," she warned him. "I might get lazy and loaf on the job."

"But listen!" Larry insisted, ignoring her banter. "Up here you don't have any chance to go to parties or theaters or wear pretty clothes."

"I'm sorry your bookkeeper doesn't dress to suit you, but at business college they warned me especially against wearing my faded finery."

"You know what I mean. It just seems funny, is all, that you can get a good time out of this when you've had all the things you had in the city."

"You get a good time out of it, don't you?" she countered.

"Sure, but I was a river pig last summer——"

"And I was dependent on wealthy relatives. Now I've put my first month's salary in the bank. Just because you've succeeded I won't have you minimizing my humbler efforts."

"Succeeded! Why, I've just——"

He stopped and, as was his habit, sought a facetious expression to hide his emotion.

"I've just found the portage and I know there's a lot of nasty going between me and the other end. Even if I get across I won't have time to stop and scrape the muskeg off my shoes."

"I imagine Uncle Howard still shows some traces of that portage," Marcia smiled, "but he's one of the biggest, finest men I ever met. The load and the way he carried it was all that counted."

For a moment he sat there digesting her statement and then arose with sudden energy. His eyes were bright, his head high, and because his mind was reeling with the riotous thoughts that had come to him, he did not see the effect of the picture he presented.

"I might have known you'd say that!" he exclaimed, and then he laughed. "It's all up hill—but I'm going across."

CHAPTER XVIII

—Over the Falls

Monday morning there were enough cars to finish the loading. Larry supervised the work, hurrying his men. Two days previously he had spoken facetiously of how he had been duped by Harris, but there was no longer an attempt to cover his chagrin with a jest.

Now that he recognized the purpose back of his striving, there was a savage vindicativeness in his attitude toward the matter. He was determined not only that he would not be caught again, but that somehow he would make up the loss his ignorance had caused.

He drove the loading crew remorselessly. He wanted that lumber hauled away, out of his sight, so that he could start afresh. Tuesday night it was gone.

That afternoon the cook for the government timber estimator had walked in and asked for a team to haul his outfit to Sabawi. Wednesday night they arrived after supper and Larry provided sleeping quarters above the office.

The inspector, an office man with whom he could find no point of contact, had baffled Larry. He had seemed like a machine, coming in, adding figures, departing. Hopler, the estimator, one of the old type of timber cruisers, was someone Larry could understand, could talk to, and after supper he was invited into the office for a drink.

"That must be a rotten outfit you're working for," Larry began abruptly.

"You been trying to get funny with them?" Hopler asked with a trace of a sneer.

"I don't mean that way. I've been here only three months. Bagnall owned this mill until it was foreclosed on him. What I mean is, it's a rotten office when it estimates that limit at forty million, lets Bagnall cut twenty-two, and there's still thirty-five million left."

Hopler glanced shrewdly at Larry and then asked: "How you know that?"

"Looking at Bagnall's books and at the timber. I worked here once. The scaler stayed at the mill, not at the camp."

"What did the inspector tell you?"

"Nothing, except that I could count on a trip to Toronto."

"Who'd you have estimate what's standing?"

"No one. I took a quick run through it last summer. I figured it thirty-five million."

Larry was rewarded only by a quick gleam in Hopler's eyes, an expression, he knew, of admiration for a close guess.

"And that stuff you rossed?" Hopler asked.

"I figure it at four million. And say! You didn't see a scaler's chalk mark on a stick of it, did you? You can report that."

"I intend to."

"Well, I hope you have better luck than I did. I reported it three months ago and haven't heard from it yet."

"Reported it!" Hopler repeated in amazement. "What was your idea?"

"We want to pay for every log we cut. With all his graft, Bagnall didn't make his mill pay. We're going to run it on the square and make it pay."

Hopler smoked in silence for a while and then arose, announcing that he was going to bed. Larry was not greatly disappointed. While he had not succeeded in learning what was back of the investigation, he had decided that Hopler was honest and, if convinced Franklin's intentions were right, might be induced to talk. Now, though the man had been exasperatingly discreet, Larry still had faith that something might happen in the morning.

But after breakfast Hopler did not come near the office. He sat outside the cook camp and smoked a pipe. The tote team came to take him and his men and outfit to Sabawi. Larry, from an office window, saw him speak to the driver. The team went off without him. A few minutes later, when Larry came out, Hopler arose and joined him.

"Nice fall we're havin'," he commented. "Guess I'll mooch along to town. Don't see much use in riding three miles."

"Bo' jou'," Larry said. "Good luck to you."

"Bo' jou'," Hopler answered and started away.

After a few steps he stopped and turned.

"Our department's all right," he said abruptly. "The head of it's square, but he can't know everything that's going on. You'll find crooks even in a church, I understand. I've heard talk, of course. Things get whispered about. That inspector, he's square, too, but all he can do is report. Same as me. We'll both turn in reports. What comes of 'em, that's another matter. We can't do anything."

"Like that letter I wrote three months ago," Larry remarked.

"Just the same. Clerk or somebody loses it. Keep an eye peeled."

He turned and walked away. Larry knew better than to comment, or even to repeat his good-by. He went into the office and told Marcia what had happened.

"Begins to look like we'll have a fight," he concluded.

"Then we ought to get ready for it," she said decisively. "I don't know what the inspector could have found in the Bagnall books, but whatever it was, we can find it, too."

"I thought you could," Larry grinned. "Then they can't spring any surprises on us. I'm going to dig up some witnesses who saw how the scaler worked. We'll show somebody up if they start anything."

Marcia began work at once and Larry went down to the blacksmith shop to see how the repairing of sleighs and the steam haulers was progressing. He had not been able to give this work a thought for some time.

When he came back an hour later Sid was returning from Sabawi with the mail.

"Getting so you like exercise," Larry laughed. "Why didn't you get a ride back with the tote team?"

"Rene said he wasn't coming right back," Sid answered. "Only way he could get a rest, I heard him tell a fellow in the bar. Says he had to work extra time on the loading and drive forty miles yesterday bringing in the cruiser."

"If Rene don't like it he can have his time," Larry said. "Did you get those bills of lading?"

"Yes, and here's a telegram and the mail."

Larry read the message, which was from Franklin in answer to his letter. He hurried in to show it to Marcia.

"*Put up a fight*," it read. "*We're in the right. It's all up to you. I am busy here*."

"Good thing you started on those books," Larry said. "We'll be all ready for them."

"It's going to be a slow job," she told him. "Things are in a fearful mess. I'm glad there's nothing else to do."

After the noon meal Marcia returned to the office at once to continue her work. Larry had gone upstairs to collect his laundry and take it to the wife of a Galician employee. It was a warm day, the room was close and he had opened a window. He heard the men leave the cook camp and start down to the blacksmith shop and stables, but gave them no heed until he heard a sharp voice:

"Cut that out, Rene. The girl's in the office and she can hear you."

"To hell with her," Rene retorted viciously. "You think we act like it's a church all the time just because she's here? If she don't like it let her stay where she belongs," and he amplified his remarks with the filthiest words in the language.

In an instant Larry was at the door and half tumbling down the stairs. He ran around the corner of the office and shouted to the men, who had moved on. They stopped and the next moment Larry was among them, confronting Lacrodaire.

The men were startled. Never had they seen Larry as he was now. They had always forgiven his driving methods because of the smile that accompanied his remarks, because of the jests that prodded but did not sting.

Now his face was white with fury. His fists were clenched, his body tense for a spring. They expected nothing but the annihilation of the French Canadian.

Rene, too, recognized the presence of something against which he could not even struggle, a force and a will and a rage before which he would be powerless. Yet his own hate, grown after the two preceding encounters with Larry to a blind, festering malignancy, and the fact that he had had a few drinks, forced him to a show of resistance. He set himself, took one step forward.

It maddened Larry, brought a suppressed exclamation and an onslaught so savage Rene retreated. Instantly Larry relaxed.

“Backed up again, haven’t you?” he jeered. “French and Indian they’ve said you are, but there’s neither in you. You’re a mixture of a lynx’s snarl, a brush wolf’s yelp and a red squirrel’s chatter, and it’s all kept going by a rabbit’s heart. You can start quicker, run harder and keep going longer’n the fastest deer the wolves ever put up.

“And just to prove I’m right, I’m going to put you through your paces so everybody’ll see what I’ve always known. Get up to the office.”

Rene turned as if to run, but Larry was beside him.

“Git!” he said in a low voice.

Rene started, Larry at his side. The others stood staring and Larry called to them.

“Come on. You’re going to see this.”

At the office steps he commanded Rene to stop and then called to Sid.

“Make out this fellow’s time,” he ordered when his friend came to the door. “And tell Miss Kerr to come out here.”

In a moment Marcia appeared. She looked wonderingly at the silent group, then with quick fear as she saw Rene and Larry and caught the expression on Larry’s face.

“Miss Kerr,” Larry said stiffly, “this fellow’s got something to say to you.”

He turned and whispered close to Rene’s ear:

“Say it now, after me. ‘I’m Rene Lacrodaire’.”

The French Canadian whirled in a final revolt, the desperate flare of a cornered animal, but even as he took a step backward and clenched his fists Larry’s face kept close to his and again there blazed in it that devastating fury.

“Say it now or I’ll beat it out of you. Quick!”

Rene faltered, and then he whispered:

“I’m Rene Lacrodaire.”

“ ‘I’m a dirty dog’,” Larry prompted. “ ‘I’m sorry I ever brought my filthy carcass so close to you.’ Say it! Now, while you’re still able to talk, or you’ll never talk again.”

Rene glanced wildly about as if seeking escape, looked at Larry for a fleeting instant and then mumbled some words that only Larry heard.

"He's said it," Larry announced shortly. "That's all, Miss Kerr." Then he turned on Rene. "Now you thing that some folks call a man because you wear pants and shave, stand right where you are until Sid gives you your time check. After that you've got five minutes to stuff your turkey and another five to get a mile away from this mill. You can have the rest of your life to stay away from it."

He strode into the office, where he signed the check Sid had made out, and then stood in the door until, a few minutes later, Rene came out of the bunk house and started up the track to Sabawi.

"Never knew you had that in you!" Sid exclaimed in an involuntary outburst of admiration. "A man wants a gun when he tackles you."

"A gun wouldn't do Rene any good," Larry answered. "He tried that once. Hasn't got nerve enough to pick a grayback off his shirt. See a good teamster in Sabawi?"

"Guess I can find one. Say! What you going to put me at this winter?"

"Haven't had time to figure it yet. Wait until things work out."

Larry went on into the office. He had spoken absently, for he was experiencing a new and entrancing emotion. Whatever thought had come to him the previous Sunday had been crystallized by Rene's action outside Marcia's window and he knew he would have faced joyfully a thousand French Canadians to protect her.

But Sid was left with the growing conviction that Relda Franklin's charges were true.

"To hell with him!" Sid exclaimed as he started up the track toward town. "He's getting ready to stick me in that lumber camp for the winter."

Marcia's expression was serious when Larry entered.

"I was prepared for that sort of thing when I came here," she began at once. "It was inevitable——"

"That wasn't," Larry interrupted. "I heard him."

"But see what you have done. You humiliated him so. You've made his hatred a terrible thing. Some day he will——"

"Rene won't do anything!" he exclaimed with an exultant laugh. "That's the third time he's backed down and he always will. But Rene or anybody else can't get away with that sort of thing around here while I am boss."

It was not a boast. It was a challenge of his right to protect her and it was uttered with an intensity that not only told her of the emotion which had impelled his rage, but that thrilled her with its real significance. She drew back in her chair, breathless, suddenly afraid to pursue the subject and yet eager to catch again the flash in his eyes that had accompanied his statement. After a moment she turned to a ledger and asked Larry to explain an entry. In a moment they were deep in the intricacies of Bagnall's bookkeeping.

For the remainder of the week they were busy gathering all the data possible for the defense they planned and they made such progress that when Sunday came Marcia readily agreed to another hunting trip.

Again they wandered all forenoon in the glorious autumn woods. Partridge were plentiful and Marcia's marksmanship improved, but the real joy of the day began after they had cooked and eaten their lunch and were seated on a large, flat rock beside a small stream.

They had hunted until they were comfortably tired. The mid-day sun was delightfully warm. Smoke from Larry's pipe floated off lazily. There was a faint murmur from the water. Occasionally a chipmunk rustled the new-fallen leaves, but these were sounds that only accentuated the soft, enveloping hush and added to the peace of the hour.

"Gosh!" Larry exclaimed at last. "It would be great if a fellow never had anything to do but this."

"But it wouldn't!" she protested so passionately he started in surprise. "Life would be a dreary thing if it were always so peaceful."

"Wah! All hankering for a fight, ain't you?"

"My life has been very much like this afternoon," she continued. "Uncle Howard gave me everything. I never earned the right to exist. I told you the same thing the day we caught those fish under the falls. It is only since I came here that I feel I have really begun to live."

"It was white water you wanted."

"Just what do you mean by white water?"

"Anybody can ride a log in a gentle current. It's no trick to stay on and there's never a jam. You don't do anything but watch the logs go by, giving one a lazy poke if it catches on the bank. A jackpine eater could do that."

"What is a jackpine eater?" Marcia laughed. "Am I one?"

"Those homesteaders down in Wisconsin and Minnesota. They work in camps some during the winters. Don't know a peavy from a wanigan."

"And they are afraid of white water?"

"If they was to get into it they couldn't even pray. That's why they're jackpine eaters, and always will be."

"Then white water means danger and excitement and meeting opposition and——"

"And getting the drive through regardless."

"But Larry! You didn't feel that way. It was only the danger and excitement you were looking for. You never waited to——"

"See the drive into the booms," he laughed. "That's because I didn't know the fun of looking beyond the next bend in the river. There never was any next week for me because——"

He broke off in sudden embarrassment. He had not realized the trend of the conversation.

"Now you are different, Larry. You see, we have both been drifters, so I understand."

She turned to him with sudden animation. Larry stopped breathing, believed his heart had stopped beating. Never had he seen her so adorable. It was always in such moments of excitement that she became dazzlingly beautiful to him, but now for the first time he wanted to take her in his arms, to kiss her flushed cheeks, to run his hands through her tumbling brown hair, to have those gray eyes so close he could look down deep to all that lay behind them.

He believed some of the agony of his longing must show in his face as she rushed on impetuously.

"That's why I can talk to you about it. We're both doing something now. We have an excuse for living. And life's so different. It's just as joyous, only there is something real behind it. I needed it so badly. Sometimes I've wanted to talk about the work just to hear you say 'we,' to include me. I was awfully blue and afraid when I came and now——"

"You think," he began huskily, "you'll never be sorry you came, that you ——"

"Never! That's what I'm trying to tell you—what it's done for me—what it's meant."

Larry in his eagerness, Marcia in the fervor of her protestation, had leaned toward each other and in that moment the flash came, as it always does, revealing and unmistakable, swift and astounding. Each was breathless in the magic of it.

To them it was a thing of infinite splendor, spontaneous, belonging to that moment alone. They knew nothing of its inception, its growth, of its previous expression in countless ways. They only felt that life's witchery had suddenly withdrawn a curtain.

Larry, dazzled and humble, was the first to look away. Quick on the heels of it had come, not the old dread of its impossibility, but the ardent determination to prove himself. He could not shake off the sense of unworthiness, but he did find confidence of ultimate achievement. He knew now that he could do the thing he wished and, as if in expression of that confidence, he sprang to his feet.

Marcia, too, arose, but slowly. Women recognize such situations more clearly, understand them more quickly, and there is always an instinctive drawing back. It was not that Marcia's usual courage or genuineness failed her at last. In one of those two supreme moments of feminine existence, and she was wholly feminine.

As they drove homeward in the frosty twilight they talked very little. Marcia found new beauty in everything, the red glow in the west, a clump of cedars at the edge of a swamp, the pose of a startled deer, the gray gleam of a distant, spruce-circled lake, and she spoke of them with suppressed ecstacy.

Larry found himself responding with fresh zest and vigor to the task of keeping the eager team in hand, to avoiding the bad places in the road. He was conscious as never before of the challenging aspects of the north, of the answering elation of his own spirit.

As never before each was aware of the other there on the narrow buggy seat, of a warm, intimate, delicious contact. The fading rose of the western sky glowed afresh in their hearts.

CHAPTER XIX

—Larry Sets His Price

Two more days of office work brought Marcia and Larry to the point where Marcia alone could go on with the investigation of the books.

"You see what we want and how to get it," Larry said. "We've got the goods on Bagnall, all right, but we want to be able to prove our own case, too. I haven't been down in the limit since my quick run through it last summer and there's several things I can do there."

"But what if they send for you to come to Toronto?" Marcia asked.

"I'm not expecting that right away. There's too much red tape down there. I'll need a map of that limit, showing what Bagnall's done—he made a mess of things—and what we intend to do. I don't want to be caught by anything the cruiser reports. Besides, I've got to get my own plans made for the winter cut and I can do it all at once. I'll be back in four or five days."

Wednesday morning Sid drove Larry to the lumber camp, but the five days passed without his reappearance and it was the following Wednesday night when, carrying his blankets, he reached the mill. He had tramped through the woods all day, starting on the twenty-mile journey home after dark. There were no lights in any of the buildings and he went at once to his room above the office. Sid was not there and in a few minutes Larry was asleep.

In the morning the cook was the first to note the mill manager's high spirits. Though he had walked many miles the previous day, Larry was up early. He saw Sid in the other bed, was about to call to him, but decided to let him sleep. Ed Osland, who had his breakfast with the small crew in the cook camp, glanced up in surprise when Larry greeted him.

"You act as if you'd found a cached bottle down at the camp," he commented.

"Better than that," Larry laughed. "A whole case. How's everything been going?"

"We're getting the sleighs in shape, if that's what you mean. What you been doing? You were gone long enough to get that little jag out all by

yourself."

"It isn't going to be any little jag," Larry answered.

Ed watched him shrewdly, but Larry did not divulge further information. He hurried through his breakfast and went to the office to await Marcia, though he knew she would not appear for an hour. He sat down at her desk and began writing figures on a pad. So absorbed did he become in his calculations that he did not hear her enter the outer office a little later.

"Thought you'd get on the job early when the boss came back, eh?" he laughed as he saw her standing in the door. "Say! Look here. I've been figuring on——"

He stopped suddenly, for it had dawned on him that something was wrong. Marcia's face told it unmistakably.

"I thought you'd never come back!" she exclaimed. "I was going to send for you to-day. A government man is here. And Larry! They're going to cancel the permit to cut that limit."

"Cancel it!" he repeated incredulously. "They can't do that. They've got to give us a hearing. We haven't done anything crooked."

"But they will. The government man is at Sabawi. He told me yesterday. He wants to see you. He has been waiting two days."

Larry leaped to his feet and grasped his hat.

"Doesn't want to see me any more'n I want to see him," he declared as he started toward the door. Then he halted and asked: "Has there been any mail? Anything from Mr. Franklin about this?"

"Nothing since his telegram," Marcia answered, and Larry hurried out. A moment later she saw him swinging up the track toward Sabawi.

A mile from town Larry's swift pace ceased and he laughed.

"Good thing I walked instead of driving up," he said half aloud. "It's cooled me off or I'd been just like I was with Harris."

At the hotel, where he asked for the government agent, he was smiling, apparently care-free.

"Fellow you're looking for just went out," he was informed. "Been waiting two, three days. Williams, his name is, George Williams."

Larry strolled up to the station. As he approached he saw a man, most evidently from a city, come out of the door. For a moment Larry was startled

by his resemblance to Harris. He was small, thin, with gray hair, sharp features and cold, expressionless gray eyes.

"My name's Vail," Larry said as they met at the edge of the platform. "Understand you've been looking for me."

Williams stared for a moment and then said in a tone as expressionless as his eyes.

"Oh, yes."

Larry was nettled. He resented that cold, searching gaze.

"You've found me," he said:

"I suppose the young lady at the mill told you why I am here," Williams remarked, apparently without recognition of Larry's mood.

"She told me our permit is going to be cancelled, but that doesn't explain why you came. The inspector told me I would have to go to Toronto."

There was just a flicker in Williams' eyes, but he was as cool as before when he answered.

"Ordinarily that would have been true. But this case is slightly different."

"Slightly raw," Larry retorted. "We have a right to defend ourselves."

"It has been a particularly flagrant instance of theft from the government," Williams said severely. "The proof was absolute. The permit has been cancelled. The chief acted at once."

"Of course there was theft!" Larry exclaimed. "Anybody who ever came near the mill knew it. But it was Bagnall, not us. We haven't stolen a sapling. The last thing Franklin told me was that he didn't want a log he didn't pay for."

Williams' cold, fishy eyes did not even blink nor did the man comment. Larry rushed on.

"Another thing. If you folks were so interested in what was being stolen from the government, why didn't you do something three months ago when I wrote you about the four million feet Bagnall left in the swamp to rot, logs he had cut but never were scaled and never were paid for? You didn't even answer my letter."

"Perhaps it never reached the department," Williams answered indifferently.

"Oh, your department wrote me it had arrived, all right, and that they'd write me. But they never did. You talk about things being rotten at the mill. I think it's at Toronto they're rotten and I'm going down there and start something."

"You mean the owner of the mill will contest the cancellation of the permit?"

"I will for him. He's wired me to go ahead and do what I think best and I'm not going to sit still and see somebody take this away from us."

For the first time Williams turned his eyes from Larry's face. He looked down the track for a moment and then said:

"Let's find a comfortable place to sit down. You do not seem to have a thorough understanding of the situation. Some place in the sun. I find these fall days very chilly."

He led the way to the end of the platform, upon which he sat. Larry found a seat on a pile of ties, facing him.

"As I said," Williams began, "this is a flagrant case. It was brought to the chief's attention. As soon as he was assured of the facts, which was easily done, he cancelled the permit. He was very much worked up about it and I might tell you that his word is final."

"You mean I've got to lie down and take this?" Larry demanded angrily. "Well, just because this chief of yours has the last word is no reason I can't go down to Toronto and tell him where he's made a mistake."

Williams appeared to be wholly unimpressed by Larry's anger or declaration of intentions. He looked across the yards and smiled, and his smile was as cold and fishy as his eyes.

"It is hardly possible that you know the chief," he said. "In the first place, he is Scotch. In the second, he is rather zealous in maintaining the power he holds and he is satisfied that no injustice has been done in this instance. You could accomplish nothing with him, for he believes he has made adequate recompense."

Larry was about to utter an indignant retort, but a trace of oil had crept into Williams' tone. It made him cautious, and he remembered, too, what had happened as he walked to town from the mill, and what Hopler, the cruiser, had told him. He leaned forward, picked up a piece of pine and, taking out his knife, began to whittle.

"How does this chief think he has been so just?" he asked, and this time the anger was cleverly simulated.

"His first act was to withdraw the so-called Bagnall limit. The permit was cancelled. The cruiser reported that the logging methods had been disgraceful, that the limit never should have been logged in the first place, as there was much young timber—stuff too small to be cut and yet which would be greatly damaged in taking out the other. There will be no more cutting there for thirty years at least."

Larry bent closer over his whittling. There was no young timber in the Bagnall slashings and he knew Hopler would not have reported so.

"It was called to the chief's attention, however, that the present owner of the mill, who was in no way responsible for Bagnall's acts and had obtained the property in good faith, would suffer," Williams continued. "His action was very characteristic. He considered the question for a moment and then turned to the map of the district.

" 'That matter is easily disposed of,' he said in his curt, decisive manner. 'Here are forty million feet immediately adjoining the limit in question. Inform the new owner of the mill when he is notified of the cancellation that he has the first opportunity to apply for a permit to cut this forty million feet. And let him know that the application will be granted.'

"He closed the case then and there. It cannot be re-opened. And, as you see, instead of having a limit containing thirty-five million feet, you now have one at no greater distance from your mill which contains forty million. There remains only the forwarding of the papers to Mr. Franklin and the matter is settled. He will understand, of course, when the matter is explained to him, and you can understand now why I have come to Sabawi."

"I see," Larry said without looking up. "I won't have to do that, though. He wired me to go ahead as I thought best and he had already sent me power of attorney to do such things for him."

"Power of attorney! Do you mean you could sign the papers applying for the new limit?"

"Sure. Anything like that. He sent me half a dozen copies of it."

"Well, well!" Williams exclaimed with relief. Then he added quickly: "That saves me considerable trouble. I was told to remain here until the affair was settled, but now I can catch the afternoon train east."

"Of course," and Larry spoke slowly, for his attention seemed to be divided by his whittling, "there's one little thing the matter of that limit. The forty million's there, but there ain't any way to get it out."

"No way to get it out! Absurd!"

"Maybe, but older hands than I am have tried to find a way and couldn't."

"H'm!" Williams exclaimed, and Larry, glancing up, saw an angry gleam in the man's eyes. He returned to his whittling.

"I presume," Williams remarked after a moment, "that Mr. Franklin knows of this."

"He doesn't even know the timber's there," Larry answered.

"The fact is not well known, then?"

"Bagnall had an outfit looking it once and the government has estimated it. Those men know logging possibilities."

Williams glanced shrewdly at Larry, but could see only the top of his hat. The young man seemed to be absorbed in getting the right flare to the bow of a tiny canoe he was fashioning out of the soft pine.

The modern business man, with his desk chair so cleverly placed that a visitor can see little more than a silhouette against the bright glare of a broad window, is only employing a bit of age-old wisdom that recognizes the enormous value of the eyes in conversation. A man's eyes may belie his words, may express fear, avarice, uneasiness, confidence, exultation. They afford intimate, accurate glimpses of thoughts he believes are hidden, give the true shading and inflection to statements.

David Harum was only one of thousands of horse traders who knew this. The cowpuncher, squatting on one heel and tracing figures in the dust, is acting on the same psychological principle, is maddening the man with whom he talks, hiding all save what he wishes to give. He can say one thing and mean something else and the other, perplexed and irritated by his helplessness, drops his guard in the end.

"I have been told," Williams said, "that you have been operating this mill very efficiently. It seems to me that a clever young man could find a way to log that limit."

"Maybe," Larry agreed indifferently as he carefully shaved a tiny bit off one side the canoe.

"And you have been working for Franklin how long?"

"Three-four months."

"Your first position of the sort, is it not?"

"Yes."

"You receive, perhaps, one hundred and seventy-five dollars a month?"

"Maybe."

"A hundred and fifty, then. That's eighteen hundred a year. Much more than you ever earned before, I imagine."

Larry nodded. Williams remained silent for a time.

"I have been told that Mr. Franklin is confining his operations to the Pacific Coast," he remarked at last. "Entirely different methods of logging out there. If he should sell here, or leave for any reason, you would be out of a job. Under present conditions there are few such positions in Ontario."

"I suppose that's right," Larry agreed, and there was a certain ingenuousness in his voice. "I've been knocking around the bush quite a while and this is the first that ever jumped out and bit me."

"How did you happen to get it?"

"I been lying awake nights trying to answer that."

"Of course you are getting experience here, yet it seems to me that a man of your capabilities could do something else than work for others. You could make many times your present salary jobbing—cutting timber under contract. That is where the big fellows got their start."

"Franklin was a river pig down in Wisconsin," Larry said.

"I'm not surprised, and from that he went to jobbing. But it takes capital. I don't imagine you've saved much."

"Much! Say, mister, that thousand dollars I've got in the bank is more money than there ever was in the world before."

"H'm. Can't do much on it. With three or four, now, it would be different. Capital brings credit, especially with ability behind it. I know of several limits that some of the big fellows would be glad to farm out."

"You mean I'm a fool working for wages?" Larry asked.

"Any man is in this day and land of opportunity. What if you stay on here with Franklin? The sooner you get out his timber, the sooner you are

out of a position."

"Good gosh, I never thought of it that way!" Larry exclaimed, and for the first time he looked up from his whittling and grinned. "Here I've been laying awake nights working myself out of a job."

Williams pursued the subject, becoming more eloquent, more human. His cold, precise manner vanished. He told of men he knew who had gone into the bush as lumberjacks and had emerged as millionaires. He told of what they had been able to do with their money, of city houses and country estates, of the jewels of their women folks, of the power and influence that came with wealth.

"It's a thing a man owes to his wife or sweetheart, to his children," he declared. "And the hustler, the man who can think and act, can get them. Instead of remaining on a small salary, shut up in such a place as this, knowing only the women of the bush, he can meet women of education, of refinement, can offer them the best."

Larry had abandoned his whittling and was listening intently.

"You certainly make a fellow feel like a fool, sticking to a job," he remarked. "I've thought lots about things I'd like to do, but I never could do 'em."

"You can," Williams retorted. "What would you pay for such success?"

"Pay! Ain't there a story or a play or something about a fellow that gave the devil a mortgage on his soul? Well, I'm that fellow's brother."

"All right. Play the game as it is played. Get out and grab. The end justifies the means."

"That sounds fine," Larry laughed. "It's just like telling a jackpine eater all about top loading and then expecting him to go out and put twenty thousand on a sleigh."

Williams leaned forward and spoke in a lower tone.

"Look here. All the big fellows do it. You've got to think of yourself and yourself alone. Does Franklin care anything about you? He'll forget you in a second when he's through with you. Why should you consider him?"

"You mean just to quit him cold?"

Williams did not answer. He stared at Larry searchingly and then he demanded abruptly:

"What are you willing to do to get a start on your own?"

"I've never been tried out."

"All right. I'll give you a chance. In my room in the hotel are two papers. One is an agreement to accept the cancellation on the Bagnall limit. The other is an application for the limit adjoining. Sign those, attach to each a copy of that power of attorney, and the thing is done."

"Huh!" Larry snorted. "And knock myself out of a job."

"And into this."

Williams slipped a long billfold from a pocket and took out a sheaf of notes of large denomination.

"Good gosh!" Larry whispered. "How much is that?"

"I lay this twenty-five hundred on the table. When you've signed your name twice you pick it up."

"And you want me to play a dirty trick on Franklin for that? It's not more than a year's wages. Besides, it don't seem quite square."

"Square!" Williams repeated. "How square would Franklin be with you in a pinch? Do you think he's earned every one of those millions of dollars he's got? Do you think you can start in and *earn* every one of the millions you want?"

"I'll tell you right now!" Larry exclaimed. "If I start anything like that I'm not going to be cheap about it. I couldn't forget how mean I was, just for that."

"It's a lot of money."

"Look here! You told me I've got to grab. All right. I've got you where I want you. I can see your game. You or somebody you're working for wants that limit and figures on getting the mill cheap because it will be nothing but scrap after Franklin finds out he can't log the forty million. It's a fine scheme all right, for you or your boss. You can make a lot of money, but you don't get the chance for any twenty-five hundred."

"What do you want?" Williams demanded.

"Put twice that on the table and you get the papers signed."

"But I am not authorized to go any higher."

"Then you'd better be. I can stir up a nasty mess down in Toronto with what I know now."

Larry stood up, closed his knife and brushed the shavings from his trousers.

"There's No. 1," he said casually. "Guess I'll go up and watch her. Haven't seen a train come in for a month."

CHAPTER XX

—The Whirlpool

Two men got off the west-bound passenger train, a commercial traveler and Jefferson Shand. Larry had never met Shand, but he had once seen him in Sabawi on his way out from camp and watched him a little curiously now as he walked briskly down the platform.

Williams was approaching leisurely. The two men passed within a few feet, but there was no sign of recognition. Larry's only impression was that it was strange Hughie or Jack Hinton had not come to town to meet Shand. A moment later Williams joined him.

"Better send for those copies of power of attorney," he whispered. "I'll wire to see if I can get what you want."

He went on into the station, from which he emerged a few moments later. Without speaking again to Larry he went on toward the hotel. Shand had just entered. Larry went into the station and, on a telegraph blank, wrote a note to Marcia.

"Please get two copies of that power of attorney from the safe and send them to me," it read, and it was dispatched to the mill by Dave Connor's oldest boy.

Two hours later the necessary papers were handed to Larry. There was also a note from Marcia to the effect that the cook had reported that both flour and lard were exhausted. She suggested that if the expected shipment was not at the station Larry should wire to Port Arthur.

He went back to the station, found that the supplies had not arrived and wrote the telegram.

"Keeping you busy to-day, sending messages," he remarked idly as he handed it through the ticket window.

"Huh!" the agent snorted. "If it wasn't for you I wouldn't have any except railroad business. This is the first I've had to send for a week."

Larry strolled across to the hotel and entered the bar. It was empty. He went through into the office. Neither Shand nor Williams was there and he walked out and over to the store, where he learned from Dave Connor that

no one had arrived from the camp, but that Shand had made inquiries as to the possibility of getting someone to paddle him out. Dave was trying to get a canoeman.

Larry and Dave talked for a few minutes, then Mrs. Connor entered the store.

"Jimmie's feeling a lot better," she remarked to her husband.

"He's not sick?" Larry asked in quick sympathy.

"He has been, but he's getting well," the mother answered. "Just lying there now wishing he could get up."

"I'll go up and chin with him," Larry said as he started toward the living quarters at the rear.

"If you only would!" Mrs. Connor exclaimed happily and she hurried to show him the way upstairs.

Larry had always been something of a hero to the ten-year-old Jimmie. The boy's eyes brightened and he grinned with delight when his visitor entered the room.

"Well, old-timer," was Larry's greeting. "Been clawed up by a bear or trompled by a moose?"

They talked for fifteen minutes, the man keeping the boy laughing until color came to his cheeks.

"There's one thing about being sick though," Jimmie said at last. "Dad gave me a new knife. Lookit!"

He drew it from beneath the pillow and Larry hitched his chair forward. As he was about to lean over to examine the glistening treasure his eyes caught a movement in a window of the hotel, only twenty feet away.

"There's three blades!" Jimmie exclaimed as he opened them.

But Larry did not notice. He was staring at the window, wholly oblivious of his sick friend, for in the hotel room he saw Shand and Williams engaged in earnest conversation.

Larry drew back so that he could not be seen. He admired the knife, jested for a while with Jimmie, but all the time kept watch of the two men. At last he looked at his watch, rose to his feet and said good-by.

He went at once to Mrs. Wade's sitting room.

"I ain't got time to explain," he said, "but I'm going to eat my dinner at the hotel this noon."

She stared for an instant and then, sensing a purpose, answered readily:

"Better go in. The bell's rung."

Larry found a seat at one end of the table. Williams came in a moment later. He nodded and took a seat on one side, several chairs from Larry. Then Shand entered and sat opposite Williams. Others, railroad men and woodsmen, filled in the other places.

Larry seemed intent on his food. He did not talk, but nothing escaped him, and when he left the table he knew that neither Shand nor Williams had recognized the other.

Outside on the verandah Williams approached Larry.

"Get those papers?" he asked.

Larry nodded.

"I should have an answer to my wire any time. I doubt, however, if your figure will be met. It is unreasonable."

"I've never been in Toronto," Larry remarked. "I'd enjoy a trip down there."

Shand came out of the hotel. He looked at Larry and then stepped closer.

"Your name Vail?" he asked. "Mine's Shand. Heard a lot about you. Good job you did out there, building that camp. Haven't seen Hughie in town?"

"No," Larry answered. "You expecting him?"

"I thought this was his regular day, but I must have guessed wrong. Want some partridge shooting. But Connor says he can get someone to take me out to-morrow."

Shand walked on toward the store. He had not looked at Williams nor Williams at him.

"I'll be hanging around," Larry said. "When your telegram gets here let me know."

"If I am not authorized— —" Williams began.

"If you didn't make that first telegram strong enough you'd better send another."

A few minutes afterward Larry saw Williams going up to his room. Soon Shand came from Connor's and entered the hotel. Larry went on to the store where, after studying a showcase, he purchased a cheap watch. With this in his pocket he paid another visit to Jimmie Connor. He remained only long enough to hear the boy's excited exclamations, for again he saw Shand and Williams in the hotel room.

From the store Larry went to the station, where he entered the agent's office and took a seat in a corner near the ticket window. He said he expected an answer to his telegram. Between the taking of train orders, he and the agent talked.

Larry had been there an hour and a half when he heard the waiting room door open. Then Williams' voice came through the small window.

"Is the east-bound passenger train on time?"

"Ten minutes late but she'll make it up," the agent answered.

"Thank you."

Williams departed. A few minutes afterward Larry went out through the freight room, skirted the water tank and the round house and approached the hotel from the rear. Williams was on the verandah.

"My wire has just come," he said. "We'd better go up stairs."

He led the way to his room.

"Now give me your lowest figure," he whispered when the door was closed.

"I've done that," Larry answered.

"But man! That is out of all proportion to—"

"You know it isn't."

"But I can't—"

"It's a fine open fall we're having," Larry remarked.

Williams drew back angrily. He hesitated a moment then said:

"Let me see that power of attorney."

Larry handed him a copy. Williams read it through carefully, folded it and handed it back. Then he drew forth his billfold and counted out some bills. These he placed in an envelope.

“The postmaster is a notary,” he said. “These will have to be signed before him. We’ll go over there and do it. Then we’ll come back here and exchange the papers for the money.”

“How much?”

“Five thousand.”

“Come on,” Larry said as he arose.

Dave Connor attested Larry’s signatures, attached the copies of the power of attorney and affixed his seal. Back in the hotel room again, Williams counted out the money.

“That right?” he asked.

Larry ran through the pile of bills and when he found the amount correct he handed over the papers.

“Guess that settles us,” he remarked.

Williams placed the papers in a pocket without comment and then opened the door. Larry walked down the stairs. A few minutes later Shand, who had seen Larry leave the hotel, entered Williams’ room.

“Stick it out?” he asked.

“He thought he did,” Williams answered. “That was cheap.”

“Sure. Let’s see the papers.”

“They’re all right. His power of attorney is proof against anything. Franklin must have believed Vail was a saint.”

“It’s that clan feeling. They once drove the same river, or something like that. Wow! Franklin does make this strong. There isn’t anything Vail can’t —”

He broke off so suddenly Williams glanced at him in surprise. Shand was staring at the document in undisguised astonishment. At last he whistled and then without warning he began to laugh.

“What’s the joke?” Williams demanded.

“Nothing, only—did you read this through? Franklin doesn’t own the mill. His wife does.”

“You mean that is why Franklin got so careless?”

“No. Yes, maybe that’s it. Good Lord! When this breaks!”

Again Shand laughed. His shoulders shook. His eyes were moist.

"I'll have to hand it to Franklin," he said at last. "Wise? Oh, he's a wise one."

"He's trapped you?"

"Not me. I'm all right. But—"

He pulled out his watch and jumped to his feet.

"Close to train time!" he exclaimed. "Better pack up. And listen here! Don't waste any time. File those things. Get the papers off to Vail by the first mail. Cinch it. Tie it up. Have things settled so there won't be any backing up."

"There's no fear on that score," Williams said as he began to stuff things into a bag. "In four days the papers will be in Sabawi and after that, with these filed in Toronto, there's no way of re-opening the case. But what's this about Mrs. Franklin owning the mill?"

"I never knew it," Shand said. "Not until I read that power of attorney. I remember now he told me once about loaning some money to Bagnall. It was his wife's money. He was handling it for her. Got eight or nine per cent, I imagine. Then Bagnall slipped and Franklin had to take over the mill."

"None of which concerns us," Williams commented.

Shand was thoughtful for a moment and then he grinned.

"No, I guess not," he said. "But see here!" and his voice became hard. "I'm out of this. Understand? If it leaks—"

"Don't be a fool by taking me for one!" Williams snapped irritably. "Better get back to your own room. I'm going."

The next morning Connor had a canoeman ready and Shand departed for the camp. It had snowed heavily in the night, the storm that invariably accompanies the third week of September, but during the afternoon there was a slight lull. Shand reached the camp just before lunch and found Relda in the living room.

She had no greeting for him. As he crossed to where she stood she stared at him steadily.

"What have you done?" she demanded in a cold tone.

"About what?" he asked easily after a quick glance.

"This mill business? And Larry Vail?"

Shand's thoughts raced back over several possibilities. He decided that she could not have had news of the events in Sabawi the previous afternoon, but he wondered if she could have learned that she herself was owner of the property in question.

"You had better sit down and tell me what's bothering you," he suggested as he drew up two chairs.

Relda hesitated and then sat down.

"This raid, as you called it," she began. "I want to know all about it."

She was calm now. Her voice was even and instantly Shand was on his guard.

"Oh, that!" he answered. "I gave it up. Couldn't put it through as I thought I could."

"You mean you haven't done anything?"

"Not a thing. Got back to Toronto and found it wouldn't work."

"Then why should Larry Vail be running away?" Relda countered quickly.

"In view of the fact that I don't know Mr. Vail, have never had anything to do with him, know nothing of his past or present, I can't even hazard a guess. However, I should say that you have been misinformed. I saw him in Sabawi yesterday afternoon. Spoke to him, in fact. Told him who I was and asked if Hughie were in town."

Relda did not comment. After a moment she arose and went to her room. When she returned she carried a letter.

"I received this three days ago," she said as she handed it to Shand.

It was from Franklin, written in San Francisco on office stationery. Though addressed to his wife, it was a plain business communication.

Shand read it quickly. It merely stated that, due to pressure of business caused by the disposal of his Minnesota mill, he had not had time to report on certain funds he had been handling for her. These had been loaned two years before to Bagnall at a high rate and with what seemed to be excellent security. Bagnall had gone to pieces personally and his business had followed. It had been necessary to foreclose and take over the Sabawi mill at a loss. This loss, however, undoubtedly would be made up and a handsome profit returned as a result of Larry Vail's efficient management.

When Shand finished reading the letter he handed it back with an exclamation of surprise. Then he laughed.

"That was a close call," he said. "The raider almost raided. Didn't you know any more about your own business than that?"

"No," Relda answered. "Once I did. I took a few thousand ten years ago and played around La Salle street. It got to be quite a fascinating game. I had good tips. Fussed with real estate, too. Ran it all into quite a fortune. Then I got tired of it all and turned everything over to Howard."

Her tone was reminiscent. Shand was completely deceived and wholly off his guard when she said coldly:

"And now you've stolen it. Why did you lie to me?"

"My dear girl!" he exclaimed. "I told——"

"Don't lie again!" she interrupted fiercely. "I know. You've put this thing through as you planned. You've bribed Larry Vail and he—he has run away, to The States."

Shand caught the note of triumph in her voice at the end and chose his course.

"Then you're satisfied," he said. "That's all you were playing for—to get Vail. You didn't care what Franklin lost. Well, you've done it and now——"

She turned on him, white with fury, but he only grinned.

"I haven't been a fool," he remarked. "It was easy to read you—you and the whole situation. The moose pictures, Vail's new job, your niece coming to the mill, your interest in what would be done to Vail. I knew right along you were using me to get him. Now I've done it for you."

He leaned forward and his eyes became hard, his voice harsh.

"Another thing," he said. "Don't think you can double-cross me at this stage of the game. You're in too far. Nobody can touch me in this. I'm clear—all the way through. You've got what you wanted. You can't stop me from getting mine."

"You knew all the time I owned the mill!" she accused him.

"I never suspected it until yesterday and then it was too late to do anything."

"How did you learn it?"

"Franklin gave Vail power of attorney to transact business for him. To sign certain papers, Vail had to attach copies. After the deal was completed I saw them."

"Then he knew!" she cried.

"He couldn't help it. He had several copies of that power of attorney and he must have read them. Yesterday he sent for them from Sabawi. Wrote a note to your niece to get them out of the safe for him."

"Marcia!" Relda whispered hoarsely. "She knew, too! The little cat!"

Shand found time to marvel that a woman so good looking as Relda Franklin could suddenly become so horrible. Her face was twisted and lined by passion. Her eyes blazed with animal ferocity.

"Marcia put him up to it!" Relda rushed on. "She'd like to see me sold out. She——"

"Look here," Shand said when she became inarticulate with fury. "Maybe all that's true, but you're wrong somewhere. I don't believe Vail skipped. There was no need of it. If he's crazy about your niece, why would he run away and leave her there? I saw the girl in Sabawi this morning."

"He ran away all right," Relda answered. "But perhaps," and there was an exultant note in her voice, "he wasn't crazy about her. And now——"

"But listen, woman! I saw him yesterday afternoon in Sabawi."

"And I saw him here this morning before daylight," she retorted. "Something wakened me. I saw a light in the clearing, then heard voices in the kitchen. I listened from the living room. Hughie and Larry were getting something to eat. They were whispering together. I couldn't hear everything, only words such as 'two days,' 'across the line,' 'catch a train to Duluth.' They talked about supplies, rifled the kitchen. Then they went out, down to the lake. I saw them, and I saw Larry paddle away, alone, toward the south."

Shand whistled softly.

"The fool must have lost his head," he said. "If he was going to get across into The States he'd go by here. Only way. But he didn't have to—yet. And now his skipping out. When is Franklin coming?"

"He said he would surely be here for the hunting season."

Shand made no comment and Relda saw a troubled look in his eyes.

"Why didn't Larry have to skip out?" she asked. "What did he do?"

“It’s enough for you to know that he took five thousands dollars for being crooked.”

Relda did not press the matter then. She waited, and two days later she had the information. She immediately told Jack Hinton to be ready to take her to the mill in the morning.

“But it’s snowing!” he protested. “It will be snowing to-morrow. You’ll freeze in a canoe.”

“I’ll keep warm somehow,” she answered shortly. “Be ready after breakfast.”

CHAPTER XXI

—The Vortex

When Larry left Williams' room in the hotel it was his intention to go at once to the mill, but as he passed the door of the bar he heard Sid's voice. It was most evident that the timekeeper was drunk. Larry went in.

"Come on, you old stiff-neck," Sid greeted him. "Loosen up and buy a drink."

"Sure," Larry agreed. "I'm feeling just like one."

"You're getting so you can get a start in fifteen minutes," Larry said when the glasses were empty. "You just came to town."

"I got my start yesterday," Sid boasted. "More'n twenty-four hours now. Took a bottle home with me last night and finished it this morning. I'm just keeping the ball rolling, is all."

"I thought you'd cut this out."

"It's all your fault. You go and hide in the bush for a week. Why don't you come home when you say you will?"

"You don't need a guardian all the time," Larry laughed.

"Guardian ain't got anything to do with it," Sid protested indignantly. "Yesterday I walk up and get the mail. Same as always. Never came in here. But there's a letter from my mother. She's sick. All alone and sick. You here, I get some money and send it to her. But you're gone. I ain't got any money. I want to cry. Pretty near cry. Can't send any money. Mother sick. All alone and sick. You here, I get some money. You not here so I just have to get drunk."

Larry, expecting to call a bluff, asked to see the letter. Crumpled and soiled, it was dragged from a pocket and slammed down on the bar.

It was a pitiful missive, a strange mixture of pride and faith and hesitancy and despair, and Larry could read between the lines.

"Why didn't you go to Miss Kerr?" he demanded.

"She wouldn't do anything," Sid complained. "No use. She don't like me. Besides, I'm overdrawn a month now."

He folded his arms on the bar, laid his head upon them and began to weep. Larry was about to speak when he heard the whistle of the approaching east-bound passenger train.

"Look here!" he exclaimed as he grasped Sid's shoulder and shook it. "There's twenty minutes to catch No. 2. Get hold of yourself. You've got to go down there and look after her."

He slipped an arm under one of Sid's, started him out through the door and up toward the station. For fifty yards Sid got along fairly well and then, despite Larry's help, he began to crumple.

"Can't go and see my mother like this," he sobbed. "Can't, I tell you. No fit condition to see mother. Want to go to bed anyhow."

Larry half dragged him onto the station platform and into the freight room, where he leaned him against the wall and considered him.

"Guess you can't to-day," he decided at last. "I'll take you home for a good night's sleep and you can catch the first freight in the morning. But now——"

He hesitated a moment and then, after a quick glance around, drew from a coat pocket the envelope containing the money he had received from Williams. Sid stared stupidly as Larry searched for a hundred dollar bill, drew it out and replaced the rest in the envelope. From a pocket in his trousers he brought some silver and pressed it, with the bill, into Sid's hands.

"Go and wire this to your mother," he whispered. "Don't want anybody to think I have to do it for you. And tell 'em to rush it."

Sid walked off, more steadily than when Larry had helped him. When he returned they started together down the track to the mill. For a time Larry held Sid's arm, but after a mile he saw that his friend could walk without assistance. He remained unwontedly silent, however, plodding doggedly, his head down.

"Cheer up," Larry said. "She'll get that money this afternoon and to-morrow you'll be there. You can let me know if you need any more."

"You got enough of it," Sid growled. "Where you get all that?"

"Picked it up on the track walking to town this morning."

"You think I'm drunk and you can fool me," and Sid shot a look of alcoholic shrewdness and quick suspicion. "But I ain't so drunk that I don't

see pickings are getting good for you around here. How much is it? Must be ten thousand."

"Hardly that," Larry laughed. "Too bad I didn't find you in time to walk off this bust. You're getting sober enough to try and guess a roll of money."

"You bet I'm sober," Sid retorted. "And sober enough to tell you what I think of you and your mushy talk. You thought I was drunk or you wouldn't have showed it to me. But I fooled you. You preach, but you don't pay any attention to your own gab. When you see a chance to graft you take it."

"Don't be a fool," Larry advised. "You know me better than that."

"You bet I know you. You think you've fooled me for a long time now. Been telling everybody how you look after me and all the time you're holding me down. A hell of a fine pardner you are."

"You'll feel better about it when you wake up," Larry said with forced good nature.

"Same old stuff about taking care of me. I'm sick of it. Here you got me owing a month's wages besides the hundred. Time was when we was pardners and now you make me borrow a hundred to send to my sick mother when you got a roll like that. Ever since you started up you've kicked me down. If I took care of myself the way you do I'd go and tell Franklin about it."

"Shut up!" Larry cut in on the maudlin accusations. "Where'd you get those ideas? You never grew 'em."

"Think somebody had to tell me, do you? Think I'd never see it unless a woman told me."

Larry stopped in sudden enlightenment, then walked on more rapidly, heedless of Sid's stumbling feet. At last, with a new sympathy and understanding, he turned, placed a hand under Sid's elbow and helped him down the track.

After he had put his friend to bed Larry went down stairs to the office, where he expected to find Marcia. She was not at her desk but, propped against the inkwell, was an envelope addressed to him. In it he found this note:

"I've been just dying with impatience all day, Larry, and when the tote teamster told me he was going to town, I decided to go, too. Mrs. Osland is going with me. I'm so anxious to hear what the government man had to say,

but I know you'll win if there is any way to do it. I'm leaving this on the chance that I miss you in Sabawi."

Larry made a notation on an envelope, tucked in the money and sealed it. The safe was unlocked and he placed the package in a small compartment. The outer door did not swing easily on its hinges and he closed it with a bang and twirled the combination.

At supper a few minutes later he sat down with Ed Osland.

"The women folks are going to get wet if they don't come back pretty soon," the filer commented.

"It's raining now," Larry said as he looked out a window. "Be snowing before morning."

"Always does when the sun crosses the line in September. They'll stay with Mrs. Wade."

The storm increased, the rain turning to sleet. After looking in on Sid, whom he found asleep, Larry went home with Osland. They played seven-up until bedtime. The tote teamster had brought word that Marcia and Mrs. Osland would remain with Mrs. Wade.

In the middle of the night Larry found himself wide awake. He was conscious that something had aroused him. The pelting of sleet against the windows had ceased and, because the wind still blew and it was very dark, he decided that the sleet had turned to snow. It was cold and he turned over and drew the blankets about his shoulders.

A sound brought him upright in bed. It was the unmistakable click of a door latch and he felt certain he had heard snow crunching under a foot on the steps in front of the office. He sat there listening for a while and at last, when there were no more sounds, he lay down.

Sleep would not come. There was no logical reason for anyone being around the office at that time of night. He tried to dismiss the subject, but he could not. At last, half an hour after he had wakened, he arose and lit a lamp. The first thing he saw was that Sid's bed was empty, the second that Sid's clothes were gone.

He rushed to the door and opened it, only to let in a cloud of snow. He dressed quickly and went down stairs. The door of the office was closed, but not locked. He entered, lighted a lamp and walked into Marcia's office. Everything was as he had left it late the previous afternoon.

As he stood there, perplexed and shivering from the cold, he saw several patches of melting snow on the floor in front of the safe and he remembered the sound that had wakened him, that he had been unable to determine. It was the clang of the safe door.

Larry had never opened the safe since that first day when he and Marcia and Sid had spent a laughing half hour trying to understand exactly what the salesman meant by his instructions. Later Sid and Marcia together had solved the riddle, but now Larry was not even sure he remembered the numbers.

He struggled for fifteen minutes, his fingers becoming numb, and it was quite by accident, he suspected, that he produced the welcome click. He jerked the door open and pulled out the compartment in which he had placed the money. It was empty.

For a moment he squatted there on his heels, then jumped up, slammed the safe door shut and hurried out. Upstairs he found and lighted a lantern and with this he searched the ground in front of the office. The snow was more than an inch deep and footprints, though somewhat blurred, were plainly visible. They led from the office door to the cook camp, which was never locked, and from there down to the railroad track.

Larry followed them for half a mile to the west, around the curve beyond the mill and over a trestle. They kept on and, as at the mill, they were far apart, with long scoops at the heels, the certain evidences of flight.

For a time Larry stood there between the rails, heedless of the buffeting wind and driving snow, of his numb fingers holding the lantern. He was torn between a sense of bitterness and injury and a loyalty that would not down. He knew Sid's act violated every precept of partnership, that he would be justified in casting the boy out of his life. And yet, such is this spirit of partnership as the wilderness knows it, so deep and secure is this attachment of kinless, lonely men, so unalterable are the unwhispered laws of those who share the sweat of portage and the peace of camp fires, that Larry found his stinging resentment was only a short-lived flare.

This spirit now made of Sid, not an ungrateful thief, a traitor to an unbreathed but sacred pledge, but a vain youth, jealous, pitiable in a plight from which there was no escape. With this there came a sense of guilt. Larry now saw that in the absorption in his work, in the new and engulfing emotions that accompanied his associations with Marcia Kerr, there had been little of his time left for his friend.

Most of all, Larry regretted that he had made no effort to overcome that other influence. He had been blind to the significance and the importance of the change in Sid's attitude, the increasing surliness, the wild charges made in that alcoholic outburst as they walked from Sabawi the previous afternoon. These were things that could have been born only in the hate, inexplicable before Larry's buoyant nature, of the woman who brooded alone in the Franklin hunting lodge.

It was this that added a savage fury to Larry's determination to save his friend. He even wondered if Relda's clever nursing of Sid's vanity had led him to go to her now. A sudden hope to trap them together, to expose the woman, drove him to return to the mill at a dog trot. Ten minutes after he arrived he had shoved a Peterborough into the bay and paddled away in the storm and darkness.

Twenty miles of river, lake and portage lay between the mill and the Franklin camp; twenty miles of black night and blinding snow, of rapids and slippery trail, of crashing waves and icy spray that froze to clothing, canoe and paddle. Yet Larry, starting at one o'clock, was shaking Hughie Knowles' shoulder before daylight.

"Get on some clothes and come outside," he whispered. "Don't wake Hinton and bring a lantern."

Hughie did not comment, even when he joined Larry in the driving snow.

"Has Sid been here?" Larry asked.

"Ain't seen him."

"Let's make a circle and look for tracks."

Five minutes later they reached the kitchen door. Nowhere in the clearing, around the buildings or on the lake shore was the surface of the snow broken by a footprint.

"He's gone on south," Larry said. "He portaged into this lake. I saw his trail."

"The States, eh?" Hughie growled. "Let him go."

"No!" Larry protested. "He's just been a fool, is all. I've got to catch him. I can't let him spoil his life."

"You mean you're going chasing off in this storm to bring back a good-for-nothing— —"

Hughie broke off suddenly, lifted the lantern and slowly adjusted the wick.

"What you need, lad?" he asked gently. "I see you didn't have much in the canoe."

"Everything," Larry said. "Grub and a tent and blankets. Spare socks, too. He can't be far ahead, but I might miss him and have to go clear through to Tower or Ely."

"What time'd he start?"

"About midnight. I left at one, but I had to paddle down the river and make that long portage. He had a canoe on Burnt Lake, you know."

Hughie did not comment as he turned and hurried away to the men's camp. He returned to the kitchen in a few minutes with a bulging packsack and an empty one. While Larry ate a cold lunch the old prospector collected food, frying pan and kettles and stowed them in the empty packsack. He worked rapidly, apparently in a hit-or-miss fashion, but in the days that followed Larry found in that pack everything he needed.

"Nobody knows I'm gone," Larry said as he ate. "Guess it's better you didn't see me. Chances are I'll catch him before night."

"What if you don't?"

"I'll keep going clear to Duluth. He'd take the first train for there."

"He'll have to go down Bad River to get through to the line," Hughie suggested. "There's plenty of other ways, but he don't know them."

"Yes, and when he leaves the Bad he can head west or south, and water doesn't leave any tracks."

"If you ain't caught him there, he'd head south. It's shorter to steel at Ely."

Larry nodded and picked up one of the packsacks. Outside they found that dawn had come, though it was still snowing.

"When folks get up at the mill they won't be able to see any sign of where you went," Hughie commented. "I'm going to town for mail tomorrow and I'll stop."

"You might tell Marcia——" Larry began. "No, keep it as it is. I'll have to fix some story of why Sid and I dug out this way. I don't want anybody to think—— He's a damned fool kid, is all. He's headed for hell with no one

but me to stop him and he's got to know he can come back without anyone looking at him funny."

The packs were laid in the canoe and Larry took his place.

"Hug the west shore after you leave the bay," Hughie said. "Going to blow hard after sun-up."

Larry nodded and pushed off.

"Fair wind to you, lad," the old prospector called after him.

Larry paddled to the south end of the lake, where he found Sid's tracks in the snow on the portage trail. He took his own canoe and packs across in one load. When he reached the next lake the snow had ceased falling but, though he could see ahead for several miles, there was no tiny speck on the roughened surface of the lake.

This did not disturb Larry. He knew that delays and his own longer route had added two hours to Sid's original lead of at least one hour and he did not deceive himself with the thought that he could make this up in a few miles. Further, he knew Sid and understood the terror that would come with the first weariness of flight; foresaw the frantic, unsparing pace to which fear would spur him.

There was nothing frantic in Larry's pursuit. Not once during the day did he change his paddle stroke. The last was as strong as the first, and as regular. Nor did he call too much on his reserve strength. Twice that day he went ashore, boiled tea and prepared a hot meal. After it was finished he washed his few dishes and smoked a pipe. Each time when he started on again he was rested and strong and against the delay he balanced the inevitable deterioration of Sid's strength and speed.

The waterways of the country he traveled are inexpressibly intricate. A height o' land between two courses may necessitate a portage of no more than three hundred yards over level going. Rivers are many and lakes countless. Bays and arms are infinite and islands myriad, and never does water leave a trace. From Sabawi to the railroads of Northern Minnesota it would have been possible to select scores of routes, and to change constantly from one course to another.

It was wilderness. Except for a few Indians on one border lake, it was uninhabited, and in that season of the year no Indian would be traveling. No one would see Sid and from no one could Larry get news of his friend's flight. Only in the snow on a portage could he determine if he were on the right course.

Though he conserved his strength as much as possible, though he enforced patience and foresight, Larry was not engaged in an emotionless pursuit. Rather he was forced to fight down a desire to waste his energy in fitful bursts of speed. The necessity of catching Sid became an all-absorbing passion, in the end a driving demon.

Toward the close of the second day his body seemed only a thing of aches and strains with a frost-burned covering. His hands were senseless hooks frozen to the paddle. There was no feeling in his legs below the knees. Yet he drove on as relentlessly as at the beginning, fighting for each inch and each second, stung by an ever-growing desire, cursing bitterly and fluently at the thought of Relda Franklin.

The storm, which had ceased for a few hours the first day, raged more fiercely the second, and only when he reached the mouth of Bad River and looked across a big lake to The States shore beyond was the curtain of swirling snow lifted for a moment.

He had not overtaken Sid. He knew he was on the right course, for only ten miles up stream he had seen the tracks on a portage. But still his friend was far in the lead.

So stiff and sore that he was forced to roll out of the canoe, he got ashore and climbed a small rise near the river's end. In the last light of day he saw a black dot tossing on the waves near the southern shore.

Larry knew no one else was traveling in that sort of weather. It could be only Sid. He knew, too, that Sid had reached The States. Even as he looked, a blinding squall of snow rushed down the lake and shut out everything except the tossing white caps near shore. He went back to his canoe, got in and shoved out into the crashing waves.

Darkness came before he had gone a mile and he had only the waves to steer by. Exhausted and racked by pain, hands stiff and without feeling, face raw from the ice and wind, he drove himself on until, two hours later, he reached the shelter of a chain of islands. Through these he threaded his way slowly and at last, a mile farther south, he found the thing for which he had been looking.

At the head of a little bay, sheltered by a thick fringe of spruce saplings, a huge camp fire was roaring, lighting up the trees overhead. Larry watched it for a moment and then turned his canoe ashore.

Five minutes later he pushed aside some snow-crusted brush and stood in the circle of fire light. Sid, seated beneath the shelter of an open tent, was

drying a pair of socks. He stared for an instant, then grasped a rifle, sprang to his feet and cocked the weapon.

"Go away!" he cried shrilly. "Go away! You can't touch me. I'm in The States. You haven't any right. Go away, I tell you, or I'll shoot. By God, I will! If you come a step closer."

Sid was hysterical from fear and weariness. His hands trembled, the muzzle of the rifle barrel wavered, but he was close enough to shoot effectively and his eyes were glaring with the desperate, heedless terror of a man who faces the end.

"I'll kill you!" he shrieked. "So help me God, you'll not take me back!"

Larry knew that he meant it, that Sid was no different than a trapped wolf, as reckless, as unthinking, as wanton and as dangerous.

This knowledge was only a flash in Larry's consciousness, something accepted and retained as a reality. His thoughts were elsewhere, back at the mill, in Marcia's office, with the inevitable consequences of his disappearance.

No one except Hughie knew he had gone, or why, and Hughie could only guess. If Sid pulled the trigger there would be no mystery in Sabawi once the signed application for the new limit arrived from Toronto. There would be no search for his body, for there would be no question but that he had sold out his employer and run away.

Larry did not demand that the faith of his friends or Marcia's trust survive that. They would be justified in considering him a thief and a traitor. Mrs. Wade would say, "After twenty-five years I went wrong in a man." Hughie would indulge in a cynical shrug of his shoulders. Marcia would be left with only a bitter memory of their last Sunday together, with a sickening sense of deceit and faithlessness.

Larry felt that he had done this to himself and to those who loved and believed in him. In his rash, heedless manner, he had rushed into a situation from which a word to Hughie, a note to Marcia, might have saved him and their trust.

But he knew that above all else he had kept faith with himself. Through the storm and the wilderness his friend had called with the despairing cry of a doomed man, and he had answered. As he looked at Sid now, wild-eyed, driven by panic and remorse and the hopeless terror of a cornered beast, he knew why he had come, why he must stay.

Larry's lips moved slightly.

"Marcia! Marcia!" he groaned, and took a step forward.

CHAPTER XXII

—Relda Begins to Paddle

So impatient was Marcia to see Larry and learn the result of his interview with Williams that she walked from Sabawi to the mill immediately after breakfast that first day of the storm. She went at once to the office and when she did not find Larry or Sid there, she turned to the cook camp.

"The boss was here for supper, but he hasn't had breakfast," the cook told her. "Nor Sid either. I been looking for them. Somebody robbed me last night."

"Robbed you!" Marcia exclaimed.

"Took my rifle. I left it in the kitchen. Cleaned it just before I went to bed. And a lot of grub, too. Bread and bacon and stuff. Somebody was here in the night."

At Marcia's suggestion the cook went to the room above the office. He reported that Larry and Sid had slept there.

"But nobody's seen 'em," he repeated. "They didn't have any breakfast and the stableman says they didn't take the driving team. Maybe Osland knows."

Marcia found the filer at the shop. He told how Larry had played cards with him the night before after putting Sid to bed.

"Larry was feeling mighty good about something," he concluded, "but he didn't say anything about going anywhere to-day."

Marcia returned to the office and searched for a note from Larry. She found the one she had written, open on her desk, but nothing else. Even now she was not worried. There was only the disappointment that she could not learn the results of his talk with Williams. It was the cancellation of the permit to cut the Bagnall limit that disturbed her, and from that came the explanation of the absence of both Larry and Sid. They had gone to the lumber camp in preparation for the fight to be made in Toronto.

The matter was settled in Marcia's mind and she saw her own part in it. She must complete the investigation of the Bagnall books, get the

information she and Larry had decided was necessary and be ready when he returned.

She worked hard all day, with such concentration that she gave little heed to the cook when he reported in the afternoon that the canoe he sometimes used for fishing was gone.

"Somebody stole that along with my rifle," he declared.

At noon the next day Hughie Knowles stopped at the mill on his regular trip to Sabawi for mail and supplies. Marcia was quickly sympathetic because he had been exposed to such weather.

"The storm is worse than ever," she said. "The mail isn't worth such a trip. And Larry, too. He and Sid left early yesterday morning."

Hughie glanced at her keenly before he asked: "Where they gone?"

"Down to the lumber camp, I think. A government man from Toronto was here and Larry left before daylight the next morning. Something he had to look up."

"I see," Hughie said.

The next forenoon he returned to the mill and showed Marcia a letter from Franklin. It announced his arrival at Sabawi the next day.

"Oh, he's just in time!" the girl cried. "We need him."

"I wasn't expecting him for two weeks or more," Hughie said. "He wrote once he couldn't get up before hunting season, the fifteenth of next month. Now I'll wait over for him."

"I can't stop and gossip with you," Marcia laughed as she turned back to the books. "I must have this data ready when uncle arrives. Maybe Larry will be back to-night."

She worked all afternoon and that evening. When she arose the next morning and found Larry was not there she went to the office early, feeling almost glad that the responsibility for compiling the data rested with her alone.

As she tabulated and summarized, a thrill of pride came to her—pride in Larry and his stewardship. He had justified the faith her uncle had placed in him.

It was after luncheon, while she was still in this mood and the task was nearly completed, that she heard someone in the outer office. It was a light

footstep. There was the swish of feminine garments as snow was shaken off, and she thought only that Mrs. Osland had come. Then she looked up to see Mrs. Franklin standing in the doorway.

"Aunt Relda!" she exclaimed as she arose and started forward impulsively. "In this storm! I never expected——"

Marcia halted at the corner of the desk. In her first amazement she had not caught the older woman's expression. Relda did not speak. She stood there staring, her blue eyes pale and cold and hard, but with tigerishly exultant lights dancing in them. Even in every line of her figure there was manifested a controlled but unmistakable air of triumphant malignity.

Marcia returned the stare with a cool, level glance. She did not believe she hated her aunt, but for several years there had been a growing contempt that now found unconscious expression in features and attitude as she waited for the other to speak. When Relda recognized it she smiled jubilantly and turned to find a chair.

"You did not get so far away from me last summer as you thought," she began as Marcia resumed her seat at the desk. "Wouldn't live in the same house, but you would take my money and pretend to give service for it."

"If you mean that you own this mill and I am working for you, I never suspected such a thing until four days ago," Marcia answered calmly.

"Indeed? It was only last week that I received a tardy letter from Howard informing me of the fact. I imagine he wrote you at the same time."

"He has never written or spoken of it to me. I happened to learn it in a power of attorney he gave Larry."

"Then Larry, too, was unaware that I was being benefited by his services?"

"I think Larry has known it ever since I turned the papers over to him when I arrived, but he has never mentioned it and he always speaks as if he considered Uncle Howard his employer."

"Because Howard engaged him, I dare say. But this power of attorney—what was that? You'll pardon these questions. You seem to have been busy, but after all, you must realize that I am interested in what you are doing."

Marcia knew her aunt too well not to understand this was all preliminary, that back of it was some evil intent, some vengeful purpose. Her sudden appearance at the mill in such a storm, the absence of a greeting, that air of malign triumph, each told of it unmistakably. But because she had nothing to

fear, because she suspected in what direction that purpose lay, a sense of security gave her self-control.

"They conferred upon Larry power to transact practically all business in the absence of Uncle Howard," she answered.

"Has he used it?" Relda asked so sweetly Marcia glanced at her in fresh distrust.

"He used two copies four days ago," she said.

"For what purpose?"

"I don't know. He was in Sabawi. I sent them to him."

"Surely you have seen him since then."

"No."

"But you are in his confidence, know what important business required two copies of the power of attorney," Relda persisted.

"Yes, the government has been investigating Bagnall's operations here. There has been crookedness and we will have to put up a fight to save the investment."

"But why should I suffer a loss because of another's grafting proclivities?"

Marcia, in response to this and further questions, gave an outline of the situation.

"I see," Relda murmured at last. "A very serious condition. But," and her eyes flashed, her body stiffened and her tone became harsh, "why should the manager of the property choose this of all times to abandon his post?"

"He hasn't abandoned it," Marcia retorted warmly. "He started early the next morning for the lumber camp to get additional facts for the fight he is going to make in Toronto. He is there now, working in this storm, and I have been working nights getting facts from the Bagnall books. That is what is being done in your interests."

"In the lumber camp, you say," Relda sneered. "I thought you hadn't seen him. But of course he would leave a note for you before his early morning start."

"What do you mean?" Marcia demanded.

"And about the mail," Relda rushed on, ignoring the question. "Has there been any word from Toronto about this—anything since that

government man left Sabawi?"

"No one has gone for the mail since yesterday morning. It seems to me, Aunt Relda, that you know——"

"Know!" Relda shrieked as she sprang to her feet and leaned across the desk. "You little fool, of course I know! Can you imagine why I came here to-day, in this storm? Why I have waited there in that horrible camp all these weeks? Of course you can't, you sanctimonious prude.

"You wanted him, didn't you? You thought you were stealing him. But I saw through that pretense of leaving to earn your living. You knew Howard had given him this place and you chuckled over me when you got back here to this *job* of yours."

She broke off and laughed, a cold, horrible sound, venomous and gloating. Marcia, flaring in resentment, rose to her feet but, while there was battle in her clear gray eyes, there was loathing for what she saw and heard. Relda was quick to catch it and lost all control.

"Now you've got him you can have him!" she screamed. "You appointed yourself guardian of the morals of the universe, you meddled in other people's business. Now tend to your own. You have your hands full.

"Oh, don't be afraid of me. I give him to you, freely, without strings or favor. He's yours, his smile and his wide shoulders and his hazel eyes and his curly hair. I don't want him."

Again she stopped to laugh.

"It's funny, you with your straight-laced ideas, with your holier-than-thou manner, you with your primness and self-righteousness, being crazy over a cheap thief, a dirty grafter, a man running from the law and afraid to show his head in the country again. Take him! Take him! I renounce all claims. He's yours now, if you can ever find him again."

She stopped, suddenly weak from her mad outburst. As she relaxed Marcia leaned across the desk.

"You lie, Relda Franklin!" the girl cried. "You—you—oh, what a despicable thing you are!"

"Hurts, doesn't it?" Relda taunted. "You'd begun to suspect, too, since he skipped out for The States without even a good-by kiss."

"Stop it!" Marcia commanded.

She had drawn back and was surveying her aunt coldly and with loathing. The first passionate impulse to defend was gone. In her heart the charges against Larry had failed to find lodgment. Their very absurdity made even the recognition of them absurd.

"A man might believe that," she continued, "but never a woman, especially one that has lived with you as long as I have. I know every twist and fold in that shrunken, distorted soul of yours. I know your deceitfulness, your despicable methods, all your shameful, shameless attitude toward Uncle Howard. I left because I couldn't stand it any longer, because I would rather go out in the streets and beg than spend another moment in your presence.

"For a moment I went to Larry's defense and I am sorry. No one who knows him would believe you for an instant. I have worked with him here. I know what he has done, and he is so wholly incapable of wrong doing that your charges are ridiculous."

Complete serenity had come to Marcia as she spoke. For the first time in her life she had been free to tell Relda Franklin what she thought of her. The opportunity had brought no exultation, only a dispassionate desire to make known her thoughts. Yet in speaking of Larry she had grown suddenly vehement, not in defense, but with a new, subtle delight that she could express her admiration for him.

It was an attitude that had always maddened Relda; this cool, incisive tone, this faith of Marcia in herself and in the ideas she so frankly made known.

"You're awfully sure of this wilderness Don Juan of yours, aren't you?" she taunted.

"I am sure of Larry Vail," Marcia answered quietly, but with a swift inhalation as she felt the glory of that statement and experienced the rapturous delight of making it.

"And he's down at the lumber camp?" Relda persisted.

"I think so."

"Think so! Listen, you little fool! You didn't know you were confirming my suspicions when you told me all about the government's action. You didn't know you were proving Larry Vail to be a thief.

"Your pretty boy isn't in the lumber camp. He's in The States. I *know* that. He came to the camp in the night, the first night of the storm, came

straight from Sabawi. He got food there, and an outfit. From Hughie. I heard them talking in the kitchen, planning his flight. Across the line in a canoe. A train to Duluth. Hughie could tell you, but he won't."

"You know that isn't true," Marcia said quietly, "because there is no reason for his running away."

The confident tone more than the words enraged Relda. She had come to revel in Marcia's wretchedness, to laugh at her tears, to gloat over her grief, and she was being denied the very thing that had driven her to that freezing, torturing journey in the canoe. Fury, again unleashed, drove out all discretion.

"No reason!" she cried. "He's sold me out to some crooks. He's taken money for cheating me out of this timber limit. Wait until those papers come from Toronto. You'll see."

She stopped and traced Marcia's face for fear or misgiving.

"And I'll do this for you," she continued viciously when she failed to find what she sought. "I'll hunt your Larry up for you. He's in The States. It's a big country, but I'll get him."

She leaned across the desk and shook her clenched hand before Marcia's face. Her voice trembled with a hatred that was terrible to see; a hatred, Marcia understood, that was not of herself, but of Larry.

"I'll spend every cent from the wreck of this mill, every cent I can lay my hands on, to land him in jail. He can't do this to me and escape. When I find him, when he is behind the bars—" she stopped and looked at Marcia triumphantly "—I'll let you know so that you can go and see him."

She turned and picked up her mittens and woolen scarf.

"To allay any anxiety you may have," she said coolly, "and to speed the reunion with your lumberjack lover, I am going to Sabawi and wire a detective agency in The States to start the search. Don't worry. They'll have him in a short time."

In an instant Marcia had darted around the desk to the door, where she whirled like a fighting animal.

"You won't!" she cried. "You won't blacken him when he is innocent. Uncle Howard will be here this afternoon. He won't let you do such a thing. And until he comes you can't leave this room."

She leaped back, slammed the door and turned the key, locking Relda inside.

She hesitated a moment as she slipped the key into a pocket and looked at her watch. It was an hour and a half until train time. She knew the two windows of her office looked out over a deep ravine and it would be impossible for her aunt to escape from them. The door was solid.

Marcia ran out and across to the cook camp. A man was just rising from the table and she asked if he were Jack Hinton. He nodded.

"Mrs. Franklin wishes you to go to Sabawi in the canoe," Marcia said. "I will take her in the buggy."

She returned to the office and waited until she saw Hinton crossing the empty lumber yards to the bay and then ran up to the blacksmith shop, where she found Ed Osland.

"I want you to do something for me," she said when she had drawn him aside. "I can't explain it all now, but it's for Larry. Here is the key to my office. A woman is locked inside. Go to the outer office and stay there. Don't let her out and don't let anyone get her out. I'll have the stableman drive me to Sabawi. When he comes back, unlock the door. Then the stableman can bring her to town. Go tell him now to hitch up the team, please."

"What if she kicks down the door?"

"Don't let her go, no matter what happens!" the girl cried. "She'll threaten, but never mind. It's Mrs. Franklin and——"

"Mrs. Franklin!" the filer exclaimed.

"Yes, but don't let her get away. It's for Larry. If she does——"

"She won't. If it was for Larry I'd tie up the big boss himself. Don't worry."

CHAPTER XXIII

—The Faith of Three

Marcia reached Sabawi less than an hour before train time. As she was driven past the hotel she saw Rene Lacrodaire come out of the bar door. He started, peered through the whirling snow at the driver, not at Marcia, and then went on.

Marcia gave no thought to Rene. She went at once to Mrs. Wade's and asked for Hughie.

"Haven't seen him since dinner time," the landlady said, "but he's around somewhere. What's the matter, child?"

"Oh, I can't tell you now!" the girl cried. "I must see Hughie."

"Sabawi's a small place," Mrs. Wade said after a shrewd glance at Marcia's face. It was rosy from snow and wind, but anxiety had drawn its lines and fear fought with determination in her eyes. "We'll find him."

But all Mrs. Wade's energy and the searching of the Connor boys failed to find trace of Hughie. He was in the one place they never thought to look, the bar.

"He'll surely be here at train time," the landlady said at last. "He got a telegram this morning from Mr. Franklin to meet him this afternoon."

Marcia went to the station, learned the train was on time and then sent the stableman after Relda. She knew now that she could see her uncle first and she was confident he would prevent the sending of a telegram to a detective agency.

It was this imperative matter alone that she considered as she waited on the platform and her relief was so great when she saw Howard Franklin step from a Pullman that her laugh had an hysterical note in it and her lashes were wet with tears.

"You look as if the mill had burned down," he said, after she had kissed and hugged him with rapturous intensity.

"It is so much worse!" she cried as she took his arm and started toward Mrs. Wade's. "Aunt Relda came to the mill this afternoon and made

ridiculous charges against Larry. She says he accepted a bribe and has run away to The States and now she is going to wire a detective agency to look for him."

"Where is Larry?"

"Down at the lumber camp getting facts with which to fight the government. They say they'll cancel the permit. You won't let her, will you?"

"Naturally not. But what's this about canceling?"

"I'm not sure. They sent a man. I missed Larry, coming to Sabawi the first night of the storm, and he was gone before I got back the next morning."

"They can't cancel that permit. We've been square."

"That's what Larry says. He's had me go through the Bagnall books to get facts for our defense. There comes Aunt Relda now."

They had reached Mrs. Wade's boarding house. As they turned to wait, Marcia saw Hughie coming out of the hotel and waved to him to join them. The next moment the team stopped and Relda Franklin threw back a snow-covered blanket and jumped out.

"It's time you came," was her only greeting for her husband. "I want a warrant for Vail sworn out at once and a detective agency instructed to begin search for him in The States."

Franklin looked at her for a moment and then said quietly: "We'd better get inside and talk this over first."

"No!" Relda cried furiously. "He's a thief and a grafter and he can't do this to me. I want that telegram sent now," and she started toward the station.

Her husband sprang to her side and took her arm.

"We'll talk this over first," he repeated firmly. "Come inside."

As he led her toward the door Relda seemed to see Marcia for the first time.

"I suppose the little cat has been purring around you since the train got in," she said contemptuously.

"None of that or we won't discuss this at all," Franklin commanded so sternly that Relda started.

Then she saw Hughie, who had just come up.

"I want him present!" she exclaimed. "He'll back me if he'll tell the truth."

Mrs. Wade was in the sitting room. She shook hands with Franklin, but had only a stare for Relda. Relda, however, seemed unaware of this. She removed her snow-covered coat and sat down.

"We may as well be comfortable," she remarked. "This promises to be quite a session."

Mrs. Wade, after a quick glance around the room, turned to go. Marcia threw an arm around her waist and whispered:

"Stay, please. For Larry's sake."

"I want to ask first if you have gotten the mail?" Relda said, looking at Marcia. "There may be something in it that will support what I have to say."

Marcia shook her head and Hughie announced that the post office was closed until Connor distributed the sack that had just arrived.

"All right," Relda continued as she turned to her husband. "First of all, I want you to understand that what I am to tell you is not a wild guess on my part. It is information I received this afternoon from her," and she indicated Marcia.

"Last week I received your letter telling me you had loaned my money to Bagnall and that the mill is mine. My first reaction was that you had made a grave mistake in placing Vail in charge. However, I gave the matter little thought at the time. To-day, after questioning Marcia, I have discovered that there was some crooked work on Bagnall's part, that the government has investigated his books and mine and that an agent of the government arrived here last week and talked to Vail.

"After talking with this man, who, I feel certain, has no connection with the government, Vail disappeared. He has not been seen in Sabawi since. For four days my property has been without a manager, without supervision."

"I hardly see how you can base charges of graft and theft on that," Franklin interrupted.

"Wait a moment. As I said, I got all this information this afternoon. The fact remains that Vail disappeared immediately after talking to this man from Toronto and——"

"The mail's distributed," Hughie said as he arose quickly. "Maybe you'll like to have me get it now."

"By all means," Relda said. "I am sure it will prove interesting."

When Hughie had gone Franklin turned to his wife.

"I still fail to understand what grounds you have for such charges against Larry," he said.

"Wait until you see the mail," she answered shortly. "I haven't begun to tell what I know and I want that old man here when I do."

The four sat in silence for a time and then Franklin turned to Marcia.

"You told her this?"

"Yes."

"You don't know what happened when Larry saw this Toronto man?"

"No. He came to the mill while Larry was down at the lumber camp. He merely told me the case was serious, that our permit undoubtedly would be cancelled and that he wanted to see Larry at once. Larry got back late one night. I told him when I saw him in the morning and he came to Sabawi at once. In the afternoon, when he did not return, I came up with the tote team. I was anxious to know what had happened, but he had already started back on the railroad track. Then this storm began. It rained so hard Mrs. Osland and I could not get back until the next day. When I arrived at the mill Larry was gone."

She leaned forward tensely.

"Don't you see, Uncle Howard?" she pleaded. "There is no reason to believe such terrible things of Larry. He has done nothing."

"Nothing!" Relda laughed, and Franklin glanced at her quickly when he caught the triumphant note in her voice. "But wait. Here is Hughie."

She watched closely as the old prospector handed a bundle of letters to Marcia and as the girl sorted them. Relda caught a glimpse of a large, bulky envelope with an unmistakable government seal in a corner and she looked at her husband triumphantly.

"Before we investigate the mail," she said, "there is something more I want to say. The first night of the storm I was wakened by a noise. I don't know what it was, but I saw the light of a lantern and looked out the window. Two men were coming from the dock to the main building. I heard them enter the kitchen.

"Remember, this was the night after Vail talked to this so-called government man here in Sabawi. I got up, went into the living room and listened at the kitchen door. From the voices I recognized Vail and Hughie. They whispered, or spoke in low tones, and I could not hear much. Vail was eating and Hughie was putting food in a packsack.

"I caught some things they said, words and phrases. They spoke of getting across the border, of the shortest route, of the time it would take, of catching a train to Duluth. A little later—it was getting light—I saw Vail paddle away, *alone, toward the south*."

She whirled in her chair and pointed a finger at Hughie.

"Isn't that true?" she demanded. "Every word of it?"

The old prospector had filled and lighted his pipe and was listening attentively. When Relda turned and asked the question he calmly took another puff, slowly removed the pipe and said:

"So far as your getting up in the night and all that, I don't know. Like as not you did. But as for seeing me or Larry in the kitchen or anywhere else, it's all news to me."

"What!" Relda screamed as she leaned forward. "You mean to say I lied?"

"I don't know what you think you saw, but I wasn't out of my bed that night or any other night and I haven't seen Larry Vail at the camp."

"You lie, you contemptible old beast!" Relda shrieked. "He lies, Howard! It happened! As I told you!"

"How about it, Hughie?" Franklin asked sharply.

"I've answered her."

"But he would lie!" and Relda sprang to her feet in a fresh burst of fury. "He knows more than I've told. I saw Vail there. I heard him talk. That is why I came to Sabawi. I knew he had done something and when Marcia told me about the government investigation I was certain of what it was. Now do you see why I want detectives to search for him, why I want a warrant for his arrest?"

"Mr. Franklin," said Mrs. Wade, speaking for the first time, "I know where Larry Vail is. If I had suspected anything like this was going to happen I would have told it before. He couldn't have been at your camp when she says because he is in Port Arthur."

"Port Arthur!" Franklin repeated. "What is he doing there?"

"He and Sid Evans are down there taking care of Sid's mother. Sid got a letter that his mother was sick and because Larry was gone he couldn't think of anything else to do but get drunk. Larry found him in the bar just before train time, but Sid wasn't fit to go. So Larry gave him a hundred dollars to telegraph to his mother and then took him back to the mill to sober up. What they did was this—they caught a wheat train in the night and went to Port Arthur."

"That's only guessing," Relda said with a sneer.

"Guessing!" Mrs. Wade cried, and her wrath was an awesome thing. "I can prove every word of it, about the letter and sending the money. Larry gave Sid a hundred dollar bill. It's up at the station yet. I saw it there. First one ever come to Sabawi, far's I know."

"You see," and Relda turned jubilantly to her husband. "She says he is in Port Arthur and Marcia says he is at the lumber camp. Hughie refuses to tell the truth. Which do you want to believe?"

"I can give you another story, too, if you'd like it," Hughie said quietly, but with a contemptuous glance at Relda. "Larry had a couple of run-ins with Rene Lacrodaire and gave him his time at the mill. Rene went down to his trapping shack below the camp and yesterday he came back to town. He's been filling up at the bar. He was quiet at first, but talking more to-day. I've just been over listening to him. He's saying this afternoon that Larry'll never come back and he knows why."

The color left Marcia's face and a little gasp escaped from her lips. Mrs. Wade quickly placed an arm around her and then the girl caught a twinkle in Hughie's eyes.

"That the fellow Larry ran off the place a couple of times last winter?" Franklin asked.

"Yes, and made him eat dirt before the crew at the mill a while ago."

"How did Lacrodaire know Larry was gone?" Franklin persisted.

"Oh, it's been talked about. Fellows at the mill coming up for a drink nights and chinning at the bar. They've hooked it up with a rifle and canoe being stolen and some grub from the cook camp."

"Never mind that now," Relda interrupted.

She had risen and, with a quick motion, snatched the government envelope from Marcia's lap and tore it open.

"That's Larry's!" the girl protested. "It's addressed to him."

"He'll never come to claim it," Relda sneered. "Besides, it's mill business."

She returned to her chair and spread the contents of the envelope on her lap. There were two documents, typewritten and bound in covers. One was a letter, which she began to read.

The others watched her in a strained silence. Only Franklin seemed cool. He was studying his wife's face, for there was something triumphantly confident in her manner.

"There!" she cried at last, her tone so cruelly exultant Marcia shivered. "Read that!" and she handed the letter to her husband.

Franklin read it quickly. It was short, formal notice that copies of the agreement to accept a cancellation of the Bagnall permit and of the application for the adjoining limit, both of which Larry had signed, were inclosed. It ended with the official announcement that permission was granted the Franklin company to cut the forty million feet of timber in the new limit.

"This is simple," Franklin said, "and it explains Larry's absence, I think. He has agreed to the cancellation of the Bagnall permit to cut thirty-five million feet remaining and has asked for and been granted a limit of forty million. There is a gain of five million feet and he is undoubtedly down there ——"

"Applied for it!" Marcia interrupted in astonishment. "He couldn't have done that."

"Why not?" Franklin asked.

"It's—it's—he wouldn't do that. Why—why——"

She broke off, frightened by she knew not what. She was looking at her uncle, but she was aware of a smile of savage triumph on Relda's face.

"Why wouldn't he do it?" Franklin prompted gently.

"It's a trick!" Marcia cried. "A trick! Larry never applied for that. He wouldn't. He knew it can't be logged."

"Can't be logged!" Franklin repeated. "Why can't——"

"Don't you see?" Relda interrupted furiously. "The little fool has given it away. The beans are all over the floor now. Let her pick them up if she can."

"Wait a moment," her husband commanded. "Why can't this limit be logged, Marcia?"

"Larry pointed it out to me one day while we were hunting. We could see it from a high ridge. I thought we ought to have it, get out the whole seventy-five million, make a bigger thing of this. But he said it couldn't be done, that a height o' land made it impossible to get the logs to the mill."

"But these papers show that he gave up the Bagnall limit and applied for this useless limit."

"He didn't! He couldn't!" Marcia cried desperately. "I know it. I know him. He worked so hard to make the mill pay. I tell you, Larry Vail never did such a thing. You knew him, Uncle Howard. You know he couldn't. You won't believe it, will you?"

"I thought I knew Larry," Franklin answered slowly. "I trusted him absolutely."

"Then you still believe in him."

"It seems to me, Howard," Relda interrupted them coldly, "that facts, not sentimentality, should decide this case. Presuming for a moment that Vail has done what these official documents show he has done, what is the value of my mill to-day? Scrap, isn't it? The best I can do is to sell it as it stands for what it will bring. Is that true?"

Franklin nodded.

"And this whole transaction—what is at the bottom of it? Did you ever know a government bureau to decide a case so quickly, without a hearing, or get papers back in so short a time? Of course not. There is just one explanation. Someone saw a chance to get my mill for a song. They misrepresented things to the head of the department and got him to cancel the Bagnall permit, offering us this other as a sop.

"But," and Relda leaned forward and beat the arm of her chair with sudden vehemence, "they couldn't do that unless they reached Vail, unless they got him to recommend to you that you accept the transfer. You didn't know this other limit was not loggable, but the promiscuous manner in which you scattered about your power of attorney made it easier for them. With that, Vail could sign the papers, making them binding, and they could

rush the thing through, get the papers back here and conclude the deal before there was any suspicion or a chance to make a fight."

Relda whirled and pointed at Mrs. Wade.

"That woman holds the key to the whole thing!" she cried dramatically. "She didn't know it, but she gave us the one clinching bit of evidence. She says that Vail, immediately after talking to this so-called government agent, gave Sid Evans a hundred dollar bill to wire to his mother. She says she saw the bill at the station, that so far as she knows it is the first ever seen in this place. What was Vail doing with a hundred dollar bill in his pocket? Common sense should tell you he not only had that bill, but perhaps fifty others like it."

"Then you mean——" Franklin began slowly.

"Mean!" Mrs. Wade cried with startling fury. "I know what she means! And I'll ask her to get out of this house. Now! Yes, you!" as Relda turned to her with a contemptuous expression. "Coming in here and trying to make out Larry Vail is a thief! And you with no more than a few papers from Toronto and a lot of guess work to go by. Larry never touched anybody's dirty money and he never will."

Her onslaught was so unexpected and her anger so great that even Relda was silent.

"Don't you believe a word of it!" and Mrs. Wade arose and turned to Marcia. "There's no meanness or crookedness in Larry Vail. There couldn't be. I've known him for years now and he's like he was one of my own."

"Look here, Mr. Franklin," Hughie said in a low voice that trembled slightly. "Don't make the mistake of going wrong on that lad. I don't know anything about what's been told here, but I've lived with Larry Vail most a whole year alone in the bush and he's been my friend a lot longer. When you know a man that way you know him."

He arose and stood beside Mrs. Wade.

"You can give me my time," he added.

"Oh!" Marcia cried as she held out her hands to the two old people. "You're wonderful! Wonderful! Both of you! To say that about him, to believe in him so. Uncle, don't you see? He couldn't have done this."

"Howard," Relda said coldly, "are you going to send that telegram to a detective agency or am I?"

"You can't do that!" Hughie shouted savagely. "He'll come back, I tell you."

Hughie stopped. All the facts he knew in connection with Larry's visit to the camp in the darkness and storm suddenly marshaled themselves in startling array. They could so easily be worked into the intricate pattern of a clever method of escape.

Franklin had caught something of the old man's tone and attitude.

"How do you know it?" he asked.

The question rekindled Hughie's faith. It flamed higher in its sudden passionate intensity than in its calmer, surer form.

"How do I know it?" he repeated triumphantly. "I've got the best reason in the world for knowing it. I know him."

Marcia arose. She felt as if she had been lifted to her feet by the old prospector's trust. To her it was a marvelous, beautiful thing, this faith in the integrity of another, this unshakable belief in the soul of a man.

Without volition she stood between Hughie and Mrs. Wade, facing Franklin and Relda. As the three stood there, the physical division of the group revealed something which, in the turmoil of the last few moments, had escaped her. She was arrayed against her uncle, stood ready to fight him if necessary, because she, like Mrs. Wade and Hughie, possessed this blind faith in Larry Vail.

So far Franklin had not disclosed his attitude, but calm reason told Marcia's quick mind that he would be justified in believing Relda's charges. Everything pointed to it.

There was an instant of doubt, of black, numbing fear, and in the instinctive revolt against it she seemed to absorb the faith of the two who stood beside her. Her chin went up and her level gaze met her uncle's.

"A pretty tableau," Relda remarked derisively. "And meanwhile this cheap bribe-taker is getting farther and farther away. Do you send that telegram?"

"No!" Franklin exclaimed. "Not to-day! And neither will you."

He had been unable to escape the effect of that faith the three expressed, not only because their trust had remained unshaken, but because he, too, had believed in Larry Vail.

Relda saw and understood and her outburst was a terrible thing. She stormed about the room, berating her husband, denouncing Larry, scoffing at Hughie and Mrs. Wade. But most of all her fury was turned against Marcia. She was maddened by the thought that the girl's influence over her uncle had prevailed, that in the moment when she was assured of triumph, the integrity of another's character had risen to balk her.

Franklin arose and, grasping his wife by the shoulders, compelled silence.

"Stop!" he commanded. "If Vail has done this, if he is guilty, he'll be caught. But I'm not going off at half-cock. I'm going to look into this further."

"If you don't act now I will!" Relda screamed.

"You will not. I am trustee for you, legally appointed, and I'll handle this in my own way."

Relda glared at him for a moment and then turned to pick up her coat.

"All right," she said. "You're trustee for the present. I'm going back to camp to-morrow morning and pack up. Then I'm going to Chicago as quickly as I can, get this property back into my own hands and spend all that's left of the wreck to hunt this fellow down and see that he goes to jail."

She walked out of the room without a glance at anyone and from a window they saw her going to the hotel.

"Now," Franklin began at once, "I want to get off some telegrams. I've been in touch with Toronto, was warned, and I've got to find out more about this. Marcia, you'd better go and lie down. You look like a ghost."

"But Uncle Howard!" the girl cried. "You believe in Larry!"

"I always have," he answered slowly. "You'll have to admit, however, that things look black for him. I should get answers to my wires by morning and then I'll decide what to do."

Mrs. Wade led the girl from the room. When the door closed Franklin turned to Hughie.

"You're holding something back," he said.

"No," was the instant reply. "I only know Larry'll show up. He told me he would. You just give him time."

"Time! How much? A day? Two days?"

“To be fair, you ought to make it a week,” Hughie answered after a moment’s calculation.

“That’s too long, but we’ll talk it over in the morning.”

CHAPTER XXIV

—White Water

When Larry determined not to leave Sid, when he took that step forward in the light of the leaping camp fire, Sid raised the rifle to his shoulder and the muzzle ceased to waver. His eyes became hard, his body tense.

"All right," Larry said calmly as he turned back. "Keep your shirt on."

He shoved aside the snow-crusted brush, but as he passed to the darkness beyond he stopped and laughed.

"Say, Sid, where do you think you are?" he asked.

"I'm in The States, damn you, and you can't touch me," was the shrill reply. "I've got the right to shoot you. I've got the right."

"Didn't you ever hear about that boundary commission that went through here?" Larry asked as if in amazement at the other's ignorance. "The time they got lost? You was here in daylight and you saw how this part of the lake's all cut up by bays and points and is full of islands. Even a map don't do much good."

"You can't talk me into anything," Sid interrupted, and anger supplanted fear in his voice.

"I'm not trying to. Just want to tell you something. That commission, the Yankees and the Canadians, they went through here in canoes and just about wherever they happened to go they called it the boundary. Only, when they were finished and began checking up with a map and writing down the notes they couldn't remember just where they'd been along here. They argued over it and couldn't settle it and then forgot all about it arguing over something else. When the new maps come to be made up a stretch of bush in here got left out of both countries."

He stopped and laughed and then said:

"It's funny, with all this long border here, you should happen to land right in the middle of that stretch and think you'd gotten into The States."

"You can't fool me with any yarn like that," Sid retorted. "I've heard you tell too many like it."

"I'm not trying to fool you."

"Well, whether you are or not, it don't make any difference. Even if this is Canada, I'd shoot you just the same if you tried to touch me. I'll not go to jail."

"Jail!" Larry repeated. "Who's talking about jail?"

"You make me sick!" Sid exclaimed disgustedly.

"Not as sick as you make me!" and for the first time Larry raised his voice. "Do you suppose I don't know how you're feeling right now? You'd give that five thousand dollars and all you ever hope to make if it was back in the safe and you was in Port Arthur with your mother. A man's got to be pretty bad all the way through to do a thing like that and not do a lot of thinking about it."

"Quit preaching!" Sid growled, but his voice became uncertain when he added: "Besides, it's done now."

"Not unless you say so," Larry retorted quickly.

"I've had my say."

At last terror and anger and bravado had given way to despondency. Larry stepped back through the brush into the circle of fire light. There was no answering movement of the rifle, which had been lowered gradually as they talked.

"Look here," Larry said. "In a way I'm glad this happened. You've lived about ten years in the last two days, I bet. The speed you made showed how scared you was. And when you got to The States you didn't know just what you were going to do. You knew you couldn't ever go back to Canada, that you'd have to keep hid out for years, and you got to wondering how you could change those bills into American money without being caught. On top of all that, there was your mother being sick and needing help.

"It takes some thinking like that to make a fellow grow up, I guess. He cusses drink and he cusses women and he says his foot'll never slip again, but at the same time he knows darned well he's reached the end and that he can never get back to where he was."

"Shut up!" Sid interrupted, but there was a sob in his voice.

"You've gone through all that," Larry continued imperturably, "but it'll never be anything more'n a bad dream for you. Because you're going back, Sid, back to work at the mill."

"A fat chance I got with that money gone and everybody knowing what's happened."

"Nobody knows the money's gone, because nobody but you and me knew it was there," Larry said quietly. "Nobody knows I've come after you except old Hughie. He doesn't know why and he's not going to tell what little he might guess."

Larry stood there among the snow-crusted bushes. Sid no longer looked at him. The rifle had dropped, hung in one hand. At last Larry moved slowly forward and took the weapon.

"Better let the hammer down before it goes off," he remarked. "And say! How about a little grub? You're a hell of a pardner. I'd rather be shot than starve to death."

Sid sprang to get a packsack at the rear of the tent. He knelt to open it, then leaped to his feet.

"Here!" he exclaimed as he drew a small cloth sack from a pocket. "Take it! Quick! It's all there. Forty-nine hundred."

Larry thrust the money into a pocket as casually as if it were a package of tobacco.

"Boys, oh boys, but that fire feels good," he said as he spread his hands to it. "And maybe some hot tea won't trickle down to the right spot. Here, butter-fingers! Give me that kettle. You cut the bacon while I get some water. And don't let your arm get tired doing it."

An hour later, when supper had been eaten, the dishes washed and the pipes lighted, Larry stretched out comfortably on the blankets. He had talked almost continuously, the light banter, the harmless gossip and the humorous anecdote with which Sid had become familiar around many a camp fire. He knew it would be the period of reaction for his friend and he sought to divert his mind as much as possible.

Larry's manner was not all intentional. He had never been quite so happy. At last, in an excess of spirits, he began to sing.

"Oh, I went up the Eau Claire to drive,
I thought they'd never begin;
The wind was blowing dead ahead
AND Kelly was drunk agin."

Sid had spoken but little. He still sat close to the fire, hunched over tensely with his arms around his legs, his chin on his knees. When the song was ended he stiffened even more and then, without looking away from the flames, he exclaimed fiercely:

"I'll take an oath, Larry! Right now! So long as I live I'll never touch another drop."

"Don't go to do anything like that," Larry answered with marvelously assumed indifference. "Anybody can quit drinking. I'll tell you something harder. Take a drink when you want it. One, maybe two. Then walk out of the bar and forget about it. There's something only a saint or a fellow that's broke can do. But here we're chinning about nothing when we got a long trip ahead of us. I'm going to sleep."

Two terrific days followed. The storm continued, always blowing a gale, often snowing. But in spite of the weariness resulting from the flight and pursuit, Larry and Sid toiled desperately through every moment of daylight. They abandoned one canoe, returning in the other.

The wind and the current were against them now and progress was slower. On Bad River they were forced to portage around rapids they had run on the way down and when they turned off through a chain of lakes that would take them to the railroad the northeast wind seemed to take a fiendish joy in sapping their strength and retarding their pace.

In the afternoon of the second day Larry saw that they would be unable to reach the railroad that night. He wanted to do so. He knew that with both gone from the mill, and no word left, there would be questions. With each day rumors would increase, with the consequent possibilities of suspicion. Because he had given his word, he did not want this to happen.

"Tell you what," he said as, battered and breathless they pulled in behind a point before attempting a long, wind-swept stretch. "We can't make it this way. Working your head off and not getting anywhere takes all the tuck out of a fellow. If we go up this arm there's a chain of small lakes leading into the Bagnall limit. We can get good shelter and from the camp we can shank it home on the tote road after dark."

It was thus that they reached the mill at midnight the last night of the storm. Not once in the last two days had Larry spoken of the theft or in any way referred to it or its possible consequences. It was not that Sid was crushed. Larry knew from the manner in which the bow paddle was swung, from an eager energy on portages, that his friend had emerged from the fire

with a tempered soul, with a sober, clear-cut resolve to make the most of this unexpected opportunity.

It was Larry's own spirits that kept him from thinking of Sid's act as anything except a closed subject. He had won through, had set his partner's feet again upon the trail, and even when they started on their twenty-mile walk through the darkness and dying storm, he strode along triumphantly.

Sid slept late the next morning, but Larry was up before the cook had cleared the breakfast table. Ed Osland had gone to work, but two men who wanted their time were in the kitchen. After eating, Larry went to the office and made out their checks and, turkeys on their backs, they started to Sabawi.

The first thing after rising Larry had entered Marcia's office and, after unlocking the safe, replaced the forty-nine hundred dollars in the little compartment. It was one they had never used and he did not believe Marcia had opened it during his absence. Above all, he did not want anyone to know but that the money had been there for four days.

Half past eight came and Marcia had not appeared in the office. Larry waited impatiently a little longer and then, when he heard Sid coming down stairs, went outside to join him.

"This is a brand-new day," he said after a quick look at his friend's face. "Don't forget it. I'll go along while you eat breakfast."

Before Sid had finished Larry learned from the cook that Marcia was in Sabawi. The cook grumbled, complained of the theft of his rifle, told how the canoe had disappeared, and dropped several veiled remarks that worried Larry and robbed Sid of his appetite.

"It's no use," Sid said quietly as they went back to the office. "There's been a lot of talk here and something's sure to get out."

"It won't get out!" Larry retorted angrily. "It can't. No one knows. But whatever happens, keep your mouth shut. Understand? Leave everything to me."

Yet Larry, too, was worried, though the more determined.

"The only thing to do is to get busy," he said. "Just as if nothing had happened. Leave the talking to me. You'd better check up on the time I gave those fellows. You'll find the stubs I filled out in the check book."

He went on into Marcia's office and sat down at her desk and it was thus that Marcia, Franklin and Hughie found them when they entered a few

minutes later.

Marcia was the first and she halted abruptly when she saw Sid. Her face lighted. She was about to call out, and then she saw Larry in the next room.

His appearance shocked her. His face was drawn and thin and, though he smiled, she was aware only of the haggard expression.

Howard Franklin walked past her.

"Vail," he began abruptly, "there's something I want to talk over with you."

Larry stiffened at the tone and Marcia and Hughie saw it. All three noted that he glanced quickly at Sid before he spoke.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"It seems to me there's a thing or two to be explained," Franklin said.

It was a passion with Larry, his effort to save Sid from the consequences of his act. Now in being so unexpectedly confronted by Franklin, in the face of his employer's most evident suspicion, he thought only that in the haste of his departure that stormy night he had left behind some clue to the reason for his disappearance.

It occurred to him suddenly that he had written something on the envelope in which he had placed the money in the safe and that the envelope had not been with the money when Sid returned it. It maddened him to think this small detail should have upset all his plans, that Sid's future hung on so insignificant a thing.

"That's my business!" he burst forth in answer to Franklin's question. "After all I've done here if I can't——"

"Wait a moment," Franklin interrupted sharply. "It happens to be my business. I'm the one who's losing the money."

"You haven't lost a cent," Larry retorted.

"Look here!" the mill owner commanded. "Only the fact that I trusted you so completely has made me hesitate, though I never suspected I was laying you open to such temptation. In the face of this——"

He paused to reach into a pocket and in that moment Sid pushed his way through the group and faced Franklin.

"Leave Larry alone!" he shouted in a high, unnatural voice. "He didn't have anything to do with——"

Larry sprang forward and clapped a hand over Sid's mouth.

"Shut up!" he whispered. "Get out of here!"

He shoved Sid through the door, across the other room and outside.

"Go upstairs and stay there!" he said fiercely. "I'll show 'em. The money's here. They can't do anything. They can't prove you took it."

"But they think you did," Sid protested. "They're blaming you now."

"Let 'em blame. Leave this to me."

He pushed Sid toward the outer stairway and turned back. As he was about to enter Marcia stepped out and closed the door. Her eyes searched his, fearfully at first, then with a blaze of confidence.

"Larry!" she burst forth impetuously. "You have! I know you have! Tell me! You have found a way to get the logs out of that other limit."

For a moment he stared at her without comprehension, so occupied was he with Sid's problem.

"You did find a way, didn't you?" she persisted.

"Have those papers come from Toronto?" he demanded.

"Yes! Yes! But tell me, Larry!"

"So that's what— —"

He stopped, for in one instant the whole situation had dawned upon him, and not only that, but he saw what Marcia's coming to him now must mean. Franklin, with the evidence of the official communication, believed he had been sold out; but Marcia, despite that evidence, retained her faith in him.

"Franklin thinks—but you didn't!" he whispered in awe. "I never hoped —never expected— Oh, Marcia! Marcia!"

Involuntarily he had reached out and grasped her by the shoulders. With a spasmodic motion he drew her roughly to him and held her in his arms.

"You wouldn't believe it! You wouldn't believe it!" he murmured in her hair.

She strained back and looked up at him. There were tears in her eyes, but they only made her smile the more glorious.

"All last night it was only faith," she said. "Oh, Larry, I'm so glad it wasn't until this morning that the explanation came to me, just a moment

ago. Now I feel that I can have a place with Hughie and Mrs. Wade. They never doubted. Not once."

"With them!" he repeated, and his laugh had a sob in it. "They're my friends, and you—you——"

He looked down into her eyes. There was something more than the old understanding and comradeship in them. They were so soft, so expressive of courage and confidence and exultation that their message was unmistakable. The sudden contraction of her throat and her quick, short nod were unnecessary.

"I guess," he said huskily, "we don't have to say anything, do we? We just know."

"Oh, my dear!" she whispered as she clung to him.

They stood there, lost in the ecstacy of the moment, until Marcia, suddenly shy, suddenly afraid to risk more than a glance at Larry's face, brought them back to the present.

"Quick!" she whispered. "You must explain to Uncle Howard. I can't bear to have him doubting you another instant."

"I don't blame him," Larry answered. "With those papers—I never expected them back so soon. Come on."

CHAPTER XXV

—Into the Boom

Franklin was seated at Marcia's desk, the papers from Toronto spread out in front of him. Before leaving Sabawi that morning he had received answers to his telegrams. Because their contents only confirmed Relda's charges, he had refrained from re-opening the subject with his niece. Larry's belligerent attitude had not helped matters.

He was about to speak when Marcia and Larry entered. A glimpse of the girl's face startled him to silence. Rapture possessed her. She held her head triumphantly. Every mark of the strain and suspense of the last few days was gone. He glanced quickly at Larry and was amazed to see a broad grin spread across that young man's countenance.

"Guess you never saw a worse jam than this, Mr. Franklin," Larry began at once. "I don't blame you for thinking you'd have to use dynamite, but I know where the key log is. She'll be out in a jiffy."

He reached for the letter and began to read, and as he read his grin became a chuckle. Franklin, watching, wondering, was conscious only of a suffocating sensation of relief, of the welling up of emotions which made clearer the magnitude of the faith that had been so sorely tried.

"Grab a peavy and dig in, lad," he said in a voice that trembled slightly. "I know you can do it."

Quick, heavy feet thumped on the steps outside the office as he spoke and before Larry could continue the door was thrown open and someone was calling his name excitedly. He looked out to see Ed Osland beckoning to him across the counter.

"Rene Lacrodaire's coming down the track!" he exclaimed. "The tote teamster just come from town and he says the frog's all liquored up and talking about what he's going to do."

Larry had walked into the outer office and he looked through a window. Rene was a quarter of a mile away.

"What's Rene saying?" he asked.

"When you were gone there was some talk about what had happened to you and after he'd been drinking a bit he begun to tell how you'd never come back, letting folks think he'd chased you out. This morning those two who quit were cashing their checks at the bar and they said you were back."

"So he's coming down to see if it's so," Larry laughed.

"He don't talk much and he's drunk," Osland persisted. "The tote teamster says he's got a gun and when the fellows in the bar kidded him a bit he started for the mill."

Marcia, Hughie and Franklin had joined Larry and heard all that was said.

"Is this fellow a bad actor or only a talker?" Franklin asked.

"He's part Indian, and if he's drunk he can be bad enough," Hughie answered. "He's the fellow Larry run off your place a couple of times last winter."

"Look here, Larry," the mill owner said. "You don't want to mix in anything like this. Keep in the other room there, out of sight. You," and he indicated Osland, "get up to Sabawi quick as you can and bring the constable down. There's just one way to settle that sort."

"Of course," Hughie agreed. "Mixing the Indian and the booze in him makes a bad combination."

"Wait a minute!" Larry commanded as Ed Osland started toward the door. "I took care of him a couple of times before when there wasn't a chance to get a constable or anyone else and I can do it again. Besides, Rene's satisfied he's got a right to make trouble."

"Don't be a fool!" Franklin exclaimed as Larry started toward the door.

Marcia, who had not spoken since Osland's entrance, stepped quickly in his way.

"Listen," she said as she took hold of the lapels of his mackinaw and looked up into his face. "Hughie and Uncle Howard pretend they don't understand their own code. They won't admit this is your affair alone. But I understand exactly how you feel—and I think you are right."

"Marcia!" Franklin interrupted. "You've lost your head."

"I understand," she continued without looking away from Larry's face, "but I am a woman just the same and because I am I ask you to go back into my office and shut the door. For my sake, Larry! Please go."

There was a moment of silence in which no one seemed to breathe. Then Hughie whispered from the window:

"He's left the track. He's walking up here."

If Larry heard he did not indicate in any way. His eyes did not turn from Marcia's until suddenly he strode into her office and closed the door.

"Hurry up to Sabawi," Franklin said to Osland. "Hook up the driving team and bring the constable as quick as you can."

Ed opened the door and stepped out. Before he could close it Rene thrust his way in.

There was nothing to indicate that the man had been drinking. He stared impassively at the three people in the office and then in a low voice he asked:

"Where's Vail?"

"He's not here," Franklin said. "What do you want?"

Before Rene could answer there was a sound of swift feet on the outside stairway. Rene darted back through the door, one hand dropping into the outside pocket of his mackinaw. On the narrow porch he met Sid, who had heard the raised voices and hurried down.

"Where's your pardner?" Rene demanded, his voice surly.

"In the office," Sid answered as he passed.

"Inside, eh?" Rene cried. "Hiding! Afraid to see me. I'll smoke the skunk out of here."

He brushed past the astonished Sid, through the door and around the counter.

"Get out of here!" Franklin shouted as he stepped in the man's way.

Rene sprang to one side and drew a revolver from his coat.

"Vail he tell you he mak me a coward, eh?" he demanded contemptuously. "I show you and I show him. Vail he mak himself a coward hiding in a woman's place lak—stand back there, Hughie, or I——"

Hughie had been edging closer and Rene fired just above his head. Marcia's scream pierced the roar that filled the room and instantly the door of her office was thrown open and Larry leaped out.

“So you mak me a coward with your grin, eh?” Rene shouted. “I tell you some day I wipe that grin off and now, by God, I do it!”

Slowly he had been raising his revolver and now it was aimed at Larry’s breast. The evil, merciless smile of the Indian in him had twisted his thin lips and his eyes were alight with the mad joy of revenge and torture. It was this last that caused him to withhold the pressure on the trigger, to prolong a savage’s gratification in the extremity of a victim.

In that moment Sid leaped. He had entered the office on Rene’s heels and when Larry appeared in the door had sprung to the counter. Now he jumped straight out, not at Rene, but at the weapon, gathering it and the arm that held it in a fierce, enfolding embrace.

He and the French Canadian went down. The revolver was discharged, and Rene sprang up empty-handed. Sid lay still. On the floor beneath him a little stream of blood started its jerky flow along the crack between two boards.

Larry was the first to see it and he knew it flowed because Sid had sacrificed, had proven himself. And because he knew Sid was dead, that he had given his life, he stood there for an instant, transfixed by the horror of it. Then he leaped at Rene Lacrodaire.

It was a mad thing that Larry became, as savage and as merciless as the French Canadian had been. Only he was prompted by a rage in which there was something of justice instead of a brooding, whisky-stirred hate. He was feline in his quickness and cold ferocity, like a bear in the weight and crushing effect of his blows, and in an incredibly short time he had battered Rene’s body until it appeared to be lifeless.

Then he grasped the man by the collar, dragged him outside and hurled him from the porch into a ravine at the side of the office. The next moment he was back on his knees beside Sid.

Marcia had preceded him.

“Quick, someone!” she cried. “It’s his leg. He’ll bleed to death.”

“I know how to do that,” Hughie said as he picked up a small piece of rope and a stick.

“Then he isn’t dead!” Larry whispered.

Sid opened his eyes. Seeing Larry, he smiled.

A little later the injured man was in Marcia's bed in the Osland house and a telegram had been sent to Port Arthur for a doctor. Hughie and Larry examined the wound and found that the bullet had entered Sid's thigh, but that it had not struck a bone or the main artery.

Ed Osland brought the constable, who found his prisoner still lying unconscious in the ravine. Two hours after the shooting, Mrs. Wade, out of breath, but moving with her quick, vigorous stride, burst into the Osland home. She had walked from Sabawi.

"I've seen so many men hurt in the bush that I'm the next best thing to a doctor," she announced. "And I suppose Hughie and Larry have bungled things, as usual."

She found fault with the tourniquet, the bandages, Sid's position in bed, and it was not until she had rearranged everything and was satisfied that Sid was as comfortable as could be expected that she left him long enough to learn the details of the shooting.

"Huh!" she snorted indignantly when she had been told. "I must say that this is once when I went wrong in a man. He fooled me completely, fooled everybody but Larry, I guess. He'll be wanting a drink of water now. No, I'll take it. He musn't have too much."

Larry, walking softly, followed her.

"Don't you worry," he heard her saying gently as she lifted Sid's head. "You'll be around as good as ever in a month, ready to run foot races with that good-for-nothing Larry Vail. And beat him, too. Wish I had you up at my place. But I'll come down and take the night shift."

"Bless his heart!" she exclaimed when she returned to the others. "He's only a boy, isn't he? And not a whimper out of him. Larry, you ought to be ashamed of yourself, getting into a scrape with a man like Lacrodaire."

Larry took her two hands in one of his, placed his free arm around her shoulders and kissed her.

"You damned old humbug!" he whispered in broken tones, and then he dodged.

But Mrs. Wade did not slap him. She was blushing and her eyes were wet.

"Go 'way from me!" she cried. "Before all these people! I can't afford to have a scandal at my time of life."

A little later Marcia, Larry, Franklin and Hughie returned to the office. Larry plunged at once into a description of his interview with Williams, giving it in detail, without explanation, except to relate his own deductions and surmises as Williams progressed toward his offer of a bribe. Franklin made no comments, but when Larry related how he had signed the papers Hughie could contain himself no longer.

"Of all the fool things to do!" he snorted.

"Shut up, old-timer," Larry laughed. "When you folks came busting in here this morning, all het up, Marcia got the point right away and I'll bet that right now Mr. Franklin has."

"You've found a way to get the logs out of that new limit," the lumberman said, "and you figured from the first that the crooks who've got hold of the Bagnall limit will give it up in a hurry when they find out. Then we'll get the seventy-five million feet."

He turned to Marcia with a slow smile.

"I think I'm getting old," he said. "It should have been the first thing I thought of."

It was his tribute and his apology, said so characteristically that both Marcia and Larry understood.

"However," and he shook his shoulders as if trying to throw off his emotional reactions, "there's one bit of reasoning I don't get. Why go through all this rigamarole when it would have been just as easy to hang onto the Bagnall limit and apply for the other, too? That department down in Toronto is square but, like any large bureau, crooks can get in a hand sometimes."

"It was this way," Larry grinned sheepishly. "I'd just been done by one of those city fellows. He came down here and bought all our lumber and I was so green I let him sting us for two thousand two hundred and fifty dollars on a forfeit for not getting loaded in time. He tied up the cars. Then I rushed into the thing so quick I lost another two thousand two hundred and fifty dollars because the market was going up.

"That made forty-five hundred. It wasn't my money, it was the mill's. When I saw a chance to make it back I took it. The money's there in the safe now, all but a hundred I used to send to Sid's mother, who was sick and needed it. I'll put that back with my own check. Haven't had time yet."

Franklin had been staring at him in amazement and now he leaned back in his chair and laughed until his eyes were wet with tears.

"This is about the richest thing I ever heard of!" he exclaimed at last. "If I only knew who this crook was! I'd like to tell him how he was done, and why."

"I can tell you who he is," Larry said. "I was going to. I thought you ought to know. It's this fellow Shand."

"Jefferson Shand?" Franklin demanded, and he leaned forward across the desk, his face savage. "How do you know that?"

Larry told what he had seen from Jimmie Connor's window and about Williams' pretenses to send and receive telegrams.

"The *mee-tass-way-sha-un-gah-do-sah* crook's out at camp now," Hughie growled.

"He is!" Franklin snapped as he swung around. "I might have—— How many time's he been there?"

"This is the third."

"I haven't told you the best part of this whole business," Larry broke in quickly, for he sensed what Franklin was thinking of. "It's getting out the logs. You know those cruisers, and Bagnall, they was looking for a steam haul, same's they got on the other limit. It's all they thought of.

"When I went down there to look things over for this winter's cut I got to thinking there might be something else. Maybe it was my being used to river driving and liking it best, and maybe it was something I'd seen there once when I was working for the Maje. It's hard to tell what sets a fellow thinking about something.

"Anyhow, there's a break in that ridge, but it's on the shore of a lake and there's high cliffs on the lake side and no chance to get through. But that lake's on the other side of the height o' land and it's forty or fifty feet higher than the swamp where those four million rossed logs are lying.

"Now, right in the break in that ridge there's a granite wall that holds the lake out of the swamp. What we're going to do is this. We'll skid all that forty million right onto the ice. Won't have to use a sleigh for a stick of it. We'll string booms around it and then, when the ice goes out, we'll blow out that rock wall and let the lake into the swamp. Moose Creek heads out of it and that water will carry the logs from both limits to the mill at about one-

tenth what it cost Bagnall to get 'em here. When the lake's dry next summer we can build a dam and control the water."

"Oh, Larry!" Marcia cried. "Now that we've got the seventy-five million feet we can enlarge the mill and cut fifteen million a year."

"No, we'll just buy a dynamo, wire the mill and the yards and run day and night shifts."

"And with a water drive—no expensive, uncertain steam haulers—why, Larry! We'll make—maybe three or four dollars a thousand more on every thousand we cut!"

"It's going to save a lot, and with that extra forty million——"

Marcia, her eyes dancing, her face flushed, reached for a pencil. She and Larry seemed to have forgotten the others. Franklin, listening and watching, began to laugh.

"Say, you two!" he exclaimed. "Don't go to planning on five years. You're going to be here only one year at the most."

"One year, Uncle Howard!"

"Yes, enough to put this thing through, get it going. That'll be all. Think I'm going to let a couple of live wires like you waste all this energy and enthusiasm on a dinky mill? You're going to the coast, both of you. I've got a new proposition in Oregon. Besides, I want you working for me. This mill isn't mine, you know. It belongs to Relda."

"We know," Marcia said quietly. "It was in the power of attorney."

Both Larry and Franklin were about to speak, but Hughie had leaped to his feet.

"Belongs to her!" he cried as he struck the desk with his fist.

For a moment the Ojibwa crackled from his lips and then he shouted:

"And these two works their heads off for her, scheming and giving all they've got to put money in her pocket when she——"

"Hughie!" Marcia cried, and she started toward her uncle.

"When she hates the ground they walk on!" the old man continued. "When she and Shand——"

He stopped as if appalled by what his own words had revealed. Franklin, his face white, stared at him and then said quietly:

"That's enough for now. I'll talk to you later. Meanwhile——"

"Meanwhile there's that money," Larry interrupted. "It ought to go to the bank. I was going to send Sid down with it to-day when he went to see his mother."

Marcia, understanding his effort to change the subject, knelt at the safe. Her fingers quickly adjusted the combination and she swung back the door. Larry opened the small compartment containing the bills.

"Why send it by Sid?" Franklin asked. "Would have been quite a responsibility for the boy. Easier to express it."

"Responsibility won't hurt him none," Larry answered. "He's made a good man, Sid has."

There was a note of defiance in the last. Marcia had glanced at Hughie in bewilderment and now she found they were staring at each other. She became aware that their eyes flashed and received messages, that she and this loyal old man were beginning to understand some things, that they were sharing a glorious secret.

Marcia's own thoughts raced back over what had happened in the last few days. There was Larry's interview with Williams; the payment of the money; her own absence in Sabawi because of the storm; the disappearance of Sid and Larry in the night; the drawn, haggard faces upon their return; the presence of the money in the safe when it had not been there during Larry's absence. Two days previously she had opened that compartment.

For a moment she could not connect the inevitable conclusion with Larry's intention to turn the money over to Sid. Suddenly she understood his motive.

She looked from Hughie to Larry and as never before she experienced the physical effects of emotion. She felt as if she were smothering, or choking. Pride and humbleness and love and adoration became things of substance, distending her chest, crowding upward into her throat in a mad scramble for expression, while a surge of happiness demanded that it be cried to the world.

She had no thought of Larry's physical self. She was unaware of the handsome face, the white teeth that flashed when he smiled, of his broad shoulders and grace of movement. It was the spirit of the man, buoyant and yet solid as granite, a spirit that gave and was accorded unquestioning loyalty, a spirit that sprang from clean impulses, from strength and courage and a deep compassion.

Marcia was not aware that she had risen or that she stood beside Larry. She only knew that suddenly she had become very calm and that she gloried in the thing she was about to do.

"Uncle," she said, "you've had a lot of news since you came, but the best has been saved for the last."

"Going to train some beavers to drive those logs to the mill and save another dollar a thousand?" he asked with a grin.

"It isn't anything about the mill!" she exclaimed. "It's—why, it is, too! You'll have to get a new bookkeeper. I'm going to be—well, bookkeeper ex-officio, or emeritus, or something like that. I'm going to——"

She stopped, glanced up at Larry's puzzled face, then took his hand and held it tightly.

"I'm going to marry Larry," she finished.

Her courage lasted only that far. It had sprung from an impulse, from an impelling desire to accord tribute, to match so far as possible that courage which was his. The hot blood prickled in the tiny veins of her cheeks and she darted to her uncle, threw her arms around him and hid her face on his shoulder.

Hughie began to swear, and he did not use Ojibwa. He sat in a corner, motionless and expressionless, the words flowing from his lips in a steady stream. But there was a new note in this profanity. It was soft, gentle. Marcia, startled at first, felt in it something of a benediction. She looked up and saw that the old prospector was blinking furiously, and that his lashes were wet.

In a moment she was at his side, her arms around his neck, her smooth cheek pressed against his harsh, and wrinkled face.

"You darling old bear!" she whispered, and kissed him.

Hughie patted her shoulder awkwardly and a sheepish grin spread across his face.

"I've saved up all that for years," he said. "And gosh, but I'm glad I did."

CHAPTER XXVI

—The Reckoning

After the noon meal Hughie and Franklin departed for the camp. For a while they talked as they paddled, but the lumberman found it unsatisfactory with Hughie behind him and neither seeing the other's face. On a portage they stopped for a smoke.

"Cut loose," Franklin said. "I've reached the end. It's only those two back there at the mill I'm caring about, and I don't think you can tell me anything I haven't guessed."

"I've had to guess a lot."

"Of course. The only thing against guessing is the guesser and why he guesses. After yesterday—well, it isn't guessing any more."

"I don't know what Larry could tell—"

"He never will."

It was after dark when they reached the camp. Franklin entered the main building through the kitchen. Relda was sitting before the fire reading. Shand was playing solitaire.

Both started to their feet when they saw him but, though watching him closely, Relda did not ask questions. Before leaving the hotel that morning she had extracted a promise that he would press the investigation of Larry's actions. She had expected that he would remain at the mill. Now she was puzzled at his unexpected appearance.

Nor did Franklin enlighten her in any way. He shook hands with Shand and for a time they talked of partridge shooting, of the prospect for good moose heads, of the snow storm. Then dinner was announced and it was not until afterward, when they were sitting before the big fire, that he told how Sid had been shot.

"Then Vail has come back?" Relda asked in a low, strained voice.

"Just last night. He'd been down in the new timber limit he's acquired. You ought to feel very grateful to him. He's turned a deal that's made a lot of money for you."

Puffing smoke toward the ceiling, his feet stretched comfortably toward the fire, Franklin related the story of the two timber limits and Larry's actions. He told it without reference to or apparent regard for the charges Relda had made the previous afternoon. To him it seemed to be only an interesting business story and he told it well, glancing from one to the other as though to see if they caught the finer points of Larry's strategy.

At the end Relda was silent, sitting white-faced in the shadows.

"Clever chap," Shand commented.

"Yes," Franklin agreed, "and now that you've got the Bagnall limit, how much will you pay me to take it off your hands?"

Shand was caught completely off his guard. For a moment there was a sickly smile and then his face hardened. Wisely, he sat tight, waiting for the next move. Franklin gave him only a glance and turned to Relda.

She, too, had been completely deceived by her husband's manner.

"And Shand's five thousand," Franklin said. "Larry has turned it into the mill account, provided, of course, you care to accept such money."

Something in his tone startled her. For the first time she realized that she was being baited. Franklin had turned back to Shand.

"The case against you is clear-cut," he said. "Ordinarily I wouldn't bother further. There is an element of retributive justice in it, but you're one of the dirtiest dogs I ever encountered and I've decided to put you over the road."

"All right," Shand retorted. "Only, if you do, there'll be——"

"Don't listen to him!" Relda screamed. "He lies! You can't depend on a word he says. He lies, Howard! He lies!"

"He hasn't said anything yet," Franklin commented coldly. "Just what lies did you expect him to tell?"

Shand laughed as Relda shrank back in her chair.

"I imagine that puts the seal of truth on what I am about to say!" he exclaimed exultantly. "Still want to hear it?"

"No. I have all the facts I care for. Get out."

Shand arose and went through the kitchen to the little cabin where he slept. For a time there was silence while Franklin refilled and lighted his pipe.

"The mill," he said at last. "I'll take that off your hands. For just what you loaned Bagnall and interest. To that I'll add enough more to make it an even five hundred thousand, and the Chicago house will be made over to you. Better try California or Nevada. Reno's quickest. Don't go beyond plain desertion. I'll not stand for any funny business and I'll have you watched.

"That's all. I'll get in touch with my lawyers immediately and everything will be handled through them."

In the silence that followed Franklin realized that for the first time in ten years she was giving him cause to be proud of her. She took it standing, without a quiver.

"All right," Relda said at last. "You're more than fair, more than generous. You always have been. I wish you would believe me, Howard, when I say that I am sorry I have spoiled your life."

"You haven't," he answered. "I'm all wrapped up in two of the finest, cleanest, truest young folks that ever lived. They're just like children to me."

He arose and knocked the ashes from his pipe.

"I've had a long day. Guess I'll go to bed."

Relda arose, too. She hesitated a moment and then impetuously thrust out a hand.

"Good-by," she said. "You haven't preached or scolded and you didn't refrain from it because you know you were hurting me more."

"I had no wish to hurt you," he answered quickly. "I haven't been blind. I know what hit you, what you wanted and what you missed, and—and there's nothing harder to bear than that."

It was the first time he had shown emotion of any sort and for a moment she did not comprehend.

"There were two ways of meeting it," she said. "Yours and mine. But—but the water's flowed into the sea."

There was a bare suggestion in the last that Franklin considered for a moment.

"Yes, into the sea," he answered. "Good-by."

In some stretches Bad River does not deserve its name. There are places where it tears madly at the granite ridges, tumbles headlessly and recklessly

over ledges or rips and roars down boulder-cluttered inclines.

But there are also places where it flows silently and placidly, though strongly, through curving reaches; where the ragged, savage spruce give way to the soft contour of birch; where the rough-edged rocks bordering the rapids are succeeded by grass-covered, rounding banks. Then Bad River becomes typical of the north's gentler moods, of the long, tranquil days of summer, of the exquisite peace and satisfying solitude of the wilderness.

It was down such an unruffled stretch that Marcia and Larry floated one June afternoon. For an hour there had been the swift motion, the dash of spray, the quick strain at paddles, the mad, dancing rush through tossing, white-crested rapids. Now, with the strong but gentle current bearing them on, Marcia had abandoned her blade and turned to find a comfortable seat in the bow, facing Larry.

It was a belated honeymoon. There had been no time, or desire, through the long cold winter when Larry's whole attention had been required by the big lumber camp and the preparations for the spring drive. It had been gloriously successful, that turning of the roaring waters of Amik Lake into gentle Moose Creek. Seventeen million feet of logs had passed cheaply and quickly to the boom at the mill and now a man-made dam stood in the place of the granite wall that had once held back the lake.

The mill was running day and night. It was cutting a million feet of lumber every ten days. A new permit to log the old Bagnall limit was in the office safe. Sid Evans, after a course in a Winnipeg business college, was at Marcia's desk and living with his mother in a little house at the mill. A new manager was in charge and Larry was through, his work finished. In another month he and Marcia would be in Oregon.

As the girl reclined comfortably against a pack, idly watching the green shores slip past, she was conscious only of a vast content. There was no roar of rapids, no dash of spray in her face, no need of worry or strain. She did not need to turn her head to know that Larry knelt in the stern, guiding their craft. She had learned to feel him there, to read those tremors and thrusts through the frame of the canoe, and she knew that with strong, steady sweeps of his blade he was holding them to their swift course.

Idly her thought turned to the fact that it was on Bad River that she had first seen him just two years before. Her mind swept through all that those two years had brought to her and to him. Suddenly she was sure her heart had stopped beating, that her cheeks had paled, for there had come to her a picture of the Larry on the log.

Not of grace and beauty astride a shaft of golden sunlight, but of a care-free, impulsive, adventurous spirit, of a vagabond light in hazel eyes, a challenge to circumstance in the pose of a head, a song of white water rising above the roar of the river.

It was because the Larry on the log was gone that fear had come to her, because there was resolution now in the hazel eyes, determination in the way he carried his head, crispness in the quick orders that came from his lips. The vagabond soul had fled.

As she sat there mourning the loss of so blithe a spirit she felt again through the canoe the tremors of those strong, steady paddle strokes and she knew it had been only the maternal instinct grieving over a sturdy baby head just shorn of its gleaming curls. The Larry of yesterday had only grown into the man the daring figure on the log had promised.

He was like Bad River itself, she thought, dashing heedlessly and futilely back there in the rapids, but now settling to the strong, steady purpose of a mature river; more serious, more sedate, perhaps, but with subtle reminders—the swirl of an eddy, a ripple against a boulder, a tinkle over gravel—of the white water that was past. She knew, too, that it was in those earlier stretches of recklessly expended energy that the present stream had acquired its power and reliance. Only——

The canoe seemed to leap ahead. The bow dipped. Marcia glanced around to see that they had entered a short stretch of swift water, hardly a rapids. There was no crash and roar, no plunging of the craft, only a delightful dancing of the canoe, a gay cadence of little waves, a delicious sensation of change and lightness and joy.

She glanced at Larry and caught a gleam of the old recklessness in his eyes, saw that his head was tilted at the old angle, and then his lips parted and the clear notes burst forth:

"Oh, I went up the Eau Claire to drive,
I thought they'd never begin;
The wind was blowing dead ahead
AND Kelly was drunk agin."

The canoe was again gliding swiftly. The strong, steady strokes had not ceased, and Marcia leaned against the pack in supreme content.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Chapter headings “XXV” and “XXVI” have been correctly numbered.

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *White Water*, by Robert E. Pinkerton.]